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Short
Tall
Tales



Sheriff Tomas Ortega

SHORT TALL TALES

The Lantern That Never Went Out

By Ted Clifton

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They say the desert keeps its secrets.

But in Mesilla, some secrets refuse to stay buried.

Sheriff Tomas Ortega knew that better than most.

He was a quiet man, the kind who didn't waste words or bullets. Folks said he could hear trouble before it happened—like the wind whispered it to him through the cottonwoods along the Rio Grande. Others said it wasn't the wind at all.

It started the summer the lantern appeared.

No one knew where it came from. It wasn't hanging from any post, wasn't carried by any man. Just... there. Floating low along the edge of the plaza after sundown, glowing a soft, steady amber. Not flickering like flame—steady, like it had a mind of its own.

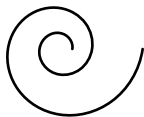
The first night, people ignored it.

By the third night, people locked their doors.
Because wherever that lantern drifted...
trouble followed.

A rancher swore he saw it hovering outside
his barn just before his best horse vanished
without a sound.

A shopkeeper claimed it passed his window
moments before his safe was found
open—no marks, no broken lock, nothing
missing except a single silver coin.

But it was the fifth night that brought Sheriff
Ortega into the story.



A young boy came running into the station,
breathless, eyes wide as desert moons.

“It took my sister,” he said. “The light—it
came to the window, and she just... followed
it.”

No tracks. No struggle. Just footprints
leading out of town—and then nothing.

Ortega didn't call for deputies.

Didn't gather a posse.

He took his hat, his revolver, and one old
oil lantern he kept hanging by his desk.

The one he never lit.

Not once.

He stepped into the night.

And walked toward the glow.

Out past the last adobe wall, where
Mesilla gives way to desert and silence,
the strange lantern waited.

Hovering.

Watching.



Ortega stopped ten paces away.

“You’ve been busy,” he said.

The lantern didn’t answer.

But the air changed. Grew heavier.

Like a storm without clouds.

“You’re not lost,” Ortega continued.

“You’re looking.”

The light flickered then—just once.

And for a moment, it wasn’t a lantern at all.

It was a face.

Faint. Hollow. Searching.

Ortega didn’t flinch.

“Long time ago,” he said quietly, “a man came through here. Took things that weren’t his. Thought the desert would hide what he’d done.”

The wind stirred.

The lantern drifted closer.

“And now,” Ortega said, “you’re still looking for what you lost.”

The glow dimmed... then pulsed.

Angrier now.

The ground beneath them seemed to breathe.

“You won’t find it like this,” Ortega said.
“Taking from the living won’t settle the dead.”

For a long moment, nothing moved.

Then—far behind the lantern—a shape appeared.

A girl.

Barefoot. Eyes distant. Walking as if in a dream.

Ortega stepped forward.

“Let her go.”

The lantern flared bright—too bright.

The desert wind howled.

And then—

Darkness.

When the light returned, it was morning.

The girl was lying in the dust, unharmed,
as if she'd just fallen asleep under the
stars.

The strange lantern was gone.

Only one light remained.

The one in Sheriff Ortega's hand.

Burning.

For the first time anyone could remember.



They say that lantern still hangs in the
sheriff's office.

Still burns without oil.

And every now and then—on nights when
the desert feels too quiet—it flickers.

Just once.

Like something out there is still searching.

And Sheriff Tomas Ortega...

Is still listening.