

Bounty of the Land

By Rick Burnett

Writing Battle 2025 Heart Flash Fiction

I was surprised I had a signal out here amid the farmer's long rows of trees.

The camera's crooked, said the voice from my hidden earpiece. It was Frank, my customer service specialist. I straightened my bowtie to adjust the video feed to my cell phone.

That's better.

This wasn't my first foreclosure, but the first out in the country.

You got two more today, so make this quick, he reminded me.

With my briefcase set on the sunken porch, I pulled on the rickety screen door. A large tear in the screen flopped back and forth. It creaked in the way you'd expect from a farmhouse older than the dirt caked around the window casings.

Three knocks, just enough to announce your presence, but not enough to sound impatient. The door opened slightly with each hit. Stale smoke and remnants of centuries-old fatback assaulted me. I released the screen as a dog barked my arrival.

"Hello? I'm Clifford Alton...from the bank?" I spoke toward the crack.

You need more confidence, Frank instructed.

Heavy footsteps approached, "I hear ya."

The door creaked open. Tired eyes above hunched shoulders, a half-gone cigarette, and mud-stained overalls sized me up. The man looked to be in his seventies.

“Mr. Lawson?” I asked.

He nodded and pushed open the screen door, leaving just enough room for me to enter. I grabbed my briefcase and stepped into a shadowy wood-paneled kitchen with appliances that should be in a museum. Old newspapers, scattered envelopes, and stained coffee mugs covered a table in the center.

Something behind me clicked.

Holy shit, look at the table! Frank yelled, but I'd already turned.

“Door don't like to stay closed and Rufus ain't too fond of strangers,” Lawson said as he stepped around me to circle the kitchen.

Get your ass out of there! Frank instructed.

Then I saw it. On the other side of the table, a large ornate Bible sat adjacent to an old-looking gun.

“You look...busy, I can...come back?” I offered, confidence-free.

“Daddy always said, you gotta face your troubles head-on.” Lawson's wooden chair squawked as he sat, resting his forearm against the pistol.

Cliff, you hearing me? Nod the bowtie if you can.

I sat, leaned forward twice, feigned settling in. My ignorance of guns amplified my fear. Lawson pushed it against the Bible as his words brought my

eyes to his.

“I reckon you're here about that extension?”

“Well, I'm, uhh, afraid I'm here for a different reason Mr. Lawson.” I panicked.

Are you stupid? Don't piss him — static replaced Frank's voice.

“Oh?” he said.

I hesitantly pulled the briefcase from the floor, the crackle of his cigarette the only sound. I extracted the documents, then half stood to offer them. His shaky hand grabbed them as his other slid the pistol closer. His lips moved while he read.

Frank was back, *We're calling 911.*

I couldn't believe this stupid bowtie might actually save me. But what if the police didn't get here in time? I considered throwing my briefcase and lunging for the gun, but I'd never make it. My heart raced. Instead, I settled on sympathy. “I don't think it's right, what the bank is doing.”

Good, stall him!

“I try to be a good man, live my life by the good book. Do you believe?” His hand was now on the Bible.

“Oh yes sir,” I lied. “Do unto others and all that.” Shit, what if he shoots me, then himself?

“My daddy told me we were the first to settle these lands almost 300 years

ago. This land is in my blood, my bones. It's all I know." The last words dragged out low.

Offer him an extension! Frank yelled.

"Tobacco carried us through till Patsy got sick, God rest her soul. Spent more time at that hospital than here. Growing truffles was supposed to be my salvation." His head was shaking now.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. Maybe...we can work out...another extension?"

Cops are five minutes out.

"I'm tired of carrying these burdens."

I was gripping the table so hard I was sure it would snap.

"Let's just," I started as time slowed. The gun lifted from the table, the barrel moving toward me. I couldn't breathe.

Get out of there!

As he stood, his chair screeching across the floor, I shoved hard against the table to launch myself to the door. My hands fumbled with the ancient lock, but I couldn't decipher it.

"Ten years I told y'all I needed."

"Please sir, we can work this out," I cried, yanking on the handle, "Frank!"

"Mr. Alton," he spoke in calm delivery. I turned, not knowing what else to do. He leveled the gun at my chest, too far to reach.

I'm so sorry man!

He pulled the trigger with a laugh.

Nothing happened.

“Did you think I's gonna shoot you?” He said with a half-cocked smile.

The adrenaline had stolen my voice as I doubled over, almost throwing up.

“This ain't shot nothing for longer than we owned this land. I took this and the Bible out to give to you. Belonged to a fella named John White. You know 'im?”

“No.”

“Well his things been in my family a long time,” he lifted the Bible and offered both to me. “They was buried in that cursed Roanoke land.”

I reluctantly took them.

“I ain't good with modern gadgets, so when you sell 'em, you wire back the difference, you hear?”

I was still in shock.

Cliff! Tell him yes!

“Yes...okay.”

Lawson pointed toward the door.

Get out before he changes his mind!

I silently retrieved the papers and put them and the artifacts into the briefcase. In the distance, I heard the sirens.

As I walked down the steps toward my car, he said one last thing.

“Next time you come back, there's always my daddy's pistol.”

I glanced back to see a grin I couldn't read. I was never coming back here.