

## Hollow

By Anthony Rainone

The county road had been plowed clear through to the blacktop five miles north, though the fields on either side were covered deep with snow. The sun was sitting low in the Nebraska sky, bands of pink and purple emerging just above the jut of horizon.

Jake's sheriff's car bounced as it went over the frozen rivets cut into the dirt road, the display screen on his computer flickering. When he made the final turn and drove up towards the white barn, he saw Bobby Tellus' cruiser parked by the entrance.

Tellus was shaking his head, his deputy hat dipping in a slow rhythm to each thing Osterholt uttered. Tellus looked up and walked over to Jake, as he disengaged from his silver Fremont county cruiser.

"Tyler's body's inside the barn, sergeant. Carl found him when he came by to get his wages. He's kinda freaked out."

"Who else besides you been in the barn, Carl?" said Jake.

Osterholt stared at the deputy with eyes poised at his head like ice picks.

"Well, the guy who killed him. And it wasn't me." His face was flushed from more than the biting cold. Osterholt had lost his son the summer before, when the teen's tractor overturned harvesting crop. It had turned Osterholt into a binge drinker.

"You wait here," said Jake. "I need to talk to you."

Inside, the barn smelled of feed, manure and gasoline. Equipment was scattered on a work table. The corral was empty, though fresh alfalfa littered the floor.

"What time did Carl find Knox?" said Jake. He forced his hands into a pair of latex gloves. He walked up to the body lying next to an empty cattle water tank. The tank was streaked with blood, tissue and hair.

"About eight a.m."

Tyler Knox had a large wound at the base of the head. He was nearly decapitated. Jake examined the wound, though careful not to disturb the body too much. The back of the lower head was gone, its pulverized mass instead smeared along the side of the water tank.

"Must've been shotgun."

"Coroner's on his way," said Tellus.

Jake was the sole investigator for the county and all homicides were under his jurisdiction. It was up to him whether he wanted to call Nebraska State Patrol for assistance. He rarely did so, unless the case crossed county or state lines.

"Bobby, go out to my cruiser and get the digital camera. I need photos before I collect evidence."

"Look at this," said Tellus. He had wandered to an area past the corral and was looking under the fold of an old quilt. Jake joined him and together they stared at the fresh carcass of a brown and white calf.

"Why'd he cover the thing up? We used to just stack them like kindling."

The winter had been brutal, and Jake heard that ranchers were losing a sizeable number of calves to premature birthing. There was only one vet for several counties, and the ranchers were desperate.

Jake lowered the quilt on the dead calf. "Get that camera." He turned and walked back to the gruesome task at hand.

\*\*\*

He put the heater on high in the sheriff's substation, and drank from a black coffee, the hot liquid warming him. On camping trips to Wyoming with his dad, Jake would make cowboy coffee on a stone cooking pit. There was nothing better than boiled coffee. Better than the gas station shit he was drinking now.

The murder file on Tyler Knox was open in front of him, and Jake began with the ME's findings. The time of death occurred between one and four a.m., and the cause was a GS to the head. The weapon was a twelve-gauge shotgun. Jake knew there were probably thousands of those in the county alone. He had found no cartridges at the crime scene, and besides the buckshot, no other forensics.

He moved onto his notes on the victim. Knox was thirty-five years old, divorced with no children. Jake reflected that it mirrored his own marital circumstances. Knox raised 90 head of cattle for meat, not dairy. In a state where cows outnumbered people four to one, that was an average-sized herd. He had inherited his range land from his father. The parents were deceased, though Knox had one surviving brother. Howard had moved away to Colorado and was a physician's assistant in a Denver hospital. He was on his way to Nebraska to bury Knox. The county attorney told Jake that Knox had filed a will leaving all his property to Howard.

Jake skimmed the remaining pages looking for the financials on Knox's ranch, but he couldn't find them. There was a new secretary in the office, and it was possible she forgot to include them.

He called the Fremont First National on his cell, because there was no phone in the substation. He asked for the account manager for Knox's ranch loans.

"Walter Herbst speaking."

Jake identified himself and the information he needed to obtain.

"We actually haven't received the warrant yet from the county attorney, so I haven't turned anything over to your office."

"What can you tell me over the phone?"

"Whatever you need, Jake."

"Was he having any pressing money issues with the ranch?"

"Well, most farmers or ranchers will tell you there's always pressing issues. But in Tyler's case...he had borrowed money for equipment and the purchase of cattle. Nothing unusual there. He was paying the loans off on time. There was something, though. Church Pettite had asked me for an appraisal on Tyler's range land. I told him he needed to ask Tyler. Pettite didn't like my response. He went over my head and further up the bank food chain."

Jake was familiar with Church Pettite. Most folks in the area were. He was a well-off local rancher who raised 300 head of cattle. The moniker for Pettite's ranch was HOG, for House of God, a tongue-in-cheek reference to Church Sr., who had been a Pentecostal minister. Church Jr. preferred money to sermons.

"He wanted to buy Knox's property?"

“Seem so. A month ago, two of Tyler’s cattle turned up dead. He was in here cashing a check and he was real upset. He said it wasn’t just the lost income, but that someone deliberately killed them.”

“He accused Pettite?”

“In so many words. They were seen arguing on main street one day. Folks said it got pretty heated. After that, I heard Tyler applied for a permit to carry a concealed gun.”

\*\*\*

Pettite’s ranch was just a few ticks up Highway 6&34 from Knox’s spread. He had several thousand acres that spanned across craggy, rolling hillsides and lush flat pasture. The land had been largely untouched since before the homesteaders, with the exception of clearing out brush. There wasn’t a tree for miles.

Jake pulled up to the main house, a large shining wood structure that looked like an architect’s modernized version of pioneer living. Unlike the pasture, the land around the house was filled with cottonwoods and shrubbery. A Chevy Avalanche with ‘HOG’ emblazoned in gold and blue colors waited at the side of a corral. An animal trailer was hitched to the Chevy, and Jake could see two eyes glaring from between the slats. It was a rodeo bull. In the Chevy cab sat Micah Twitty, the son-in-law of Pettite. He wore aviator sunglasses and his eyes never left Jake, as the deputy crossed the gravel path to the front door.

A pretty Hispanic woman answered, and Jake told her he was there to see Pettite on official business. She took him through the house to a back office. While he waited a short distance behind her, she opened the door and said something in Spanish. She turned and smiled, as Pettite yelled out to: “Come on in.”

Jake entered the large, brown-toned room. Church Pettite came out from behind his desk, with hand extended. He was wearing a blue and white checkered shirt and jeans.

“Sgt. Ballou. Please.” Pettite gestured to two chocolate leather arm chairs sitting on a polished wood floor.

“How can I help you?”

Pettite squinted at Jake with two bright blue eyes. His face was bird-like, but pink skin was pulled over the bones, instead of feathers.

“I’m investigating the murder of Tyler Knox.”

“Tragic event. He was a good man.”

“I have several questions to ask you, Mr. Pettite. I understand you had some recent dealings with Tyler.”

“Whatever you need to know.”

His tone was confident, but Jake detected a stirring of his eyes and a flutter of his hands.

“I heard that you were pressuring Tyler to sell his land.”

Pettite looked at Jake for several beats. His eyes studying him for a tell, a hint of how the deputy perceived him. Jake gave him a cop look - inquisitive and unreadable.

“You heard that from the bank,” said Pettite. “Let me show you something.”

He got up from his chair and went over to a rifle mounted on the wall. He took it down and handed it to Jake. “Look at this. It’s a flintlock rifle.”

Jake took hold of the weapon. Jake could tell it was the real deal and not constructed from a modern day kit.

“It belonged to a Brulé Indian. In 1854, the US government sent Army Lt. Grattan with twenty-nine soldiers to arrest several Indians for butchering a lame cow. The cow had been abandoned by a white farmer, who claimed it was stolen. The soldiers opened fire without warning, which seemed to be the government policy at the time. Grattan and all his men were hopelessly outnumbered and they were all killed. This rifle was used at that battle. The US government retaliated and slaughtered one hundred and twenty-five Lakota women, children and men. Right here in Nebraska.”

Pettite took the rifle back and replaced it on the wall. He sat back down next to Jake. “I discovered through some land developers I hired that Knox’s range land falls prominently on a former Lakota seasonal camping ground. Not too many folks know this, but I’m part Lakota. I wanted to buy his land to own a piece of my ancestral history. I’m getting older, and maybe I’m getting sentimental.”

“Witnesses saw you arguing. Several of his cows had died. Was it about this?”

“I never threatened him. I had nothing to do with his cattle. He took my proposition the wrong way. Look, it’s true I am buying more land. I just bought a spread in Ogallala to raise two hundred more head. But I ain’t Ted Turner. My offer was for familial reasons.”

“Why would he feel so threatened by you that he applied for a concealed weapon permit?”

Pettite shook his head and got up. “When they passed that law, lots of folks applied.” He sat down behind his desk and hit several keys on his laptop computer. “You sure it had to do with me?”

Jake was hearing all the right things. His cop gut was telling him nothing. And he had no more cards in his deck. He stood up. “I’m asking everyone who came in contact with Tyler this same question: Where were you the night before and the morning he died?”

“At home. I went to bed at ten o’clock, which my wife can verify. I got up at four in the morning and had breakfast with my ranch foreman. Then he and I looked over the herd. He’ll tell you that.” Pettite stood up. “You ask me, one of his former hired hands may be who you want.”

“Why?”

“He fired several of them last month. Some were Mexican. Word was that Knox got wind they were illegals.”

“All his current hands have alibis, but I appreciate the information. And thanks for answering my questions. I may be back with more, however.”

“You come back any time, sergeant.” He took hold of Jake’s hand and gave it an extra hard squeeze. “You tell Jimmy King I said hello.”

Jake made his way to the door. “I see you’re getting into the bull riding business. That looks like a brute out there in the trailer.”

Pettite waved at the air. “Oh, that’s my son-in-law Micah’s latest hobby. Now, it’s bulls. Tomorrow, it’ll be ethanol plants.”

Outside, Jake noticed several men standing near a long bed truck, with paving stones stacked on the flatbed. The men were all wearing baseball hats, except one

wearing a straw cowboy hat, with a pheasant feather stuck in the band. The cowboy looked at Jake with faded eyes, like stones at the bottom of a sullied creek. Jake nodded imperceptibly at him and got into his cruiser.

\*\*\*

It was getting late. The dinner crowd was wandering into The Rocket in Indianola. Jake watched a blonde in a black parka and jeans walk from her car towards the restaurant. He thought it was his ex-wife, for a second. Misty was living in South Dakota though, and he hadn't heard she was coming back to Nebraska, and certainly not back to him.

He was sitting in his pickup in civilian clothes. A coffee from home kept him occupied while he waited. It was his fifth of the day, a compromise for quitting cigarettes. Earlier, he had stopped by the courthouse to drop off his cruiser and give the sheriff Pettite's message. Jake knew it wasn't a casual, friendly comment, and the handshake squeeze reinforced that fact. Pettite had been the powerhouse behind King's last election. The remark was made to remind Jake that Pettite was a strong ally of the sheriff's. He was treading into dangerous waters.

A man came out of The Rocket and started towards the rows of cars sitting in icy silence on the street. He turned his head in several directions, before making a line to Jake's pickup. He opened the front door and got in quickly, his straw cowboy hat almost coming off his blocky head.

"You think you could park in a more obvious spot, Ballou?"

Jake started up the engine and pulled out onto the street. He looked across at Donny Palisade's furrowed face. "Relax. Your cover is safe." He took the back roads for as long as he could, then he pulled over into a boarded up gas station.

Palisade had been Jake's primary confidential informant for the past year. He was reliable and delivered solid information, though Palisade played both sides of the fence. Jake was pretty sure it was that fact, more than being discovered, which made the CI so nervous.

"You really pissed Church off," said Palisade. He removed his hat and wiped his hand over a thick face and nearly bald head. "He was on that phone hollerin' and screamin'."

"About what and to who?"

"Hard for me to hear that when I was hundreds of feet away out in the cold stacking that sonofabitch's new floor in the shed." He put his hat back on. "But I think it might've been Micah. He's been calling him coupla times a day."

"What do you know about Pettite and Knox? Pettite told me that he had spoken to Knox about buying his land. Said it had to do with family history."

"Yeah, I heard that bullshit. I mean, Pettite *is* part Lakota. But he don't want that land for no spiritual reasons. He wants it for what it can get him in dollars and cents." He pulled a flask out from under his lined canvas coat and took a swig. He offered the bottle to Jake.

"No, thanks. I'm covered." Jake tipped his coffee cup at Palisade. "What're you talking about?"

“He’s lying to you. He wants the land for gaming. He wants to build a casino on tax free Indian land.”

“That’s insane. We haven’t had a casino amendment on the ballot in Nebraska in years. That’s not likely to happen anytime soon. And Knox’s land’s not designated an Indian reservation. Plus, who’s gonna go to a casino out here?”

“A lot of folks will. Look, you underestimate Church. He has senators, sheriffs, lawyers, and lots of judges in his pockets. They’re deep pockets. He gets Knox’s land first, right? That pasture lies by Highway 83. You get off I-80 at North Platte and hit 83? Shit, you’re there at the casino. Easy commute. Then, he works the politicians. He gets the amendment going. People will vote for it. Church said there’s a way to get land designated as ‘off-reservation trust land’.”

“He’s really thought this out.”

"It's not impossible. More importantly, Pettite thinks he can pull it off."

“Do you think he had Knox killed?”

Palisade shrugged his shoulders. “Pettite’s style is conquer and vanquish. I mean, taking life wouldn’t be a problem for him. But did he need to pop Knox? I don’t think so. The other thing to consider is them boys from Council Bluffs.”

A lot of money changed hands in Council Bluffs, Iowa. The casinos across the Missouri River were the only way for Nebraskans to gamble nearby. It was a popular draw for residents in neighboring states, and Jake’s mother had once been a waitress in a mob-controlled joint called the Golden Horseshoe.

“Don’t think those guys aren’t aware of what Pettite’s doing. How do they know? He told them. He wants them as partners. They got the experience, the backing, and the muscle. Maybe Knox got a visit from those Iowa boys who want to move things along Pettite’s way.”

Palisade leaned forward and looked out the window and scanned the road. He cracked the passenger door open. Frosty air invaded the truck. “That land is looking real interesting to lot’s of dangerous men. Whoever inherits it? Tell them to watch their back.”

Palisade exited the pickup and faded into the night.

\*\*\*

It wasn’t until near the end of the next day, that Jake had the time to drive over to Knox’s ranch. Other duties had interrupted his work on the case, which usually happened on a small force like his. He parked by the barn and ducked under the crime scene tape. The first thing he noticed was the patchwork quilt lying on the floor. He picked it up and checked the area by the horse stall, but the dead calf was gone. Someone must’ve buried it, which was okay with Jake, but he hadn’t cleared the crime scene yet.

Annoyed, he went back outside and entered the main house. He had been through it many times and turned up nothing. He was no closer today to naming the killer than the morning he first caught the case. His cell phone rang and he checked the caller ID. It was Bobby Tellus.

“Tell me you got something good,” said Jake.

“We got the phone records finally from The Dover Telephone Company. I took the liberty of scanning through them.”

“What sticks out?”

“The week before he died, Tyler Knox called the Geiger Cattle Company in Montana five times. That’s unusual.”

“No calls to Pettite, or from him?”

“None. The day before he died, Knox called the Motel 6 in McCook two times.”

Jake hung up and first dialed the phone number in Montana that Tellus had given him.

A young woman answered and Jake identified himself. She told him to hold on.

“This is Rusty Geiger.”

“I’m Sgt. Jake Ballou with the Fremont County Sheriff’s Department. Do you mind if I ask you some questions relating to Tyler Knox? He called you several times in the past week. Mr. Knox was recently murdered.”

“I guess.” The man was clearly apprehensive.

“Why was he calling you?”

“He said that he found Blue Devil.”

“What was that?”

“One of our prized champion rodeo bulls was stolen from our farm last year. Blue Devil was worth millions of dollars. Whoever took him couldn’t compete him, but if you bred him, those calves would be monsters. And earners.”

“He said he found this bull?”

“He said he knew where it was. He said it was nearby and that we needed to come down and identify it. He said Blue Devil fathered a calf and he had it. We could use it for DNA. We went down to Nebraska. Stayed in McCook. Then he was killed before we could meet him. I don’t even know what the guy looked like, you know? We thought we were being set up. Maybe someone trying to shake us down for money. We headed home and reported it to our state police.”

“Did Knox say where the bull was?”

“A nearby ranch is all.”

Jake thanked him and said they would hear back from him. Knox’s murder had nothing to do with land, though it was looking like a Pettite was perhaps involved after all. He hurried outside to his cruiser.

It was dark and the stars had rushed into their places in the sky. As Jake reached cruiser, gun shots hit the driver’s side door and window. The glass spider-webbed and caved inward. Jake ducked and ran, as another round hit the hood and put a chip in the front windshield. He made it to the passenger side, crawling like a crab. More gunfire pinged over head.

He pulled his .40 caliber Glock 22. He thought about reaching for his Remington 870 in the rack, but more gunshot came in the open window and banged around the interior. He looked out over the hood and waited to see where the next flash came from. The metallic snap from a stand of cottonwood trees caught his attention, and he saw a man come out low through the bluestem grass.

“Sheriff’s department. Don’t move,” Jake said.

The man raised his gun and let off a round in Jake’s direction and ran towards the edge of the barn. Jake fired back several times, his nerves and anger pulling the trigger when the target was no longer visible.

The shooter fired three more rounds in a tight radius over Jake's head and to his right. It kept him pinned behind his car. If he could make it to the house without being cut down, his odds were good.

He had been thinking too much however, instead of listening. When he heard movement behind him and turned, it was too late. The shooter hit Jake hard in the head with the butt of a shotgun stock. He heard his Glock go off, before the night's darkness cradled Jake in its arms.

\*\*\*

Jake tasted dirt in his mouth. His nose filled with odors of stale beer and animal scent. He opened his eyes and groaned. It felt like someone was raking barbed wire around inside his skull. He raised his hands to his head. Blood had clotted in his hair, and the skin on the left side of his face felt hot and tight.

His swollen and painful eyes looked around. He was lying on the dirt floor of a rodeo arena, though the gouges in the earth and the worn wooden fence encircling it told him it was not for competition. He was indoors and lights were above him. Perhaps it was a practice arena.

Jake's hands were cuffed in front of him with plastic restraints. A few bulbs were burned out in the overhead lights, leaving a portion of the ring in shadows. Jake tried to stand, but his knees hurt and he had to sit down.

That's when he saw the bull.

It was half in the shadows, staring at him, blinking its eyes. The bull's head was down, its massive shoulders hunched and thick neck turned towards him. Blood dripped from above two long and sharp horns. The bull looked like it could mash Jake into a puddle of blood and bone.

"You better get up."

The voice came from somewhere by the fence. "He's got a flesh wound. He ain't happy. And it's gonna get worse."

Jake saw a man lean over the fence and give the bull a jolt on its flank with a three foot Hot Shot. The bull made an angry snort and charged Jake.

He jumped to his feet and ran. His knees ached, but it didn't matter. He looked over his left shoulder to time his leap, away from the horns' thrust.

Jake's timing was off.

The bull caught him above his left leg with the flat of the horn and tossed Jake hard into the fence three feet away. Jake jumped up and grabbed hold of the fence, pulling himself out of the bull's reach just as the animal dug its horns in for a mortal wound.

Jake's left arm went numb, and he couldn't hold his weight with just his right. He had to drop down off the fence, but waited until the bull gave up and trotted away. Jake knew he couldn't win this match.

"This is a whole lot better than just shooting you in the head," said the man.

"I know it's you, Micah. I spoke to deputy Tellus on the phone earlier. He knows you're the suspect. You want to add another murder count to the charge sheet?"

"So be it," said Micah Twitty.

The bull was out of reach, so Micah discharged a shotgun into the dirt behind the animal. The bull raced towards Jake again.

Jake took off, but he didn't get far. The animal covered the distance fast. The bull rammed his head and horns forward. Jake swerved and the left front shoulder caught him flush in the back. It catapulted him into the dirt.

The bull couldn't stop his momentum, and the bulk of the thrust shattered the fence, as the head of the bull rammed into it. The bull got stuck, his legs churning and shoulders thrashing.

Jake was momentarily stunned. If the bull stomped him, it was all over. He put his arms feebly over his head.

When the bull disengaged, he didn't see Jake, and trotted away towards the opposite end of the arena. The bull had knocked some of the fencing loose, and Jake saw his chance. He dived into the gap made in the shredded fence and found himself on the other side, between the arena and the seats.

He crouched and limped along in the darkness. He paused to look through the fence slats and see where Micah was positioned. Foolishly, the man stood under one of the lights. Micah was studying the hole that Jake had dived through. He pointed his shotgun and fired two rounds. He jumped down and ran along the perimeter heading straight towards Jake.

Jake ran around opposite to the spot vacated by Pettite's son-in-law. He found the location where Micah had been standing on the fence, and on the ground nearby lay the dropped Hot Shot.

Jake picked it up.

He quietly made his behind Micah, who was looking around the area near the shattered fence. He must've believed a stunned and wounded Jake had collapsed there. With his back turned, Jake stuck the Hot Shot into Micah's leg and pulled the trigger.

The man yelled and collapsed as electricity coursed through him, the shotgun flying out from his hands. Jake grabbed the man by his collar and dragged him into the chute, then opened the gate. As he limped over to pick up the shotgun, Jake could hear the bull charge and the screams of Micah Twitty.

\*\*\*

The door to Jake's deputy's office was open. He could see the front desk just beyond the hallway and the door leading to the jail cells. He heard the door to Sheriff King's office open and the sound of muted men's voices emerge. Church Pettite walked past with two of his lawyers, and he glanced at Jake, but said nothing. He had come in to save his own ass.

King strolled up and watched Pettite exit into the clear, winter day. He came into Jake's office and closed the door. A scent of chewing tobacco and Old Spice followed him like a shadow.

"He claims that Micah had acted on his own. Said he had no idea his son-in-law stole one of the Geiger's bulls. And said he was not behind your abduction and potential murder. Didn't care what we charged Micah with, as long as he was exonerated. You gotta love family."

"That's a lot of denying. You believe him?"

“The county attorney is asking the state patrol to come into the investigation. I have to agree, Jake. You still on it, though.” King was too closely tied to Pettite and had to step aside, if he hoped to stay sheriff. King had won election for the first time ten years before, when he beat out Jake’s father. He had no intention of jeopardizing the office.

“The Geigers told me that Blue Devil was the rodeo equivalent of Barbaro,” said Jake. “A champ among champs. Micah talking yet?”

“He’s still in the hospital. But basically saying nothing. Church thinks the boy wanted to impress him by producing monster bulls with winning records and big fees. Bad enough having to prove your mettle to your old man. Can you imagine trying to please Church? Shit.”

“Pettite is ruthless. What kind of effect does he think that has on his family? Anyone in the family? Crazy is as crazy does.”

Jake made his way out to the SUV he would be driving that day. He wanted to have a quiet few weeks and lick his wounds. Let the winter work its way through the land. When it was warm, then he would be ready for more action.

“Sergeant.” Tellus was hurrying up behind him. “We just got a call into dispatch. They found a body in an oil drum at the ethanol plant.”

So much for quiet. Jake tossed the young deputy the car keys.

“Two man team today. You drive.”

*Anthony writes articles, reviews and interviews for several magazines. He is an Editor for CrimeSpree Magazine and January Magazine, a contributing writer for Mystery Scene Magazine, and a book reviewer for The Lincoln Journal Star. He has recently completed a novel featuring some of the characters in this short story.*