

Bondy

By Jerry Peterson

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James Early, the sheriff of Riley County, stood scratching at his mustache as he gazed down at his coroner and a body – the body of Shep Dildford, until an hour earlier the oldest member living of the Gustaf Adolphus Lutheran Church.

“What do you think killed him?” he asked.

Doc Grafton peeled back the dead man’s eyelid. “Can’t be sure ’til I get him on my table.”

“Gimme your guess.”

“Seventy-eight. Had heart trouble, but nothing all that serious. My guess is he had some help.”

“Perhaps what made the others sick?”

Grafton gave the slightest of nods.

Early read down his notepad scribbings. “The only thing Shep had in common with the others is he and they always came to church early. The Sunday Morning Coffee Gang.”

“Coffee wouldn’t do it.”

“Wouldn’t think so.”

“Unless it had something in it that wasn’t supposed to be there.”

A deputy hustled in from the kitchen. He handed a container to Early, the container wrapped in a Daisy Sue tea towel. “Found it in the pantry, way in the back,” the deputy said.

Early turned the container to Grafton.

The coroner screwed up his face in an expression of one who had tasted something foul. “Now that’d sure do it,” he said.

Early glanced at his deputy. “Who’s the coffee maker?”

“Bondy.”

“Willy Bonderson, the high school gym teacher?”

“In the kitchen now, washing the communion cups and trays.”

A sigh escaped from the sheriff. He didn’t dislike Bonderson, just found the one-time marathoner a bit squirrely, reed thin, a bachelor who lived by himself on a farm that had been his parents’.

Early rambled into the church’s kitchen. He put his arm around the shoulders of the man at the sink, drew him away from the sudsy water. “Bondy, got a question for you.”

The two leaned against a counter, Early with the container under his arm.

“You make the coffee this morning?”

“Want some?” Bonderson asked.

“No, not really.”

“At’s good because I’ve already dumped it out. Even washed the pot.”

“You wouldn’t happen to be unhappy with someone here, would you?”

“Not particularly. Guess you’ll find out, though.”

“That Shep was working on the school board to get you fired?”

“Oh, you know?”

“I heard the talk, but nobody’s saying why.”

“Well, Shep’s got a nephew fresh out of Fort Hays State. He wants – wanted him hired in my job. Sheriff, I’ve put in thirty-two years at that damn school. I was shootin’ for forty.”

“And with Shep out of the way – ”

“I wouldn’t do that. My God, he was my Sunday school teacher when I was a kid.”

Early brought out the wrapped container. He let a part of the tea towel fall away. “Am I going to find your fingerprints on this?”

“Course you will. Among other things, I’m the church janitor. It’s a country church, sheriff. I put bait out for the varmints.”

“And maybe a little rat-poison cocktail in the morning coffee? Doc going to find warfarin in Shep? . . . Well?” Early laughed. “You’re not going to tell me old Scratch made you do it.”

Bonderson rubbed a boney hand over his thinning hair. “Well, I have been known to hear voices, and at the damndest times.”