

# BirdDog BOOGIE

A JAKE ELIAM  
CHICKENBONE MYSTERY



CLIFF YEARGIN

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A Jake Eliam ChickenBone Mystery

Cliff Yeargin

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Touch with NEW updates from Jake & The Gang

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# **The ChickenBone Mystery Series**

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**Rabbit Shine**  
**Hoochy Koochy**  
**MudCat Moon**  
**BirdDog Boogie**

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*cliffyeargin.com*

*Reader Reviews for the ChickenBone Mystery Series*

**RABBIT SHINE**

Expertly captures the soul of Atlanta with all its eccentricities, quirky characters and distinctive sense of humor. With characters as strong and intriguing as the story they move through, it was easy to read cover to cover without coming up for air. I'm looking forward to seeing what is in store for the next installment in this of uncommonly clever series."

Bob Koenig Baltimore, Maryland

Rabbit Shine is a fun, breezy yarn utilizing excellent character development and good old-fashioned southern storytelling. Baseball fans will especially enjoy the author's insights into the lead character's association with America's Pastime. Look forward to the next Jake Eliam adventure!"

David Steele Orlando, Florida

"Great Story! LOVED, LOVED, LOVED IT! Move over Sue Grafton. Loved Jake, Chance, Catfish and Toot was my hero."

Linda Fox Fallston, Maryland

*Reader Reviews for the ChickenBone Mystery Series*

## **HOOCHY KOOCHY**

“Reminded me of James Lee Burke. Yeargin is a true son of the south.”

Jeff Duckett, Atlanta, Georgia

“This book feels alive. Every page seems to breathe with life and atmosphere. The inside of Jake’s head is a wonderful place to be. He’s smart but knows he’s a working class stiff. He’s old fashioned, but adaptable. Most of the time, he is looking for a beer and something to eat and something to listen to. Even if you are not from the Deep South, anyone who enjoys the simple life will find a kindred spirit in the characters of this book.

There is an old saying: Step onto the road and there is no telling where you might be swept off to. If there was any book that could teach this saying it is this one. Jake lives his life in a fairly routine manner. He likes routine. When he steps off of that beaten path, the places he goes are as exotic as if he had hopped a plane to another continent.”

The BookWorm Speaks

“If you’re from the South, ever been to the South, or plan on visiting the South...READ these books.”

Bruce Cramer, Los Angeles, California

## **HOOCHY KOOCHY**

***2016 Georgia Author of the Year Award  
Silver Medal Finalist in the Mystery/Detective Category***

### **Judge's Comments**

With a taste of noir in the storytelling, *Hoochy Koochy* grabbed me from the beginning with voice and action. Dialogue runs this story, which is a special interest of mine when it comes to reading a new author. Clipped one-liners. Snappy retorts. Guys who accept their lots in life and roll with the punches. Loved the fact this protagonist had so many flaws yet I found myself loving him still. It's terse, quick writing, my favorite type of prose. Minimalist with no wasted words. Yet the words used were spot on in keeping me engaged. Loved it. Really did.

*C Hope Clark, Author of the Edisto Island & Carolina Slade mysteries*

*Reader Reviews for the ChickenBone Mystery Series*

## **MudCat Moon**

"I have to admit that MudCat Moon is one of the most entertaining books I've read in a long time. This one has it all. Jake and his friends come off as strong, funny, sarcastic, likable and a little strange, or maybe a lot strange. The reader may know what to expect, but the fun is finding out how to get there."

Paul F Johnson for Readers' Favorite    5 STARS

"If you love mystery, sports, southern food and spicy humor, this is a book to cherish. Terrifically authentic good ol' Southern mystery that has just that right balance of off the cuff humor mixed well with Southern drawl dialogue that could only blossom this well in the south. Cliff Yeargin is becoming a significant voice in American writing."

Grady Harp    5 STARS

"What wonderful details this book has. I found this to be a difficult book to put down. The setting is very atmospheric, the southern vibe is very much present and you can almost feel it."

Kimberly Borget    5 STARS

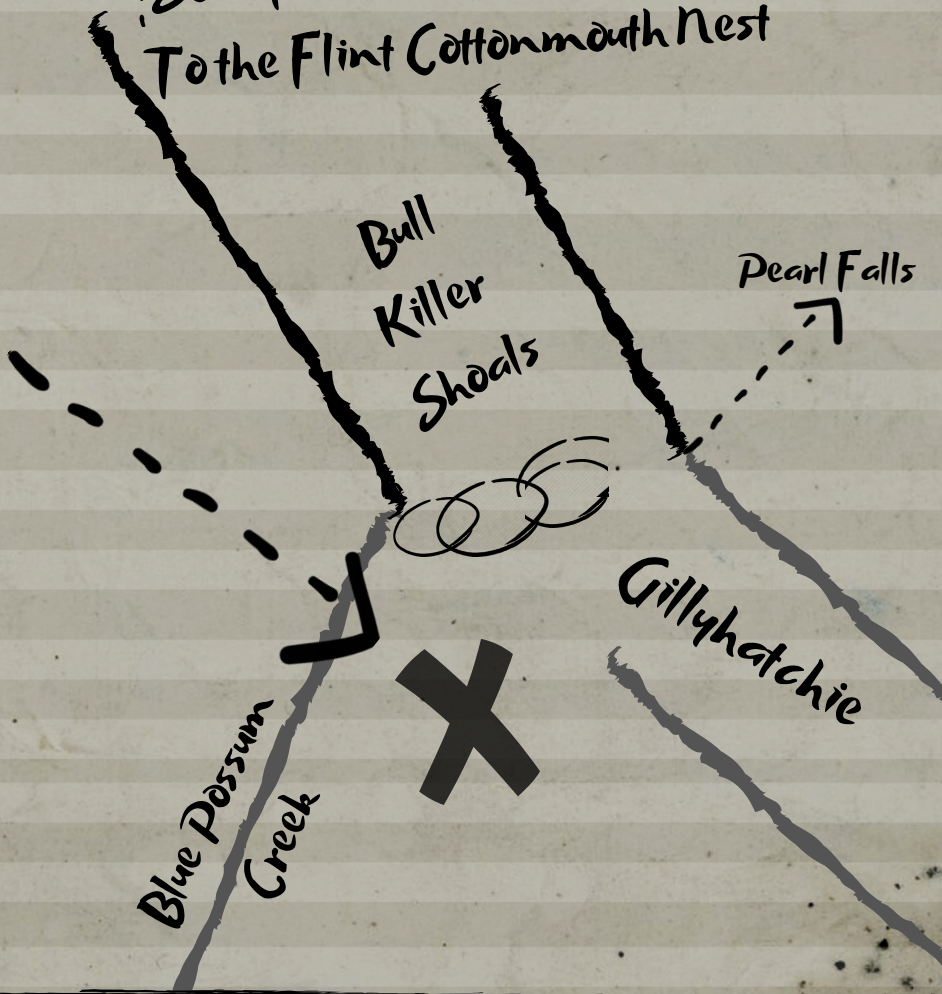
"If you're a southern guy, you know the kind that loves college football, MLB (& especially BRAVES) baseball, Country and MoTown music, and food from the Varsity, the Colonnade Restaurant, Mary Mac's Tea Room , you're going to love Yeargin's books. Think "Lewis Grizzard", okay. With main characters like Catfish, Dumptruck, Boobytrap and Buddy Lee, you know it's going to be fun."

Shelton Stevens, Atlanta GA



# Shoestring's Map

N ↑ At Mouth of Gator...  
50+ paces - Follow Waterfall  
To the Flint Cottonmouth Nest





## Prologue

“She’s dead.”

“What?”

“I know dead, and she’s dead.”

The man who made this pronouncement leaned in for a closer look. Ashes from the cigarette in his lips dropped off. He poked at something. I cringed at the sound.

“Yep, she’s dead,” he said.

“You sure?”

He looked at me, cocked his head, and pointed at his partner.

“Tell him, Henry.”

“He knows dead,” Henry said and wiped his face with the sleeve of a dirty white t-shirt.

I stood in the ditch next to the road. The sun had drifted below the pine trees behind me. Nothing in view, left or right, except a long two-lane tar and gravel road. The man asked me where I was from. I told him.

“What you doing way down here?”

“Was on my way to see a man about a piece of machine gear.”

He looked me over and rubbed a hand across the stubble on his face.

“So, what do we do now?” I asked.

“Well, getting dark.” He looked up at the sky. “I guess me and Henry can haul it back to my yard and take care of it for you.”

“How much is that going to cost me?”

He took a long drag off the cigarette and tossed it in the ditch. “Five hundred dollars.”

“Really?”

“Look, son.” He turned to face me. “I don’t know where you’re from, but where I come from, five hundred dollars is a lot of money to give somebody for a 1974 Ford truck with a blown engine and rusty parts and I’ve still got to haul it back to my junkyard. A tree will be growing through it before I make my money back. Five hundred. Take it or start walking.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Go get the tow truck, Henry.” He fired up another cigarette.

An hour later, I was sitting on a stool outside a convenience store in the dark. I had five hundred bucks in my pocket. I was one hundred miles from home. I had a cardboard box with the remains: two screwdrivers, a hammer, a handsaw, three cans of motor oil, four baseballs, two bats, and a soon-to-be-empty bottle of Wild Turkey to mourn the loss of a good truck. May she rest in peace.

# Chapter 1

My name is Jake Eliam and at the moment, I wasn't a happy man. I shouldn't have been in a foul mood; I was being paid to be on a baseball field. I was back in a baseball uniform for the first time in a long while, if you could call the bright orange nylon pullover I was wearing a uniform. Still, I was wearing baseball pants and cleats. My cleats. Old metal cleats that made that great sound when you walked across concrete. I should've been happy, but I wasn't.

I'd been hired by my old friend Walt Williams to help coach at a prospect showcase camp for kids who were eligible for the upcoming amateur baseball draft. Forty-five kids. Position players only. Drills in the morning, simulated games in the afternoon, all while a host of player personnel folks and camera crews looked on. I would've guessed that only a handful of these kids would get drafted, and only one or two would make it to the show, but the cameras and scouts were there for the one kid they all thought was a sure thing: Bobby St. John. He was the reason I was in such a foul mood.

Eighteen years old, Canseco-sized arms, linebacker legs, and over six foot four. He played at a local private school, hit buckets of long home runs, and was a few weeks away from a payday of millions as a first-round pick. He also had a full ride at Tennessee in football as a bargaining chip. What he didn't have was any sense of just how dang lucky he was. The kid was arrogant, lazy, smug, disrespectful, and uncoachable.

At one time, I'd been a professional baseball player. Seventeen years as a player or coach. I had even made the major leagues for a few white-hot minutes, but you would have a hard time finding anybody who would or could remember that fact. Yet, I could and did remember every second, every minute, every hour, every day of being in the big leagues. When I was St. John's age, I was the 687<sup>th</sup> player drafted that year. I was sent off to Bluefield, West Virginia with \$752.24 in my pocket. No cameras; nothing but a small bag of clothes and two taped-up bats. Call it bitterness, call it resentment, or maybe a bit of jealousy. Call it whatever you like. Maybe I wished the big dog had barked at my door, just once.

It was the last day of camp, and Bobby St. John took his sweet time getting in the box, adjusting his batting gloves slowly to give the news cameras plenty of time to get a close-up for his final turn at bat. The metal stands behind home plate were packed with young baseball execs, their laptops out in full force. The Phillies, who held the first pick, had sent six people to get a look. His last time up, St. John had hit one deep over the scoreboard in left center.

Since these were position players only, we had local college kids fill in on the mound and behind the plate to expedite the showcase. The lefthander on the mound was nervous. St. John took a slow curve for a strike and waited for the fastball. He turned on it, hitting it over 400 feet just foul down the left field line. He smiled at the pitcher on his way back to the plate. I called time from the third base box and jogged to the mound. The hired hand, a former Minor League catcher, joined me.

"Sorry, coach," the young pitcher said. "I can't get my fastball past him. I'm just a junior college guy, I never faced a number one draft choice."

"Yeah, he can hit a fastball a mile, can't he?" I said.

"Yes sir."

“But that’s not the only pitch you throw is it?”

“Sir?”

The catcher with a thick red beard spoke up. “Bet he can’t hit that two seamer you were throwing on the side yesterday.”

I looked at the pitcher and smiled. “The sinker. He can’t touch it.”

“I couldn’t hit it,” the catcher said. “That’s why I’m working construction.”

“But I’m just supposed to be throwing accelerated BP right? I’ll get in trouble.”

“No, you won’t. I will. But let me worry about that.”

The burly catcher covered his mouth with his mitt and laughed.

“Here’s the drill,” I said. “Throw the next one way outside. Unreachable. When he inches up on the plate, throw another fastball hard as you can inside and knock him on his big butt.”

“You want me to hit him?”

“No, but I do want you to wipe that smug grin off his face. Then drop that sinker on him down and out. Throw it hard and make it dive.”

The umpire started to trot out to the mound. I could see Walt over in the dugout giving me a quizzical look. I patted the young pitcher on the rear.

“Come on now,” I said. “Let’s have some fun out here. Baseball is supposed to be fun, isn’t it?”

Back in the box, I watched the catcher set up outside. The pitch was nearly three feet off the plate. I saw St. John creep up close. The nervous young pitcher unleashed his fastball. He was more nervous than I’d thought. It went up, in and high, right at the eyes. St. John pulled his

head out of the way just in the nick of time, stumbled backward three steps, lost his balance and fell flat on his butt, helmet flying one way, his bat the other. He came up fast and headed toward the mound. The big catcher flipped his mask off and caught St. John with a chest bump.

“Where you going, Draft Pick?”

The ump and I restored order. The execs buzzed, and the cameras followed it all. I jogged back to my spot and nodded to the catcher. The young pitcher broke off his two-seam sinker. A sinker looks like a fastball but drops on a right-handed hitter. It wasn't even a Class A sinker; it was a junior college sinker, but Bobby St. John missed it by a foot and slammed his bat so hard, it snapped into two pieces. Welcome to wood bats, kid.

The umpire jogged down toward me. I saw Walt over in the dugout rolling his eyes at me. The umpire closed in and lifted his mask. He pointed a finger in my chest.

“What in the hell was that all about, coach?”

“Sorry, Blue, just trying to give the cameras a goodbye gift.” I grinned at him.

“Stifle that grin,” he said, keeping his finger in my chest. “Those folks behind the backstop and the camera idiots think I'm down here ripping you a new one for that stunt you just pulled. And since they're paying me good money, that's exactly what I expect them to think.”

“But what are you really thinking?”

“I must have done ten or more of his games over the last year or so, and Bobby St. John may be the biggest jackass I've ever seen on a baseball field.”

“So, what are you telling me, Blue?”

“I am *officially* telling you that this is a TNK agency-supported showcase and if you pull that kind of crap again, I will have Walt run you off my field.”

“And unofficially?”



He yanked his mask back down. “I was hoping you would hit the cocky big fool in the frigging head.”

**Make A Note: Every now and then, the big dog does come barking at your door.**

## Chapter 2

Bobby St. John might've been the top pick from this showcase, but he wasn't the best player. In my mind, the best kid on the field was a lanky centerfielder named Jimmy Brewer. The college kids with the laptops didn't have any analytics on him because he played his high school ball at a tiny rural school over in Madison County. It had taken his coach two weeks just to talk the agency folks into letting him come. His numbers and stats weren't that great. Matter of fact, he didn't do anything great. But he did everything right and everything better and more consistently than all the other kids. Plus, he did it without running his mouth.

I stayed late every day working with him. He hit from both sides and had a smooth swing that drove line drives to both fields. He could bunt, and he had an above average arm and good speed. We had worked mostly on his accuracy. I used an old metal bucket for the throwing drill. Stuck it on a metal rod, moved it around. Hit balls to the fielder and let him throw to the bucket. One rattle and clang at a time. The clang echoed into the darkness as we worked until we couldn't see.

He hadn't had it easy as a teen and I could relate. His father had died when Jimmy was thirteen years old, in some long-forgotten province over in Afghanistan. His mother and two younger brothers worked a soybean farm with their grandfather. It would be a long shot for him to be drafted in the late to lower rounds, but in that slot, he still might get a fifty thousand dollar signing bonus, and that could grow a lot of soybeans.

I still didn't have another truck, so I went inside, showered up, and called my neighbor Alex for a ride. She had been helping me get around all week and took care of my dog Chance while I worked the camp. It was completely dark when I left the locker room and headed down by the bleachers to the parking lot.

“Wopbopablubopboombangbang.” A voice broke through the dark. “Sounded like dang Little Richard out there, banging on that bucket.”

I nearly fell into the chain-link fence, tripped, and dropped my equipment bag.

“The kid can ding that bucket, can't he?” A scratchy voice in the dark.

“Jesus, Biscuit,” I said as I gathered myself and picked up my bag. “You scared the hell out of me, sitting here in the dark.”

“You, Jake Eliam, were the one out there working the kid in the middle of the night. I was just sitting here.”

He pronounced my name correctly, with the hard *E*. He should've; we had known each other for more than thirty years. Grady “Biscuit” Bailey was a legendary and longtime baseball scout. He wasn't the man who had signed me, but he could've been. He worked throughout the South for decades and could boast a large roster of guys who had made the Major Leagues. Day after day, mile after mile, he traveled the countryside in search of another baseball player.

“What are you doing here this late?” I asked.

He spat a wad of chew into a paper cup. “Making a paycheck, like you.”

“I thought you retired?”

“Did.”

“Didn't stick?”

“Not the first, second, or third time.”

“So, you here for the big kid, St. John?”

“Was. Philly gave me meal money to sign off on him,” Biscuit said. “But when I told them he had his head up his ass and couldn’t hit a breaking ball, they cut me loose.”

“Both true. They didn’t believe you?”

“The whippersnapper that fired me couldn’t been more than twenty-five years old,” he said. “I got underwear older than him.”

“So, why are you still here?”

“Your guy, Jimmy Brewer.”

“You got a line on him?”

“Good kid. Good mama. Helluva soybean farm.”

“You met him and the family?”

“How else you get to know a player?”

“You see him play?”

“Every home game this year. He may not have the numbers, but he’s got the heart and the head for the game.”

“May get a shot.”

“Talked with Louie Bell in St. Louis,” he said. “Remember him? Think they may take a flyer on him down around twenty-five or so. Still good money these days, even in the low rounds.”

“You waiting to talk to me about Jimmy?”

“Waiting to talk to you, but not about Jimmy.”

“Then what?”

“Wanted to ask you about that other job you do.”

“Making baseball bats?”

“Hell no.” He spat in the cup again. “I already know all ‘bout your bat business.”

“Then what other job?”

“That whatever investigating thing you do.”

“That’s not much to talk about. Kind of just fell into that. Not much of a job.”

“Shoot, I saw that fool Billy Joe Weede get marched off the field on TV.”

“Well, most of that stuff comes about through my friend Bobby Wilson, guy that owns  
The 3 Pigs BBQ place.”

“Catfish?”

“You know Catfish?”

“I know everybody.”

“Course you do.”

“So, you ever do anything like find stuff?”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Lost stuff. Missing stuff.”

“Found a missing guitar player once.”

“A guitar player?”

“Missing for twenty years.”

“And you found him?”

“I did.”

“Where?”

“On stage with a bunch of rattlesnakes.”

“Well, don’t that just beat the band.” He laughed and coughed at the same time.

“What is all this about, Biscuit?”

“I got a business proposition for you. Right up your alley.”

“And just what would that be?”

“Better to talk about it over a drink.” He pushed himself up off the bleachers. “Come on, buy me a whiskey. Maybe two or three.”

“I got a ride coming,” I said. I spotted Alex and her Jeep.

“How ‘bout tomorrow then?”

“Okay. How’s ten o’clock in the morning at The 3 Pigs sound?”

“Sounds early as hell,” Biscuit said. “But I’ll be there. This is important.”

“Does any of this have anything at all to do with baseball?”

He paused and watched Alex roll up to the back of the bleachers. “This has everything to do with baseball.”

Dust from the parking lot streamed through Alex’s headlights as I made my way to the passenger side door. Chance stuck his head out the window to greet me. Biscuit opened the door to his old battered blue van with a creak and then looked back toward us.

“Jacob Ezekiel Eliam,” he shouted. “Eighteen years old. Baltimore, Maryland. Six-four, two hundred and fifteen pounds. Throws right, bats both, good speed, decent bat, average arm. Deep late round. Ready to leave town, will sign for under a thousand bucks on the spot.”

He laughed, spat on the ground, and shut the door with a clank.

Alex looked at me and then back to the van.

“What in the world was that?”

“That? That was the late-night mournful howl of an aging BirdDog.”

## Chapter 3

“When’s Biscuit getting here?” Catfish asked me.

“He’s an hour late,” I said.

“You just got here ten minutes ago.”

“My driver was late.”

Alex looked up from her plate of pulled pork and greens and looked at Catfish. “You have got to find him a new truck. He thinks I’m a chauffeur for him and his dog.”

“I’m closing that deal today,” Catfish said and poked at a large plate of mashed potatoes and four slices of white toast. You didn’t get to be his size on some gluten-free diet. The former All-SEC lineman at Georgia owned The 3 Pigs BBQ at the top end of ChickenBone and had another one over in Athens. It was only a tiny part of a business portfolio that he kept under wraps and hidden from most. He also owned the old warehouse-style buildings across the railroad tracks where Alex and I lived and worked. He often found extra paying jobs for the both of us, even if the last big one had nearly gotten us killed. A steady supply of free pulled pork and sweet tea went a long way toward forgiveness.

“You found somebody that can get me a truck?”

“Guy that sells vehicles in the front yard of his church.”

“He’s a preacher?” Alex asked with her mouth full.

“Not on Wednesday,” Catfish said. “Every Wednesday, he goes down to Augusta to this auto auction and buys cars and sells them to his congregation.”

“Decent cars?” I asked.

“Most of them are flood and hurricane leftovers.”

“I don’t want a truck that’s been in a flood.”

He waved me off and poked at his plate. “This same place has good trucks as well as the bad ones, and I made it real clear to the reverend that he gets you a good one.”

“For the same price that we talked about?”

“The same.”

“Why would he do that for you?”

“Cause, not only do I know that he buys bad cars every Wednesday down in Augusta, but I also know what little club he heads off to every Wednesday night in Augusta, where he puts on a red wig, lipstick, and a dress.”

“The preacher is a drag queen?” Alex asked with a giggle.

“Just on Wednesdays.”

“How do you know this?” I asked.

“I am nothing if not well informed in the ways of conducting business.”

“That you are.”

“That’s blackmail,” Alex said.

“I prefer to think of it as a negotiating tactic based on valuable information.”

“And people in his church don’t mind being sold cars that have been flooded?”

“A few months ago, he sold a little compact car to his third cousin, a retired school teacher on social security. The dang thing stalled out, burst into flames, and burned up completely.”

“Was she mad at him?” Alex asked.



“The good reverend explained to her that the car burst into flames because her faith wasn’t strong enough. Said it was a sign from above. Told her that donating more money to the church would make her stronger and get her a better car.”

“And she believed him?”

“She did. Gave him another two hundred bucks. Bought himself a new dress and some high heels for the next Wednesday night.”

## Chapter 4

A little before noon, Biscuit Bailey ambled into The 3 Pigs. As far as I could tell, he was wearing the same clothes from the day before: a blue-checked, short-sleeve shirt buttoned up to the top, faded brown dress slacks, worn brogans, and a snappy straw fedora. He removed the hat and raked a hand across what hair he had left. On his right hand was a battered old championship ring of some sort. Hair sprouted from his big ears, and it had been a few days since he'd had a shave. He smelled of Old Spice and hours-old whiskey. He had a ragged old plastic grocery bag under his right arm.

I introduced him to Alex. Catfish had a full #4 plate delivered to him. We made small talk, and Biscuit mentioned he had watched Catfish play football over at UGA. He told Alex she had eyes like a Cheshire cat. I wasn't sure if she was flattered or insulted, but she stayed quiet and ate her blueberry pie.

"So, are you going to tell me what this business proposition is?" I asked Biscuit.

"It's kinda private," he said and looked around.

"Consider this my Board of Directors."

"Okay then," he said between bites. "But first, I gotta tell you the whole story."

"Is it a long one?"

"You remember a player named Sammy 'Shoestring' Stubbs?"

"No, I don't."

"I do," Catfish said.

“You do?” I was surprised at his response.

“Everybody knows Shoestring Stubbs,” he said. “At least everybody from around where I grew up.”

“You come from Pearl Falls?” Biscuit asked.

“Born and raised.”

“Well doggone,” Biscuit said. “Then you do know the story?”

“Well we don’t,” Alex said. “So which one of you is going to tell us the story?”

Catfish looked over at Biscuit. He wasn’t one to pass up the chance to tell a story.

“Shoestring was a baseball player who grew up just outside of Pearl Falls in Perry County in the sixties,” Catfish began. “From a real nasty backwoods family, but he was a pretty decent athlete.”

“I was the fool who signed him for the Reds,” Biscuit added.

“Made the big leagues for a few years.”

Biscuit jumped in. “From 1967 to 73. Ten damn different teams. Played nearly every position, but no good at any of them. That’s why they called him Shoestring.”

“Hanging on by his shoestrings,” Catfish explained.

“Got it,” I said. “Carry on.”

“But that ain’t the real reason no team wanted him around,” Biscuit said.

“He was mean as a rattlesnake, a miserable idiot who stayed drunk around the clock and even the players on his own team didn’t like him,” Catfish added.

“That’s because he was a damn thief.”

“A thief.” I said. “What did he steal?”

“Everything he could get his hands on,” Catfish said.

“Like money or what?” Alex asked.

“Baseball stuff,” Biscuit said. “That fool stole more baseball crap than you’ll find in any dang museum.”

“You mean baseball memorabilia?” I asked.

“Anything and everything from every player on his own team and the team in the other clubhouse.”

“Like what?” Alex asked.

“Uniform tops, cleats, gloves, baseball cards, bats, balls, autographs, wallets, letters, everything he could find. Like a squirrel grabbing nuts before winter.”

“His own teammates beat the crap out of him four or five times,” Catfish said. “I heard one of them stuck Stubb’s head in a toilet when he caught him. Nearly drowned him.”

“So, he was out of the game by 73 and back here in Georgia playing for a semi-pro team out of Macon,” Biscuit said.

“What happened to all the items he swiped?” I asked.

“That’s where the story gets interesting.” Catfish smiled.

“That wasn’t the interesting part?” Alex asked.

“No, it ain’t,” Biscuit said.

Catfish couldn’t resist. He jumped in. “Story goes he was gonna keep all that loot and sell it down the road when it aged a bit. Be worth a lot, later on.”

“But he screwed the pooch, again,” Biscuit said.

“Got in a mean poker game and ended up mouthing off about the loot and then the idiot went and bet it all on an inside straight.”

“Guessing he lost,” I said.

“He lost,” Catfish repeated. “And the guys marched him out to his truck to get their payday and that’s when it happened.”

“What happened?” Alex was locked into the story now.

“He reached behind the seat, came out with a pistol, and shot them both dead.”

“Killed them on the spot and took off,” Biscuit added.

“Big damn storm that night, raining hard and Shoestring headed down to Bull Killer Shoals with all the baseball loot locked inside a big metal footlocker.”

“He took it to a river?” Alex asked.

“The shoals. Rough place. The other fellows at the card game figured he took off down to the shoals to bury the footlocker, hide it all, and come back later to get it.”

“So did he?” I asked.

“Nobody knows.” Catfish turned his hands up. “Deputies found his old truck. Water was high and running hard with the rain. Later they found some stuff at the bottom of the shoals. Found his boots, his pistol, and his old cap. No sign of him or a footlocker.”

“Did he bury it?” Alex asked.

“That’s what folks thought,” Catfish said. “People went to the shoals all the time for years looking for it. Nobody ever turned up anything to this day.”

“So, this guy Shoestring is dead?” I asked.

Catfish shrugged his big shoulders.

“So, nobody knows?”

“Some thought he drowned, some thought he hid it and took off. Folks figured him to come back for it, but nobody is sure if he did or didn’t. Few years later, there was a rumor that he and a first cousin, Tucker Boone, got in a fight over it and Boone killed him. Cops brought

Boone in, but came up empty. He denied it all and they never found a body. Nobody has seen Shoestring or his footlocker full of stuff since.”

“And no sign of any of the items showing up on the market?” I asked.

“Not that anybody ever heard. Could be he just buried it so deep nobody could find it. There must be a thousand places down at them shoals to bury something like that forever. Like I said, it ain’t a place you want to be messing with. Dangerous damn place and some say it’s haunted.”

“Haunted?” Alex leaned forward. “I love this story.”

“That is what worries me,” I said. “Sounds like a story somebody would make up.”

I looked at Catfish. He just tilted his big head with a grin. I looked at Biscuit.

“That’s a pretty wild story the two of you just told,” I said. “But I still don’t understand where I come in and why you wanted to talk to me about it.”

“I need you to help me find the damn stuff,” Biscuit said.

“You just heard Catfish say nobody knows what happened, and people have been looking for years and nobody has turned it up. So what makes you think that you, with or without my help, can find it now?”

He took the old grocery bag, laid it out on the table, and removed some folded newspapers. He unwrapped them and pulled out a worn notebook. He turned to the back of it and removed two brown faded pieces of loose-leaf notebook paper.

“Because,” Biscuit said, “I got these here pieces of paper that tells me right smack dab where Sammy ‘Shoestring’ Stubbs buried it all.”

## Chapter 5

Biscuit squinted at the first piece of paper, holding it away from his face. Alex was impatient to see what he had and snatched it out of his hands. She read it aloud to us: “It says, *‘Biscuit, I done messed up again. This time real bad. I know I let you down and I plan to make it up to you. If something happens to me, this here will tell you where you can find all the stuff I wrote down and you can keep the money.’* It’s signed, *Samuel B. Stubbs, Jr.*”

Catfish took it from her. “When did he send this to you?”

“Is there a date?” I asked.

Alex reached over and picked up a torn envelope from the notebook. She rubbed a finger across the tear. “It’s postmarked 1974,” she said. “Can’t tell from where, it’s torn off. Looks like it might say ‘FL’ at the end, maybe Florida.”

“How long have you had this?” I asked Biscuit.

“Just got it maybe two months back.”

“But he sent it to you in 1974. And you just now got it?”

“You didn’t get it then?” Catfish asked.

“What you think a BirdDog does for a living?” Biscuit asked.

“Travel,” I said.

“All the damn time,” he said. “Ain’t like I ever had no driveway and mailbox.”

Alex looked at the envelope. “It’s addressed in your name but was sent in care of a Mrs. Delores Sanders at the Sweet Peach Boarding House in Bainbridge, Georgia.”

Biscuit scratched a hairy ear. “Stayed there every now and then. Delores and me, well you know.” He grinned. “She took my mail in for me.”

“How nice of Delores,” I said.

“And it suddenly shows up now?” Alex asked. “How?”

“When her husband found out about Delores and me and turned out not to be very friendly, I just never did go back to Bainbridge, if you know what I mean.”

“So how did you get it now?” I asked.

“When they tore the place down, the folks found a box of my mail. Happened to have a bunch of letters and even some damn old checks I missed from the St. Louis Cardinals. So, they tracked me down and sent it all to me in Florida where I was retiring and that’s when I found the stuff from Shoestring.”

“All these years later,” I said.

“Damnedest thing, ain’t it?”

“So, he didn’t die that night at the shoals?” Alex asked.

“It would appear not,” Catfish said.

“And you never heard from him any other time?” I asked. “Anywhere?”

“Not until I opened up this letter. Figured he was dead and gone.”

“Were the things he took worth anything?” Alex asked.

He held up a lined brown sheet of paper with scribbled writing. “Take a look.”

Line after line of notes, hard to see and harder to read. Some of the lines were drawn through and marked out, and some things were added in the margins. Every line, both front and back, filled in. Sometimes, two items were squeezed into one line. Catfish grew tired of me staring at it, grabbed it, and pulled his reading glasses from his shirt pocket.



“Listen to this,” he said. He read from the sheet. “Rod Carew away jersey. Tom Seaver cleats. Willie Stargell ugly Pirate cap. The ball from Jim Palmer’s twentieth win in 1970. Catcher’s mask from Johnny Bench in ‘69.”

“This is a list of the items he stole?” I asked.

“Told you he was a thief,” Biscuit said. “Damn good thief.”

Catfish ran his finger across a line. “A signed picture of Nolan Ryan on the mound at the 1969 World Series.”

“That was the only time Nolan Ryan ever got to pitch in a World Series,” I said.

“So, if he stole these things,” Alex said, “would they be worth a lot of money today if you could find them?”

“A lot,” I said. “A big pile of lot.”

“And this list is two pages long.” Catfish turned it over.

“But this list and the letter says nothing about where it all might be?” Alex asked.

“Right,” Biscuit said. “That’s what the map he drew out is for.”

“Map?” Alex asked. “You have a map showing where he left this stuff?”

“I do.”

“Let’s see it,” Catfish said.

Biscuit paused and looked down at the table. He rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Ain’t nobody seeing that map until we go looking. I got it hid.”

“So how are we supposed to help if we can’t see the map?” I asked.

“You ain’t said if you going to help yet.”

“Haven’t decided,” I said. “And not seeing this map is making it harder to decide.”

“You helping or not?”

“Why is this so important?” I asked. “All these things are most likely turned to dust by now.”

He put the notebook and newspapers back in the plastic bag. “Remember, I told you I done retired three times?” I nodded. “The reason I ain’t stayed retired is cause the place I was living was a damn mess.”

“What place?”

“Retirement home for old baseball scouts down in Fish Camp, Florida.”

“I know the place,” I said. “Marvin Weisenberg, the rich guy that owned all those Minor League franchises, built it just for scouts to have a nice place to retire.”

“That’s the guy,” he said. “And it was nice until he passed on and some fools that ran nursing homes took it over.”

“What happened?” Alex asked.

“Place went to hell. Guys were living in small trailers. No air-conditioning. Food in the main building turned bad. Roaches everywhere. The good help up and quit. One old BirdDog, Hammer Hodges, died in his trailer and they didn’t find him for three days.”

We all sat in silence for a few moments. You could see his eyes water up just a bit, and he wiped his nose with a sniff.

“We got old scouts like me living on the streets. We gave our whole lives to baseball and now we’re just shoved aside like empty cans of dog food. A BirdDog don’t know how to do anything else. Baseball is the only thing we ever done and now we got nothing.” He paused and rubbed at his face. “Now they just look at some computer screen and think they can tell you if a kid is a ballplayer or not.”

“If you found this stuff,” Alex said, “what would you do with it?”

“I’d make damn sure that no other old scout died alone in some hot, broken-down trailer.” He made a quick rub of his right eye and fiddled with the button at the top of his shirt.

Catfish put a big hand on his shoulder. “Count me in.”

“Me too,” Alex said.

Biscuit looked at her and smiled. He turned to me. I glanced over at Alex. She gave me a look I’d seen before that said, *Don’t you dare say no.*

“You’ll show us the map?” I asked.

“Soon as you say you’re in.”

“Okay,” I said. “Give me a few days to get a truck, and I got to get an order of bats out. I get that done and then we’ll see where we start.”

“I’ll find Toot Thomson,” Catfish said. “He can help.”

“Isn’t that the guy that saved your butt down in Birdsong?” Alex asked.

“That would be him,” I said. “Why would he be a help?”

“He was a Deputy in Perry County before he moved over to Birdsong. Pretty sure he would have worked that case.”

“You think you can find him again?” I asked.

He shrugged and smiled. I shouldn’t have asked.

“Find this Toot, find whoever you need,” Biscuit said. He stood up and put his fedora back on. “Let’s get this dog a hunting.”

“Where are you staying?” I asked

“Nearby. I got to go see a kid up around Cherokee County today.” He picked up the plastic bag and patted Alex on the hand. He turned serious. “And you, Jake Eliam,” he said, looking to me. “You help me find this stuff and I got something I’ll give you that you can keep.”

It ain't stolen, but it's more valuable than anything you got and anything I ever had. We find Shoestring's stash and I'll give it to you. It's yours. A real baseball treasure. If I'm lying, you can chop me up in little pieces and bury me up in Royston, Georgia next to Ty Cobb."

## Chapter 6

It had been three days, and we hadn't heard back from Biscuit. Maybe he'd found a diamond in the rough player or maybe he was just still mad because I didn't really believe his story, but it had given me time to finish up a current order of bats. Over the previous few days, I had turned out fifteen blonde stock bats of different sizes for a Class A team, the Myrtle Beach Pelicans. I was down to the last five.

I did my work in a building that was more than a hundred years old and parked on the very edge of a working train yard. I'd grown accustomed to the constant clang and clatter of boxcars and train horns that wailed day and night. I lived upstairs and worked downstairs in an area that had once been the home of a Carolina & Western Railroad machine shop. I took that name off the old building for my bats. I stamped the logo on the barrel and on the end, I added a model number and etched in the words "*Made in ChickenBone.*"

I hadn't planned this business. It had been born when a retired Army man who'd taken me under his wing when I was a teenager left me a garage full of outdated equipment when he passed on. I had set out with a plan to make bats—ash bats only—for Minor League teams in need of a stock supply for those without equipment contracts. If you were a Minor Leaguer whose career resided on the margins, like mine had, you were in a constant struggle to find a good piece of wood that wouldn't let you down when you needed it most.

Making a baseball bat by hand was a slow, tedious process. It took hours of time and attention to detail to get each one right. The big factories punched a code into a computer and

spat out dozens with ease and precision. As Catfish often told me, I hadn't thought this whole idea through very well. Truth be told, I had just dived into it because other than playing or coaching baseball, I hadn't known how to do a lot of other things, so it was my way of staying close to the game. Making money turned out to be the part I hadn't thought through, so that was what had led to what Biscuit called "that investigating thing you do."

Chance and I had started the day before dawn and the sun was now low and pushing the late afternoon light through the open garage-style doors. Chance, as usual, did not help with the work. He spent his day curled up in his favorite chair, only getting up every now and then to go watch a train roll by. I was turning an ash billet in the old lathe when I thought I heard someone drive up. I looked over my shoulder but saw nothing. I went back to my work. A few minutes later, I thought I smelled cigarette smoke. To my right, I saw that Chance had sat upright in his chair. His head was tilted, and even the ear that usually flopped stood up. He sat silent and didn't manage even the smallest bark.

I turned and looked toward the open door. Toot Thompson. He was standing at the end of my long work bench, an unfiltered Camel in his fingers, the smoke rolling upward and glowing in the low light from behind. He held one of my unfinished bats and ran the hand with his cigarette up and down the wood. I guessed Catfish had found him, but I hadn't expected him to show up at my place. I hadn't seen Toot Thompson since a summer night a while back when he had shown up with a blue plated .357 and killed an ex-con hit man who had been about five seconds away from killing me.

I flipped the switch to silence the noisy lathe and it spun to a stop. Chance tilted his head the opposite way but didn't move. "Got any extra fine?" Toot asked. His voice sounded like tires crunching on a gravel road.

I reached over and handed him a strip of 500 grit. He took the sandpaper and ran it smoothly, expertly up and down with the grain of the bat. He looked pretty much the same, maybe a touch more gray in his hair that was combed back over his ears. He had a sun-weathered face, large nose, and a mustache that ran across his lip and curled down into a scruff of a goatee. He wore canvas work pants and a faded, open-collar white shirt with double front pockets. One pocket held an eyeglass case and an ink pen, the other a full pack of Camels.

“Didn’t hear you come up,” I said. “Chance didn’t bark like he usually does.”

“A good dog knows who to bark at and who not to bark at.”

I nodded. Chance curled back up in his chair and closed his eyes.

**Make A Note: Later, have a long talk with Chance about how he knows this.**

“Learned how to make any money making these ball bats yet?”

“Not really,” I answered. “It’s a hard road.”

“Never got anywhere good taking the easy road,” he said without looking up from the bat and sandpaper.

“Guess Catfish got in touch with you?”

He looked up and grinned.

“Kind of surprised to see you up here in the city.”

“Had to go see a man about a dog,” he said.

I had been living in the South long enough to know that when somebody used that expression, it simply meant *none of your business*. I moved on.

“Catfish said you might remember something about this thing we’re looking into.”

“This thing being Shoestring Stubbs and the baseball stuff he supposedly buried at Bull Killer Shoals?”

“Guess you do remember.”

“Remembering things ain’t the problem, forgetting is the hard part.”

I filled him in on Biscuit Bailey and his story. I told him about the letter, the list, and the map that Biscuit wouldn’t share. He listened as I recounted what Catfish knew about what had happened.

He put the sandpaper and bat down, and we moved over to stools. He stubbed out the Camel on the bottom of his worn cowboy boot and popped another one out of the pack. He pulled an old metal lighter from his pants, fired up the new cigarette, and snapped the lighter shut with a sharp click.

“What can you tell me about the night the shooting happened?” I asked.

“I was working night shift with the sheriff’s cousin, Luther Tibbets. Rain was hard and winds like a hurricane.”

“You work the shooting scene?”

He shook his head. “Shooting took place at a roadside tavern called The Trotline. Eight miles from the river. They sent me and Luther down to the shoals.”

“Why?”

“Fellow in a camper down on Frogleg Road was listening to his scanner, spotted Shoestring go by, and called it in.” He picked up a small wood chisel and flipped it over, tapping it on the bench.

“Find anything when you arrived?”

“His truck. Parked where the road ends. We followed the path down the hill to the shoals but wasn’t no use.”

“Why?”



“Damn rain was so heavy, he could’ve been three feet in front of me and I would’ve never saw him.”

“Then you found the other stuff,” I said.

“Not till a bit later,” he said. “Rain let up and we found it down at the end of the shoals where it flattens out.”

“No sign of the footlocker?”

“Not that we saw. The shoals run into two other rivers that run into the ocean. Hell, that footlocker could have made it to Japan.”

“You think he might have drowned that night?”

“If he had, way the water was running high, we would’ve found his body in the flats.”

“So, you don’t think he drowned?”

He shrugged. “That’s what Luther and the sheriff thought, or wanted to think.”

“You didn’t?”

“Didn’t look like that to me.”

“But the sheriff you worked for did?”

“Nobody cared nothing about Shoestring.” He pulled on the Camel. “Plus, it was an election year and Sheriff Abel didn’t need nothing in the paper about murders and such.”

“So, if Biscuit’s letter is the real deal, you think the story about Shoestring being killed later by his cousin might be true?”

“Tucker Boone,” Toot said, his voice a low growl. “Trailer trash rat.”

“You think he killed Shoestring?”

“If he did, wouldn’t be the first or the last man he killed.”

“What’s his story?”

“Made his bones with weed, then moved up here to run hard stuff, then meth, now mostly black market pain pills out of his place.”

“His place?”

“Strip club called The Scuttlebutt, up here somewhere.”

Chance stirred from his nap and stood in his chair. He hit the floor with a sharp bark and bolted out the garage door. *Now he barks*, I thought. We heard a vehicle drive up and the door shut. A minute or so later, Chance came back around the corner with a big grin and Alex right behind him. She waved at me and bent down. Chance gave her a big kiss.

“That dog can fetch, can’t he?” Toot said. He grinned as he stubbed out another Camel on his boot.

## Chapter 7

Alex pulled up a metal toolbox and took a seat, Chance at her side. One of her large cameras hung from her shoulder on a strap.

She lived across the way on the third floor of an old plumbing warehouse where she ran her photography studio. Alex was very talented, but like me, often struggled to make ends meet, so she often joined me in taking on jobs from Catfish, mostly against her wishes. She was in her mid-thirties, tall, slender, dark hair, and natural good looks without a stitch of makeup. I don't think I had ever seen her wear a dress, and she kept her hair in a ponytail that bounced when she moved.

We were very different. She was good with every new gadget and technology, and I was lucky if I could get a microwave to work. She questioned my taste in music, and I questioned her taste in boyfriends. She couldn't understand why I used such outdated hand tools to do my work, and I couldn't understand why she spent all her profits on the latest expensive camera. But since we were the only two residents of the old warehouses on this side of the train yard, we had become close friends.

And one more thing, she was always blunt.

"So, you're the guy that saved his bacon?" Alex asked Toot.

"Unless you've forgotten," I said, "I did happen to get shot that night."

"You almost got dead," she said and smiled at Toot.

Toot thankfully changed the subject. "You got any cold beer on hand?"

“I do.” I got up, made my way over to a small fridge in the back, took out three longneck bottles, and passed them around.

Toot took a big draw off the beer and plunked it down on the bench, half empty. “Going down to Bull Killer Shoals might not be a great idea,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“Mean place. Deep down a valley. Not many ways in and out, and all the rocks and steep hills make it tougher. And then there’s the split part—nobody goes in there.”

“Catfish mentioned it could be rough.”

“Rough is a good bar fight,” he said. “The shoals are damn dangerous. Then you throw in all the other stuff.”

“Other stuff?”

“Bobcats, boars, snakes. Cottonmouths meaner than the boars.”

I let that settle in. I really hated snakes.

“Catfish says the place is haunted,” Alex said.

I gave her a look. Toot reached into his shirt pocket, popped out another Camel, flicked open the lighter in one motion, and fired it up. He let out a long stream of smoke and finished off his beer.

Alex wasn’t getting her answer. “Well, does this place have a ghost or not?”

“There’re ghosts everywhere you look,” he said. “Just depends on how you do your looking and what kind of ghost you’re looking for.”

She glanced over at me. I shrugged.

Her next question was for me. “So when do we go?”

“We?”

“If there’s any chance of a ghost being seen, I’m in,” she said and lifted her camera.

“Ain’t a place to be wandering into without help,” Toot said.

“You know somebody who can help?” I asked.

“Cotton Mulligan is your man,” he said. “Grew up down at a little crossroads called Mulberry Creek, right next to the shoals. Was a deputy with us for a long time, then went back maybe ten years ago to run the family chicken farm.”

“He’s a chicken farmer down at the shoals?”

“Not now,” he said. “Gave up on chickens. Decided to grow instead of raise.”

“Grow what?”

“Worms.”

“Worms? He grows worms?”

“Alabama Jumpers and Georgia Nightcrawlers.”

“This guy is a worm farmer,” Alex said with a laugh. “Ghosts and worm farms. I am most definitely in.”

Toot stamped out the Camel butt on his boot and let out a raspy cough. He motioned with his empty, and I retrieved him a second beer.

“I’ll let Cotton know what’s up and put him in touch with Catfish. He’ll know what you need to know and some things you wish you didn’t know about them shoals.”

“Is that your cool old truck outside?” Alex asked.

“Sweet, sweet Lucinda,” he said. “Been with her longer than any woman.”

“What year is it?”

“Same year Elvis recorded ‘Blue Moon.’”

“I have no idea when that was.” She laughed again.

“Most people don’t or can’t remember.” He winked at her.

I returned with his beer. Alex asked if she could go take some photos of his truck and she and Chance left. Toot lifted his beer straight up and took a very long drink, nearly draining it all. His look turned serious.

“Something else on your mind?” I asked.

He flicked ashes off his Camel, stared out the door at the setting sun.

“Some things buried might be better off if they stayed buried,” he said without looking back at me.

We sat and drank our beer in silence for a bit. He lifted his empty bottle toward me and I obliged, rising to go grab another. He toasted me and started on his third.

“Why are you going out of your way to help this guy?” Toot asked.

“Biscuit?”

He nodded. “Know him well?”

“No,” I said. “But I’ve known a lot of guys like him through the years.”

Toot raised his shaggy eyebrows in a question mark.

“BirdDogs,” I said. “Baseball scouts. Lifeblood of the game for years.”

“Not now?”

“Not now,” I said. “But without a guy like him, I most likely would have spent all my years working in a damn dirty steel mill. I just feel like I owe a debt.”

“Some debts are harder to pay off than others,” Toot said.

He pulled himself off the stool and stretched his long arms. He rubbed a hand through his still-thick hair, and we made our way out the garage door. The sun would be down soon, darkness around the corner. Chance stood next to Alex, who was on her knees taking a picture of

the headlight of Toot's truck. I thought back to when I first met him, deep in the woods of Pine County. He lived in a trailer stashed on a hillside. Catfish said he made moonshine out there, but I didn't see a still. In fact, I didn't see any sign of electricity, a phone, or even a road that led out of the hidden grove.

It crossed my mind that I may have never thanked him for what he did that night in Birdsong. A lot of that night was still fuzzy. Getting shot will do that to you. "If I didn't say it then, I want to say thanks again for showing up when you did."

He nodded. "Catfish and me settled up."

I had no idea what he meant and felt it best not to ask.

"This is a great truck," Alex said as she stood up.

"You take this truck on the interstate?" I asked.

"I ain't been on the interstate highway since I left the department."

"Taking the back roads all the way to Birdsong must take some time, especially at night."

"Takes a lot longer when the headlights don't work," he said.

Toot crawled in the truck and pulled the door shut. The old engine rumbled to life. He handed me his empty bottle. "Thanks for the beer. Don't drink and drive."

## Chapter 8

After Toot left, I finished off the night watching a game, Mets and Cardinals, a rare game where the pitchers both went into the late innings and the Mets pitcher lasted until one out in the ninth. In a world of launch angles and five inning starts, it was nice to watch a 2-1 game in just over two and a half hours.

Thanks to the short game, I was up and moving early, much to the objections of Chance, who made his way slowly to his chair and sacked out. My plan was to get the full order for the Pelicans shipped out by the end of the day. It was more humid than usual, rain on the way, so I had the big doors open and the fans blowing. I kept at it and by late afternoon, I had the bats finished, packed up, and out for delivery, invoice enclosed.

A pretty good thunderstorm rolled through and left the air moist and thick. I was down on my knees, covered with sweat and sawdust, when I heard Chance move quickly toward the open door and let out a sharp bark and a low growl.

I pulled myself up and walked toward the door. I stood next to Chance, who had his eyes locked onto an old orange BMW 2002. A man stood near the rear bumper and eyed us.

“Is it okay to come in?”

I motioned to Chance. “Guess you’ll have to ask him.”

He nodded his head and took a few steps forward. Chance didn’t move.

He was short, maybe only five-foot-six, well-groomed salt and pepper beard, most likely bald, but his head was covered with a soft LA Dodgers cap. He wore white slacks, blue sneakers,



and a colorful Hawaiian shirt covered with parrots. He held a small notepad and had an ink pen stuck next to his left ear.

“You looking for the Jimmy Buffet concert?” I asked

“Excuse me?”

“You lost?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“You’re Jake Eliam, correct?”

“Who’s asking?”

“My name is JC Brucey. I’m a reporter.”

“A reporter? For who?”

“I freelance out of Florida.”

I looked up at the sky. It had started to rain again. I motioned for him to come inside. I took a rag and wiped the sweat and sawdust off my face and arms.

“So, Mr. Reporter,” I said. “What are you reporting on?”

“I wanted to ask you some questions about Grady Bailey.”

“Biscuit?”

“That’s what people call him.”

“What about him?”

He flipped open his small notebook and took the pen from behind his ear. “I’ve got some questions about this baseball treasure hunt of his.”

I tried not to show surprise. How in the world did a reporter know about this?

“From what I understand, Bailey has a line on the long-lost memorabilia that Samuel ‘Shoestring’ Stubbs stole and supposedly hid. That true?”

“How would I know?”

“I heard he reached out to you for help tracking it down.”

I picked up the rag and wiped more sweat from my forehead.

“That true?” he asked again.

He was nearly a foot shorter than me, but he didn’t lack confidence. He seemed really sure of himself and his information. It was easy to see he wasn’t afraid to poke a bear with a hot iron.

“Biscuit is an old BirdDog,” I said. “They all like a good story, and he likes a story more than most. Most likely just talk over whiskey to pass the time.”

He flipped a few pages in his notebook. Took his time, looked it over.

“Buried at Bull Killer Shoals,” he read from the page. “A metal footlocker this Shoestring Stubbs had packed. The list includes personal things from the likes of Rod Carew, Pete Rose, Tom Seaver, Willie Stargell, Jim Palmer, Carlton Fisk, Nolan Ryan, and more.”

He thumbed the page, kept his eyes down. No fear. I stayed quiet. His information was more than on target and he knew it.

“A letter, a list, and a map.” He looked right at me. “Anything ringing a bell yet?”

“You’re the one ringing the bell. You tell me.”

“I know you met with Bailey a few days ago to talk about this.”

“How do you know?”

“I told you, I’m a reporter. It’s my job to know.”

“I think we’re done here.” I hoped he would just leave. He didn’t.

“Look,” he said and closed his notebook. “I’m not here to bust your balls. I’m not interested in some big investigation or something. I’m just a sportswriter kicked out of my newspaper job, looking for a good story that will make me a payday.”

“How did you hear anything at all about this whole story?”

“Like you said, Bailey likes to talk. I like to listen.”

I thought about it. Biscuit did love to talk. He also liked to drink. Dangerous combination if you had a secret in your pocket.

“I would like to help you,” I said. “But I haven’t heard from Biscuit in days, and I really don’t think there is a story.”

“Could be just talk. But if it’s true, I’ll tell you that it’s not a good story, it’s a damn good story. Maybe a great one. Maybe a book.”

“Well, I think you better talk to Biscuit about this, not me.”

“I tried, but they wouldn’t let me talk to him.”

“Who wouldn’t let you talk to him?”

“The nurses in the ICU.”

“Biscuit is in a hospital?”

“Two days now.”

“What happened?”

“Somebody beat him up.”

I paused, stunned by the news. “Is he hurt bad?”

“Cops say he was busted up pretty good, especially for an old man.”

“What the hell happened?”

“That, I don’t know yet,” he said. “But I got a feeling it has to do with Shoestring. So that’s why I’m here and why I’m staying on this, until I find out.”

“And you didn’t feel the need to tell me this when you first showed up?”

He shrugged, put his pen back behind his ear. “Figured you already knew.”

I wasn’t sure what to think. Biscuit with this wild story. A map he wouldn’t share. Now a reporter who knew about it as well. There was more to this than he let on the other day, I just didn’t know what.

“What do you know about this beating he took?”

“Not much,” Brucey said. “Happened around midnight, outside a place. Some college kids found him in the rear parking lot.”

“What place?”

“A strip club on the westside,” he said. “Place called The Scuttlebutt.”

## Chapter 9

“You really got to get yourself a new truck,” Alex said. “You’re racking up a lot of favors with all the rides I’m giving you.”

We wound our way downtown toward the hospital to check on Biscuit. I had called Catfish and clued him in. He was having dinner at some steak place north of town and said he would meet us.

“I was on a date when you called.” Alex steered her Jeep off the downtown connector.

“I’ve met some of your dates,” I said. “I’m the one doing *you* a favor.”

It took us nearly twenty minutes just to find Biscuit in the large hospital. He had been moved from ICU to a regular room, but we were met with resistance from a rather large nurse. Her nameplate said “Patty,” but it might as well have been “Patton.” We weren’t relatives, we had no permission from his doctor, and Nurse Patton wasn’t about to let us anywhere near Biscuit’s room. On my last appeal, she barked at me and slapped my hand with a clipboard.

“Such charm,” Alex said. “At least I can get a date.”

“She reminds me of my high school football coach,” I said. “Maybe she *was* my high school football coach.”

A half hour later, Catfish ambled into the waiting area and looked at us. “What are you doing out here?”

I pointed to Nurse Patton. “Couldn’t get past the bouncer.”

“Wait here,” he said and headed over to the desk. He leaned in over the counter and in less than a minute, Nurse Patton’s scowl turned into a smile. I looked over at Alex. Thirty seconds later the two were laughing and she patted him on the arm. He glanced back at us and winked. They spent another minute or so chatting, and then he turned away and came back over. He handed us each a little visitor pass.

“Room 410C,” he said with a smile. “Right down this hall.”

“How?” Alex asked.

“You got to feed a mean dog a porkchop every now and then.”

Alex looked at me. I held my hands out to say, *I have no idea what he means.*

We pushed open the door to the room, expecting to see Biscuit laid out in his hospital bed. He was not. He was at the end of the bed, bent over, his old bare butt poking out of the rear of the open hospital gown. We stopped short. He turned around and focused for a minute on the three of us like he had never seen us before.

“I can’t find my damn pants.” His voice was slurred. “What did that big buffalo do with my pants?”

He looked as beat up as my old truck. His face had a huge blue and red bruise on the right side. Tape stretched across his big nose, his lower lip purple and swollen. Scrapes ran up the other side of his face and extended across his ear. His right hand was in a cast.

“Biscuit, just where do you think you’re going if you find your pants?” I asked him. Alex gently pushed him back toward the bed.

“I told that damn crazy big nurse that I was leaving.”

“You ain’t going nowhere,” Catfish said.

“Who are you?” He stared at Catfish.

Catfish looked at us and shook his head. "I'm your doctor."

"You my doctor?" Biscuit looked puzzled.

"I'm Dr. Good, and she's Dr. Ready. And we'll give you your pants when we are good and ready."

I pulled up a chair, turned it around, and sat next to the bed. "Biscuit, who did this to you?"

"Did what?"

I tried again. "Gave you this beating."

"I kicked the stupid one in the balls."

"Who was that?"

"The stupid one, I told you."

"Do you remember where you were when you got beat up?" Catfish asked.

"Titty bar," he answered and looked at Alex. "Are you one of the dancers?"

"Can I break his other fingers?" Alex asked.

"Do you remember what you were doing there?" I tried to press him.

"I was watching the dancing ladies."

"Besides that?"

"I gotta get my pants," he said again. "Gotta go find my map."

"Somebody took your map?"

"Kicked the stupid one right in his nuts," he said. "Give me my pants." He looked up at the ceiling and toppled over sideways. Out cold.

"Well, that was useless," I said. "He's down for the count."

"At least we know Nurse Pork Chop has a good supply of morphine," Catfish said.

I took a couple of minutes to fill Catfish in on my visit from the reporter and what he seemed to know, other than telling me Biscuit was here in the hospital.

“A reporter snooping around, huh?” Catfish asked. “That can’t be good. What did Toot Thompson have to say yesterday?”

“How did you know he paid me a visit?” He grinned. I withdrew the question. “Toot made it clear to me that one, the shoals are a rough place, and two, some things that are buried deep should remain that way.”

“All good advice,” Catfish said.

Alex spoke up. “When was the last time you actually listened to good advice?”

As true as that was, I ignored her. “Toot also thinks if anybody killed Shoestring, it would most likely be his cousin.”

“Tucker Boone,” Catfish said.

“That would be him,” I said. “And guess where he said I could find this Tucker Boone.”

“Strip club? Like the one where Biscuit just got his face redecorated?”

“Strip club called The Scuttlebutt,” I said.

“That does add a little pep to the pimento, don’t it?”

“That it does.”

“So what are your plans now?” Catfish asked.

“Guess I’ll go watch the dancing ladies.”

“Need some one-dollar bills?”



## Chapter 10

“I have better things to do at midnight than drive you to a strip joint.” Alex zipped in and out of her lane, inches away from the bumpers of other cars. “And we’re going to find a guy who might be a killer?”

“Less dangerous than riding with you.” I gripped the door handle.

“You could call Uber.”

“Who?”

“*Who?*” She darted in front of a truck and shifted hard. “Uber is not a ‘who,’ it’s a ‘what.’”

“A what?”

“It’s a car service. Like a taxi. Called ‘ride sharing.’ Can’t believe you don’t know this. Thousands of these people hire other people as private drivers. I’ve used them.”

“Just regular people, in their own cars, that will give you a ride for money?”

“Right.”

“Strangers?”

“You have their name and info on your phone.”

“Strangers,” I repeated. “Didn’t your dad ever give you the speech about never getting in a car with a stranger?”

“It’s a business.”

“Sounds more like a *Ted Bundy Starter Kit* to me,” I said

She took a hard left that tossed me into the door. I grabbed the grip bar on the dashboard and held on. She blasted through a red light and bounced over a big pothole. Maybe I should have called this Uber guy.

“Think we found it,” she said and whipped into a parking lot.

A tall neon sign glowed with the images of three ladies bent over at the waist. Oversized rear ends blinked purple, blue, and pink. We had found it. The Scuttlebutt.

We got a couple of odd looks as we made our way inside. Don’t think the two of us, especially the two of us together, fit the normal customer profile. The action was wrapped around a curved stage in the center. Music blasted from the ceiling and lights swirled, flashed, and spun as young women danced completely naked to the loud music.

“You take me to the nicest places,” Alex shouted in my ear.

We worked our way to a row of red and black booths in the rear near a long bar where the noise level was lower. I looked at my watch. It was almost one in the morning on a weeknight. The joint was jumping and packed. How little profit I made with my baseball bats crossed my mind.

A young woman in a cutoff t-shirt with the club’s logo and tight red leather pants came to tend to us. We ordered two beers and a bowl of nachos, and she returned in a few minutes and plopped the bottles and food in front of us.

“That will be twenty-seven dollars,” she said.

I looked at Alex. She raised her eyebrows back at me. I fished out my wallet and gave her thirty-five. I thought more about my bat profits.

“Can I get you two anything else?”

I shook my head. “But I do have one request to ask of you, if I can?”

“We usually refer those kinds of requests to the girls on stage.” She smiled at me. Alex grinned and dropped her head. “No,” I said. “I’m sorry. I just wanted to ask to speak to the owner, Tucker Boone.”

Her smile faded. “Do you know him?”

“No, but I would like to meet him.”

“Careful what you wish for.” She turned and left.

We had nearly finished our warm beer when a man approached our booth. He was tall, lean, and wore an ill-fitting black suit over a black polo. He stood at the edge of the booth and looked us over.

“Can we get some more nachos?”

He didn’t smile. Not the nachos man.

He leaned in closer. “What’s your name?”

“You go first,” I said.

His eyes drifted to Alex and slowly back to me.

“Tucker Boone is a very busy man.”

“Will the name Biscuit Bailey buy me five minutes with a very busy man?”

He didn’t answer. He turned and walked away.

“That is one creepy guy,” Alex said. “Let me ask you, do you have any sort of idea of what you might do when you meet him, or maybe a plan?”

“I’m still thinking it through.”

“Great,” she said. “I’m in a strip club at one in the morning and you don’t have a plan.”

“And no nachos.”

Ten minutes later, tall and creepy returned. “Mr. Boone will give you five minutes.”

“Good. I’ll be here.”

“Nobody talks to Mr. Boone out here. You want to talk to him, wait ten minutes, then go out those red fire doors over there.” He pointed behind some curtains. “He will meet you out back in the parking lot.”

Tall and creepy left. Alex studied me for a moment. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

“I’m absolutely one hundred percent positive that it is *not* a good idea.”

“But you’re going to do it anyhow?”

“Might as well,” I said. “We’re out of nachos.”

## Chapter 11

“So, let me get this straight,” Alex said. “You’re going to meet a guy who’s a drug dealer and mostly likely a killer in a dark parking lot in the middle of the night and you have no plan. Correct?”

“I have a plan now.”

“Do tell.”

“I’m going to meet a guy who is a drug dealer and most likely a killer in a dark parking lot in the middle of the night.”

“Good plan,” she said.

“I’ve thought it through.”

“Don’t look back but there is a big guy dressed like a cowboy at the bar behind you and he’s been giving us the eyeball since creepy guy came over.”

“Alex, this a strip club. Naked women everywhere. The cowboy is most likely giving you the eyeball, not us.”

“Just when I thought I couldn’t dislike this place any more than I already did.”

I stood up, took ten bucks out of my pocket, and gave it to her. The Pelican profits were now completely wiped out in one hour at a strip club.

“Buy yourself another warm beer,” I told her. “If I’m not back in fifteen minutes, get the Jeep and come around back blasting the horn.”

“You have got to get a new truck,” she said as I headed toward the rear doors.

The doors led to a sunken concrete wall with a set of stairs that led up to the rear of the building. I eased up to the top and looked around. I didn't see anything or anybody. To the right was a metal storage unit, empty cardboard boxes piled high next to it. To the left were two dumpsters with trash scattered around it and some busted up wood pallets. A chain-link fence bordered what may have been an alley of sorts. Big 18-wheelers were parked on the other side of the fence in rows. A weak security light on a pole. Dark and cornered. Maybe my plan did have a few flaws. Could've used some more thought.

I moved out into the dim pool of mercury vapor. Lights from a vehicle sprayed the area. A black Escalade slid into sight and stopped ten feet in front of me. Headlights locked in like a prison spotlight. Two men emerged from the SUV. At first glance, I was pretty sure that neither of them was Tucker Boone.

The two were dressed in identical tactical black pants and black t-shirts, but they were nothing alike. The one in the rear was overweight and his pants hung low over his boots. His face was almost comical with large ears, a squared off nose, and eyelids that drooped. He held a paper bag in his hand and ate peanuts from it.

The guy in front wasn't eating, but he looked ready to chew on me. He was a big man, tall as I was at about six four, but with a lot more muscle. Arms ripped at the black shirt, his pants tucked into his boots and his head shaved slick. I could see the silver tip of a pistol at his waistline.

“Don't move.”

I didn't. He approached and did a quick and efficient frisk. He grabbed my wallet from my back pocket. I reacted with a reach for his arm. He took my arm and flipped it up behind me with ease. “What part of ‘don't move’ didn't you understand?”

I let him have it. No money left anyhow. He took it over to the passenger side of the Caddy. A tinted window slid open and he passed my wallet inside. He returned and stood in front of the vehicle. He cracked his knuckles with a loud pop.

**Make A Note: If we go back to the hospital, find out what my blood type is, just in case I keep coming up with bad plans like this one.**

The passenger door slid open and an oversized man eased out and made his way to the front, my wallet in his hand. He was large, mostly fat and all packed on a big belly. Multiple chins rolled up under his neck, thick eyebrows and hair swooped back in the style of an old country music singer. His hair was dark but odd gray muttonchop sideburns ran long down the sides of his big face. He wore black dress slacks, held up by black suspenders and an open-collar tuxedo shirt. Four gold rings on his fat fingers. He reached into my wallet and pulled out a card. He tore the card into two pieces.

“This investigator license ain’t worth nothing around here.” His voice had a dirty backwoods drawl. He looked at the wallet again and tossed it at my feet. “You can tell Biscuit he’s wasting what little money he’s got hiring some damn PI.”

“Biscuit didn’t hire me.”

“No?”

“I came here on my own, as a favor.”

He snorted. “Let us return that favor.”

He nodded to the big guy, who moved forward quick and threw a right hand at the side of my head. I was able to block it, but he threw a left that caught me square in the ribs and knocked me to my knees. I coughed hard and tried to catch my breath. Damn, he had a mean left hand.

“You know what dog you barking at, boy?” The fat man drawled his words.

“My barking ribs tell me you might be Tucker Boone.”

“And how did you know where to find me?”

“Easy. I was told to look for the last guy in town sporting muttonchops.”

The big guy hit me hard and fast across the face with that strong left hand. I rolled over and spat out blood. I pushed myself back up to my knees.

“How did you find out Biscuit had Shoestring’s letter?” I asked.

“The greedy fool talks too much and drinks too much.”

“That he does,” I said and spat blood again. “You got his map?”

“Family business.” He turned his head and spat. “Hell, it was my idea for Shoestring to steal all that stuff, anyhow. He owed me half. I aimed to collect.”

“So, you killed him?”

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t. Don’t matter none, he was screwed. I just had to keep looking ‘til I found the little map he drew up and find all his baseball stuff.”

“Took a while.”

“Damn near too long,” he said. “Done gave up. Half forgot it. Then along comes that fool idiot Biscuit running his mouth.”

“He’s just an old man. You didn’t have to beat the hell out of him.”

“Stubborn old man.” He grinned wide to show stained teeth. “Took a bit of negotiating to convince him to offer up the map.”

I rubbed my bloody lip. “Yeah, I just got a taste of your negotiating. Your lawyer here needs to work on his deposition skills.”

The deposition was about to continue as the big guy cocked his left fist and drew it back once again. The very loud sound of a gunshot froze everybody.



## Chapter 12

“Now, everybody just hold the water in your bucket right where it is, and nobody, including this pretty little filly, ain’t gonna get hurt.”

The voice came from the cowboy Alex had spotted at the bar. He stood at the top of the stairs, a huge pearl handle Colt. 45 revolver held high in his right hand. In his left hand, a broken beer bottle. He had Alex by the neck and the bottle up against her cheek. She did not look happy. She gave me a hard stare. I had a feeling she was telling me that once again, I was wrong, and she was right.

“I do offer up my most sincere apologies for busting up such a fine party you boys got going on, but I got me some business to take care of with Honey Boy here.” He pointed the gun at the big guy that had been beating on me.

He seemed to be the real deal. Big and round. His voice had a drawl, but more Texas than Southern. He was dressed in black jeans, a western-style shirt, a leather vest, slim toe boots, and a huge black cowboy hat. And of course, that big long-barrel six-shooter that he now had pointed in our direction. Everybody stood motionless.

“Now, Honey Boy, you move in a little closer.” He pointed the big gun at him. “Here’s what I propose. Ya’ll boys stay where you at. Me and Honey Boy here are going to get in my ride with this little lady and go down the road a bit. If I don’t see nobody behind me, I’ll put her out and you can go on about your business of beating on that fellow.” He pointed his gun at me.

I didn't like his plan. Alex didn't seem to like it either. I could see it in her eyes what she was about to do and I tried to tell her no with a look. It didn't stop her. She raised her right foot and stomped it down hard on his left boot. He yelped, and the Colt fired. Alex shoved an elbow into his gut. Gunfire erupted from every direction. Alex crawled on all fours to the pile of cardboard boxes. I rolled over twice toward the dumpsters. Peanut boy fired at the cowboy as Tucker Boone screamed at him to get in the SUV. The Escalade roared down the alley, and a small pistol fired rounds out the window as it flew out of sight. Honey Boy ran for the parking lot next door. He hit the tall chain-link fence in a sprint and began to pull himself up and over. The cowboy was down on one knee, cranking off loud rounds from the Colt. 45. Sparks flew from the metal fence.

I grabbed a scrap piece of wood from a busted pallet and swung it as hard as I could across his back. The cowboy went down hard on his face. I lifted it again, aimed at his head, but he raised his hands up and held them out to the side in surrender.

"Whoa now, whoa now." He rotated the big pistol down in his finger and pointed it backward. "Let's slow this pony down to a slow trot."

Alex rolled out of her cover and came toward him. She looked mad as hell.

"Get his gun," I said to her. "And don't shoot him."

She yanked the gun out of his hand hard. He shook his fingers. She gave it to me.

"And get the little one he's got in that ankle holster on his right leg," I told her.

"Ooooooowee, big fellow," he said. "You got injun eyes on you."

I checked the chamber of the big revolver. All six shots spent. I flipped it open and dumped the casings onto the ground.

“Now that the bullets have stopped flying, hoss,” he said, “how about us do some talking?”

“Talk,” I said. “But stay where you are.”

“Dang boy, now that ain’t rightly being sociable at all.”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t put down the piece of wood. He glanced back at Alex. She had the small pistol from his ankle pointed at him.

“Ain’t no reason to be getting trigger happy here, darling,” he said. “My creds and paperwork are in my vest pocket.” He started to reach toward his pocket. I put a foot on his back. I nodded to Alex. She reached down and pulled a folded piece of paper and a black leather badge holder from the vest. She handed them both to me.

“Bounty hunter,” I said to Alex.

“Now, that ain’t what it says, podner,” he said. “That there is an official State of Georgia permit and badge stating that I am one hundred percent certified and classified as a Bail Recovery Agent. And that’s just one of four of them I got in different states.”

I looked at it. It was legitimate. He was indeed a Fugitive Recovery Agent, usually just called a bounty hunter. I motioned for him to stand up. He dusted himself off, picked up his big cowboy hat, and plopped it back on his big head. I handed him his empty gun and credentials.

He stuck out his hand. “Jerry Lee Lacy,” he said. “Born and raised in Hondo, Texas, now domiciled in Hahira, Georgia with a sweet little lady from Valdosta.”

I didn’t shake his hand. I took the small pistol from Alex before she decided to use it on him and gave it back to him. “So, talk. What was your deal here tonight?”

“Me? I was here to bring that boy beating on your face back to South Georgia, that is until the little filly here started up a rodeo.” He looked at Alex. She glared back.

“Who is he and why do you want him?”

“Honey Boy?” He took his hat off and put it back on. “His name is one Smitty Abercrombie. Thrown out of the service after he took a hammer to some airman’s head outside a bar, down at Moody Air Force Base.”

“Sounds about right,” I said. Bet he had that hammer in his left hand.

“Boy went and skipped out on twenty-five large from Big Bobby Tooley, owner of Free Bird Bail Bonds in Hihira. Paperwork says bring the boy back for cash. Says dead or alive.”

“And you decided on dead?”

He shrugged. “Check cashes same, no matter to me.”

“And the bondsman, what does he think?”

“You don’t run out on Big Bobby Tooley.”

“There were two names on that paperwork.”

“The fat one,” he said. “Carl P. Teeters. They call him Bagga Nuts.”

“The sloppy one eating peanuts?”

“He’s got four or five outstanding, but none of them worth a chigger’s butt. I was here for Honey Boy, maybe pick me up a two for one, if I took the notion.”

“What about Tucker Boone?”

“Tucker Boone is untouchable,” he said. “Everybody knows that. Everybody that wants to stay among the living, that is.”

I thought about that for a moment. What had Biscuit gotten us into?

“What is this here map you talking about, anyhow?”

I gave him a hard look.

“Hoss, I gotta stay on Honey Boy, ain’t no harm in finding out if there is something else going down I need to know, since I’m in town.”

“Well, hoss,” I mocked his words, “I highly suggest you get on your way out of town.”

He removed his hat again, dusted it off. “Now, I thought this here big city was full of southern hospitality. Plus, we now got us what you might call a mutual interest.”

He put the big hat back on, tipped it at Alex. “I’m gonna go back inside, clean myself up a bit, get me two, maybe three beers, and sit at the bar and watch them naked girls dance. But I’ll be seeing you soon. That’s a promise, a Texas promise.”

He disappeared into the club. Alex looked at me and I held up my hands to stop her. I figured she was about to unload on me. I was surprised when she didn’t.

“I didn’t think anything could be worse than the date I was on when you called,” she said. “But this. This was worse.”

“Yeah, you usually don’t get shot at on a date. At least not a first date. Sorry about that.”

“You hurt bad?”

“I feel like I got hit in the ribs with a Randy Johnson fastball from that lefty.”

“Good,” she said. I think she meant it.

I picked up my wallet, found the pieces of my license, and stuck them in my pocket. A PI license taped together. That pretty much summed up my ability at the job.

“But that story Biscuit told just got a lot more interesting,” she said.

“That old codger has got some talking to do when he gets his pants back on.”

“You know what’s odd?” Alex asked.

“Asking what’s odd is odd.”

“No sirens,” she said. “A shoot-out behind a strip bar. Nobody notices. No cops?”

“Guess that’s just normal business practice in this part of the city. Good thing for us. Go get the Jeep and let’s get out of here before they do show up.”

“I’ll be glad when you get that new truck.” She walked away.

Alex drove us out of the parking lot and shifted onto the empty street. I rolled the window down and stuck my head into the side mirror to look at my busted and bloody lip. In the mirror, from the same parking lot, I could clearly see an orange BMW 2002 with Florida plates pull out. Just like the one the reporter had driven up to my place.

“I don’t believe it,” I said.

“Does it look bad?”

“Worse than I thought,” I said as we pulled away.

## Chapter 13

“You said the guy that busted up your lip was big?” Catfish asked.

“He was.”

“Big and mean?”

“Both.”

“And he was being chased by a bounty hunter from Texas?”

“Big and mean with a big gun.”

“And then Alex started up a rodeo?”

“Big and mean one.”

“You ever had to knock down a big ol’ wasp nest in a barn?” The question Catfish asked veered hard to the left.

“What?”

“Wasp nest. Big nasty ones.”

“No, can’t say that I have.”

“Know how you do that?”

“No idea.”

“Gasoline,” Catfish said. “You take a big cup of tractor gas and you throw it up there and try and hit the nest.”

“Then what?”

“Then you run like hell as they scatter, all mad and fired up.”

“Doesn’t seem like that works very good.”

“Well, when they settle a bit, you go back and knock down the nest and burn it up.”

“And as usual, I guess you got a point?”

“You done already threw the gas on the wasp nest.” He grinned. “Now you gotta go back and knock it down, burn it up.”

We were holding court in his cluttered office in the rear of The 3 Pigs. Catfish was behind the desk in his old wooden chair, and I was sitting in a folding chair with my feet propped up on a soda crate. I had taken a day to ice the ribs and rest up, but my lip was still blue, and sips of coffee were painful. Catfish stood up, poured himself another cup, plopped back down. The chair creaked as he leaned back. “So, you went and had a talk with Biscuit?” He asked.

“I did. Nurse Patton said to tell you hello.” He smiled, toasted me with his mug. “The drugs have been tapped down and he found his pants.”

“He shed any light on how Tucker Boone found out about this so-called secret map?”

“He did, reluctantly.”

“Involve whiskey?”

“Lots.”

“Whiskey and secrets. Never a good outcome.”

“Seems Biscuit had a few, or more, with a former player he signed years ago. Guy named Leon James. Never made it, now works in beer distribution.”

“And Biscuit got to drinking and talking.”

“Exactly, and what he didn’t know was this James fellow had borrowed way too much money from Boone and found out just enough to try and use that info to erase his debt.”

“The guy set him up?”



“He did. Told him to meet him at the strip club. Said he had somebody that could shed more light on what Shoestring had done with the stuff.”

“Instead, he found Tucker Boone and his boys.”

“And ended up without his pants and a morphine drip from Nurse Patton.”

To the left of his desk, Catfish had a table piled high with folders. Some skinny, some stuffed to the gill. I had no idea what they held and had always been wary of asking. With his off-the-books method of business, there was no telling what secrets of his own he had stuffed in the files. He reached over and pulled a skinny one off the top.

“Did some looking into this boy, Tucker Boone,” he said and opened the file.

“More than a strip club owner?”

“Lot more,” he said. “Drugs, rackets, gambling just for starters.”

“The bounty hunter said he was untouchable.”

“Seems to be. Law enforcement all around got him on the radar, but ain’t ever made anything stick. Got insiders inside all the right places.”

“They ever come close?”

“Reading here, seven years back, DEA had closed in on four brothers up in Habersham County running a big meth lab for Boone. Right before they were set to take them down with Boone present, the place went up in a huge explosion and fireball. Killed all four of them boys.”

“Meth accident?”

“Only if you can make meth with your hands tied behind your back and your mouth wrapped with duct tape.”

I rubbed my sore lip for a moment. Catfish tapped his ink pen on the folder. “So, you gonna go knock down a wasp nest?”

I shrugged. “Guess I will. Already threw gasoline on it.”

“Figured,” he said and closed the file. “Already rounding up a posse.”

“Posse?”

“Toot put me in touch with this ex-deputy buddy of his, Cotton Mulligan, lives down at Mulberry Creek.”

“The worm farmer. He offered up his help?”

“Not exactly.”

“Meaning?”

“What he told me is that any fool who thinks they can find that baseball crap couldn’t find his butt with both hands in his back pocket.”

“Guess he isn’t going to help.”

“He didn’t say that. What he did say was that if Toot Thompson vouched for you, then you were welcome to come on down.”

“He offered a place to stay?”

“Not exactly.”

“And that means?”

“The old home on the property has long since fell down. He’s got himself a double wide on the farm. Says you welcome to use the bathroom but that’s all the room he’s got, other than some old chicken houses and barns.”

“So, what is he offering?”

“Camping spot. Said he’s got a good spot under some trees and a big fire pit.”

“Camping.”

“They ain’t finished building the Marriott down at the shoals yet.”

“I don’t have a single piece of camping gear,” I said.

“Which is why I already called up another member of the posse.”

“Who’s that?”

“Guy I know from Pearl Falls. Runs a boat place and has got tons of camping gear. Also, a good fishing guide. He can be odd, really odd, but he has his moments.”

“Still missing one thing. I need a truck to get down there.”

“Done and done.”

“The drag queen preacher found a truck?”

“Some years on it, but no floods, no hurricanes. Decent motor. Took the money you gave him, found a good one, and he still had cash left over for a new wig.”

“What color?”

“Bright red, to match his lipstick.”

“I meant the truck.”

“Oh, the truck,” Catfish said. “The truck is faded green with a blue passenger side door, no rear bumper, no hubcaps, and grabs in third gear.”

## Chapter 14

“This is your *new* truck?” Alex asked.

“I like it,” I said.

“You would.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means the empty hole in the dashboard is where the 8-track tape player used to be.”

“I’ll have to get that replaced,” I said.

We were on a two-lane county road on our way to find the worm farm and Cotton Mulligan. I had taken possession of my new truck from the preacher man. A 1989 Chevy Silverado, extended cab, long bed, V8 with 4X4, 212 thousand miles on the third motor. We were chugging along with the windows down at about eight miles per gallon.

“No A/C, broken seat belts, a screwdriver for a door handle and only AM radio,” Alex said. “And you’re happy with this truck?”

“Be a little bit happier if the AM radio worked.”

Following the directions Catfish had supplied, we turned off one road and then another. The small green sign said *Bully Boy Road*. We had most definitely left the city.

Chance was along for the adventure. He had insisted when he’d heard about the ghost. The extended cab on the truck had come in handy. Alex had three camera bags, plus two others. Chance was asleep on top of them all. Somewhere, deep in my one bag, I heard my phone ring.

“That your phone?” Alex asked.

I glanced back. It stopped ringing. Chance didn't move.

"Great place for it," she said. "Could be Tubbs from Miami Vice calling."

Third gear grabbed with my shift. A minute later, the fancy phone in her front vest pocket rang loud and clear. She looked at me, rolled her eyes, and punched to answer it. Catfish.

She listened for a bit. "He's too busy listening to the Doobie Brothers on his 8-track to answer," she said. "Hang on, putting it on speaker."

We rolled the windows up and she held the phone out so we could hear him.

"Where you at, son?" His voice boomed over the rumble of the old V8.

"Bully Boy Road," I told him.

"Getting close," he said.

Nothing out here seemed close to me. "You talk to your fishing guide buddy?"

"I did indeed," he answered. "He is locked and loaded. Bringing sleeping bags, tents, lights, ropes, floatables, winches, and a case of Vienna sausages and saltine crackers."

"Who is this you're talking about?" Alex asked.

"High school classmate from Pearl Falls," he said. "Jimmy Don Dudley."

"Jimmy Don?" Alex smiled when she heard the name.

"Well, he ain't gone by that name since high school."

"So, what is his name now?"

"Since he was eighteen, everybody just calls him Greasefire."

Alex laughed out loud. I shook my head and smiled. We weren't sure what to say.

"You guys still there?" Catfish shouted.

"Sorry," I said into the phone. "We thought you said grease fire?" I grinned at Alex.

"You know exactly what I said."

“We’re waiting,” Alex said.

“Our last year in school, he hired on at the Big Mouth Fish Fry place, part time,” Catfish said. “Second day on the job he blew up the grill, burned the ceiling, took out his eyebrows, and melted the hairnet of the lady who cooked the fish.”

“Get fired?” Alex asked.

“He did indeed.”

“So that’s where the name came from?” Alex asked.

“I ain’t done,” he said. “After we graduated, his third cousin on his mama’s side got him a job working the grill at the top place in town, Donny’s Dixie Burger. Night before the Fourth of July, place was packed, Jimmy Don was screwing up, working too slow. Donny yelling at him. So, to speed things up, he cranked the deep fryer up from 350 degrees to about 600 or so, boiling that oil wide open, and tossed in a huge full bag of frozen French fries.”

“What happened?” Alex interrupted.

“What the hell do you think?” Catfish said. “Damn fryer exploded with hot grease going every which way. Set the whole place on fire in minutes. Burned the legendary Donny’s Dixie Burger Drive-In to the ground in less than an hour.”

“I assume he got fired again?” I said.

“He did, but from that night on, the whole town started calling him Greasefire. It stuck and stayed with him all these years. He’s kind of a local legend of sorts.”

“Fame and affection,” Alex said. “Beloved for burning down a burger place.”

“Loved by one and all,” Catfish said. “Except of course, Donny.”

We slowed at a crossroad. A small general store sat at the intersection with two trucks outside. An old sign ran across it that read *Rabbit’s Groceries*. I pulled away from the stop sign.

“How’s that truck running?” Catfish asked.

“Like a Baptist preacher with a new red wig.” I sped up and shifted gears.

“I just found a Kool and the Gang cassette tape under the seat,” Alex shouted.

I ignored her. “So, when is this guy Greasefire getting here?”

“He said he would be down there tomorrow.”

“But if he’s got all the camping gear, what are we supposed to do tonight?”

“Check and see if they maybe finished building that Marriott down there yet.”

He hung up.

## Chapter 15

Over a hill, at the edge of a soybean field, a red wooden sign with large block white letters told us we were indeed close. It simply read *WORMS 3 Miles On Right*.

“Wonder if you can really make money growing worms?” I asked.

“Some have asked that question about making baseball bats,” Alex said, her eyes focused out the window. Chance was up and his head was next to hers, ears blowing back in the wind.

“Speaking of money,” Alex said. “How am I going to get paid for this little expedition?”

“You invited yourself. You could have backed out.”

“After getting nearly shot outside a strip bar?” she asked. “Not likely.”

“Another reason I would rather be broke and making baseball bats.”

“You are broke.” She turned toward me. “How much?”

“I’ll give you half of what I’m being paid,” I said.

“Which is?”

“Nothing.”

“I gave up a paying shoot for this,” she said. “Corporate sales meeting.”

“Salespeople or worms. I would take the worms.”

I pointed to another red wooden sign. *WORMS*. A big white arrow pointed down a long dirt and rock driveway. We slowed and turned down the lane bordered by tall pecan trees.



The driveway led into a circle around a large old oak. A farmhouse with a sunken and busted porch faced the drive. The windows were boarded up. I pulled alongside a late model Ford pickup parked in the grass.

We walked around to the rear of the old house. No one was in sight, but you could hear a tractor off in the distance. On the right side of the property, a row of five long structures stood empty. The old chicken houses. Stretched out low, old sheets of plastic flapped in the wind on broken windows. A large barn butted up against a tree line, surrounded by several other three-sided wooden storage sheds packed with rusted and tangled farm equipment.

On a clean knoll to the left was the double-wide trailer Catfish had mentioned, and down a dip, several lawn chairs sat under a huge tree next to a stone fire pit. A fat orange cat ignored us and napped on a big tree stump.

The sound of the tractor grew near. From a dirt and grass lane next to the old buildings, a rusty tractor emerged. Smoke puffed from a tall pipe as it shifted to pull a ten-foot trailer on old truck tires up the hill and coughed to a stop. The man on top of the tractor let out a big cough as well. He glanced our way, nodded, and lifted his hand just an inch or so off the wheel.

A lanky, spotted dog with long black ears loped up the drive, tongue out. The dog stopped when he spotted Chance.

Tails wagged as they circled each other with serious looks for a moment, then the spotted dog led the way and they headed off toward the trees. Chance had made a fast buddy. I could only hope our introduction would go as well.

We approached the tractor. The man crawled down from his metal seat. "How you folks doing?" He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped his forehead and then his hands.

“Mr. Mulligan,” I said. We shook hands. “Jake Eliam.”

“Call me Cotton,” he said. He looked at Alex.

“Call me Alex,” she said.

“I got to get out more.” He smiled at her and let out a soft chuckle.

He was pushing seventy but moved with ease. He removed a worn, blue ball cap to reveal a balding head with thin, slick hair to the rear and liver spots across the bald front. Lots of wrinkles around his eyes, a thin mustache across his lip, but bright blue eyes that didn't show age. His blue work shirt was damp with sweat. He wore jeans with a huge silver belt buckle that poked out beneath a medium-sized beer belly.

“Thanks for letting us come down and stay at your place,” I said.

“Don't get a lot of visitors when you live on a worm farm.”

“This whole thing just might be an offbeat idea.”

“It most certainly is,” he said. “I told Toot that, I told your buddy Catfish that, and I will tell you that straight away.”

I nodded. He looked over at his dog and Chance as they romped about.

“But if Toot says holler, I say how loud,” he said. “I owe him.”

“Me too,” I said. “A lot.”

Alex was blunt with her first question. “So, you grow worms here?”

“They grow, I dig them out,” he said.

“You grow them in those buildings?” She pointed at the chicken houses.

“No, that was for the chickens we had when my daddy was still around.”

“What's in those buildings now?”

“About thirty years of chicken poop.”

Alex laughed. He wiped his forehead again. Cotton looked up at the sky. "Be dark soon," he said. "Come on, let's go see some worms."

He put two fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle. "T-Bone, get over here," he yelled toward the dogs. I saw Alex grin.

We walked down the lane where he'd just come from. The dogs loped past us and took the lead. Down the hill, the tree line opened to the right to expose a wide, open field that stretched flat and deep to another line of pine trees. At the far end of the field was a long metal pavilion with a silver tin roof that reflected the setting sun. It would have looked like any other plowed and flattened farm field if it weren't for all the bathtubs. Rows of them. Groups of six. Groups of twelve. Old bathtubs, all sitting atop evenly placed concrete blocks, inches apart and a foot off the ground. A worn tractor lane between each row.

"Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing?" Alex asked.

The bathtubs, maybe a hundred of them, were all packed to the top and overflowed with rich, dark brown soil. A large sheet of green mesh covered each, held in place by rocks or bricks. T-Bone shuttled down the lane nose high. Chance had stopped to take a long look. Even he hadn't seen this before.

"I'm a little afraid to ask," I said. "Worms?"

"Worms," Cotton Mulligan said.

"In bathtubs," Alex said. "You grow worms in bathtubs?"

"Well, not everybody does," he said. "Most use metal rounds, some build up walls with borders, trench like. Some build wood boxes in rows."

"But you use old bathtubs."

He lifted his shoulders in a small shrug. “Seemed cheaper. Lot of them in junkyards. Don’t think the worms mind.”

“And you dig them out of the tubs?” I asked.

“I do.” He pointed over at the pavilion. “Dig them out, divide them up, bag them up, and ship them out.”

“You ship them out?”

“Ship to more than twenty-plus states, orders going out every two weeks.”

Alex went over and took a closer look at the first bathtub. She lifted the green mesh and looked in, poked at the soil.

“You were a cop, right?” she asked.

“Twenty-eight years as a deputy.”

“So how does one go from that to this?” She pointed at the bathtub.

“Promised my daddy I would come back one day and take over his farm.”

“And grow worms.”

“This was always a chicken farm when he was alive.”

“And you decided to switch to worms?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Simple,” he said. “Chickens are nasty and noisy.”

“And worms?”

“Quiet as the night and don’t stink.”

## Chapter 16

We sat under the big tree next to the fire pit. A nearly full moon looked down between the branches. We had just polished off a meal worthy of a four-star restaurant. Cotton had wrangled three steaks as thick and big as a catcher's mitt and had grilled them cowboy style over the open fire. Served up on a tin plate with a hunting knife and a roll of paper towels, but no small side of broccoli or carrots. The steaks were offered up with a side of longneck beer from a plastic bucket of ice. I had three sides.

"How far are the shoals from here?" Alex asked.

Cotton poked at the fire with a long stick. "Beyond the field where we were earlier, a trail takes you down that way. About a mile."

"What's with the name, Bull Killer Shoals?"

"Before trains took over," he said, "they shipped goods down the Gillyhatchie toward the coast. Had to use bulls to haul barges across the rocky shoals."

"That sounds awful," Alex said. "Terrible thing to do to the animals."

"Terrible duty for men and the bulls. Name is earned. Earned hard."

I finished off the last of my third beer. Cotton took his stick, broke a burnt log into two pieces, and stirred the coals. Sparks swirled in a stiff breeze and drifted toward the moon.

"Time to put the horses in the barn," he said.

“I’ll just stay right here in this long lawn chair,” I said.

Cotton nodded. He looked at Alex. “You can take the trailer tonight ‘til you get your camping gear.”

“I’m not taking your place,” she said.

He pointed toward the barn. “I got a good place in the barn.”

“You’re not sleeping in the barn,” she said.

He ran his hand across the bald part of his head. “Come on.”

He started down the grassy knoll, a slight limp tilting him off to the left. The inside of the dark barn smelled of damp hay and tractor gas. All down the left side was a jumble of old parts, farm tillers, headlights, and assorted junk. On the right, bathtubs were stacked up nearly to the A-frame roof. At the far end of the barn, Cotton approached a battered yellow door and shoved at it with his foot. “This is my office.”

We stepped in behind him, and the first thing that hit us was the cool air. Air conditioning. He flipped on the lights. We weren’t in a musty barn any longer.

“Jeez Loueeze,” Alex said. “Are you kidding me?”

Cotton smiled and turned on another small lamp. The room glowed with warm light. It was about twelve by twenty feet with piney wood paneling and wood beams across a bead board ceiling with tiny track lights. The A/C unit hummed, and a large window wrapped the corner of the back wall. A row of tall bookcases bumped up against a large wooden desk with two computers. The plank floor was covered with a western-style rug, and a leather recliner faced a big flat screen TV mounted on the wall. A thick blanket was draped over the recliner.

“Well, I didn’t expect to find *this* in the back of your barn,” I said.

“Business is business,” he said. “Wall Street or worms, you need a place to add up the money and pay the bills.”

He flipped the remote and the TV stirred to life. A black-and-white movie popped up on the screen. He muted the sound.

“You tune in baseball games on that?” I asked.

“From time to time,” he said. “You watch baseball?”

“That’s all he watches,” Alex said and grinned.

“You play?”

“For a time.”

“I’m not much of a fan, but I got a nephew from Oklahoma that’s played on and off this year with the team up in Minnesota. I watch his games when his mom calls to tell me.”

“He plays for the Twins?”

“Up and down. Been playing now for maybe eight years or so, trying to make it stick. Already married, got a kid. Trying to make it as a relief pitcher now.”

“Hard way to make a living.”

“Beats digging out worms,” he said.

Alex moved over to the desk, picked up a bronze pig figurine, and rolled it around in her hand. She sat it down and leaned in to look at an oil painting on the wall. “Is this a painting of the shoals?”

Cotton turned to look. “My older sister painted that a long time ago. She lives down in Jacksonville.”

“Nice painting. The shoals really look pretty.”

“Pretty like a high school prom queen,” he said. “Until you find out how mean she is if you don’t watch your back.”

He handed me a blanket and two to Alex. We started out the door. “What time are we getting up in the morning?” Alex asked.

“Whatever suits you,” he said. “We no longer get up with the chickens. Good thing about worms, they don’t give a damn if you decide to sleep in.”

Alex headed out of the barn. Cotton motioned for me to hang back.

“Can I be blunt?” he asked.

“Blunt is always best.”

“Why are you really down here?”

I hesitated. “Not sure. Trying to do the right thing, I guess. Especially after those boys beat up Biscuit.”

“And beat up you.”

“And me.”

“You don’t seem like the treasure-hunting type.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I don’t think there is a treasure to be found.”

“But you do think Tucker Boone and his boys will show up down here with that map looking for one.”

“I do.”

“And you know that this fellow Biscuit will show up on his own if he has to.”

“I do.”

“Toot mentioned that about you.”

“What?”



“Loyal and stubborn.”

“Been accused of both,” I said.

“And you hold grudges.”

“Guilty as charged.”

He smiled. “So, you decided to come on down here and dig around?”

“Dig a few holes in the ground. Keep an eye on Biscuit and go home.”

He kicked at the loose hay on the barn floor. “Only problem with that,” he said, “is that sometimes you dig a hole so deep you can’t get yourself out of it.” I nodded. “But then again,” he said, “I’ve been known to dig some deep holes myself. So, just say what it is, and you got my help.”

“Appreciate it.”

“Wait here,” he said and dipped inside his office. He came back with a worn rifle, an old Winchester model with a scope.

“Take this.” He handed it to me.

“What’s this for?”

“Bobcats been known to come around at night.”

“Bobcats.”

“And other things,” he said.

“Other things,” I repeated.

“Now, if we done eating, drinking, and talking, I’m headed inside, crawl in my chair and spin that satellite around in a big circle until I find me some John Wayne to watch.”

He turned and shut the old yellow door behind him.

“Other things,” I said aloud to the empty barn.

## Chapter 17

Two hours later, boots off, blanket behind my head, I was wide awake. The moon danced in and out of clouds through the limbs above me. The fire was down to red coals, a small flame flickering to life once or twice. I couldn't sleep. If I was at home, after three beers and a big steak, I'd be sacked out. Road games. Never could sleep much on the road when I was a player, especially on a travel night.

Bus trips in the Minors could be long and miserable. Up to ten, maybe fourteen hours, depending on the league. Most players found ways to bend, curl, stretch, and slump into some sort of sleep. I could not. I would prop my head on a sweatshirt against the window and watch the miles go by in slow motion. My time spent with thoughts of every single at bat of the last series, taking them apart, pitch by pitch. Funny thing was, I didn't spend much time at all on the good ones. That double or home run would slip by like a quick gas station exit, and I'd be left to chew on that strikeout in the 8<sup>th</sup> inning for a good seventy or eighty dark miles. Two states can roll by while you fret over missing a 2-2 curveball with two men on base.

I felt like I was back on that bus. Just a nagging feeling that I couldn't shake. Like a 2-2 curveball that I couldn't hit. Cotton's question left me unsettled. Why was I down here? Things I *didn't* know, outweighed things I *did* know. I'd always been wary of the unknown. I was a creature of routine, and lying in the dark under a tree on a worm farm was *way* outside my routine.

The reason I often missed a 2-2 curveball was due to my routine. I believed in it. I would convince myself the pitcher wouldn't throw it at a certain time. That would lead to a taken pitch, a strikeout, and miles of debate on long bus rides. Old habits and routines are hard to break. Tonight, those old habits made it impossible to find sleep.

I sat up and pulled on my boots. Chance looked at me. The lights were off in the trailer and no lights shined from the back of the barn. John Wayne had caught the bad guys. Chance stretched long and let out a yawn.

"Let's go for a walk," I said and picked up the old Winchester.

We headed down the trail past the bathtubs. The worms had found sleep, I guess. Fifteen minutes later we came to a creek. The water ran smooth and fast downhill. A footbridge with missing planks took us across and soon after, the trail split into three paths. One to the left, one down, and one up. The path up looked worn, so Chance led the way. It was rough going. The trail would narrow, cross over huge boulders, weave down, then back up. I used my flashlight and Chance used his nose as we made our way. We would reach a high point where the moon peaked through the trees, but then dip down among tall rocks, and the trail would disappear into high grass. I thought about the snakes Toot had mentioned and wondered if they were out at night. Maybe they were asleep like the worms. The trail dipped sharply down for another quarter of a mile and we heard water. I guessed it was the Gillyhatchie, but I couldn't see anything through the trees.

The path switched up again and leveled out on top of a huge bluff of flat rocks. We were high enough to be almost above the treetops. The sound had changed. Louder, stronger, you could almost feel the force of the water as it crashed against the rocks.

We moved another hundred yards to our left, where the tree line opened. Deep below us, in the glow of the nearly full moon, we spotted it. Bull Killer Shoals. Strong white water swirled, turned, and roiled over jagged rocks. I took in a deep breath. It looked impossible to reach. The trail seemed to end where we stood. The sound from the shoals matched my mood. Unsettled and out of sorts.

We backtracked down the trail but somehow ended up on another path. Not sure where I'd turned wrong, but I didn't like the thought of being lost. I decided to go up over a ridge and find the original trail. At the top, I shined the light and it landed on a tall brick wall. I stopped. I was stunned. It was so out of place. I ran my light across it. Maybe seventy feet tall, window holes on each side, and a huge arch opening in the middle. We moved closer. It joined three other walls, shorter, with their bricks gone. The remains of a building of some sort, sunken into the hillside. Maybe a mill, maybe something to do with the barges Cotton mentioned. Tall weeds and kudzu ran up the bricks. It would be an odd sight, even in daylight, but under the faint glow of the moon, it was damn right spooky. I was about to move closer toward the arch, to take a better look, when Chance froze in his tracks.

He stood rigid, like a dog on point. I had never seen him do this. His eyes large and focused. I looked in the direction of his gaze. I'd grown up in a rural area before moving to the city at thirteen, so I had spent time in the woods. I had seen a variety of animals and I had seen a lot of deer, but I had never, ever seen anything like what we were looking at now.

This deer was huge. A buck. A rack that spanned wide and high. Chest thick and strong. And solid white. A white deer.

I raised the Winchester and put my eye to the scope to get a closer look. I spun the focus on his head. Most deer would keep their head turned and look at you from the side. This deer did not. He looked square at me. His eyes locked in on the crosshairs of the scope.

Even if I'd had the notion, I couldn't have pulled the trigger. He seemed to know that. I lowered the rifle and looked at Chance. He hadn't moved. I stood in place. It felt like I couldn't pull any air into my lungs.

The big white deer turned his head and walked away. Took his time. No hurry, no fear. With his back to us, he strolled into a row of tall bushes and faded away. The sound of water from the shoals covered his disappearance. I let out a long slow breath and took in some new air. Cold sweat trickled down my back. Chance turned his head and looked up at me.

"Why are you looking at me?" I asked him. "I don't have an answer for you."

He shook his whole body like he had just gotten out of water. I felt like doing the same.

"I think we've walked enough for tonight," I said. He agreed.

Maybe it was a sign. Maybe not. Maybe it was a message. Maybe not. I had absolutely no idea. But I did know one thing for sure; I had most definitely stepped way outside of my comfort zone and circle of routine.

**Make A Note: Maybe it's time to stop thinking, close your eyes, and swing at the damn 2-2 Curveball.**

## Chapter 18

“What is she doing?”

Cotton watched Alex, who was down on her knees in the barn with a camera pointed at part of an old plow.

“She calls it ‘recording a slice of life,’” I said.

“I thought maybe she was one of them archeologists or some other kind of ‘ologist.”

“Just taking photographs. But she is pretty good at it.”

“And tell me again why she came down here with you?”

“She doesn’t take kindly to being told no.”

“Met a woman like that once on a trip to Mexico,” he said. “She was up here three years before she went back home.”

“Glad to see her go?”

“Miss her every day.” He smiled.

We sat on a picnic table outside the barn and drank coffee. I hadn’t mentioned my walk in the woods the previous night or the white deer. Chance and his new pal wrestled over a big stick. I wasn’t sure if he had told T-Bone about the deer, but I doubted it. Our secret.

The morning calm was broken up by the sound of a big engine up the driveway. A bright yellow pickup with double back wheels rolled into view, a boat trailer attached. A green inflatable boat was mounted on the rear.

The truck pulled onto the grass and down toward us. On the doors and front hood was a name and logo: *The Tackle Box*. Greasefire had arrived.

A big man rolled out of the truck. Broad shoulders, cut off t-shirt, huge arms covered with tattoos. His large nose was framed by an open-mouth grin that seemed stuck in place. He walked with a roll that turned into a swagger.

“Worms,” he said, still grinning. “I might just be a dumb redneck, but whoever thought you could make yourself a living raising worms? Don’t that beat all.”

I glanced over at Cotton. Alex made her way out of the barn.

“Jimmy Don Dudley,” he said and stuck out a big hand. “But ya’ll can just call me Greasefire. Everybody else does.”

I made the introductions all around and thanked him for coming. He told us Catfish had made it worth his while. Again, I had no idea what that meant, but figured I would hear about it down the road. Another debt to pay. Alex asked the question I knew she was going to ask.

“So, is Catfish lying, or did you earn that name by burning down a burger joint?”

“Maybe true, maybe false,” he said. “But to this day, I submit to you that Donny had a faulty fry machine.”

“I was a deputy then,” Cotton said. “What Donny had was a faulty fry cook.”

Greasefire opened his grin wider. “I’ll put the real truth in the book I’m gonna write someday.”

“So, now you opened up your own boat business?” Alex asked.

“My cousin Dickie did that. I still plan on having my own burger place someday.”

“Really?”

“I make a mean burger. Melt in your mouth mean.”

“Do everybody a favor,” Cotton said. “Get somebody else to cook the fries.”

He took his truck and backed it up to the spot under the tree near the fire pit. Cotton went to take care of his worms, and we began to set up camp. I couldn't believe how much stuff Greasefire was rolling out of the truck. When we got it all done, he had five individual tents, each with a mat, sleeping bag, and hanging light. He had two other open tents; a smaller one with a folding table, four coolers, and boxes of supplies, and a larger one with flaps on the back side and a half dozen fold-out canvas chairs. Cotton returned from his worm duties and took in the oversized campground.

“Looks like a traveling carnival set up while I was gone.”

“First class,” Greasefire said. “How's them worms of yours growing?”

“The worms are fine,” Cotton said. “You plan on staying a few months?”

“One night, one week, one month,” he said. “Greasefire don't live low.”

He moved over to the coolers. He opened a big one and pulled out an oversized brown bag. He tapped on it. “Inside here are the remains of one of the finest cows in Pine County. Gonna make us a some two-pound and round burgers.”

“That sounds great,” Alex said.

“You bet, girlie,” he said. “So, grab some new wood and let's get a big hot fire going.”

Cotton looked over at me. “Do me a favor.”

“What's that?” I asked.

“You take care of building the fire.”



## Chapter 19

He was right about the burgers. Large and crisp on the outside, red and juicy on the inside. Night had settled in by the time we'd relaxed and sipped on cold beer around the fire pit. Fireflies, or "lightning bugs" as Catfish called them, skittered about in the woods. The humidity of the last few days had vanished, replaced with a dry and cool breeze. Stars filled the sky.

Back in the city, I lived adjacent to a loud and active train yard. You get used to all the noise and lights and can easily forget how nice it is in the middle of nowhere. I rolled around the idea of how it might be to live in a place like this. Then I thought about that huge white deer and quickly decided against it.

"So, you're the private eyeball that's leading this treasure hunt?" Greasefire asked me.

I shrugged. Sipped my beer.

"Catfish said this baseball crap is worth a lot of money. True, or he yanking my chain?"

"Depends. If you could find it, it could be."

"That's what we aim to do, ain't it?"

"Got to find a dime to make a nickel," Cotton said.

"What does that mean?" Greasefire asked.

"It means you got about as much a chance of finding that stuff as I have of hooking up with Dolly Parton."

"The hell you say," he said. "Last night I talked to a fellow who told Greasefire exactly where to look."

“Who would that be?”

“Louie Barnes. He was at the bar the night it went down.”

“Louie Barnes is a drunk,” Cotton said. “Was way back then, is now, and he hasn’t left that barstool at the Trotline since he retired from the paper mill.”

“He knows things. He bet me a thousand bucks that I’d find that footlocker buried somewhere on the rock slopes inside the *Y*.”

“I rest my case. Money lost,” Cotton said. “If you go looking in the *Y*, you’ll wind up floating in the shoals all the way down to Savannah.”

“I heard all the talk about the *Y*,” Greasefire said. “I’m not afraid of going in there.”

“Wait a minute,” Alex said. “I’m getting lost. What is the *Y*?”

“I was afraid you were going to ask that,” I said and looked at Cotton.

He picked up a round stick about a foot long. He took out a big pocket knife, flipped it open, and carved a point at one end of the stick. We waited for his answer.

“The *Y* is the intersection.” He took the stick and drew in the dirt. “Blue Possum Creek comes this way down the hill. The Gillyhatchie this way.” His stick made a *V*.

“The two of them meet up here to form the top of the shoals,” he said and drew a straight line under the *V* that turned it into a big *Y*. “Bull Killer Shoals is like a big *Y*, and the area in the middle of the *Y* is no man’s land.”

“Horse hockey,” Greasefire said.

“In all the time you been down at the shoals, taking folks fishing and such, you ever been up into the *Y*?” Cotton asked him.

“Never had a reason. Can’t fish in the woods.”

“Could it be one other reason?”

“Aw, hell,” he said. “I don’t believe in all that ghost stuff.”

“Whoa, hold on.” Alex pulled her chair closer to the fire. “This is what I came to hear. Tell me more about this ghost thing.”

Greasefire looked at me. “You don’t believe in ghosts do you, big man?”

“Depends,” I said. “During the day, not so much. Ask me again at night and I tend to have a more open mind on the subject.”

“Not me,” Alex said. “I love this stuff. As kids, our uncle would take us camping and tell us ghost stories. Things would happen, and I was convinced it wasn’t the wind. I was sure it was a ghost. I would get up and go looking, just hoping I might see one.”

It didn’t surprise me she felt that way. “How about you Cotton?” I asked.

He rubbed the piece of wood with the sharp blade, the bark peeled away. “You’ve got to ask yourself,” he said. “Do you believe in the lie or the story?”

He dug the knife blade in a circle around the top of the stick and clipped off the end in one move. He held it close to his mouth and blew the bits of sawdust away.

“Anybody can believe in lies. It doesn’t become a story until you believe it with your own eyes.”

“Them worms done got up in your head. What are you trying to say?” Greasefire asked.

“Eyes can turn a lie into the truth real damn quick,” he said.

Greasefire stood up. “I need another beer to listen to this kind of crazy talk.”

I took a hoe next to the fire pit and moved the logs around. The flames leaped when I poked at the fire, and the smoke rolled back in my face.

“Story goes back to 1923,” Cotton said.

“Oh, here we go,” Greasefire said. “He’s gonna tell that old Hoke the Hunter story.”

Alex shushed him. “Go on, please,” she said.

“Harlan H. Hokam,” Cotton said, “owned a cotton gin over in Musella. Had himself a young wife who took a liking to one of his customers.”

“And we’re off down this road.” Greasefire rolled his eyes.

“Hokam found out about it, followed them one night. The couple ended up down here at the shoals. He had his rifle with him and he aimed to kill the other fellow. Chased them down the creek to where they used the old winches and crossed over to the edge of the Y.”

“The winches?” Alex asked. “What is that?”

“All along the shoals, they strung these long steel cables with winches hooked to trees to pull goods and supplies up and down from the river.”

“Them cables and winches are still hanging,” Greasefire said. “Rusted all to hell, grown into the trees.”

“They were old even then,” Cotton said. “But when you’re dodging rifle rounds, you do what you have to.”

“He was shooting at the man with his wife?” Alex asked.

“Seems so. Only folks to see any of this were two fishermen down at the bottom of the Y, doing some night grappling.”

“Some what?” I asked.

“Grappling,” Greasefire said. “Reaching under rocks and yanking out big mudcats.”

“I saw that on TV,” Alex said. “Thought they called it ‘noodling?’”

“Not around here. ‘Grappling’ or just ‘hillbilly hand fishing.’” He grinned wide.

I took a sip of beer and thought about that. Sticking your hands under a rock in the dark and trying to grab a big fish? Add one more item to the list of things I didn’t ever plan to try.

“So, did he hit the man?” Alex asked.

“The fishermen saw the lady, dressed in a long white dress, go half-running, half-tumbling down a hill toward the *Y*. They lost sight of her. Up above them, they heard more rifle shots, a yell, and a body came flying off the hill, crashed into the upper shoals.”

“He killed the man with his wife?” Alex asked.

“They dug what was left of him out of the rocks.”

“What happened to her?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Next thing they saw was Hokam, rifle in his arms, hanging on one of those old winches and flying across the shoals and into the *Y*.”

“He was going after her?”

“He was. But he didn’t make it. The cable snapped. He flew maybe five hundred feet out and over the *Y* and right into the intersection of the shoals. Dropped into the deepest part of the river.”

“Dead?”

“For sure,” Cotton said. “But they never found his body. Never found any sign of him.”

“And she’s the ghost now?” Alex asked.

Greasefire laughed. “Not her, Hoke, Hoke the Hunter. Everybody thinks he’s still down here at the shoals, roaming around, still searching for her.”

Alex looked at Cotton. He flipped the stick from end to end.

“Started up some years after that,” he said. “People started telling stories about being down at the shoals and this fellow passing by them, no words, just a nod and then he would walk on by. They would look back and he’d be gone.”

“Harlan Hokam?” Alex asked.

“Everything matched up. Tall boots, canvas jacket, felt hat like he wore. Carrying his old 1920s model Savage bolt action rifle in his right hand. Always the same.”

“How many times have people seen him through the years?”

“On and off. People think he’s just wandering around, mostly up in the *Y*. Same description, no matter how many years go by. Just walks on and fades away.”

“After all these years,” she said. “Still looking for her. That’s amazing.”

“That is a dog-faced lie,” Greasefire said. “Everybody around here knows about the old Hoke the Hunter story. I could say I saw him. I could be lying. I bet half the folks who say they’ve seen him are lying.”

“My granddaddy never told a lie in his life.”

“Your grandfather saw him?” Alex asked. Her eyes grew large.

“Told me about it when I was ten years old, sitting under the same tree we’re sitting under right now.”

I looked up at the moon as it emerged from behind a small cloud. Cotton took his stick and poked at the embers in the bottom of the fire pit.

“He’d been in the big war. Told me he saw a ghost on the battlefield, but thought he was just dealing with stress. Then he saw Hoke. Thought the same thing. Changed his mind after the third time.”

“He saw him three times?”

“Four.”

Greasefire drained his beer, shook his head a little, but stayed silent. Alex was hooked. I wasn’t sure. Good story, but who knew. Maybe that white deer would know.

“Have you ever seen him?” Alex asked Cotton.

“Once.”

“Once.”

“Once was enough.”

A burnt log broke off in the fire with a pop. Sparks flew toward the moon.

## Chapter 20

“Follow me,” Greasefire said. “Watch yourself, it’s steep.”

He tossed a huge backpack and tools down a long slope and followed them feet first. He crashed through thick limbs and brush and disappeared. We heard a thud, a yelp, and then he clapped his hands. “Yeahhhhhh boy, come on down little doggies,” he yelled.

Alex went next, on her rear, and slid to the bottom. I followed, tumbled at the end, and rolled. My bad knee landed hard on a sharp rock.

“That’s the worst of it,” he said. “We nearly down to the bottom of the *Y*.”

“One question,” I said. “How are we going to get back up that slope?”

He looked up to the top. “Well, I didn’t think that far ahead.” His permanent grin grew wider. “Let me think on it a bit and get back to you.”

He grabbed the gear and headed down through the trees and rocks. It could have been a trail, but not one made by humans, which unnerved me a bit. We reached a high ledge that overlooked the top of the shoals. From here, the sound of the water roared loud and steady as the three points of water met in a swirl of anger. The *Y*.

“Down there,” Greasefire pointed. “Those big rocks will roll down this ledge and form all sorts of pockets, tunnels, caves. That’s where Louie Barnes said to look.”

I wasn’t sure what he had in mind, but I hadn’t expected it to be such back-breaking work. For the next several hours, he had us moving rocks—or more aptly, boulders—one by one, using our hands, ropes, and a pry bar. Once removed, they would reveal a deep open pocket of



darkness. Greasefire would stick his head and flashlight into each hole and come back out with a curse if he had found no treasure. This went on, hour after hour. Alex helped a bit but spent a lot of her time taking photos of the shoals below us. I kept at it with very little hope. Greasefire was much more enthusiastic. I was pretty sure we wouldn't be finding a footlocker of baseball stuff, but there was a good chance we might uncover some general from the Civil War, so I pressed on with him.

"Give it a big horse pull," he said. "Yank that rope and let's see what's in this hole."

The light was fading, and he had promised this would be the last one, so I wrapped the rope around a tree and put my weight into it. A huge boulder rolled aside, and Greasefire shined his flashlight into the now open pit.

"Well, tickle my tush," he said. "Get over here and take a look at this."

I moved toward the hole, and Alex pushed in behind me. He shined the light and I heard a nasty hissing sound. His light landed on an open mouth of angry teeth.

"She's pissed off, ain't she?" Greasefire said. His grin got even bigger.

"A mama possum and her little babies," Alex said. "How cute."

"Cute?" I looked in again. Sharp teeth glowed in the light.

Greasefire shined his light at me. "Big man, reach in there and get the mama out."

"Do what?"

"Ain't nothing but a little bitty ol' possum," he said. "Just reach in there and grab it by the tail. She ain't gonna hurt you."

"That is not happening," I said. "The words 'when hell freezes over' come to mind."

"City boy," he said. He handed the flashlight to me, crawled into the pit, and took his left hand and waved it in front of the possum. The hissing got louder. He reached around with his

right hand, grabbed it by the tail, and pulled it out. He held it up in the air. It wiggled and tried to reach his hand. He laughed and held it up to my face. Alex reached out and touched the tail.

He let it go and, one by one, grabbed the babies. Alex took one in her arms and cradled it like a kitten. I kept my distance.

**Make A Note: When I get back to the train yard, apologize to all the city rats that I have run off with rocks. These guys were much worse.**

“Can we get out of here now?” I asked.

“Dang it, if I didn’t think for sure we’d find something today.”

“You said yourself, people have been searching for decades. Why on earth would you think we would find something in just one day?”

“Cause you talking to Greasefire and this is the first day he ever looked for it.”

It always worried me when people talked about themselves in the third person. We headed back up the trail. We reached the tall slope where we’d had trouble. He stopped, looked up.

“Any ideas?” I asked.

“Greasefire won the 4-H Blue Ribbon for calf roping at the Pine County Fair, three years running.” Third person again.

He took a long nylon rope off his belt and hooked it to one of the small pry bars. Swung it in a circle and threw it up above the slope. On the third toss, the bar lodged hard and firm. He grinned and offered up the rope to Alex.

“Up first, then me, then I’ll help pull up the big man last.”

Alex went up with ease, hand over hand. Greasefire went next, stumbled a few times, but made it to the top. It had gotten dark quick, so he took a flashlight and hung it on a limb, pointing

down the slope. We hauled up the gear in two trips, and he tossed the rope down to me. He took up the slack and gave me some help as I made my way up.

I was halfway, hand over hand, when I thought I heard Alex say something in the distance. It was odd. Not a yell, not a call, maybe something like a gasp, I wasn't sure. Then again, a little louder. The rope went slack, Greasefire let go and I dropped ten feet in a flash. I reached out and grabbed a limb to stop myself. The flashlight disappeared. I steadied myself, got my feet under me, and heard Alex again, farther away. I made my way up the hill in the dark, one step at a time, and pulled myself over the edge and rolled to the ground. I looked up the ridge and in the distance, I spotted the glare of a flashlight. Greasefire and Alex headed back toward me. I relaxed. They were good. As they got closer, I realized they were safe, but they were not good.

“You’ve done lost your mind, girlie.”

“I know what I saw.”

“Watch your step, girlie.” Greasefire took her by the arm.

Alex yanked her arm away. “Stop calling me girlie.”

“Damn near scared me to death,” he said. “Him too. I had to drop him.”

I took the rope and began to roll it up. Alex had a camera in her hand. Greasefire shined the light in my face.

“You good?”

“I’m fine. What’s going on? I heard something, but couldn’t tell what.”

“I saw him,” Alex said.

“You did not,” Greasefire said.

“Saw who?” I asked.

“I did too,” she said. “And I got images of him.”

Greasefire shifted the flashlight and pointed it in her face. “Girlie here, thinks she saw Hoke the Hunter.”

She glared at him. “I know what I saw.”

“You saw the ghost?” I asked. “Where?”

“Up on the ridge.” She didn’t look up. She was clicking through the buttons on the rear of her camera.

“Damn that Cotton and his ghost stories,” Greasefire said. “He just got you all fired up about seeing things.”

“The man looked just how Cotton described him. Same clothes, everything.”

“Ghost.” He looked at me and rolled his index finger in a circle next to his head. Crazy.

“I’ll show you.” She continued to poke at her camera. We watched her. Her fingers moved fast across the buttons on the rear of her camera. “I don’t understand,” she said.

“What?”

“He’s not here.”

“Where?”

“I took shots. Fired off a speed burst. Two of them, I think. Maybe three times.”

I moved over her shoulder and looked at the rear of her camera. Greasefire joined us as we all looked at the little screen in the dark. Alex clicked through the screen, one frame at a time. She clicked fast, then slow.

“Trees,” Greasefire said. “All I see is trees. Where’s your ghost, girlie?”

“He was standing right there on those rocks. Rifle in his right hand. I had him in the shot. He looked right at me.”

“I don’t see nothing,” he said. “Told you, just damn seeing things in the dark.”

“I know I saw him. He was in my frame.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Positive.”

I could tell she was irritated with Greasefire, but she wasn’t her usual sarcastic self. She looked puzzled, maybe a bit shaken.

“You okay?” I asked.

“No, not really.” She continued to scroll through the frames.

“Well, if you’re done looking for pictures of a ghost that don’t exist,” Greasefire said, “let’s shake a leg and get out of here. I need a strong drink.”

Alex looked up the hill to where she’d taken the photos. The moon was up and hung low over the ridge where she’d stood moments earlier. The tall trees swayed slightly in the breeze. She looked at her camera and back up at the ridge. She rubbed her eyes with one hand, took another look at the camera, then looked up at me.

“You believe I saw him, don’t you?”

Greasefire had already moved up the trail. The moon slid behind the clouds and he faded into a silhouette. I took a deep breath.

“It’s getting darker by the minute,” I said. “Let’s go.”

## Chapter 21

When we got back to the farm, Cotton had already turned in. Alex retreated to her tent with her camera and her thoughts. Greasefire broke out the hard liquor, and I tried to sleep. I did not sleep well. It wasn't the tent or the sleeping bag. Maybe it was the muscles that ached, the shoulder that hurt, the knee that barked, or just maybe, and I was going out on a limb here, it was the thought that Alex had seen a real ghost. I'd lost sleep over a ton of things in my life, but this was a first. Routine replaced by the unreasonable.

I rolled out before dawn and cranked up a fire. The air was cool and fresh. I found some coffee and made a pot. I thought I was the only one up, but I soon spotted Cotton emerging from one of the sheds with two heavy bags over his shoulder. He tossed them easily onto the trailer behind his tractor. I joined him and helped him load a dozen more. T-Bone hopped up on the trailer with the bags.

“Greasefire hit the hard stuff,” I told him. “He’s down for a while.”

“Good.”

“You should talk with Alex when she gets up.”

“About seeing Hoke?”

“You know?”

“She woke me up in the middle of the night. Asked if she could use the computers in the office. She and that dog of yours have been in there for hours.”

“Did she tell you what happened with her camera?”

“She did.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think she believes what she believes.”

“So, you think she actually saw the ghost?”

“I didn’t say that.”

He put one foot on the tractor tire, grabbed the fender, and pulled himself upward into the seat, all in one smooth motion.

“If she did, the question is, why didn’t he show up in her photos?” I asked.

“I would guess that’s the question she’s asking herself.”

“You have any answers?”

“Sometimes you learn more from questions than you do from answers.”

The tractor growled and puffed to a start, and Cotton pulled away toward his worms. I started back over to the fire. I heard another engine, but this one was more of a putter. I looked up toward the driveway and saw a car circle the oak tree and squeak to a stop. An orange BMW 2002. The reporter.

He was dressed the same, but different. Blue untucked shirt with red stripes along the buttons. Pressed jeans, red sneakers, and the same soft Dodgers cap. The ink pen behind his ear.

“Surprised to see me?” he asked.

“Surprised is one word. I can think of a few others as well.”

“Guess you’re wondering how I found this place?”

“No, you’re a reporter. It’s your job.”

He smiled. He carried himself with ease. Just roll up on private property, in the middle of nowhere, do it with confidence, and do it dressed like you were headed to a beach bar.

“Find your treasure chest yet?”

I didn't answer. I felt the less I said, the better.

“Nice camp you got set up here,” he said. “Is this place really a worm farm?”

“Think you already know that.”

“Course I do,” he said. “Just being sociable. Place is owned by a man named Cotton Mulligan. His family farm. Former deputy.”

“So, you still working on your big story?”

“A story, sure, but not big. Right now, just enjoying some country air.”

He took the pen from behind his ear and pulled a skinny notepad from his pants. He flipped through it, stopped at a page and tapped it with his pen.

“This Jimmy Don Dudley, the guy they call Greasefire, he able to take you to any of the places down at the shoals that the old barfly Louie Barnes told him about?”

I looked over toward the tents, paused, and kicked at the ground.

“This can be a two-way street,” he said. “Might work out better. I get my story, you get the information I dig up along the way, and we work together.”

I wasn't keen on that idea, but he did seem to be a step ahead of us.

“He did take us to a place,” I told him. “Didn't work out. Found nothing but one very angry possum.”

“No Pulitzer Prize in possums.”

“Now, I have a question for you. Were you at the nightclub the other night?”

“I was.”



“Thanks for the help.”

“We’re trained to observe, not participate,” he said. “Especially when guns are involved.”

He smiled.

I nodded. Couldn’t disagree with him. Better plan than mine. “I guess you’ve done your homework on Tucker Boone?”

“Tucker Boone is indeed interesting reading,” he said. “But most important thing right now is the fact he’s coming down here. He’s got his boys with him and he’s got that map.”

“You know where he is?”

“I don’t. Word is he has an old hunting cabin. Not sure where, but I just know he’s left Atlanta and he’s down here or headed here, and soon.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” I said. “Are you going to stay?”

“State park. A few miles down the road. Got a cottage.”

“So, you still think you got a story to tell?”

“Not just yet. But I don’t have a full-time job, so I might as well hang around and see what turns up. Other than possums and worms.”

He tugged at his cap, walked back to his car. Put the pad back in his rear pocket, but then pulled it out again.

“One more thing you should know.” He flipped it open again. “Jerry Lee Lacy, the cowboy bounty hunter, he’s down here as well. Still looking for the one they call Honey Boy.”

“He did express an interest in the payday.”

“And the payday for Honey Boy is dead or alive, and from what I can turn up, Jerry Lee Lacy is more inclined to dead than alive.” He tossed his pad into the car and opened the door.

“Oh, another thing, baseball has got wind of all this.”

“So?”

“If anything is ever found, they’ll try and seize it.”

“Really? They can do that?”

“They have their own investigators. Ruthless bunch. Powerful and greedy.”

“What would they do with it? Give it back to the players?”

“It would be like finding gold, so I don’t think baseball is going to care a whole lot about what the players think, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” I said. “No, I don’t.”

He closed his door and drove the little orange car down the long dirt driveway. I had no idea how he knew what he knew, but he sure knew a lot, and more than we did. Maybe people just liked buying the guy drinks at a bar. It was easy to tell he would be good at sharing a beer and a story. I was just glad of two things. One, he seemed to be on our side. And two, he didn’t seem to know about Alex seeing the ghost of Harlan H. Hokam. At least not yet.

## Chapter 22

I pushed the office door open and found Alex with her head down, eyes locked on a computer. Chance took advantage of the open door to slip out. She didn't look up or say hello. Cables ran from her camera to the computer, and on the screen was an image from the empty ridge where she'd told us she'd seen Hoke the Hunter.

"Cotton said you've been in here all night," I said.

"Most of it."

"Find anything?"

"No."

It was obvious she wasn't in a talkative mood. Not only had she supposedly seen a ghost, but she'd taken pictures of it. Now nobody believed her, and she couldn't produce the photographs.

"If it means anything," I said, "I do believe you saw what you saw."

"It doesn't."

"Have you found any reason why there's no images in your shots?"

"If I had, do you think I would've spent the night in here looking at shots of trees?"

I moved to the computer and stood behind her. I knew she was upset, knew she didn't want to talk, but I also knew that she needed to talk.

"Show me what you're doing," I said.

She let out a big breath and leaned back in her chair. “Like you would understand this. It is a bit more complicated than a wood chisel.”

“Try me. Maybe it’s time I moved into the 1980s.”

“Okay then, smart aleck,” she said. “I had the camera set in burst mode, consecutive frames, for the water, meaning when I hit the trigger, it turned out images at eighteen frames per second. So, I ended up with several hundred frames of the same image, in the same spot, and they all come out in what are called ‘stacks.’ Now I am going through the stacks, frame by frame.”

“I got it.”

“Sure you do.” She allowed herself a small smile.

“Seeing anything in the stacks?” I was trying to ease her stress.

“Just orbs, distortions, backscatter.”

“Right,” I said. “Backscatter, of course you would see that.”

She shoved her chair back, relaxed and stretched her shoulders. She tugged at her ponytail.

“What you’re really asking is, have I found a picture of Hoke the Hunter, right?”

“Be good to see.”

“The answer is no, I haven’t, and I don’t understand why.”

“Have people ever been able to take a picture of a ghost?”

“A lot of images through the years, but all of them debated. The most famous was a guy named William Mumler, back in the 1860s. Toured the country with his photos, made a lot of money showing them off at carnivals.”

“So, it can happen?”

“Could, but Mumler turned out to be a fraud. He was using double negatives.”

“Sort of like the lady at the carnival with two heads?”

She smiled. “I need to get back to looking through these stacks.”

“Anything I can get you?”

“Yeah,” she said. “A double negative of Hoke the Hunter.”

She turned back to the computer. I shut the door behind me and headed through the barn. Chance bounced up to me, an old baseball in his mouth.

“Where did you get this?” I asked him. He turned and went over to an old five-gallon bucket. A full bucket of old balls. Maybe Cotton’s nephew had been here before and had spent some time throwing. Chance dropped the ball next to the bucket. He just wanted to show it off, he did not do fetch. Chance believed the game of fetch was a ridiculous waste of time and effort.

I picked it up and rolled it around in my hand. I thought about Cotton’s nephew, still hanging on with the Twins. At least he’d made it for a bit, just like I had. But for every one of us who had his “cup of coffee” in the big leagues, there was always someone like Dean Buckley.

Dean and I had both played in the Minors with the Cardinals. He’d been a good pitcher, always near the top in stats at each level, but always one player away from being called up. One September, when he was twenty-nine years old, the big club called him up to start a make-up game, a chance for his first Major League start. We were in the clubhouse after a game in Rochester when the skipper told him. I watched him at his locker. Tears rolling down his face, sobbing like a kid, his face buried in a towel.

He flew out that night to meet the big club in Philadelphia. He woke up the next day to a relentless rainstorm. He went to the park and saw his name on a big-league jersey for the first

time. He warmed up underneath. The rain continued. He walked out to the dugout. The rain came in waves. Water poured down the steps and into the tunnel. He stood and looked out at the field. He stared at the mound, covered by a tarp. The rain would not stop.

He went inside, pulled on the jersey with his name on the back, and sat at his locker. He rolled a new Major League baseball around in his hand, over and over, again and again.

An hour later, the manager of the Cardinals called him into his office. The game had been postponed and they needed him back in AAA to start the International League Playoffs. Dean Buckley packed his bag and left. He took a long look at the huge stadium through the sheets of rain as the taxi pulled away, on his way back to the Minors.

Injuries, missed chances, full rosters, and a trade left him at age thirty-four, stuck in AAA. He finished the season with a winning record and went home to Oklahoma. I only saw him a couple of times after that night in Rochester, but I'd always remember his reaction to being called up. Whenever I rolled a baseball slowly around in my hand, I often thought of Dean Buckley and that rainy night in Philadelphia.

One chance. Sometimes, that's all you get. Maybe it was the same for Alex. One chance. She'd loved the idea of seeing a ghost ever since she was a kid. She'd been taking photographs, since she was a kid. Maybe thousands of them. Now, one chance to come up with that one photo. One chance and it was gone, faded away like the moon behind a cloud.

I stuck the ball inside the pocket of my sweatshirt and rolled it around in my hand.

## Chapter 23

I lowered the heavy cooler off the tailgate, and Catfish poured a bag of ice over rows of longneck beer bottles. I shifted the ice while he packed a rolling cart with all the things we'd picked up on a run to Rabbit's store. Catfish had arrived a few hours prior, with Biscuit and his old blue van in tow. Catfish hadn't planned on coming, but when Biscuit showed up and insisted Catfish tell him how to get here, he figured it best just to lead the way. He told me Biscuit had weaved across the road the entire trip, and he wasn't sure if it was due to pain pills, bad eyesight, or both.

The trip to the store gave me a chance to fill him in. Even told him all about Alex, the ghost, and the missing photographs. All he said was, "First time you see a ghost can be a little unsettling." I didn't think a follow-up question was in order.

"Lot of trucks and cars in this yard," Catfish said.

The driveway around the old oak was packed with vehicles, including Biscuit's van parked out on the grass with the doors wide open.

"I don't think I saw this many cars in Donny's lot the night Jimmy Don burnt the place down," he said.

Down the hill, Greasefire poured a stream of lighter fluid on a grill next to the fire pit. The flames leaped toward the tree limbs with a big whoosh.

"Maybe we should move the vehicles back a bit," I said.

I grabbed the heavy cooler, and Catfish reached behind the seat of his truck and pulled out a large paper bag. Two bottles clinked inside. We started down the hill. The sky was streaked with purple across the tree line, and a nice breeze blew in from the shoals. Two guys came down the hill toward Cotton. One was tall, dressed in overalls and no shirt. The other man was short, in a plaid shirt and jeans, his face covered with a ragged red beard. The tall man carried a guitar, and the bearded one had a banjo case in his left hand.

“Who are those guys?” Catfish asked.

“I have no idea.”

“Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs maybe?”

Two hours later, bellies full, beer cooler half empty, eight of us sat around the fire and listened to the two fellows pick occasionally at their instruments. They didn’t speak, just ate the burgers and picked at the banjo and guitar. Not really playing a song, just a little rift now and then between sips of beer. At least they hadn’t started up the dueling ditty from *Deliverance*.

Biscuit had his pants back, but still looked like hell. The left side of his face had turned purple, and somewhere along the way, he’d lost a tooth, and his hand was still in a cast. It did nothing to slow his quest to find the buried baseball treasure. He badgered Greasefire about the search.

“And all you found was a possum?”

“Kiss my go to hell,” Greasefire said. “We’ll find it.”

“Dang, I wish I still had my map.”

“I don’t need your map. I’ll dig it up, you watch.”

“Do you remember anything about the map?” I asked Biscuit.

He scrunched up his bruised face. “I read it. Bunch of times. Didn’t make much sense.”



“Why not?”

“Wasn’t like no roadmap,” he said. “Had something about an alligator.”

“Alligator?” Greasefire asked. “Ain’t no gators at the shoals.”

“That’s what it said. Or least I think it did. Something about a gator.”

“I think Tucker Boone knocked more out of your head than a tooth,” Greasefire said.

The two fellows ran a small rift, matching each other back and forth. I took another longneck from the cooler. Catfish stood and reached for the large paper bag from his truck. He slid out a huge bottle of Evan Williams Single Barrel Bourbon. He spun the cap off and made the rounds, pouring out a finger or more in paper cups for everybody. Summer night, under a tree, by a fire, with cups of smooth sipping whiskey in a place inhabited by a ghost and a white deer.

**Make A Note: There are certain times when it’s just better not to question how or why.**

“So, Alex,” Catfish said as he sat back down. “I hear tell you saw Hoke the Hunter.”

I hadn’t thought he’d bring it up. She wasn’t happy he did.

“Not something I feel like talking about.”

“Who is Hoke?” Biscuit asked.

“Hoke is a ghost,” Greasefire said. “Or so they say. I don’t, but girlie here thinks she saw ol’ Hoke the Hunter and tried to take a picture of him. Picture of a ghost.”

Alex glared at him. Biscuit studied her for a moment. I thought he was going to follow up about the ghost and the photograph.

“Are you sure you ain’t one of the dancing girls from the titty bar?”

Alex looked at me. “Can I *please* break his other hand?”

Catfish made the rounds, topping off the whiskey. He doubled up on his own and took a seat on a large upright piece of firewood. He looked at Alex.

“You ever hear about the red-eyed dog?”

“Oh boy,” Greasefire said. “Here we go.”

Flatt and Scruggs cranked up a low ditty. Catfish rubbed his big hands, a story brewing in his eyes. It may have been the first time he’d had music to back him up.

“You need to hear this story, Alex,” he said.

“I’m sure you think so, and I assume I have no choice,” she said.

“When we were in high school, we would pull this trick every year to scare somebody that didn’t know about it. Spend about a week or so, spreading a story about the red-eyed dog. A half-man, half-dog that roamed the shoals and had big red eyes that glowed in the night.”

“Scared the pants off me when I was in the ninth grade,” Greasefire said.

“It wasn’t real at all. We would work it up, then one night we would get five or six kids, all in on it, and go up to Donny’s, before he burned it down.” He pointed at Greasefire.

“I resemble that remark,” he said.

“We would find our victim and tell them we’d spotted the red-eye dog, and take off down here to the shoals to see it. Pull the car down some dark dirt road, cut the engine and wait.”

“Then the red-eyed dog shows up,” Greasefire said. “Except it ain’t no dog.”

“So, what is it?” I asked.

“Me,” Catfish said. “Or somebody like me. I did it a lot, since I was pretty big.”

“Did what?” Alex asked.

“The car is parked and somebody shouts they see the dog. And I’m in the woods, hunched over a bit, with two cigarettes held under my hands by the thumbs.”

He demonstrated, held his hands up to his mouth in a cupped position.

“Then you blow on them cigarettes and they glow in the dark. The ashes look just like red eyes glowing. You lurch around a bit and you flip your hands up and down really quick.”

He stood up for this part. Hunched over, cupped hands moving up and down near his mouth, he moved toward the fire.

“When you do that, it looks just like eyes are blinking. Blink and glow again when you blow on the cigarettes. The red-eyed dog with his eyes glowing in the dark.”

“Some damn scary stuff when you see it,” Greasefire added.

“Then all the kids in the car start up hollering and yelling. One of them tries to get out, another one pulling him back in. Guy doing the driving is acting like the car won’t start, the girls are all screaming, and out in the woods I’m getting closer and closer. Blinking and blowing.”

Greasefire jumped in. “And the one person that don’t know it’s all fake is peeing in their pants.”

“Then the car cranks and everybody heads back to town to tell the story about seeing the red-eyed dog.”

The guy on the banjo hit a little stinger of an accent with two plunks. Catfish sat back down, pleased with his story and the musical ending.

“And do tell what this red-eyed dog story has to do with what I saw,” Alex said.

“It’s about seeing what you believe and believing what you saw.”

“I already know what I saw and what I believe.” Her voice sounded agitated.

“But that ain’t the end of the story,” he said. “When it’s all over, you got to walk back through the woods and have one of your buddies pick you up. Last time I played the dog, my

senior year, it was down here, and I was making my way to the old fishing road on the other side of Blue Possum Creek to be picked up.”

“The night was dark as Honey Bee Snuff. The old flashlight was dim and I could barely see my feet as I worked my way up the hill. You know, you spend half the night alone, waiting to scare somebody, you get to where you start to scare yourself.”

He got up, took the bourbon bottle, and poured Alex another good bit. She took a tiny sip. It was the first time I could remember her drinking the hard stuff, or anything other than a beer. Catfish picked up a long stick and stuck it in the flames, then pulled it out. The end glowed with fire.

“That was the night I saw him. The night I saw Hoke the Hunter.”

He stubbed the stick back in the fire, looked at Alex. She downed her entire cup of whiskey in one swallow and took in a long deep breath. Catfish gave her a wink.

## Chapter 24

Cotton stood up and motioned for Flatt and Scruggs to stop.

“You all hear something?”

“Like what?” Catfish asked.

“I thought I heard a car door shut.”

We all stayed silent. Nothing. Up the hill a shadow emerged. The glimmer of a cigarette glowed in the dark. The red-eyed dog crossed my mind. The shadow drifted down into the dim light of the fire and Toot Thompson, a lit Camel in his right hand, emerged into view.

“Jeez, Toot,” Cotton said. “Didn’t hear you drive up.”

“Parked down the drive,” he said. “Truck sometimes needs a running start to get going.”

He limped over to Cotton and they shook hands. Cotton put a hand around Toot’s neck and patted his back. Old friends. Toot was dressed the same as usual, but tonight he’d added a holster on his right hip, the top of a dark blue gun handle poking out.

“You come down to join in the big treasure hunt?” Catfish asked him.

“Nope,” Toot said. “Just running low on worms.”

He grinned at Cotton and took a long drag off the Camel. Introductions were made and Alex greeted him with the bottle of bourbon and one of the tiny cups. He handed the cup back.

“That’s for sipping, not drinking.”

She went to the tent and came back with a large plastic cup and filled it for him. He gave her a smile and returned to take a seat on the wooden bench next to Cotton. He nodded at the two men with the guitar and banjo.

“Herm, Scooter,” he said. “Don’t stop on my part.”

They went back to plunking. Guess they weren’t Flatt and Scruggs.

“Can I ask you a personal question?” Alex asked.

Toot shrugged. Stubbed the Camel out on his boot.

“You told me there were ghosts everywhere you looked,” she said. “Have you ever seen Hoke the Hunter down here?”

I lowered my head. She had sunk her teeth into this now. Catfish let out a small chuckle. Toot took a big swig from the paper cup. He didn’t answer her.

“There’s a lot I don’t understand,” she said, “but I’m trying.”

“There is only the trying. The rest is not our business.”

“You’re quoting T.S. Eliot?” Alex asked. “You’ve read T.S. Eliot?”

“Got a lot of time on my hands.” He grinned and lit up another Camel.

She was about to press him for more when we all turned to hear the sound of yet another truck turn into the circle driveway. Headlights flashed across the old house. The engine rumbled to a stop, and we heard a door shut.

“You need to start charging for parking,” Catfish said.

“Expecting anyone else?” Toot asked Cotton. He shook his head and put his right hand on the hunting rifle propped next to him on the bench.

We heard the whistling first, a soft easy whistle. The whistle belonged to Jerry Lee Lacy, the bounty hunter from the strip club. He moved into the light and ambled down to our group.

“Well, lookie here,” he said. “If this don’t bring back memories from a Texas- style cowboy roundup. All the cowpokes drinking by the fire.”

He still wore the big cowboy hat, same belt buckle and boots, but his large Colt was now strapped in a crossed shoulder holster. He eased up toward the fire pit and stopped.

“Your bounty hunter, I presume,” Catfish whispered to me. I nodded and stood up.

“What are you doing here, Lacy, and what do you want?”

“Right now, what I could use is a touch of that medicine.” He pointed to the bourbon.

“That’s for invited guests,” I said. “You weren’t invited.”

“Now that ain’t being real appreciative, is it?” He grinned wide. “Especially seeing how if it wasn’t for yours truly, you might have ended up dead as Del Rio roadkill.”

“I remember things a bit differently. But again, why are you here?”

“Like I told you, hoss, I got a payday coming for rounding up Honey Boy.”

Toot spoke up, his voice a low rumble, “Take out your credentials and show them.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m the man who just told you to show your credentials.” Toot stood up and placed a hand on the blue handle of his big gun.

Lacy paused. The smile vanished. He reached down toward his boots.

“Try your left one,” Toot said. “No room in your right boot where that little gun is stashed.”

“Oooowee,” Jerry Lee said. “You boys are a bit on the touchy side tonight.”

He reached into his left boot, pulled out his little pouch with the credentials, and handed them to Catfish. He read them over and nodded at Toot to confirm.

“Jerry Lee Lacy,” Catfish said. “Your mama a big fan of Jerry Lee Lewis?”

“Right you are,” he said. “She told me *Great Balls of Fire* was playing on the car radio while she was headed to the hospital to pop me out.”

“Good thing they weren’t playing Fats Domino.”

Jerry Lee let out a laugh. “Now that’s better. A little amusing rep-per-te among associates. We all here for the same thing, all out to make us some money, right?”

Toot looked over at Cotton. “You give this man permission to be on your property?”

He shook his head, rolled the old rifle between his legs.

“Then why don’t you act like Jerry Lee Lewis and do a whole lotta shaking on down the road?”

“Now that’s some fancy talking for an old man,” Jerry Lee said. “But guess I’ll mosey on out of here. But before I go, let me tell you crackers this. Where I come from, when you make a promise, you keep it.” He took his big hat off, put it back on slowly, and adjusted his shoulder holster. “And I promise you, I will see all of you again. Soon. Maybe sooner than you think.”

He moved into the dark, whistling the tune, “The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You.”

A couple of hours later, both bottles of Evan Williams empty, one by one we turned in. I walked down the driveway with Toot. He was heading home.

“Why did you really come here tonight?” I asked.

“Just to visit an old friend, drink some good bourbon.”

I knew that wasn’t exactly true but didn’t press. No need. He wasn’t going to answer.

“Thanks for setting things up with Cotton. He’s been really patient with this odd group hanging out at his place.”

“He raises worms for a living. He’s used to odd.”

“And you still think we’re just chasing our tails down here?”



“Lot of dogs chase their tails,” he said. “Not many catch it.”

He crawled into his old truck. He popped another Camel from his shirt pocket, fired it up, and hit the ignition. It growled a few times, then turned over, rumbling to life.

“You driving all the way home again without any headlights?”

“Sometimes you see things better in the dark.”

He rolled off down the driveway.

## Chapter 25

If you could find a more unqualified group of treasure hunters, I would've loved to know about them. We had rolled out in a puddle of coffee, pain pills, sore muscles, and hangovers. Two bottles of single barrel can do some damage. Herm and Scooter had taken their instruments and left before we woke. Catfish had four cups of coffee and hit the road back to the city. Even Chance and T-Bone had given in to the morning sun and were asleep on top of the picnic table. Cotton was the only one of us who appeared fit and ready for duty. If this had been a day game after a night game, the rest of us would've been benched.

It was past lunchtime when we made our way back to the shoals. Greasefire was convinced he was working the correct spot, so he went back to digging at the big rocks up the hill in the *Y*. Alex and Biscuit stayed with him to help, but Alex had two cameras with her, and Biscuit had collapsed under a tree with a flask.

Cotton wanted to show me the shoals down at the crossing. He held to the theory that if Shoestring had been headed across the swollen waters that rainy night, he couldn't have made it very far up the steep hills of the *Y*. It took us nearly two hours to work our way down the steep trail to the bottom. The trek left me out of breath, and it was downhill. I dreaded the trip back up. Cotton used a big carved pole as a walking stick and made it with ease.

We stood on a small patch of sand at the edge of the water and looked out across the shoals. Tucked deep into a valley of steep hills, water moved fast in all directions.

“Some sight, these old shoals,” Cotton said over the rushing water. I nodded. “Come on, let’s work our way out to the middle of the crossing.”

I followed him as he moved from one big rock to another, then a small one, a hop to a big one, pausing to find the next path. Soon we stood in the middle of the shoals on a rock that rose about five feet above the rushing water.

He took his walking stick and pointed with it. “This is the middle of the intersection for the *Y*,” he said. “The Gillyhatchie comes in from that way.” He pointed up to the left. “Blue Possum from over there to the right.” He turned around and pointed downriver. “They meet up here and for about a quarter of a mile that way, you get the roughest waters, Bull Killer Shoals.”

I turned in a circle, surrounded by hills. Water swirled and roiled around the long ribbon of rocks. Some tall and flat, some jagged and small. Smooth glassy sheets of water spun out from the rocks, only to bounce off more. An occasional huge limb or part of a tree jutted up from below to split the movement off into a new direction.

Cotton pointed to a small sandy area across the other side. I could see a rock fire pit and logs on the bank.

“That’s where you come down to the crossing from the Pearl Falls side. It’s an old logging road,” he said. “Fishermen use it. We used it the night Shoestring was here.”

“He would’ve tried to cross over where we are now?”

“The only way, but with the rain, the water was high, rocks lower. Tough crossing.”

“Think he may have tried and not made it?”

He shook his head. “No way of knowing. But, if he was lucky, he may have made it to the bottom of the *Y*.”

He motioned for me to follow and we worked our way from the middle, forward and closer to the banks where the three bodies of water merged. The current was still strong but pooled more around smaller rocks and a few sandy patches. At the intersection, the water diverted into a large pool fifty yards wide, maybe three feet deep. Smooth rocks jutting out. We eased toward the edge of a tall outcropping.

“I always figured, if that fool made it this far, he could’ve found his way up that hill over there, found a place to stash it,” Cotton said.

I looked up at the hill he mentioned. It didn’t seem possible somebody could make it up the side, especially during a big rainstorm.

Cotton moved forward. He poked the bottom with his pole.

“Look at this.” His voice went up a notch. I leaned in over his shoulder. It was a fish. Ugly, huge, and drifting slow just under the water.

“Mudcat,” he said. “That boy is hitting at maybe twenty-five, thirty pounds.”

The big fish with a big head and whiskers moved down and under a rock, and out of sight. I was glad to see him go.

“Now’s your chance,” Cotton said.

“Chance for what?”

“Reach under the rock and pull him out.”

“Why on earth would I do that?”

“That’s what they do. Just reach under the rock and grab him.”

“I would just as soon stand naked on the mound in Yankee Stadium than reach under that rock and grab that big fish.”

He grinned. “Then what about that rocky hill over there? Think you can shimmy up it and take a look around?”

“Sounds better than reaching under that rock.”

“It is,” he said. “Unless you run into a wild boar or a big snake.”

“Becoming a worm farmer is looking better by the minute.”

He used his tall walking stick as we moved further across the pool. I kept a watch over my shoulder for the big fish. We reached a sandy bank and stopped to catch our breath. I looked up at the steep rocks in front of me. I didn’t see a route, just stubs of tree branches and moss. I turned to tell Cotton I didn’t think I could climb it. He had turned in the opposite direction. His face was ashen, like he had just seen a ghost. I followed his gaze. I wish it had been a ghost. It was much worse.

## Chapter 26

With a short-stock automatic weapon in his left hand, a cigarette in his right, and a crooked grin on his face, Honey Boy stood on a large rock across the pool of water from us. He was dressed in utility pants, combat boots, and a zippered wet suit top without sleeves that showed off his big arms and tattoos.

I could conclude three things from this. One, Jerry Lee Lacy hadn't hit him with any of his shots at the strip club. Two, Jerry Lee hadn't found him yet. Three, we had just stepped in it, about as deep as it gets.

Two other men were with him. A big guy to his left, dressed in black, with a sawed-off shotgun on a strap. Behind him to his left, a skinny fellow held what looked like an AR-15 aimed at us both. No sign of Bagga Nuts, or for that matter, the boss man, Tucker Boone.

He tossed his cigarette into the water and motioned for us to cross over. We did as we were told. We eased up on the big flat rock and faced him.

"Take your pistol and kick it over here," Honey Boy said to me. I complied.

"Most people that fish down here use a rod and reel," I said. "But big guns? Not very fair for the fish, but I guess that's another way to go."

"You enjoy being a smart ass, don't you?"

"Gets me through the day."

"Know what being a smart ass can really get you?"

"I don't."

“Dead,” he said.

“Wasn’t in my plans for today.”

“Plans change.”

I glanced over at Cotton. He had regained his composure. He wasn’t afraid. He was mad as hell. He glared hard at Honey Boy. The old deputy was returning. I wished he had his old posse with him. Maybe he could have pulled out something from those old John Wayne movies he watched.

“Boone told you to leave this alone.”

“How is Muttonchop, anyhow?” I asked. “Couldn’t join us?”

He turned and nodded to the skinny guy with the automatic weapon. He opened fire. A spray of shots ran across the water and up the edge of the rock where we stood. He smiled at the look on our faces when the rounds stopped.

He motioned for the guy to his left to come forward and handed him his weapon. The big man swung the short shotgun around to his back on a strap. He pointed the other gun at us.

“If they move, even an inch, shoot them both.” He came forward and gave us both a quick frisk. He found a pocketknife on Cotton and tossed it into the water. He pulled a phone out of his cargo pocket. With one hand, he punched a number and waited.

Cotton let out a small laugh. “You got a better chance of finding Elvis than you have of finding a cell signal down in this valley.”

He looked at the phone. Punched at it, held it high in the air. Cotton was right.

“You got company.” Cotton nodded behind him.

Honey Boy turned to look. Four huge wild boars crawled up over the rocks behind them and headed our way. The hog out front snorted and picked up speed.

“Think that big boy out front is a little bit mad,” Cotton said.

Honey Boy yelled, “Dammit, Jimmy, shoot that crazy looking thing.”

Jimmy, the big guy with the short automatic, opened fire. The skinny guy turned and joined in. Rounds flew and the boars retreated. Screeches mixed with gunfire. Water, dirt, and rocks kicked up with their missed shots.

I knew this was my only chance. I grabbed Honey Boy by the right shoulder and turned him around. I hit him as hard as I could in the gut. He staggered but came right back at me with his strong left hand. He connected hard on the side of my head. I slipped off the rock, up to my waist in the water. Cotton lunged forward to grab him by the neck, but Honey Boy shoved him hard to the ground.

Skinny boy spun around and emptied the rest of his magazine across the rocks. The rounds missed, but a slither of a rock splintered off and struck my left arm. It cut through me like a sharp, hot knife, and I fell back into the water over my head. I splashed to my right to hide. My ears rang from the gunfire, but I could hear an odd noise that seemed out of place. A high-pitched buzz. I thought my ears might be playing a trick on me. It was a metallic zing unlike anything I’d ever heard. It seemed to be in the air. I looked up the steep hill to my left. Greasefire.

He was two hundred feet in the air, knees pulled up to his chest, as he came across the valley wrapped around one of the old metal winches that crisscrossed the shoals. The cable bounced and swayed as he flew toward us. Sparks flew off the top of the winch.

At about fifty feet out, he let out a long scream, a “yaeaeaeaeaeaeaeaeaeaaaaa” that echoed through the air. The big man with two guns turned. Greasefire stuck both legs out stiff and blasted right into him. He spun in a circle on the cable and bounced high. The big man went



head over heels and into the fast part of the shoals. The skinny guy tried to fire his weapon, but the gun just clicked. Honey Boy ran toward the winch, but Greasefire came around in a circle and kicked him in the face with his feet.

The big man in the river yelled, but his screams were headed down the river. The screams faded away underneath the sound of the shoals. Honey Boy and the skinny man wrestled Greasefire to the ground. I crawled up on the rock, picked up my gun, and fired near them, afraid I would hit Greasefire. I fired once more, high on purpose.

Honey Boy grabbed Greasefire around the neck, put him in front, and they retreated in reverse across the rocks and into the trees. I fired a few more rounds off target and above them. They kept moving. In a matter of just a few seconds they had disappeared into the woods. The sound of gunfire gave way to the roar of water. They were gone. So was Greasefire.

## Chapter 27

“Come again with the part about the wild hogs,” Catfish said. His voice crackled through the speaker. Alex held her phone out for all of us to hear him.

“They just invited themselves,” I said. “A well-timed distraction.”

“And when they opened fire at the hogs, Greasefire flew in?”

“‘Flew in’ would be the right choice of words.”

“How high up?”

“At least six hundred feet,” Cotton said. “Maybe more. On a winch that’s likely a hundred years old and hasn’t been used in over fifty.”

“Sometimes it’s better to be a fool without a plan than a genius with one,” Catfish said.

We were back at the camp, under the large tent. Catfish was in his truck and on the way down again. We were on the phone with him as we tried to wrap our heads around what had happened at the shoals and now, figure out a plan to get Greasefire back.

“What happened to the guy who went downstream?” Catfish asked.

“Screw him and the goat he rode in on,” Biscuit said.

“I called Toot and asked him to report it,” Cotton said. “He said to let it go. Figure he’ll show up somewhere south, maybe in the Ocmulgee.”

“You got a line on where they took Greasefire?” Catfish asked.

“I heard Boone has an old hunting cabin down here somewhere,” I said.

“Who told you that?” Cotton asked.

“That reporter.”

“Don’t know how he knows,” he said, “but he’s right. He does.”

“Well, let’s go get that boy back,” Biscuit said.

“Not that easy. That cabin is buried deep in the woods.”

“Where?” Catfish asked.

“Off some dirt roads, five miles or so, on the other side of Pork Rind Creek.”

“That is deep.”

“Can’t go but so far by road. The last miles are just rutted paths. Need a tall, high-wheeled truck to get any closer.”

“Can you walk in?” I asked.

“You could, but you know he’s got men watching that route.”

“So, you can’t get there on foot?”

“No, but I know another kind of feet that will get you in there quicker and from another direction.”

I looked at Alex. She raised her eyebrows. I looked back to Cotton.

“Horses,” he said.

“Horses. You got horses?”

“No, but I know somebody nearby that does.”

“Who?”

“Man named Rocky Marinino. Got a stable full. Been down here about five years or so after he retired early from up in DC.”

“Retired early from what?”

“Law enforcement. Secret Service.”

“He protected presidents?”

“He kept an eye on them.”

“What’s that mean?” Alex asked.

“He watched them through a rifle scope.”

“Through a rifle scope?”

“He doesn’t talk about it,” Cotton said. “But yeah, he was a Secret Service sniper.”

With that bit of news, a plan was hatched. Cotton went to set things up with the Secret Service guy. Catfish got directions from him to the old dirt roads at the head of the cabin trail. He would come by, pick up Alex, drive to that location, and wait to hear from us. We wanted Biscuit to go with them, but he would have nothing to do with it. He was going with us.

Two hours later, the three of us jammed into the front seat of the truck, we rolled through a rusted metal gate and drove another mile down a gravel drive to Rocky Marinino’s horse farm. Behind a grove of pecan trees sat an old red brick house with weathered yellow trim. New fencing and a large modern barn with a tin roof surrounded the house. Outside the open barn doors, a man tossed a saddle on a dark brown horse.

Cotton introduced us. Rocky sported a gray military buzz cut and was tall and slender, with a chin that belonged on a football player. He wore a pressed khaki shirt, blue jeans, and worn cowboy boots. Big wrinkles wrapped his eyes, maybe from a lot of time spent outdoors. Maybe from a lot of time spent looking through a sniper rifle.

He took a long look at Biscuit. You had to think he was reconsidering his offer to help. He finished putting the saddle on the big brown horse and went to work on the next one. I edged around the other side to give him a hand.

“This missing man a friend?” His voice sounded like the thump of a bass guitar.

“Just met him a few days ago.”

“How about Cotton?”

“No, he met him the same day.”

“What’s the story with the old bowlegged guy?”

“Cotton fill you in on what’s going on?”

“Some. Told me about the baseball stuff.”

“His name is Biscuit Bailey. This is his deal, not mine. He insisted on coming.”

“So, how did you end up involved?”

“Known him a long time. Pretty simple. He asked. I gave him my word.”

He nodded. “Okay then, I understand.”

Biscuit strolled up, patted one of the horses on the rear. It jostled to the left but didn’t spook. Rocky reached for the bridle.

“You ever rode a horse before?” he asked Biscuit.

“Been a while.”

“What’s a while?”

“Maybe fifty years.”

“Well, this should be interesting,” Rocky said.

Biscuit circled the horse, went around to the wrong side, and tried to lift his left foot into the stirrup. Rocky shook his head.

“Come over here,” he said. He grabbed Biscuit by the butt and shoved him up on the horse. He went back to the barn and returned with a small trunk. He opened it, took out a gold-plated Henry, and stuffed it into a long rifle holster. He pointed to the holster to indicate that it was mine. He took a bolt action and handed it to Cotton, who was already up on his ride.

From the trunk, he retrieved a long leather case and opened it briefly to check. Inside was a long, dark green rifle with a huge scope. He strapped the case to his horse.

“We’re losing light,” he said.

We turned toward the back of the property and headed down a trail by the fence line. Rocky held the lead for Biscuit and led him second in line, since he was teetering to his left a bit. I was behind him and Cotton brought up the rear. None of us had asked him any questions about his job yet. Cotton had told us Rocky didn’t like to talk about it. Biscuit hadn’t gotten the message.

“So, you worked for the dang Secret Service?”

Rocky nodded a silent answer.

“Ever meet the first George Bush?”

“Not really.”

“What does that mean, ‘not really?’”

“Hard to get to know a man from two thousand meters away.”

I don’t think Biscuit understood the answer. I tried to get his attention to tell him to leave well enough alone, but he tossed out another question.

“I’ve seen them movies and TV shows where they got sniper guys. Ain’t it always two guys? One with the looking glasses and one with the gun?”

“Usually two men,” Rocky said.

“Then how come there’s only one of you?”

“Only takes one man to pull the trigger.”

## Chapter 28

“That’s it.” Cotton pointed down through the valley. “You can see the roof.”

“It really is buried down in a hole,” I said.

We were at the top of a ridgeline. A creek tumbled downhill toward the cabin. Rocky tied the horses off next to the water. He took out a big pair of binoculars.

“Let’s get closer.” He motioned for us to follow. He took his rifle case and a backpack. We trailed the creek down the hill. Fifteen minutes later, we came to a flat, overgrown spot, what could have once been a road.

“This will work,” he said.

“Think this might’ve been a pulpwood road at one time,” Cotton said. “Nobody has pulled wood out of here since the 70s. Hard to get it out.”

“Wait here,” Rocky said. “Give me ten minutes and then you can head on down.”

Biscuit rubbed his butt with both hands, sore from the ride. Rocky took the binoculars and handed them to him. “Take these.”

Biscuit grinned and put them around his neck. “I’m gonna be your eyeballs?”

Rocky nodded.

“Told you it took two men to do that sniper thing.”

“Anything we should know about what you’re setting up for?” I asked him.

“Just keep your eyes forward and focused.”

“How will we know when you do...whatever it is you’re thinking about doing?”

“You’ll know.” He smiled for the first time since we met.

“Come on, Rambo,” he said to Biscuit, and the two of them headed down the old path.

“So, you got anything in mind? Any ideas?” Cotton asked.

“‘I’m all ears,’ the jackass said when he looked into the mirror.”

“I was hoping you might actually have a plan of sorts.”

“If something comes to me, I’ll let you know.”

We gave Rocky his time, then headed down the hillside. We followed the creek. The sound of the fast water made it easy to walk without being heard. At about two hundred feet above the cabin, we stopped when we heard singing. A voice off-key and mangled. It didn’t fit in the deep woods. We moved closer and discovered the source of the wretched sound. Bagga Nuts.

He was next to a tree. His fat body swayed as he sang aloud to whatever came from a pair of small earphones that dangled to his waist. He made a circle with one hand in the air.

“What the hell is that guy doing?” Cotton asked.

“Dancing, I think.”

“I don’t think that’s dancing.”

“He’s a flunky for Boone. They call him Bagga Nuts. See the peanut bag in his hands?”

“You know this fool?”

“Met him once. Didn’t like him much.”

We watched him a bit. He seemed to be the guard for the rear of the property. He wasn’t doing a very good job. He did have a pistol stuffed in the front of his pants, but his hands were full of peanuts, his ears full of music. We talked out a plan. I took both our rifles and moved to the right and just to the rear of him. Cotton moved down to just above him on the opposite side. He picked up a big tree branch and tossed it down the hill in front of Bagga Nuts. He froze. His



peanut bag dropped to the ground. He pulled the small pistol out of his waistband. Cotton stepped out from behind a tree and held his hands high in the air. Bagga Nuts pointed the pistol at him with both hands. I moved forward and directly behind him. I tapped him on the left shoulder. He spun.

“Bagga Nuts,” I said. “Remember me?”

I hit him with my right hand as hard as I could across the chin. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell back into the leaves like a tree cut from the bottom. Cotton moved forward and scooped up the pistol.

“You cut that pretty close,” he said.

“Had to wait until he locked fully onto you.”

“Well, let me tell you, I didn’t like staring into the barrel of that .38. Next time, you get to do the hands-up part.”

He leaned down and yanked out the little ear things. He picked one up and listened. Frowned and held it up to me. “You ever hear music like this?”

I held it near my ear. “Some sort of pop or rap singer, I guess. Never heard it.”

He took it back and listened again. “Sounds like a bobcat with a stick up his butt.”

We moved down the path to the rear of the cabin. An old shed at the edge of the tree line provided cover. We slipped up to the side and looked in the backyard. It was nearly dark. The sky above was still blue, but down in this hole, it was deep twilight. The cabin was built with green siding and had a rusted tin roof. One door in the rear led out to a short landing and rickety wooden steps. A window on each side. Lights were on in the left window. In the yard, a fire burned in a concrete block pit. Honey Boy and Tucker Boone sat close to the fire on wooden

chairs and sipped whiskey from a big bottle. Honey Boy spoke, and Boone laughed, tilting his head back.

“Just checking,” Cotton said in a whisper. “You come up with any ideas yet?”

“Been thinking on it.”

“Any conclusions?”

“I think we just stroll over and invite ourselves in for a drink.”

“I was afraid you were thinking something like that.”

“Got any other thoughts?”

“Yeah, just one thing I was thinking about.” He looked at his watch. “Come about an hour from now they’re showing John Wayne and Rio Lobo on the satellite channel 584, and I’m going to miss it.”

## Chapter 29

We eased into the yard without notice and stopped maybe twenty yards from where Honey Boy and Tucker Boone sat next to the fire. I held the Henry with one hand. Just off to my left, Cotton had the bolt rifle up to his shoulder and pointed forward. Honey Boy saw us first. He stumbled from his chair, knocking it over as he stood up. Tucker Boone didn't move.

"Mind if we join you for a drink?" I asked.

Honey Boy moved his hand to the rear of his waistband. A gun for sure.

"Show me that gun, slowly," I said.

He took it out and laid it on the ground at his feet. Honey Boy did not look happy. He bit his lower lip in anger. Tucker Boone did not. He seemed amused by our appearance.

"Damn, son, you just bound and determined to get your tallywacker caught in a buzz saw, ain't you?" he said. "I can't decide if you're just stupid or stupid stubborn."

"Most likely both."

"Don't matter which, both been known to be fatal."

Boone sat wide legged on his chair, a huge cigar parked between the rings on his hand. He wore khaki pants, a white shirt, red suspenders that crossed over his big belly, and if possible, more grease in his country music hair. His grayish muttonchops seemed to glow in the light of the fire.

"How did you get down in here?" Honey Boy asked.

"Bagga Nuts let us in," I said. "Nice guy, taking a nap right now."

Tucker Boone choked out a laugh. “Damn idiot nephew. Worthless piece of crap. Dumber than his mama. I hope you shot him in his fat ass.”

I took a moment to look around. One of those trucks with big wheels that rose about six feet off the ground was to the left of the cabin, parked next to a large propane gas tank. A small wood shed was off to the right. No sign of his other men for now. It was getting darker by the minute, and our exit wasn’t going to be easy if we lingered.

“As much as I’d like to sit and drink whiskey with you,” I said to Boone, “let’s get this over with. Just hand over my man and we’ll back off and leave all the bullets in the gun barrels where they belong.”

“That’s what you really think is going to happen?”

“I tend to be overly optimistic at times.”

“Way I hear it,” he said, “you knocked one of my guys in the river. So, we’re even.”

“If he was a good swimmer, he might call you from Savannah in a couple of days.”

He let out a nasty grin. He took the cigar, stuck it in his mouth, rolled it around, and spat on the ground. He shook his head.

“Bully,” he yelled back toward the cabin. “Bring that fool out here.”

The door to the cabin opened. A man shoved Greasefire out onto the small landing. His right eye was swollen, and he had a smear of blood on his chin. The man named Bully stood behind him with a long hunting knife held to Greasefire’s neck.

To the left and from behind the big truck, two men came forward and stopped at the edge of the cabin. Both carried long automatic weapons. From behind the shed on the right, another man emerged with a huge black pistol in his right hand, pointed at us. I pulled the Henry up to my shoulder, ratcheted the lever, and pointed it at Boone.

Greasefire started to say something. Bully punched him in the kidney and drug him back inside the cabin.

“You really thought you could walk up on me like this?” Tucker Boone asked.

I moved my finger over the trigger of the rifle.

“You ain’t the first man to point a gun at me.”

“No,” I said. “But I could be the last.”

He snorted. He stood up slowly and tossed his cigar into the fire. He walked past Honey Boy and moved over to a small wooden table. He opened a metal box, removed another cigar, and rolled it around in his mouth. The nasty grin returned.

“You know how most people describe me?” Boone asked.

“A cross between the fat Elvis and Conway Twitty?”

Cotton grinned. Boone turned on him. “You tell him, Cotton Mulligan,” he said. “Yeah, I know who you are. You used to be the law, but you ain’t nothing now but a pissant worm farmer. But you know what the law has always said about me, don’t you?”

“I do,” Cotton said.

“Say it then.”

“Untouchable.”

“Damn right. Tucker Boone is untouchable.” He looked at me. “You hear that?”

“Matter of fact,” I said, “I met a fellow recently who did say that about you.”

“Unnnn-touchable.” He stretched it out. He turned and looked at his men. “If you the religious sort, might be a good time to get right with the man, send up some prayers, especially since it will be your last prayer on this earth.”

He paused and lit up the big cigar, let out a full stream of smoke. Then we spotted it.

Cotton glanced at me.

“I agree,” I told him. “I think a prayer might be in order.”

“Before you kiss your sorry butt goodbye?”

“I wasn’t talking about me,” I said. “But you might want to say a prayer.”

“What the hell you going on about?”

A tiny red light danced in the center of his forehead. It moved as he moved. It stopped when he stopped. Dead center. Somewhere up the side of the steep hill behind us, Rocky had his laser scope trained on Tucker Boone. Right in the middle of his forehead.

Honey Boy spotted it next. He made an odd sound, looked up the hill, then at Boone.

“Boss, holy...boss, look.” He made another sound, unable to put words together.

“What?” He turned to his left. “What?”

Rocky ran the laser down his face and landed it on his shirt. Right on his heart.

“You got something on your shirt,” I said.

He looked down, spotted the red dot, and tried to brush it off like a bug. It bounced around. He stared at it, confused. It drifted up to his head, and he tried to follow it with his eyes.

“What the....”

“A laser,” Honey Boy said. “They got a rifle laser trained on you, boss.”

He slapped at his forehead. “Where?”

Honey Boy pointed. “Up the hill, in the woods, I don’t know.”

“Do something, dammit.”

“Do what?” Honey Boy asked. “It’s a frigging sniper rifle, aimed right at your head.”

I lowered the Henry. “Now, what were you saying about being untouchable?”

## Chapter 30

I watched the red dot. It bounced but stayed steady on Tucker Boone. I had no idea what Rocky had in mind. I had only met him two hours ago. Maybe he would pull the trigger, maybe not. Maybe Biscuit would take over and pull the trigger. I doubted Rocky had ever pulled the trigger during his days as an agent, but I would guess he had placed his dot on people much more important than Tucker Boone. Maybe on Hugo Chavez, maybe Putin, maybe on Dick Cheney when he shot his buddy while duck hunting.

We were frozen, held hostage by a tiny red dot. Cotton held his rifle steady on Boone, but I could sense he was looking to me to make the next move. He turned his eyes my way for a brief glance. A look that said, go ahead and do something. It was just a damn shame I had absolutely no idea what to do.

We didn't have to wait long for something to happen, but it wasn't on my part. The first noise was a loud pop, then a sizzle and a louder boom. Everybody flinched at the sound. Tucker Boone dropped to the ground. For a moment, I thought Rocky had shot him, but he rose to his knees and started to crabwalk across the ground. Another high-pitched crack split the air, followed by a trail of pops that sounded like a string of small firecrackers. It was coming from inside the cabin. Another long whistle, then a blast. We saw a huge light flash in the window to the left of the porch.

The men near the cabin moved toward the back door. A voice yelled something unclear from inside. The front window exploded and the one they called Bully flew through it headfirst. Glass shattered, and he rolled to the ground and came up with a scream.

“The place is blowing up, get back, get back.” He stumbled to his feet, his face cut from the glass. The others grabbed him and headed toward the big-wheeled truck. Honey Boy pulled Boone by his shirt up the hill in the same direction.

“Greasefire’s inside,” Cotton said to me. We headed toward the back door. The door flew off the hinges with another loud blast and a ball of fire. The force knocked us off our feet. Cotton punched me in the back and pointed toward a three-sided firewood shelter. We ran toward the shed and scrambled behind a pile of cut wood. Another blast came just as we hit the ground. None of them appeared to be normal explosives.

It got stranger. First, a long whistling sound, a pop, and then sparkles curling out the door. An object sizzled out the front window and left a trail as it flew into the woods. Two more followed a red trail, then blue. Drips of fire spreading across the ground behind them.

I stuck my head above the firewood. “What in the hell is going on?”

Cotton raised his head. “You’re asking me?”

“Is Rocky doing this?”

“How?”

I started to say something else but was interrupted by a zinging sound, then a burst of red, blue, and green, nearly fifty feet off the ground and spread out.

“It’s fireworks,” Cotton shouted.

“Fireworks?”

“Got to be,” he said. “Regular old Fourth of July fireworks.”



“But why? How? And where is Greasefire?”

The big-wheeled truck with Tucker Boone and his boys spun in a circle and roared up the hill and out the rutted driveway. They had escaped. I wasn't sure about Greasefire.

Another rocket flew out the window, bounced off a tree limb, and kicked back at the foot of the large propane tank. It squiggled in a circle and rode up under the tank, sparks flying.

“That's not going to turn out good,” Cotton said. “Get down and cover your head.”

It came quick. A whoosh, a sucking noise, then an incredible explosion. The blast shook the ground, rattled deep in my chest, and made my ears pop and ring. Wood, rocks, and dirt pounded off the top of the shed and flew past us. The twilight glowed red, and what followed was an honest to goodness full tilt fireworks show. Up close and personal. With the cabin fully engulfed in flames, fireworks rose up from the deep valley and spread out in explosions of red, orange, green, and blue. Canopies of sparks drifted down and set off small, scattered fires.

We inched our heads up. I could feel the heat from the flames on my face.

“His stash of illegal fireworks,” Cotton said. “Must have stored them in the cabin.”

“Illegal fireworks?”

“Guess Tucker Boone decided to traffic in more than meth and pain pills. Fireworks are illegal in a lot of nearby states, especially Florida. Good money moving them in the summer on the black market.”

A triple zing and pop sent another umbrella-like explosion of colors above the trees, sparks drifting down and pinging off the shed. A string of small pops followed.

“You think Greasefire started this?” I asked.

“He certainly has the background and experience.”

“And he didn't know about Rocky and the dot.”

“How could he?”

“You think he made it out?”

Cotton didn't answer. I didn't follow up. We didn't want to know the answer.

Another round of fireworks blasted out of the fire and up through the trees. Smoke filled the valley. From the rear of the yard, we spotted Rocky headed our way. He had his rifle in his left hand and Biscuit in his right, as he yanked him along by the shirt collar. The big binoculars bounced and swung around his neck. He wobbled and stumbled next to Rocky, who made long strides toward the shed. He slid down beside us, and Biscuit rolled over once and sat up flat on his butt.

“Sonnnnnofadangdog.” He coughed, spat, and made a whistling sound.

“What did you guys do?” Rocky asked.

“We didn't,” I said.

“Where's the guy we came to get?”

“Don't know.”

“Where's this Tucker Boone guy?”

“He's gone. All his men with him.”

“Gone?” Biscuit croaked. “I told you to pull the trigger.”

“Rambo wanted me to commit felony murder.”

“He done a felony to me,” Biscuit protested. “Shoulda parted that ugly hair with a bullet.”

The flames had died down somewhat, but fireworks still went off at random times, the night sky a smoky mix of colors, and the air stiff with the smell of burnt powder.

“What now?” I asked.

“We get out of here, and if anybody ever asks, I deny I ever met you,” Rocky said.

“Deal.”

“Damn shame, what with that red dot you put on his head, that we let Tucker Boone get away,” Cotton said.

“My fault,” I said. “I hesitated. Let him get away.”

“He may have escaped,” Rocky said, “but not before we made him pee his pants.”

“Yeah, we did do that, didn’t we?” I grinned at Rocky, and he winked.

## Chapter 31

“I need whiskey,” Biscuit said.

He lay flat on his back in the pile of firewood and rubbed his eyes with both hands. He wasn't the only one who could use a drink. The explosions bounced off the trees. My head hurt, and my eyes burned. Cotton sat with his back to the cabin and rested his rifle on his knees. I stared out at the flames as they burned past the roofline and the back wall toppled into ashes.

Rocky had left on foot to check on the horses and bring some supplies. He'd been gone a good while. Cotton had tried to get a cell signal to call Catfish at the old dirt road, but no luck. The fire created brief shadows off the pine trees, but the dark sky matched my dark mood.

Through a thick cloud of smoke, Rocky slid under the shelter without a sound and plopped down a duffel bag. I jumped at his arrival and he allowed a small grin.

“Horses good?” I asked.

“Three of them are.”

“Three? We came in on four.”

“One broke her lead,” he said. “Couldn't spot her. I'll find her later.”

He opened the duffel, shined a tiny but powerful flashlight inside, and pulled out two more and gave them to us. He reached in a side pocket and retrieved a bottle of Gentleman Jack 80 proof Tennessee sipping whiskey. High-end stuff.

He broke the seal, made a small toast, and handed it down the line to each of us.

“Come to Papa,” Biscuit said and tilted it straight up.

The fire made a loud crash and the last wall collapsed. A convoy of sparks spun in a swirl and faded away into the night. Smoke wrapped around us like a damp rag.

“You always carry high-priced whiskey in your ditty bag?” I asked.

“Ever spent fourteen hours on top of a building in the winter without moving?”

“Spent fourteen hours on an old bus in the summer without moving.”

“Same,” he said. “Whiskey helps.”

We heard another quick rat-a-tat-tat string of small firecrackers from beneath the fire.

“Thoughts?” he asked me.

“Not any good ones.”

“When these explosions die off, I say we move up the ridge.”

“Agreed.” I said. “But then again...” I paused. Cotton glanced at me. Biscuit nursed the whiskey bottle like a newborn baby. “We need to see if we can find Greasefire,” I said.

Rocky took a deep breath and looked out at the cabin. “If there is anything left of him.”

On the far side of the cabin, a tall pine tree admitted defeat and fell to the ground with a groan and a thud. Flames ran up the limbs and dripped into the scorched grass. We waited another thirty or forty minutes for all the explosions and fireworks to end. The cabin had burned down to the stone foundation. Red smolders glowed, tentacles of smoke slipped away. Other than the soft crackle of scattered, small fires across the valley, it had turned quiet, dark, and silent. I think I preferred noise and chaos to what we faced next.

“Let’s go,” Rocky said and moved out first. Cotton followed as we emerged from the shed. We left Biscuit to his bottle. We approached the ruins of the cabin. Our flashlights scanned the smolders in a crisscross pattern. Black timbers, a few bricks, a metal table, half a sofa, a

melted refrigerator, a toilet turned black, and a few studs on one corner reached up into the darkness. None of us spoke.

Rocky stepped into the mess first. He held a burnt stick in his right hand, his light in his left, and I noticed he had added a handgun clipped to the back of his belt. He poked and sifted as he moved through the pile of hot embers.

I whispered to Cotton, “How do we know what to look for?”

“You’ll know,” Cotton said.

We joined Rocky in the rubble. No words, just the flicker of white light as we poked and kicked at the black ruins. As we moved, our feet uncovered small flames that would jump up and let out a hiss, a final gasp of life. The sound haunted me.

“Is this all the damn whiskey you got?” Biscuit stumbled from the shed, his voice loud and slurred. He wobbled forward, tripped over a log, and fell face first. “Screw a flying goose.”

I shined my light on him. “Biscuit, get over here and shut up.”

“Shut up?” He was louder. “Why? Ain’t nobody here. All that racket done scared off even the damn rabbits from this worthless burnt-up hole in the ground.”

I held my light on him as he stood up and weaved toward us.

“EEYEAHYEAHYEAH.” A shout came from somewhere in the dark. We froze. It was hard to tell what it was and what direction it had come from.

“YEEEEAAEEEEAA.” Another shout. A sharp whistle. “OVER HERE. YEEEEEHAW.”

We turned toward the sound. It was beyond the front of the cabin, in the distance and seemed high, maybe up in the trees. Rocky grabbed his pistol and held the flashlight in his other hand, side by side, pointing into the night. We followed his light with ours.

“Biscuit?” The voice yelled. “Is that you, Biscuit?”

“What? Who is that?” Biscuit asked.

Rocky shushed him. I motioned with my hand for him to shut up.

“I gotta stop drinking,” he said.

“Federal agent,” Rocky shouted in his deep baritone. It echoed into the dark. “Identify yourself. Come forward. We are armed.”

“Well, I ain’t, and I can’t come forward. I’m stuck up in a tree.”

“Greasefire?” I shouted. “Is that you?”

“Well, it sure as hell ain’t Hoke the Hunter,” he shouted back. “Now get your butt over here and get me out of this damn tree before that girlie friend of yours wants to take my picture.”

## Chapter 32

The light landed on him. A good twenty-five feet up a tree, Greasefire sat on the lowest limb, his arms wrapped around the trunk. All the limbs below him were gone, blackened and burned away by the fire.

“We thought you were dead,” I said.

“I thought you were dead.”

“Lot of that going around today,” Cotton said.

“Why didn’t you yell when you saw us digging around in the rubble?”

“I didn’t know it was you. I just saw lights,” he said. “Until I heard Biscuit jabbering.”

“We were digging around for you,” I said. “Or parts of you.”

“Did I hear Biscuit say ya’ll have whiskey? I could damn sure use a drink.”

“Let’s get this idiot down,” Rocky said. Ten minutes, a nylon rope, and a good bit of cussing later, we had Greasefire on the ground. His face was bright red, eyebrows gone, arms black, not a bit of hair left. Rocky handed him a canteen.

“Is this whiskey?”

“Water.”

He frowned. “Who are you?”

“The man who just pulled your butt out of a tree instead of scooping parts of you out of the ashes with a shovel.”

“Forget I asked,” Greasefire said and emptied the canteen in one swallow.



“Let’s back up a bit,” I said.

Cotton jumped in. “Yeah, like go back to the winch stunt at the shoals. Do you realize how dangerous that was?”

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Until they hauled your butt off into the woods with a gun to your head.”

“Yeah. That part, not so good.”

“You should’ve already been dead,” Cotton said. “Those winches haven’t been tested with any weight on them since the 70s.”

“I guess I didn’t think that one all the way to the finish line.”

“You start up this fire?” I asked.

“A fire starts, and everybody points a finger at Greasefire,” he said.

“So, how did it start?”

“Place was packed with crates and boxes of fireworks. That dude Bully, he was looking out the window, not paying attention, so I grabbed about five of them M-80’s, twisted them together, fired them up, and threw them at his feet.”

“Why would you do that?” I asked.

“Figured you guys could use the distraction, you know, shoot somebody or something?”

“And what did Bully do?”

“Threw them back at me. Landed right on top of all them boxes.”

“And that didn’t seem to you like another dangerous thing to try?” Cotton asked.

“I guess I didn’t think that one all the way to the finish line either.”

“Think I’m starting to see a trend,” I said. “Then what happened?”

“What the hell you think? The place blew up. Like being shot out of a circus cannon.”

“How did you get out of the cabin?”

“Damned if I remember,” he said. “Next thing I know I was hanging on to the side of that tree like a dog clinging to a fresh chicken bone.”

He handed the empty canteen back to Rocky. I looked at Cotton. He let out a deep breath, ran a hand across the top of his head, and smiled just a little.

“You try Catfish again?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said. “I’m sure they could see this, hope they left.”

“I’m not looking forward to explaining things to him and Alex.”

“Better you doing the talking than me. I don’t have any words for this.”

Down the hill, we heard a trickle and a sizzle, like water on a hot fire. In the dark, I could see Biscuit behind a burnt tree. He weaved and hummed a tune.

“Biscuit,” I called out. “What are you doing?”

“Peeing like a cow on a flat rock,” he said. “That whiskey ran right through me.”

I shined my light at the odd sound. He was peeing on a metal case, steam pouring off as he made a circle. Greasefire spotted it, and started that way in a trot.

“Hold up,” he said. “Hold up. Don’t piss on that thing.”

We all followed. Greasefire kicked at the case with his boot. Biscuit wasn’t finished.

“Don’t pee on my shoes, fool. Holster that weapon or point it the other way.”

We closed in, shining our lights on the case. It was wet, covered with smut, and steam drifted above it. Rocky leaned in for a close look.

“It’s an old ammo case,” he said. “Still shut tight, so we need to go slow.”

“It ain’t got bullets in it,” Greasefire said. “I watched Tucker Boone put a big wad of cash into that exact same case.”

“You’re sure?” I asked.

He looked closer. “Damn straight. I remember what it said on the side.”

The green ammo case was stenciled with yellow letters that read, *400 CAL .30 LOT*.

“Four hundred caliber. It’s the same box.”

“Bring me my bag,” Rocky said. “We’re taking this slow.”

He took his time, turning it upright with a short piece of rope, sliding his multi-tool in the clasp, and gently cracking it open just an inch. He leaned down close and shined a light inside.

“If there’s money in that box, half of it belongs to me,” Biscuit said.

“How you figure?” Greasefire snorted.

“If I didn’t pee on it, you don’t find it. Half is mine.”

“Shut up, you two.” Rocky used a pocketknife for leverage, and with both tools, he lifted the clasp. It rattled enough to make us jump. He let out his breath.

“Not rigged. Not ammo.” He took the tool and turned the case upside down. A dozen scraps of paper, plastic sleeves, a snub-nosed .38, and wads of money fell to the ground. Lots of money.

“Well, slap Gomer silly and call me Goober.” Greasefire spun in a circle. “I’m rich.”

“Fifty-fifty.” Biscuit dropped to the ground. “Keep your dirty hands off my half.”

Greasefire flipped through the cash and counted out loud, while I sorted through the other paperwork that had fallen from the case. I turned each item over in the glow of my flashlight.

“What does all that look like?” Cotton asked.

“Handwritten invoices, some old checks, loan balances that others owe him, even a deed to some property, a car wash place.”

“Collateral,” Cotton said.

I flipped over a worn sheet of notebook paper in a plastic sleeve. Held it close.

“Hang on,” I said. “Take a look at this.”

Cotton and Rocky moved in and peered over my shoulder. The paper was a sketch, in free hand, faded, the drawing hard to read. In the center of some curvy lines, the words *Bull Killer Shoals*. I looked at Cotton. A small smile slipped out and turned into a grin.

“Well, I’ll just be damned.”

“Biscuit,” I said. “Come take a look at this.”

He scrambled to his feet, his hands full of cash, and peeked at the drawing.

“Is this it?”

His eyes grew big. He stuck his big nose close to the paper.

“Well, shave my butt with maple syrup,” he said. “Bless you Mother Mary and Mickey Mantle. That’s my map.”

## Chapter 33

“Sniper, little red dot, fireworks, propane explosion, idiot in a tree, and a missing horse,” Catfish said. “If I didn’t know better, I might think you’re twisting the truth into a tall tale.”

“That’s your forte,” I said. “I’m just trying to catch you up.”

“If Greasefire hadn’t blown the place up, what was your plan?”

“I had one in mind.”

“A good one?”

“A really good one.”

“If I didn’t know better, I might think you’re twisting the truth into a tall tale.”

He grinned and gave Alex a wink. We were back at the worm farm. A light rain had started, and we’d moved under the cover of the barn. Cotton had tossed some wood into a cut-down, fifty-gallon barrel and had a fire going. Alex rubbed down her gear with a blue rag. I sipped on a beer and held a bag of ice on my left knee.

“So, this Secret Service guy actually had a rifle laser on Tucker Boone from a thousand feet away?” Alex asked.

“Right in the middle of his forehead.”

“And he didn’t pull the trigger?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“This is a guy I would love to meet.”

“That’s not going to happen,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Last thing he told me as we left was to make sure I forgot his name, where he lived, and if he ever saw me again, he would deny he’d ever met me.”

“Now I like him even more.” She smiled.

“But in the end, you found Shoestring’s map,” Catfish said.

“For what it’s worth,” I said. “Doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Biscuit and Greasefire joined us. The two pulled up canvas chairs and took a seat by the fire. Chance, who was asleep at the edge of the barrel, awoke and looked at Greasefire, tilting his head to the right. He looked very odd with no eyebrows, singed hair, arms wrapped in gauze, and a ruby red face.

“Nice tan,” Catfish said.

“Looks a lot like somebody stuck his head inside a hot fryer,” Cotton said.

“Again with the fire jokes,” he said. “I was a rat turd away from being a dead man.”

“But we found my map,” Biscuit said. He had cleaned up and smelled of Old Spice.

“Damn shame your guy Shoestring drew up some silly riddle,” Greasefire said.

I took the map out of the plastic sleeve, and we decided to go over it again. It was hand drawn and the directions from Shoestring were vague at best and closer to nonsense.

It was a simple drawing of the shoals. He had sketched out Bull Killer Shoals and the two other waterways that it intersected, Blue Possum Creek and the Gillyhatchie. Across the top he had scrawled directions. To say they were odd was an understatement. *At mouth of GATOR, it said, with an arrow and the letter N. 50 paces—Follow waterfall to the flint cottonmouth nest.*

That was it. At the intersection, he had scribbled some small circles in the middle of the water and had drawn an *X* just inside the area they called the *Y*.

“X marks the spot,” Biscuit said with a touch of glee.

“That X is right near where I was digging,” Greasefire added.

“That X is a tiny mark in the middle of an area that’s at least fifty acres across and all overgrown,” Cotton said.

“I can’t make much sense of this,” I said.

“That’s the bad news,” Cotton said. “Good news is Tucker Boone can’t either.”

“Do you know what this line about the gator means?” I asked Cotton.

“Not a clue.”

“Never heard anybody talk about something like that?”

“No, never.”

“How about the waterfall?”

“No waterfall anywhere down near the Y intersection that I’ve ever seen.”

“And the other part?”

“Plenty of cottonmouth nests down at the shoals, but all over the place.”

“The flint?”

“Flint rock, I would guess. Colored rocks that you can find down here, but there are millions of them, and more pop up every time it rains.”

I passed the map over to Catfish, who studied it a bit and handed it to Cotton.

“What do you think?” Catfish asked him.

“I think you got a better chance of finding Jimmy Hoffa than you do finding that X with this so-called map.”

Greasefire was about to protest when we heard a car and saw headlights flash through the twilight and misty rain. The orange BMW 2002. My reporter friend, JC Brucey.

Catfish looked at me. “Persistent little booger, ain’t he?”

“That he is.”

“You gonna talk to him?”

“Guess I will. I’m not sure how, but the persistent little booger does seem to know a lot.”

“Ask him if knows where they buried Jimmy Hoffa.”



## Chapter 34

I made my way up the hill to the driveway. The rain spun in circles and blew against my face. I lowered my head. I did not like rain; it came from my baseball days. I played games when the sun was beating down at a hundred degrees, the top of your head on fire from the heat. I played on days so cold, your hands throbbed each time you hit the ball. But rain? Rain meant you sat on the bench and waited, and some days you didn't play at all. A lot of guys were glad for the day off. I was not. If you were a marginal player, with a marginal chance of making it to the Majors, you didn't want a rainout. A rainout meant you had lost a chance, an opportunity that rumbled away like the sound of distant thunder.

As I approached, a bright green umbrella popped out of the car. Underneath, JC Brucey wore the same soft blue Dodgers cap.

“Got time to talk?”

I motioned to him for us to step out of the rain. We took shelter under the porch of the old farmhouse. I ran a hand through my wet hair and wiped it on my jeans. He closed the umbrella and shook it. Each time I'd seen him, he'd worn brightly colored clothes, but today, his outfit was over the top: a loud blue t-shirt with a surf company ad in pink, baggy red shorts that looked more like swim trunks, and beach sandals with no socks.

“Gnarly look, Bingo. You plan on doing some surfing?”

He looked down at his clothes. “Long time on the road. No time to do laundry. Running out of things.”

He reached for the ink pen he always kept at his ear, pulled his little notebook from the baggy side pocket of his shorts, and flipped it open with ease. He dove right in. Right to his questions.

“Rocky Marinino,” he said. “Know him?”

I didn’t answer.

“Former agent with the Secret Service. Lives about five or so miles from here on a horse farm. He was a sniper with the service.”

“Sounds like a dangerous man.”

“He is. I also think he’s the man who led you to Tucker Boone and his cabin.”

“How would you know that?”

“I’m a reporter. I asked him.”

“What did he say?”

“He told me I had sixty seconds to get off his property or get filled with buckshot.”

“Like I said, sounds like a dangerous man.”

“He also denied knowing you or Tucker Boone.”

“Dangerous and smart.”

I imagined Rocky wasn’t too happy when a reporter showed up after our ordeal. Now I just hoped he would indeed forget he’d ever met me.

Brucey closed his notebook, looked up at me and grinned. He was short, but it didn’t matter. This guy would be comfortable going toe-to-toe with Jumping Joe Frazier.

“That was some fireworks show last night,” he said.

I gave in. He knew. I don’t know how, but he knew. “You saw all that?”

“Heard it, saw it, felt it.”

“From where?”

“Close enough to observe, far enough not to be blown up.”

“What else do you know?”

“I know the cabin is gone. Tucker Boone is gone. Left in a big truck with his guys.”

I nodded.

“And I know you got the map back from Boone.”

“You know what was written on the map?”

“That, I’m still working on. Maybe we can negotiate a bit.”

“Negotiate how?”

He opened his notebook again, flipped back a few pages.

“Ronny Harold Jackson,” he said and tapped the page with his ink pen.

“Who is that?”

“Goes by the alias ‘Hoghead.’ His body was found this morning washed up on a side creek off the Ocmulgee River, at the edge of a cattle farm south of here.”

“Found by who?”

“County Sheriff. Seems Mr. Jackson has been up to no good for a long time. Two swings in prison, mostly drug charges, four outstanding warrants in two states, one for murder.”

“Anybody asking questions?”

“They were. Until a retired sheriff from Pine County talked to the folks down there. They stopped asking questions after he called.”

Toot Thompson. The man was still well connected in every county.

“So, if they aren’t talking, I won’t talk,” he said. “At least not until I get a copy of that map.”

He was good at his job. It was a strange job, but he was very good at it. "Tell you what," I said. "If we come up with anything at all, I will share the map with you for your story, on one condition."

"What is that?"

"You agree to forget about Ronny Harold Jackson."

"Never heard of him." He closed his notebook.

"I will tell you this much," I said. "With the map we got, the if is a damn big if."

The rain came down harder. The limbs of the big tree in the driveway swayed and rocked in the wind.

"You going back down to the shoals, now that you got the map?"

"Maybe when the rain clears up."

"Tropical storm out of the Gulf," he said. "More rain and wind the next day or so."

"We can wait."

"Maybe you shouldn't."

"Why?"

"All those years ago, what was the weather like when Shoestring supposedly buried his footlocker?"

I looked at the tree as the big limbs clacked against each other. "Rain and storms."

"Cops do it," he said.

"Do what?"

"Recreate the crime scene. Better to see things the way they happened."

He smiled, stuck the pen behind his ear, put the notebook back in his pocket, and looked up at the dark sky. "Maybe you shouldn't wait."

“I assume you’re going to stay on the story?” I asked.

“Every story has a beginning, middle, and end,” he said. “This one is kind of stuck in the middle.”

“So, you’re sticking around?”

“Might be fun to see how it ends.”

He popped open his lime green umbrella and stepped out into the rain. He crossed over and opened the door to the old BMW.

“Hey, Brucey,” I said. “While you’re waiting to see how this ends, I got an idea on how to pass some time.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“Do some laundry.”

He grinned and ducked into his orange car in a blur of pink, red, and blue.

## Chapter 35

I couldn't sleep. The rain pelted the top of the tent. I was tired, beyond tired, but I still couldn't sleep. A creature of routine could only stand so much chaos. We figured Tucker Boone to be near. We didn't know where, but we assumed he knew about this place. We agreed to take shifts, a couple of hours at a time, to stand watch during the night. Cotton took first shift and tapped on the side of my tent when it was time for me to take over. I welcomed it. I could give up on my search for sleep.

The worm farm was full. Somebody in every tent, two extra sleeping areas set up, and the campfire moved under cover of the barn. Chairs were scattered about the barrel fire, and Cotton had pulled an old sofa up to the front. He handed me the Henry and limped off toward his office to watch old westerns on the satellite. I glanced at my watch; it was two in the morning. The big orange farm cat slept near the armrest, and Chance took up the rest of the sofa. I tried to squeeze in beside him. He opened one eye but wouldn't budge. I slid down the edge of the sofa to the ground, propped the rifle in my left hand, and tossed a small slice of cut oak into the fire.

The rain came hard. The tops of the trees swayed deep in the dim glow of the one security light that sat atop a ten-foot pole. Water poured off the tin roof, slapped hard on the ground, and gathered in huge puddles.

Even with all of us here, I felt alone, and it felt good. I was tired of the talk of ghosts, the talk of treasure, and just plain damn tired of Greasefire talking—period. I needed this time alone

to sort some things out. Chance sensed my mood. He stood, stretched, curled up behind me, and propped one paw on my shoulder.

Belief. I think belief was missing in action. I hadn't wanted to help Biscuit in the beginning, and I really hadn't believed the whole Shoestring story from the start. I didn't believe coming down here to look for treasure was the real answer, and Cotton had called me on that. I had told Alex I believed she'd seen the ghost, but I couldn't truly say I believed her, even after Catfish and Cotton said they had seen him also. I was positive I didn't believe Greasefire knew where to look, and I most certainly didn't believe the map would do us any good. I didn't believe, and the lack of belief rained down on my shoulders like the storm on the roof of the barn.

Two more hours slid by. I tossed wood into the fire and sat alone. I planned to finish out the watch on my own. I needed the time. Odd things can pop into your mind at odd times, and I wasn't sure why his name came to me now, but it did.

T Tommy Tiller. Never knew what the first T stood for, but we just called him "T." I met him in the Minors with the Orioles. He was a roving instructor, hired to work with us on baserunning, back in the days when knowing how to run or steal a base was still considered important in baseball. T was maybe in his late forties, short but thin. He wore his cap down tight over large ears, and kept a baseball-sized wad of chew in his right cheek. As a player, he couldn't hit a lick, but he'd set a string of records in the Minors for stolen bases.

The first thing he said to me was, "Kid, if I could hit like you, had them long legs like you, with your speed, I would've been stealing frigging *first* base for the ever-loving New York Damn Yankees."

We worked long hours, in the heat, before games, after games. He was one hundred percent convinced that if you had the natural speed, and would listen to him, you could swipe a base on anybody, at any time. And not just second or third base, which I thought was the easiest to steal; he truly believed you could learn to steal home. His ears would turn red with anger if you mocked the thought.

“Raise your damn hand if you ever heard of Rod Carew,” he would tell us.

Everybody did. Carew was one of the best players in baseball at the time. Hit .328 over nearly two decades. Stole hundreds of bases.

“Carew stole home seven times in 1969,” T shouted at us. “Seven times. Safe as a baby in a blanket with a bottle.”

Nobody took him seriously. Stealing home was just something that seemed outdated, back when pitchers never worked from the stretch. Ty Cobb stole home fifty-five times, but he might’ve had a knife in his back pocket when he did it. But I was interested in anything I could learn that might give me an edge, get me noticed. I took the time to pick T’s brain.

It wasn’t just speed. He had it broken down into math. Analytics with a simple stopwatch, long before the kids from Princeton with their laptops and sabermetrics were born.

He preached his gospel. “Two-point-nine seconds from a standing lead. You’re out. Average pitcher from the stretch is one-point-eight. If he’s a lefty, then it goes up to two-point-one if he’s not paying attention to you. If he’s lazy, it goes up another point-two percent, and you’re close, but you’re still out.”

I wanted to know his secret. He had hard and fast rules: check the third baseman, see if he drifted away from the bag for a better fielding position; never go with two strikes or on a full count; never go with none out, and always get a walking lead.



He was convinced the walking lead was why Carew was so successful. He had me practice it over and over, raspberries on my legs from repetition. It was a science to him. Walk off, take two more steps, then a gradual walking lead. When the pitcher lifted his foot, burst into the cross over push off, stay low, head down, eyes forward, and always go in feet first.

At the end of one long session, he clicked his stopwatch. “Two-point-four seconds. You got it.”

I told him I thought it had to be two-point-one to make it. He tossed his chew to the ground. “One last secret to this formula. You got to *believe* you’re going to make it.”

*That’s it*, I thought. *Believe*. He shook his head at my skepticism.

“When I was a young pup like you, fast as a slick-haired dog, playing down in Kentucky, you know what they had me do one night?”

I shook my head.

“The owner thought I was so fast, they had me run against a damn race horse from left field to right field during the game. Let the fans bet on us for the promotion.”

I asked him if he’d won.

“Hell no, kid. Can’t beat no race horse. But I *believed* I could.”

Two months into that season, I had been on third a bunch of times, with everything set up, but didn’t have the guts to try. On a hot August night in Johnson City, Tennessee, we were tied 3-3 in the eighth. I was 0 for 4. Not a hit all night. That inning I walked, took second on a passed ball, and third on a sac fly.

T was at the game and we had drilled all afternoon. I figured, what the hell. On a slow curve, I took off. The hitter didn’t swing, he didn’t even move. The catcher lunged at the hitter, knocking him off his feet, but my right foot crossed the plate with cleats up, one tiny beat before

the catcher slammed his mitt into my leg. Safe. He screamed, his manager raged, and the crowd threw paper cups of beer at me as I escaped to the dugout. We went on to win the game 4-3, my steal of home the winning run.

Later, I sat on a stool and faced my locker in the crowded clubhouse. I had never played a game where I'd gone hitless but felt so good. I rubbed my head with a towel. I felt something cold touch my bare shoulder. I turned around. T handed me a bottle of beer.

He had his stopwatch out. "Two-point-six seconds. Slow as a damn turtle crossing a road," he said. "But you *believed* you could do it, didn't you?"

I smiled and took a sip of the cold beer.

"Best feeling in the world. Stealing home base right under their damn nose," T Tommy Tiller laughed. "Like stealing the taters out from under the gravy."

## Chapter 36

The sunrise didn't bring sun, just more rain. I heard the door at the rear of the barn office squeak shut, and Cotton emerged with two large mugs of hot coffee. He handed me one and pulled up a short stool next to the fire barrel. T-Bone plopped next to him. He tossed some wood into the barrel, and a small flame came back to life.

I took a sip. "Good coffee."

"I know," Cotton said.

Chance rose, stretched, walked to the edge of the barn, looked out at the rain, and returned to the sofa, deciding he could hold it for a bit longer.

"You stay up all night?" Cotton asked.

I shrugged.

"Needed some time alone, I'm guessing?"

"That I did," I said. "How did you know?"

"I live alone on a worm farm," he said. "I know. Too many people here right now."

"Just some things to sort out."

"Any answers?"

"More questions than answers."

"I bet your biggest question is why."

"Why?"

“You stayed up all night asking yourself why you’re still down here, nearly getting blown up, looking for treasure that you don’t really believe in.”

“Maybe, but you nearly got blown up as well, and you don’t believe in the treasure either.”

“I said I don’t believe you can find it. I never said I didn’t believe in it. Big difference.”

I let that soak in for a moment. Drank some more of the coffee. “Guess I’m just struggling with believing in all these things. Ghosts, treasure, maps that make no sense. I usually stick to the basics of my routine, so it’s a pretty big leap for me to believe all of this.”

He thumped at the barrel with his boot. A single flame jumped to the top and retreated.

“Belief is one part of it. What you’re missing is conviction.”

“Conviction?”

“Conviction is knowing why you believe.”

“So, we are back to the why?”

“Or the why not.” He smiled.

A rumble and cough came from behind one of the sleeping tarps. Catfish stumbled out and limped toward us. He wore a 3XXL Bulldog sweatshirt with a wool blanket across his big shoulders. He punched at his chest with a fist and let out a long burp.

“When’s the last time you spent a night in a barn?” I asked him.

“Ninth grade, with the preacher’s daughter, Bobbie Sue Calhoun.”

“Get lucky?”

“Made it to second base before the Reverend Calhoun showed up with a pitchfork.”

“Says in Proverbs, ‘The prudent see danger and seek refuge,’” Cotton said.

“I sought refuge in the corn field next door.”

Catfish grinned and slid his big body into one of the small canvas chairs, inched it up toward the fire, and placed his hands over the heat. “Damn, I wish I could find that cat,” he said.

“What cat?”

“The one that took a crap in my mouth,” he said.

Cotton shook his head. “I’ll get us some more coffee.” He got up and left.

Catfish took his shoes off and stuck his socked feet against the barrel fire. “So, you have a good talk with that silly looking reporter?”

“He may dress a bit odd,” I said, “but he sure knows a lot of stuff.”

“Fill me in,” he said. “Talk slow. I’m half asleep.”

I told him how Brucey knew about the Secret Service guy, all about the cabin fire, the dead guy they fished out of the river, and how Toot had squashed that news.

Catfish grinned. “Toot does have a way of squashing things, don’t he?”

Cotton returned with fresh coffee. I told them both what Brucey had suggested about doing a search during a big rainstorm.

“Might be a good idea,” Catfish said. “What do you think, Cotton?”

He looked out at the rain. “I’ll give you one more day on my end.”

“Meaning what?” I asked.

“I told your buddy Biscuit and that fool Greasefire last night to pack up his gypsy campground and move on.”

“What did he say to that?”

“Called me a few names, but rest assured, when he wakes up, he’s packing up.”

“So, we calling the dogs off this hunt?” Catfish asked.

“You guys can keep looking till a month from Sunday,” he said. “Just not camped out in my yard. I don’t need Tucker Boone burning my place down. I got a worm farm to run.”

“That’s fair enough,” I said.

“Plus, I figure with all that stuff at the cabin, guns in my face and such, me and Toot are squared up with what I owe him for a while.”

“But you’ll help us out if we go down to the shoals today?” I asked him.

He tossed another stick of wood in the fire barrel. “Like I said, one day, as long as by midnight, the parking lot is empty and there’s nobody here but me, the worms, and the Duke on my TV.”

## Chapter 37

By late morning, two things had changed, and one had not. First, Greasefire had torn apart and packed up every bit of what Cotton had called the “gypsy camp.” Second, Catfish and Cotton had teamed up to organize everything we needed for our trip to the shoals. The one thing that hadn’t changed was the weather. The rain continued, harder by the hour.

We gathered under the edge of the barn. It was decided Catfish would stay behind to handle our makeshift logistics. We tried to convince Biscuit to stay with him, but he wouldn’t hear of it. Catfish set up behind an old wooden table. He had his own cell and a couple more phones if needed, and Cotton had come up with three old walkie-talkies he used with his farm crew. We had no idea what the range would be, but we knew a cell wouldn’t work down in the valley. If the walkie-talkies worked, we planned on checking in with Catfish on a regular basis, and if not, we set a time to return. If we didn’t, Catfish was to reach out to Toot for help. It seemed like more concern than needed, but Cotton was adamant. He warned us that with rain like this, the shoals could be a damn dangerous place. Add Tucker Boone to that forecast, and it could get a lot more dangerous.

“Let me have my map,” Biscuit said. “I’m toting the map.”

“I think I’ll hang on to the map for today,” Cotton said.

“Then give me a gun if I can’t have the map.”

“No map, no gun, no yapping.”

But guns were handed out. Cotton told me to keep the rifle, and he wore a sidearm on his hip. He kept one radio and gave the other to Alex. She stashed it in a gear bag around her waist. Alex was ready for bad weather, dressed head to toe in waterproof gear, and the two cameras around her neck were covered. Cotton wore a long green rain parka, a floppy, wide rain hat, and rubber boots that knocked at his knees. He rounded up a couple of old nylon parkas for me and Biscuit. The one for Biscuit was red and dropped nearly to his ankles. Mine was bright yellow and much too small; my arms stuck out a good ten inches, and it barely came to my waist. I topped it off with a red St. Louis Cardinals hat from my truck. I didn't think Indiana Jones would approve.

"I ain't been this damn wet since I fell into that well hole when I was ten years old," Greasefire boomed as he rolled into the barn. "And every single piece of my gear is soaked to the bone. Gonna take me a month to dry it all out."

He was dressed in cutoff shorts, a t-shirt with no sleeves, and a black hat turned around backward. A pair of unlaced work boots flopped on his feet. He tossed down a huge duffel bag.

"Hope you're happy, old man." He pointed at Cotton.

"Delirious," he answered.

Greasefire reached around, pulled off a large backpack, and plopped it to the floor. It clanked with the sound of glass.

"What was that?" I asked.

He grinned and unzipped the top compartment. "Fuel for the fire. Mountain whiskey." He pulled out two black bottles and showed them off. "Gotta have something to celebrate with when we hit gold."



He smiled, reached into the pocket of his shorts, pulled out a small snub-nosed pistol, and spun the cylinder. “Lock and load.”

It took us a lot longer than expected to make it to the shoals. The trail was washed out in some places, the footbridge over Possum Creek was under water, and it took a few logs and a rope to get across. The canopy of tall trees diverted some of the downpour, but the water that poured downhill underfoot made the walk slow and treacherous. We stopped on and off for rest and to check in with Catfish. The cell signal died quick, but the little radio did work, even though you could only hear every third or fourth word, which with Catfish, wasn't really a bad thing.

Two hours later, we emerged from the dark woods and reached the edge of the shoals. It wasn't the same shoals we'd seen the last time. Bull Killer Shoals was angry. The water was high, and the boulders that rose above were now buried by swirls of white water that spun and crashed downriver. The soft sandbar we'd walked across was gone, a strip of slick rocks the only way to cross. We stopped and gazed at the transformation. Alex raised her camera and clicked away at the powerful scene.

Cotton took a rope, tied it around his waist, and passed it down. We roped in and followed him across the slick rocks one by one. He aimed for a wide, flat boulder that rose ten feet or so above the rushing water. It took us a half hour, and we had to pull Biscuit up the last few feet. We now stood at the intersection of the *Y*, directly above the area where Shoestring had noted on the map. The rain, pushed by the water, hit hard in our faces and stung like pricks of sand.

Cotton reached inside his parka and removed the yellowed map, now double covered inside plastic sheets. I moved next to him. He stared at the map and pointed toward the rocky hill that we had contemplated climbing on our last trip down.

He read it aloud. "At the mouth of the gator, north 50 plus paces to the waterfall."

I read the remaining notes. "Follow waterfall to the flint cottonmouth nest."

He looked up at the hill. Water poured down, bounced past short bushes, ran over rocks, and spilled into the shoals. A circle of foam swirled at the bottom.

"That could be your waterfall." He motioned toward the hill.

"Wasn't there before, but with all this rain, things look a lot different."

"Maybe that reporter was right about coming down here in the rain."

"Were the shoals this high the night you chased him?"

"I remember it being rough."

Cotton studied the map, moved up to the highest part of the boulder. He looked down and then up. He held the plastic sheets out in front of him and pulled the map down, peered over it, shielded his eyes with his hand, and stared out at the swift water of the shoals.

"Take a look," he said.

I moved up next to him. He pointed with his right hand at a jagged group of wet black rocks about fifty feet out in front of us. Each rock rose maybe six inches to a foot out of the water, some lower, some higher.

"That group of rocks," he said. "See them?"

"What about them?"

"No rain and they make a path to the sandbar, but with the water running this high, all of them are almost underwater. All but the top edges."

"We crossed those same rocks to the sand bar at that spot."

"We did." Cotton held the map up even with the water. He smiled.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?"

I didn't. "No, I just see a line of rocks sticking up out of the water."

"Look closer. Look at the circles Shoestring drew. Let your imagination take over."

I studied the rocks. The rock at the front edge pointed toward the hill. It was the biggest, rounded off smooth and maybe two feet across. The staggered line of rocks behind it were smaller, water going up and over each one as it stretched for maybe ten feet. At the rear of the group, a larger black rock rose out of the shoals and turned downward in a slight *S* shape.

"See it now?" Cotton asked.

"I do."

From up on the boulder, with the rain hard and the water high, the string of rocks that pointed toward the waterfall looked exactly like an alligator.

"The mouth of the gator," Cotton said.

I repeated his words from earlier. "Conviction is knowing why you believe."

## Chapter 38

I lay flat on my back, the rain pelting my face, exhausted and muddy. We had just used a long rope to pull each person up the waterfall and to the top of the ridge, the next step on the map. Greasefire went first, pulled himself up, then me. He disappeared, anxious to begin his search, and I worked to pull up the rest. Biscuit was the hardest. Dead weight, like a big bag of sand. Alex came up last, and I fell back to rest, my hands red and raw from the rope. Cotton reached out and pulled me to my feet.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

“Biscuit ran off to catch up with Greasefire,” Cotton said. “Alex is over there.” He pointed toward the edge of the cliff. She was braced against a tree with one shoulder, her camera aimed down at the shoals.

“What do we do now?”

“I have no idea,” Cotton said.

“The map said to follow the waterfall to the ‘flint cottonmouth nest.’ Any idea exactly what we’re looking for?”

“None.”

“So, what’s Greasefire looking for?”

“I have no idea.”

“Full of answers, aren’t you?” I said. “One more question. How do we get back down this waterfall?”

“I have no idea.” He grinned.

“Over here.” We heard Alex shout from out of sight.

We trudged up a ravine and crossed the flow of water that poured downhill. Alex was in a gulley of sorts, filled with brown, orange, and white rocks.

“These are flint rocks, right?” Alex yelled up to us.

“They are,” Cotton said. “But flint rocks are everywhere. Like I said, they grow like a crop around here.”

“But doesn’t this look like a place where you might bury something?”

“Well, it looks like a place where you might find a cottonmouth nest,” he said.

Great. Snakes. We heard a noise behind us; Greasefire came up the hill, Biscuit in tow, hanging onto his belt.

“You guys find something?”

“Alex thinks this pile of rocks might be something,” Cotton said, pointing.

“You waiting for a letter from the Governor?” he asked. “Let’s tear it up.” He slid down the slope to the rock pile.

“Hold on,” Cotton said. “These piles are unstable, all sorts of holes and caverns underneath. The soil is soft and sandy. We move slow. One rock at a time.”

Greasefire wasn’t happy, but he gave in. We formed a line with Greasefire on top of the pile, and one by one he tossed rocks off to us. We stacked them as he moved his way up. It was slow and tedious work, slowed even more by the rain.

“We ain’t never going to find nothing moving this slow,” Greasefire grumbled.

“Don’t matter,” Cotton said. “Odds are, we just moving rocks for the hell of it.”

Greasefire didn't answer. We kept at it for another hour. Biscuit paced on the side and offered up direction, which we ignored. Cotton moved slow and deliberately. I think he was content to pass the day without results and be done with us for good. At the moment, with my back stiff and knees on fire, I shared the same thought.

Greasefire moved two large rocks and uncovered a ragged bush with a big root, maybe six inches across. He tugged at it and cursed. I told him to hang on, I would get him the hatchet.

"I got it." He grunted and pulled at the root. His big arms strained and bulged. We all paused to watch. He made one more big pull. The root broke free with a big snap, and he yanked it up to his chest. He grinned wide. We heard another snap, loud with an odd rumble, and he looked down at his feet.

"Oh, crap," he said, and then he disappeared. Straight down.

I scrambled over the rocks to where he'd dropped. A hole three feet wide had opened in the earth below where he'd just stood. I couldn't see him.

"Eeeee-aaaaaaah," came his groan from the darkness. "Woooooweeeeee." A big hand appeared out of the hole. "Get me the hell out of here."

I grabbed his hand and pulled hard. Cotton joined me and reached for his arm. We pulled Greasefire up and rolled him over. With his burnt eyelashes, his eyes were the size of hubcaps.

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

"The ground just fell out from under me."

"I told you there were hidden crevices. The soil around this river is soft," Cotton said.

"Sweet jelly donut and fry bacon on my butt." He wiped his face with his hands.

"What's down there?" I asked.

"You told me you didn't like snakes, right?"

“I don’t.”

“Well, then don’t go down in that hole.”

“Snakes?”

“A whole pile.”

“A pile of snakes.”

“Big pile of snakes.”

We circled the hole and peered down into the dark. Cotton looked at me and smiled.

Biscuit got down on his knees and stuck his head over the edge.

“We got to get down there,” he said. “This is exactly the kind of place Shoestring would bury his footlocker.”

“As far as I’m concerned,” I said, “Babe Ruth could be down there, drinking beer with Dizzy Dean, and you would still have no chance in hell of getting me to crawl down a hole with a big pile of snakes.”

## Chapter 39

“That is one big pile of snakes.” Cotton pointed his flashlight down the hole.

“Cottonmouth?” I asked.

“Does it matter?”

“Not to me.”

Alex leaned in with one of her cameras and the flash fired. She looked at the little monitor on the back and turned it toward me. I shoved it away.

“We need a long branch about two inches thick,” Cotton said.

“For what?” I asked.

“Fire. We need to make a torch of sorts.”

“Again, I ask, for what?”

Cotton grinned. “The snakes didn’t come in through the same hole Greasefire did, so they have an exit route somewhere.”

“And the fire?”

“Fire runs them off. We stick the torch down in the hole and send them on their way.”

“I’ll get the branch,” I said.

Cotton removed his t-shirt and soaked it in the fluid from his pocket lighter. Soon he had a good torch on fire. He stuck it down in the deep hole and went to work. Alex leaned in with her camera. Greasefire pointed two flashlights, and Biscuit had his entire head in the hole. I stood back a good ten feet and kept my eyes open for the snake exit route, just in case.



“They’re all gone,” Cotton said finally.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe,” I repeated.

“Get that rope and lower me down,” Biscuit said.

“You’re not going anywhere,” Cotton told him. “Greasefire, you ready to go back in?”

“Does a frog have a watertight butt?”

Cotton put a rope around Greasefire and he slid back down into the hole.

With a grin, he shined the flashlight in his own face. “Fire in the hole.” He dropped.

We stood by and waited. I tried the little radio again to see if I could reach Catfish.

Nothing. If he didn’t hear from us soon, he would call in backup. I hit the little button a bunch of times and called out but got only static. We were on our own for now. Cotton glanced at his watch. Twenty minutes had passed. We heard noise at the edge of the hole.

“Throw me down a trench shovel,” Greasefire shouted.

“What you done found?” Biscuit yelled.

Greasefire didn’t answer, but I thought I heard him laugh. Cotton tossed the folded shovel down with a clank. Biscuit looked at us, the rain pouring off the top of his slick head. I shrugged. Another ten minutes passed. Below, we heard Greasefire let out a shout. I shivered, thought about the snakes. Five minutes later, Greasefire scrambled back to the opening. “I need a big ass knife,” he said.

Cotton took a large hunting knife off his belt, leaned over the hole. “Here it comes.”

“What you done found?” Biscuit shouted again.

“Pull me up.”

I grabbed the rope with Cotton, and we pulled Greasefire far enough up for his head to poke out of the hole. His face was covered with mud. He grinned and looked at Biscuit.

“Fifty-fifty or I ain’t goin’ back down in this damn dark hole.”

“Fifty-fifty on what?” Biscuit asked.

“Fifty-fifty, you crazy coot, or I swear I’ll cover this hole up with all them rocks.”

“Piss on it then, fifty-fifty.”

Greasefire let go of the rope with one hand, reached out and shook hands with Biscuit, then dropped straight back down in the hole. “Yeeeeeahhhhhh,” he yelled as he hit the ground.

I looked at Cotton and Alex.

“Any idea what he is talking about?” I asked.

“Not a clue,” Cotton said.

It was hard to tell with the rain and low clouds, but I would have guessed we had about another hour before darkness arrived. I did not wish to be in that gully at night, and I did not wish to be there when the snakes discovered an exit.

Greasefire yanked hard on the rope and shouted up at us, “Toss me down another piece of rope, with some slack.”

Cotton cut off a long piece and threw it in. We heard him grunt and curse, and something banged against the rocks on the floor. Biscuit paced like a nervous cat.

“Pull me up,” he shouted. We took the rope and lifted him to the edge. He rolled onto the ground. He held the second rope in his right hand and pounced to his feet.

“Y’all ready for this?” His grin stretched across his big muddy face.

“For what?” Alex asked.

“Just grab hold of this rope and give me a hand. Thing is heavy as a bull.”

The three of us took the rope and tugged on it. It was indeed heavy. Whatever was tied to the rope caught for a moment on the edge of the jagged hole. Greasefire pulled the rope out wide with his left hand, lifted hard with his right, and it broke free. We could see it now. We slid it up and across the flint rocks—a dirt and mud-covered metal footlocker.

Biscuit stumbled forward and hugged it. “Lordy, Lordy Miss Clawdy. Bless my old butt and owe my soul to Abraham.”

“Forget Abraham,” Greasefire said. “You owe half your soul to me. We shook on it. Fifty-fifty.”

**Make A Note: When it comes to searching for *Fool’s Gold*, never underestimate the fool searching for the gold.**

## Chapter 40

Biscuit rubbed the metal footlocker with both hands. I thought for a moment he was going to kiss it. Alex passed me a cloth from her camera bag and I went to work on wiping down the muddy box. Under all the dirt was a silver metal locker, maybe three feet long and two feet wide. It had two flap hinges, each locked down with not one, but two, long padlocks.

“Don’t reckon that ballplayer sent you the keys?” Greasefire asked Biscuit.

Cotton leaned down to look. “Wouldn’t matter anyhow.”

“Why?”

“The whole box has been tack-welded shut. Sealed tight with double layers of metal.”

“It looks in really good shape after all these years,” Alex said. She moved around it, took photos from several angles.

“It was wrapped in layers of heavy plastic sheeting,” Greasefire said. “I had to cut through about four or five layers and kill one big snake to get to it.”

I grabbed a handle on one end and lifted it a few inches. “Heavy. Baseball keepsakes shouldn’t be this heavy. Not sure what we found, but I’m not sure this is Shoestring’s footlocker.”

“Well, what in the hell else could it be?” Biscuit raised his voice. “Found it right where the map said it would be.”

“Hard to believe he had the strength to get this down the hill, across the water, and up here by himself,” I said.

“Adrenaline is an amazing drug,” Cotton said. “Especially when you’re drunk, just killed a couple of men, and the law’s nipping at your feet.”

“Good point.”

“Maybe he wasn’t alone,” Alex said.

“Maybe,” I said. “But if there was another person, wouldn’t they have come back for the footlocker, even if Shoestring was dead?”

“Not if he killed that person as well,” Cotton said.

“Another good point.”

Greasefire had wandered off and came back with a pointy rock. He dropped to his knees next to the footlocker, raised the rock, and took a big whack at one of the padlocks. The rock bounced out of his hand.

“Dammit to hell,” he said and shook his hand.

“What are you doing, fool?” Cotton asked.

“Opening this bad boy up and see what’s inside.”

“With a rock?”

“Guess not,” he said.

Cotton sighed. “The box is welded shut. Airtight, waterproof.”

“We need to get this thing open,” Biscuit said.

“Not here,” Cotton said. “It’s raining hard, getting dark. We need to get back to the farm, get some tools, and get it under some cover.”

Greasefire stood up and kicked at the box. Biscuit looked like he was about to cry. He rubbed the top of the footlocker with one hand.

“He’s right,” I said.

“We got a long walk. It’s heavy, and first, we have to get it down the ridge,” Cotton said.

“I agree,” I said. “One question though.”

“What’s that?”

“How do we go about doing that?”

I wished I hadn’t asked. Getting down was harder than going up. We tied the ropes off to a strong tree and Greasefire went first. He made it look easy for the first fifty feet, bouncing out and off the rocks with a shout each time. We couldn’t see him as he dipped in again, but we heard him yelp when he lost his grip. The next thing we heard was a splash. Cotton dropped to his knees and crawled to the edge.

“You okay?”

“It’s a damn long way down when you ain’t got a hold of the rope,” he shouted. “But it’s a lot faster.”

Next, we had to figure out how to get Biscuit down. Alex volunteered with an idea. With all her camera gear in a backpack, we used the short piece of rope from earlier to tie Biscuit to the front of Alex, like a tandem parachute jumper, and lowered them both at once. It took nearly a half hour to get them down safely, and by then it was dark.

That left me, Cotton, and the heavy footlocker. I guess to be a successful worm farmer, you needed some engineering solutions every now and then, and Cotton took the lead. He tied the rope off in a split knot from two trees, rigged the rope to run through the handles of the footlocker, and left one strand for us. The idea was to go down side by side, with the footlocker tied between us. One hand on it and one hand each on the rope.

“Think this will work?” I asked.

“Almost.”

“Almost?”

“Not sure we have enough rope to get to the bottom.”

“That could be a problem.”

“Could be,” he said.

We inched our way down. Alex shined a flashlight on us. My leg muscles burned, and my arms ached. I glanced over at Cotton and I could see his teeth clenched, neck muscles tight. We were out of rope and about ten feet short, a dark pool of water below us.

“You ready?” Cotton asked.

“Ready for what?”

With his left hand, he took his hunting knife and cut the rope above our grip. We dropped the final ten feet and splashed into the cold water. I scrambled to the wet sandbar, and Alex jumped in and helped pull Cotton out.

“Get my box,” Biscuit yelled.

Greasefire waded in to grab it by a handle. “Our box,” he said. “The damn thing is shut so tight it floats.” Alex shined the flashlight in his face. He pulled the box up on the sandbar, his grin glowing in the light.

It was dark. The rain blew sideways, and the shoals roared all around us. It took us a while to gather ourselves and get all the gear organized for our trek back to the farm. We tried the radio again with no luck.

Cotton guessed it would take us at least two hours. One of our three flashlights had died. He took the big one and gave the other to Alex. It had gotten wet enough to flicker every few seconds. The plan was for him to lead the way, Biscuit next, Greasefire and me in the middle with the box, and Alex would bring up the rear with the faulty light.

Alex shined her light at me. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“This place is giving me the creeps,” I said. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Cotton told us to stay close and follow in his steps. We had to work our way back across the low rocks in the shoals to make it to the trail up the ridge. He pointed his light in that direction to lay out the path.

“Once we get over those rocks,” he said, “we’ll move up the bank and then across the ridge in the *Y*.” He pointed his flashlight across the trees, up the hill, and then moved it back down to the water.

“Wait,” Alex said, the sound of her voice urgent.

“What?” I asked. I looked down, afraid she had spotted a snake.

She shined her light up toward the ridge. “Look.”

The light hit the trees. I didn’t see anything. The flashlight flickered and went dark. She banged on it hard. It came back to life.

“Look, on that boulder,” she said. Her words came loud and quick.

I wished she had seen a snake. High on the ridge, on the edge of a rock that jutted out over the shoals, her weak flashlight landed in a flicker on a tall man with a beard. A man in a felt hat and old coat, with a rifle in his left hand. Hoke the Hunter.



## Chapter 41

We froze. The sound of angry water filled the void. The flashlight flickered and went dark. Cotton swung his big light up the hill and it landed on Hoke. The figure had the old rifle up to his left shoulder, and the muzzle flashed. The round hit a rock just in front of Cotton. A sharp stone shrapnel struck him in the thigh. He fell to one knee.

“Move,” I shouted. “Get low on the back side of the boulder.”

I grabbed Cotton by the arm and shoved Biscuit forward. We slid down the rear of the tall rock, our feet in the edge of the fast water. Another round fired from the rifle and pinged off the rock in front. Cotton shut the flashlight off and rolled over on his back.

“You hit bad?” I asked.

“I’m good,” he said. “He shot left-handed.”

I didn’t understand. Greasefire grabbed the flashlight from Cotton, flicked it on, pointed his pistol across the metal footlocker, and aimed it at the figure.

“Cut that light off,” I told him. “And hold your fire.”

“Why?”

“You want to show him where we are?”

Another shot rang out, then one more. Sparks flew up two feet in front of us.

“I think he knows where we are.” Greasefire handed the light back to Cotton.

Alex crawled to the top and fired off shots with her camera. Her head was exposed above the rock. I pulled her down. “Are you nuts?”

“I got him,” she said and rolled over. She held the back of her camera up for me to see. A frozen muzzle flash and an outline of the man in the shot.

“Good for you,” I said. “But you do realize he’s firing actual bullets, not a camera?”

“Left-handed, he was shooting left-handed,” Cotton repeated.

I was about to ask him what he meant when another shot rang out, but this shot came from behind us. The rifle fired from the hill. Another shot from behind, and this time I spotted the flash. We were between two shooters as gunfire flew above our heads from both directions.

The rifle echoed, and the round hit the metal footlocker that was balanced on top of the boulder. The shot spun the box to one side and it slid down the wet rock. I reached but missed. It turned twice and dropped into the swirling waters of the shoals. Biscuit let out a scream and slid toward the water. I grabbed him by his poncho and pulled him back.

“Sonnofaflyingduck,” Greasefire yelled and dove into the water. “Our golden booty is floating down the river!”

He floundered, then reached for the box at the edge of a swirling jetty, where it hung for a moment. From his left and across the sandbar, more gunfire erupted from a different direction. The water kicked up around him and he fell backward. The box spun out of the whirlpool, bounced off a sunken limb, then a rock, and slipped away. A third person with a gun.

“Where did that guy come from?” he sputtered, crawling back to the rock.

“It’s gone, it’s gone,” Biscuit yelled. “My box is done gone.”

To our rear, a flashlight popped on, held close to a long gun barrel. Two shots rang out, and across the sandbar we heard a groan, a brief glance of somebody going down. The light turned up toward the ridge. Three shots came in quick succession, the rifle replied, and we buried our heads against the rock. Two quick rounds from the rear, and another rifle shot bounced off

the rocks, then one more. Another round from the rear pierced the wet air. It came from a loud and large caliber weapon.

From high on the ridge, we heard a scream, a pause, some tree limbs crash, a splash, and a thud. Something or somebody hit the sandbar below. We stayed down and waited for more gunfire. Instead, we heard a familiar voice.

“OOOOOWEEEEEE!” the voice rose above the water. “I tell you what, hoss, I do love the smell of freshly spent gun powder.”

I took the flashlight from Cotton and shined it across the shoals. It landed on a big black cowboy hat, a big gun, and a bigger grin. Jerry Lee Lacy. Licensed Bounty Hunter.

He moved across the rocks and stood above us. Rainwater dripped from the brim of his big hat, and he wore a Texas-style rain slicker. A big silver gun was in his right hand, and he had another in a holster on his left hip.

“By my count, big man, that is twice that Jerry Lee has done saved your butt,” he said.

“What are you doing down here?” I asked.

“Like, I said, son, the eyes of Texas are upon you.”

“More like the guns of Texas.”

“Big Bobby Tooley is still looking for his boys, so I’m still looking for my meal money.”

I stood and looked across at the nearest sandbar, where the second round of shots had come from. A body was sprawled half in the water, half on the sand.

“Who is that you shot down over there?”

“Well, I don’t rightly know,” Jerry Lee said. “Why don’t we go and take a look?” He grinned and slid the big gun back into a shoulder holster under his rain slicker.

I pulled Cotton up by his arm, and with Alex and Jerry Lee, we made our way over to the sandbar. I shined the flashlight on the body and rolled it over. Bagga Nuts. Carl P. Teeters.

“I guess Tucker Boone had his boys following or out looking for us,” I said.

“Wish it was Honey Boy instead,” Jerry Lee said. “This boy ain’t worth diddly.”

I gave him a look. “Let’s go see if we can find the other guy you shot.”

“The other guy is a ghost,” Alex said. “How can you shoot a ghost?”

“A ghost?” Jerry Lee scrunched up his face, then a grin appeared. “Jerry Lee might be good, but he ain’t that good, darling. I’ve shot a lot of men, but I ain’t never shot a ghost.”

“Until tonight,” she said.

## Chapter 42

We made our way to the bottom of the hill where we had spotted Hoke The Hunter. It was part sand, pools of water, stray logs, and heavy bush. Floodwater from the shoals rolled and swirled against the bank. Alex moved one way with the weak flashlight, Jerry Lee another with his gun. Cotton limped next to me. I stopped and looked back.

“Where are they?”

“Who?”

“Greasefire and Biscuit.”

Cotton turned and shined the light back toward the big rock. Nothing. He moved it to the right and then pointed. “Out there.”

“Where?”

“On the rocks in the middle of the crossing.”

Far out in the shoals, we could see them in the dim light. Greasefire jumped from one rock to another, headed across the river. Biscuit hung onto his shoulders, piggyback style.

“What in the world are those two doing?” I asked.

“Going after that box, I would guess.”

“Butch and Sundance.”

“And just like them two outlaws, they might get themselves killed.”

“The toll is rising quicker than the water.”

We heard a yell. “Over here.” It was Alex. She was next to a big log and leaned in with her camera. We joined her. Face up, with one leg turned at a gruesome angle, was the tall man with a beard from the ridge. His rifle lay next to him. Blood stained his old jacket. Alex moved in closer and took another photo. The flash split the darkness and withdrew.

“Ghosts don’t bleed,” Cotton said quietly.

“Is he dead?” I asked. I shined a light on the body.

“Dead or alive,” Jerry Lee said. “Check for ID. Could be some cash on his head.”

Cotton pushed aside the brush around the body and bent down. He touched the beard. “Left-handed,” he said again.

“That’s the third time you’ve mentioned that, why?” I asked.

“People have been seeing this Hoke the Hunter, for years and years, and the one thing they all noticed was his rifle.”

“What about it?”

“He always carried the rifle in his right hand.”

“And this guy was shooting with his left hand.”

“Exactly.”

I paused to slow my breathing. It was slow to come to me, but I recalled a guy who used a strong left hand to mangle my lip not long ago. Cotton looked at me and back at the body.

He reached down and tugged at the beard. It peeled off. He removed the other side and pulled back a black wig to reveal a shaved head. He reached around and lifted the dead man’s head forward into the beam of the flashlight.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said. “Left-handed.”

“Sorry, Alex,” Cotton said. “This isn’t your ghost. This is Honey Boy.”

“Whooooeeeeeee,” Jerry Lee let out a yell. “Smitty K Abercrombie. Man of many felonies. Wanted dead or alive, and dead will spend just fine.”

Alex stopped taking pictures. She looked disappointed. “But why?” she asked.

“Some sort of scheme Tucker Boone cooked up to scare us off?” I suggested.

“Damned if I know. Hard to figure,” Cotton said. “But I know one thing for sure—I’m done. Tomorrow, I go back to being a worm farmer.”

“Rocks that become gators, live snakes, buried boxes, a ghost, and now a dead ghost,” I said. “And all for a footlocker that’s once again lost in Bull Killer Shoals.”

“You left out being shot at.”

“Shot at and hit in your case.”

“That too.”

“Plus two dead bodies.”

“And two more fools that might soon be dead.”

“This has been one long, wet, miserable, bad day.”

Jerry Lee punched me in the shoulder and grinned. “What you talking about, hoss? For Jerry Lee, this is one of the best days since Millie Mae Looney tickled my fancy behind the Hokey Pokey Ice Cream Parlor in Poteet, Texas.”

## Chapter 43

“So, what you think is worse? Two dead bodies or a treasure chest that floated away?”

Catfish had made his way to where I sat on a rock. When he hadn't heard from us by nightfall, he'd called in the law. I don't think any of them, especially Catfish, expected to find what they did.

“How about a ghost who's not a ghost with a bullet in his chest?” I said. “I think that might be your headline.”

“Does butter the other side of the biscuit, don't it?”

He took in the scene below us. Bull Killer Shoals was lit up like an all-night truck stop. The rain had turned into a mist. Fog settled in and hung low above the water. Bright work lights on yellow poles had been placed around the two bodies, linked by crime scene tape that fluttered in the wind. The lights glowed gold in the fog as steam poured off the hot bulbs. I had spent the last fifteen minutes catching Catfish up on what had happened, backing up to the map, the snakes, the pit, the footlocker, and of course, the shootout.

“Damn interesting night,” he said. “Big heaping pile of manure, but a good story.”

“Don't think the fellow with the Sheriff's Department will think it's a good story.”

“Then I highly suggest you don't tell him every part of the good story.”

“Good thinking.”

“Thinking and lying is a good skill to study up on.” He clapped me on the shoulder and limped back up the hill to where a crowd of lawmen were gathered.



I was the only one the main investigator hadn't talked with yet. He knew Cotton, so he went first and was let go to patch up his leg. Alex had gone up top, and two other deputies had led Jerry Lee Lacy off in handcuffs, much to his loud displeasure. Another twenty minutes passed before the man in charge came over. He took a seat on the rock. Even under his raingear, I could tell he was a big man with thick arms and over six feet tall.

"I'm Duck Bellamy, investigator for the Sheriff's Department," he said.

I nodded and shook his hand.

"Pretty wild scene."

"Should have seen it a few hours ago."

An easy smile slipped out. "So, talk to me."

I did my best to recap. I left out some parts, detoured around others, and tried to keep it short. He didn't take notes, just listened and looked out at his men as they worked.

"So you found what may be the box that this guy Shoestring buried way back when?"

"Could be."

"But it fell in the shoals and now it's gone?"

"Pretty sure."

"And that happened when the bounty hunter opened fire at the ghost?"

I thought to myself, *Now that is a sentence I never thought I'd hear.*

"Correct."

"And you had no idea this Jerry Lee Lacy was down here?"

I shook my head.

"The two fellows missing from your group. I'm told they took off."

"They did."

“Why did they do that?”

“My guess is they’re looking for the footlocker we lost in the shoals.”

He paused, looked out at the water. “Good luck with that.” He stood up. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“I need you back at the station house. Talk to the state guy.”

“I hope the state guy isn’t a man named Nick Allen.”

“No, this one’s coming from Macon,” he said. “But I did speak with his boss, a Section Chief that was named Allen, so I guess that explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“Why he hung up on me when I mentioned your name.”

He led the way up the hill. Catfish stood next to an all-terrain vehicle and shared a laugh with an older deputy. No sign of Alex or Cotton. I spotted Toot Thompson. He leaned against a tree, one boot propped up, a Camel between his fingers. He nodded. I nodded back.

“Wait here,” Duck Bellamy said and walked away. Catfish came over.

“How’d it go?”

“So far, so good, but I have to go and talk to the State boys.”

“Toot already talked to the locals,” he said. “Nobody gives a damn about them two dead idiots. I think they’ll keep a lid on this.”

“Hope so,” I said. “I’m ready to go home and get back to making ball bats.”

“The hunt for treasure getting old?”

“Getting blown up and shot at is getting old.”

“You know, you just might be the only person in the world that could find treasure and lose it the same day.”

“And lose two fools who went down the river looking for it.”

“Toot’s got some guys out looking. They’ll find them.”

Bellamy returned and motioned for me to follow him. The dirt road at the top of the hill was lined with vehicles. Red and blue lights spun in circles, bounced off trees, and disappeared, swallowed up by fog. In the middle of the line was a vehicle that didn’t fit. The orange BMW 2002, parked up close behind an ambulance. JC Brucey was somewhere around here with his little notepad and Dodgers cap. So much for keeping a lid on things.

We walked past a cruiser, and from the back seat came a shout. “Hey there, now, hold on a minute, boss man.” Jerry Lee Lacy.

Bellamy stopped, backed up, glanced in the open window. “What do you want?”

“Lookie here, hoss,” Lacy said. “I’m the dad blasted hero in this delicate situation and yet you got me sitting here in handcuffs.”

“Killing two men will get you put in handcuffs.”

“I got a license in my pocket that tells me that I can kill them boys, free and clear, thanks to the laws in Georgia and paperwork from the Free Bird Bail Bondsman down in Hahira.”

“Think I will let the judge sort it out. Heard he was on a fishing trip. Might be a good while before he gets back.”

“And what’s gonna happen to Jerry Lee in the meantime?”

“Oh, I think we can make room to squeeze you in the county lockup,” Bellamy said.

“Whoa now, tighten up your britches, son. You talking about me staying in a jail cell?”

“Should be fun. You can share a cell. We got a meth head coming down. He’s in with a fellow that sells fighting dogs. Think the three of you might get along just fine.”

“Listen to me, you big cracker head. Ain’t you figured out yet that I’m the lead bull in this here redneck rodeo?”

Bellamy kept walking. “I hate Texas,” he said.

“The whole state or just him?”

“Played football at Oklahoma. I hate the whole state, but now, him especially.”

“You’re really going to lock him up for a while?”

“Until they tell me I can’t.”

“He is a licensed Bounty Hunter,” I said.

“He is indeed.”

“And both those guys were fleeing felons, with bounties on their heads.”

“That’s true.”

“So, you think Jerry Lee will get off clean?”

“I figure he will.”

“And you think he’ll get his payday?”

“I’m sure he will, eventually,” he said. “But he’s going to have to work for it.”

“Work for it?”

“Long and hard,” Duck Bellamy said. “Looooong and hard.”

## Chapter 44

The Perry County Jail was a drab concrete building about a mile south of Pearl Falls. When Duck Bellamy let me leave, the sun had been up for hours. I grabbed a paper cup of coffee from the hallway and found the exit. I stepped outside, greeted by bright sunlight. It made my head hurt. Three days of dark rain and no sleep had taken a toll. I took a sip of the coffee. It went down like a brick. I tossed the full cup into a trashcan.

Everything hurt. My knee ached, my shoulder burned, my hands were raw, and my back was stiff as old barn wood. I lifted my arms high above my head, bent over, and tried to stretch out. It didn't help. I realized I had no phone, no vehicle, and no desire to go back inside the jail complex. I decided to walk the road into town to find a phone and call Catfish. I also thought the long walk would help me feel better.

I was wrong. By the time I reached the town square of Pearl Falls, I felt even worse. I spotted a small café across the square and started that way, past a row of parked cars that faced the stores at an angle. Hidden from view by a jacked-up pickup was an older truck I recognized. It was my truck. I stopped and stared. I also recognized the person stretched out half across the hood and the front windshield. Alex.

Showered and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, she had her eyes closed and her face turned up into the sun. I had no idea how or why she was sprawled on the hood of my truck here in town, but I was glad she was. I eased up to the front bumper.

“This your truck?” I said.

Her eyes remained shut. “Do I look like the sort of person who would drive a piece of junk like this?”

“Then why are you sunbathing on the hood?”

“Because, this truck has no chance of ever making it all the way to any beach.”

She smiled first, then opened her eyes and took me in. “You look like hell.”

“I know. You should see it from behind my eyes.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Was about to ask you the same.”

“Thought you were in jail?”

“I broke out.”

“So now we are aiding and abetting?”

“We?”

“Catfish and me.”

“Where is he?”

“Don’t know,” she said. “We stopped for coffee two hours ago and he disappeared.”

We walked down the street to the café, in search of coffee. As we entered, we heard a familiar laugh from a rear booth. Catfish. He sat with two people, an older man in overalls and a younger man in a business suit. His big head tilted deep to the right when he saw me.

“Dang boy, my dog has drug stuff up on the porch that looks better than you.”

“I found this stray wandering the streets,” Alex said.

“We were just on our way to get you,” he said.

I looked at the two empty plates in front of Catfish. “I can tell it was a high priority.”

He introduced the men. They laughed, and the one in overalls patted me on the shoulder when he got up. I assumed Catfish had turned my misery into a story. We joined him in the booth as a lady appeared with a fresh pot of coffee. I took a long sip and rubbed my forehead.

“Maybe this will help your headache a touch.” Catfish pulled a silver flask from his rear pocket, spun the top, and poured a generous amount into my cup. Alex lifted hers as well. I took it in. The whiskey burned as it went down. A good burn.

“Old recipe,” he said. “Just what the doctor ordered.”

I toasted him. “To the good Doctor Jack Daniels.”

Me and Alex each ordered up a plate of bacon, eggs, grits, and toast. Catfish went for round three: a tall stack of buttermilk pancakes and a slice of country ham with red-eyed gravy.

“So, they beat you with a rubber hose?” Alex spoke between bites of bacon.

“Just a lot of questions. Especially the GBI agent from Macon.”

“And how did you answer his questions?” Catfish asked.

“Very carefully.”

He grinned, stabbed a pancake smothered in syrup, and took it down in one bite.

“The odd thing about this agent,” I said. “He was really pushing, digging in, then Bellamy called him out of the room. He was gone a long time.”

“So?” Alex asked.

“When he came back, he was really angry. His face red, boiling.”

“What was he so mad about?”

“I have no idea. He just sat at the table, looked through his notes, then got up, slammed the door on his way out. Never came back.”

“He got a call,” Catfish said.

“A call?”

“Phone call. From Nick Allen.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because Nick Allen called me.”

“How does the Section Chief of the GBI have your phone number?”

Catfish winked.

“I withdraw the question,” I said.

“So, what did he say?” Alex asked.

“For the first two minutes, he just cussed. First at me, and then he cussed about you.” He pointed his fork my way. “Wanted to know why I had hired you again and why that had resulted in him being woke up once again in the middle of the night by a guy named Duck who was bringing up your name, once again.”

“But you didn’t hire Jake for this,” Alex said.

“Correctamundo. But it took a while for me to get a word in edgewise and explain that very important fact.”

“What did you tell him?” she asked.

“I told him this whole mess belonged to a guy named Biscuit, and a fellow that went by the name Greasefire.”

“And what did he say to that?”

“He told me he didn’t care if the guy went by the name Mayonnaise.”

“And then?”

“And then he hung up.”



I took a sip of the whiskey-laced coffee. “But then he called his agent and told him to back off and let me go?”

“I would guess that is exactly what he did.”

“Why would he do that?”

“Might indicate what he thinks of you.”

“That I’m a good guy?”

“No, that you are a real pain in the ass.”

“Still, he let me off.”

“Rather than deal with you,”

“How about that,” Alex said. “You finally came up with a good plan.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Piss people off so bad, they would rather look the other way than actually deal with you,” she said. “Best plan you ever came up with.”

She used her fork to swipe a piece of toast from my plate.

## Chapter 45

We were in my truck on our way back to the farm. Catfish stayed behind in Pearl Falls to visit and most likely eat a few more meals. Alex rode in silence, her head facing the window as the fields rolled by.

She finally spoke. “Can I ask you something?”

I nodded, shifted down into a curve.

“When you were playing baseball, did you have a certain moment, a certain day you wish you could have back and do over again?”

“Had a lot of those days.”

“Any one that stands out?”

I didn’t answer at first. She may have thought I was trying to remember. There was no need. I knew the answer.

“One.”

She waited.

“The day I hit a ball and it curved foul just past the pole in right field. Missed my first Major League home run by maybe ten inches.”

“Why that one?”

“Could have been my first and my last.”

She nodded, kept her gaze focused out the window.

“You’re thinking about the photo of the ghost, aren’t you?”

“Could have been my first and my last.” A soft smile came and went.

We turned down the long driveway of the worm farm, past the old house, and stopped at the edge of the yard. The place was empty.

“Everybody’s gone,” Alex said.

“Even Biscuit’s van and the big truck and trailer Greasefire drove.”

We headed down the hill toward the barn. Up the path from the field, Chance and T-Bone loped up to greet us. Both had mud-caked grins and dirty brown paws. We followed them back down the path and found Cotton parked on a short stool, a wrench up in the engine of his old tractor. He waved and wiped his hands on a greasy rag.

He tossed the wrench into a bucket. “Glad to see they let you go.”

“How did you know they let me go?”

“Toot.”

“How did he know?”

Cotton stood up. “If you have to ask.”

I didn’t.

“So, have you heard anything about Biscuit and Greasefire?” Alex asked. “Their vehicles are gone.”

“And they’re gone with them.”

“They found them?” I asked.

“A guy helping Toot dropped them off here a few hours ago,” Cotton said. “Wet, muddy, drunk as skunks, and full of piss and vinegar.”

“What happened to them?”

“No idea. They were found walking down a dirt road, arms around each other, with a big whiskey bottle and singing.”

“Singing?”

“According the guys who found them, they said it was ‘16 Tons’ by Ernie Ford.”

I shook my head. Alex grinned. “Did they find the footlocker?”

“By now, that thing is at the bottom of the shoals, and those two fools were so drunk they’re damn lucky not to be on the bottom with it.”

“So they just left?” I asked.

“Grabbed their stuff and took off in a hurry.”

“Did they say where they were going?”

“Biscuit said he was headed back to Florida to see a shortstop in Tarpon Springs.”

“What about Greasefire?”

“He said he had business to take care of.”

“Business? What kind of business did he have to take care of?”

“I asked him that exact question. He told me that when it came to talking about business matters, he had two rules: mind your own and stay the hell out of mine,” Cotton said. “And I gladly did.”

We walked back to the barn, gathered up our bags and gear. Cotton made us a thermos of coffee for the road and we packed the truck. Chance said his goodbyes to T-Bone and crawled on top of the bags, muddy feet and all. Cotton, at the window on my side, spoke across to Alex.

“Young lady, do me a favor,” he said. “Send me some of the pictures you were taking down here. I bet some of them are pretty special.”

“I will,” Alex said. “But the most special one, I won’t be able to send you.”

Cotton paused. “Just because it didn’t show up in that little camera window of yours, doesn’t mean you lost the picture.”

“Not sure what you mean?”

“You saw the *real* Hoke, didn’t you?”

She nodded.

“Then you got your picture.”

Chance poked his head out and barked at T-Bone, who circled the truck. I figured we should leave before Chance changed his mind and decided to stay.

“I guess, for you, it’s back to being a full-time worm farmer?” I asked Cotton.

“Remember what John Wayne said in *Stagecoach* about finding your place?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“The Duke said, ‘There are just some things a man can’t run away from.’” He smiled.

“That’s true. I guess his movie characters did have a way of defining people.”

“I learned long ago, there are only two kinds of people in this world.”

“Just two?”

“Yes sir, just two,” Cotton Mulligan said. “There’s good people and knuckleheads. I tolerate the knuckleheads and I enjoy the company of good people.”

“And which category do I fall into?”

He walked with a limp toward the front of the truck, banged his hand on the hood, and gave us a small wave. He didn’t answer my question. I guess it was a tossup.

## Chapter 46

August was a beast. Day after day of one-hundred-degree heat, punctuated by brief wild thunderstorms that rattled the old metal windows in my shop. Two months out from Bull Killer Shoals, and I had only heard from Biscuit once: a short note, written on a small pad from a restaurant in Florida, with an apology. It said, *Sorry I caused you problems...like I promised, I'll pay you back soon with something special.*

*Right, I thought, don't think I'll wait to pay my bills on that promise.*

Work had been slow, nothing odd, nothing from Catfish, just a trickle of bat orders that left me on the minus side of profit for the summer. But then again, I could have been off. My invoicing system was poor, handwritten and not always on paper. Alex insisted I should use the software app she used to keep track of her business, but I would rather not make a profit than have some app tell me how to send out invoices. A flaw, but it was my flaw, and I was sticking to it.

I was inching back toward profit. A twenty-four-bat order for a regular client in the SALLY League was nearly finished. Walt Williams had called the day before with an offer to coach at another camp in the fall. Good money and a chance to be back on the field.

He provided an update on the players from the last camp. The Phillies had indeed drafted Bobby St. John at number one. They'd given him a signing bonus of four-point-eight million and sent him off to the Class A short season, Williamsport Crosscutters.

In six weeks, he'd only hit two home runs. His average stood at .198, his strikeouts in the double digits, and he'd been tossed four times by the umps. Just past the first of August, he'd quit, left baseball, and showed up at the University of Tennessee ready to play football for the Volunteers. Good riddance. The only downside was he did get to keep the millions, but I was comforted by the thought he would somehow blow it all.

On the other hand, the news on the young outfielder from Madison County, Jimmy Brewer, was much better. He'd fallen deeper than we'd hoped in the draft, picked late by the Cincinnati Reds, but still got fifteen thousand in that slot, a good start on a soybean crop. He was shipped off to the Reds Rookie League team in Billings, Montana, a long way from home. He impressed with his hustle and attitude. He topped the Mustangs with a .351 average, led them in doubles, stolen bases, and this made me very proud. He led the team in outfield assists. I guess throwing a baseball at a bucket on a stick wasn't as stupid as it looked. The Reds had given him the off-season to work the farm, told him he would be at "High A" next year, and gave him a huge raise. Every now and then, the Big Dog does indeed come barking at your door.

I had two big fans going in my shop, another small one aimed at me, but the thick air sill fogged my safety glasses. I had sweat in my eyes as I used a small turning tool on an ash billet. With the noise, I didn't hear the car drive up. I pulled the glasses back to wipe my eyes and saw him alongside his orange BMW 2002. JC Brucey. He made eye contact and waved.

I hadn't seen or heard from him since the last night at the shoals, but his wardrobe was the same: a baggy shirt covered with red and green flowers, white pants, red sneakers, and that same blue Dodgers cap. In his right hand, he carried a large brown envelope.

"Bring me a copy of your best seller?" I asked.

He dropped the envelope on my bench and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his bright shirt. He took his cap off and ran a hand across his head.

“Man, it’s hot. You got any beer?”

I went to the little fridge and got us two. He took a long pull and smiled.

“Thought you would long be back in Florida by now,” I said.

“Was. Twice. On my way to South Carolina, had something to show you.”

He removed a rubber band from the brown envelope and pulled out a document, maybe twenty pages or so thick. He flipped a few pages in and pointed with his beer bottle.

“Take a look at this.”

I bent down to look. Multiple rows of columns and headings, all typed in neat order. I looked down the left side of the page. It was a list of baseball memorabilia. Rod Carew Jersey, \$3750.00. Willie Stargell Pirates Cap, \$4100.00. Jim Palmer, Game Ball, 20th win, 1970, \$14,000. I ran my finger down the row, read a few more.

“This is a typed-up list of the items Biscuit had from Shoestring in that letter, and I would guess, their estimated values?”

“That’s right.”

“Information for your book?”

“Not really,” he said. “You’re only looking at the first column. Look all the way over to the last column on the right side of the page.”

I did. Another set of dollar figures, higher amounts. I followed my finger to the top of the column on the right.

“Price as sold at broker auction.” I read the heading aloud.

Brucey looked up at me with a wry grin.



“I don’t understand.”

He folded the document back to one of the top pages. “Read the date.”

The date on the document was less than a week after the time we spent at Bull Killer Shoals. It listed the name of a firm in Birmingham called GemCity Brokers, a signature, a witness, and two other signatures. Grady Bailey and Jimmy Don Dudley. Biscuit and Greasefire.

I read it twice. Wiped the sweat off my brow. Read it once more.

“They found the footlocker,” I said. My voice was half question, half statement.

“They did.”

“But how?” I asked.

“Who the hell knows?”

“But wouldn’t this be big news all over? And the players would want their stolen items back, or like you said, baseball would intervene?”

“Trust me,” he said. “There are more secrets kept on the dark side of the memorabilia business than the CIA has spies.”

“So how did you find out?”

“I’m a reporter, remember?” He smiled. “Plus, I recently bought Biscuit enough drinks to loosen up his state secrets. For that matter, enough to loosen up CIA secrets.”

He flipped to the final page of columns. “Now, check this part out.”

I looked at the bottom row. It read, *Total Fee to Sellers...\$421,450.00.*

“I need another beer,” I said.

## Chapter 47

The sun had given in to the night, but the heat had not. Outside my shop, JC Brucey sat on the rear of his orange car, feet up on the bumper. I leaned against the right tail light. Chance had left his cool spot on the sofa upstairs and wandered about the edge of the tracks. A single work engine moved up the far rails; his light swept over my building, scattered in the humid night like a wave that retreated into the ocean. Brucey had taken his sweet time and three of my beers to fill me in on all he knew about the sale of the items from Shoestring, and what Biscuit had done with his share of the loot.

“Have you seen this new retirement home for scouts down in Fish Camp?” I asked.

“I have. Construction is about half finished.”

“Nice?”

“New main building, new trailers for the guys with A/C, and they say it’s going to have a place for the scouts to show off some of the things they collected during the years.”

“And Biscuit gave them all his money to do this?”

“According to the paper, it was an ‘anonymous’ donor. Plus, a local car dealer who once played some pro ball matched the donation after reading about it, so they have a lot of cash.”

“Good for him,” I said. “I have to assume Greasefire did something a little bit different with his share?”

“Little bit.” He laughed. “He purchased one of those huge, sixty-foot-long food trucks. Drives it around the lakes where the rich folks play, cooks on an open grill.”

“With his background, that sounds dangerous as all hell.”

“Those trucks run off propane tanks.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I smiled.

“Offers up burgers and cold beer. He calls it ‘Fire & Ice’”

“Could be the only guy ever to get blown into the sky twice in the same year.”

I went and got us both another round, the last two in the fridge.

“I would guess all this is really good material for your story,” I said.

“If only.”

“What do you mean?”

He slid off the car. “Hold that thought. I got something for you.” He went around to the passenger side and came back with a square, white box wrapped in yellow tape.

“What’s this?”

“Not sure. Biscuit told me to bring it to you. Said he’d promised you something special for helping him out.”

I opened the box, and buried deep in newspaper, in a clear plastic bag, was a baseball. I took it out. A Rawlings ball, game mud still on it, a black smudge on the right side. Written in red script, *Official Ball 1988 World Series*, with the logo below. I rolled it around in my hand.

“There’s a note.” Brucey pointed.

I took out a small index card. Biscuit had scribbled out a note: *October 15, 1988. I was at the game. Ain’t no real proof, but with God as my witness, this is the Gibby home run ball.*

“October of ‘88,” Brucey said. “The Kirk Gibson home run off Dennis Eckersley.”

“Can’t be. They never found the ball he hit that night.”

The home run that Kirk Gibson hit in game one of the 1988 World Series was baseball legend. He was hurt, could barely walk, certainly couldn't run, and he looked terrible on the first few pitches. But with the count full, two out, down to his last strike, Gibson lifted a backdoor slider into the right field seats to win the game. The television shots of him rounding second base, pumping his fist, have been shown millions of times. I can tell you exactly where I was when I watched it live on TV. It was one of those moments, like the moon landing.

"This can't be the Kirk Gibson ball," I said. "That crazy old man can't have come up with this."

"The same crazy old man that just found a baseball treasure buried for forty years?"

"Good point," I said.

The ball had never surfaced after the home run. TV didn't have a shot of who came up with it. The Dodgers searched for years with no luck. There were rumors, false leads, fakes, but nobody had ever discovered a ball proven to be the real deal.

"Do you know how much that ball would be worth, if it was the real thing?" Brucey asked.

I shook my head.

"He sold his bat, jersey, and helmet from that game for a million dollars. The ball would be worth at least a million."

"But without proof?"

"Without proof of authenticity? Nothing."

I rolled it around in my hand again. "You ever meet Gibson?"

"I did a phone interview with him a few years ago when he went back to Los Angeles for a first pitch reunion with Eckersley. He was nice. We talked about his illness."

“Parkinson’s, right?”

“Right, kind of a sad thing for him, but he’s a fighter. Does some TV now.”

I spun the ball in my hand once more, placed it back in the box.

“You still have his phone number?”

“Sure, why?”

I handed the box to Brucey. “Call him up and send him this ball.”

“But it could be the real ball. Don’t you want to try and find out?”

I shrugged. “It belongs with Gibby.”

“But odds are, he might not be able to find proof, either. How would he know?”

“He’ll know,” I said. “I think he’ll know.”

He took the box back. “You’re a strange man, Jake Eliam.”

“Just trying to give you a good ending to your story.”

“About that,” he said. “There’s not going to be a story about Shoestring Stubbs.”

“Why not? You said yourself, it is a great story.”

“It is,” he said. “But now it’s become less a story and more of a problem.”

“How do you figure?”

“The story now is about murder and backdoor underground memorabilia dealings.

Investigators from baseball, maybe even criminal investigations. All that and with Biscuit put right in the middle.”

“But you keep telling me you’re a reporter. Isn’t that what a reporter writes about?”

“Most do. I am a reporter, a good one, but more than that, I’m a storyteller and I think I’ve found a better story.”

“Really?”

“And a publisher who has already paid me a big advance to write a full book.”

“A book with a better story than all this?”

“I think so,” he said. “A simple story. A story about a group of men who have dedicated their lives to just one thing, baseball and finding good baseball players.”

“You are going to write a book about baseball scouts?”

“As you call them, ‘BirdDogs.’ A dying breed and only a handful left to share the stories. I want to capture those stories before there aren’t any scouts around to tell them.”

“Not many left for sure.”

“On my way to South Carolina to talk to this one fellow. Eighty-six years old, his hearing shot, but in the spring, he stills travels to a high school game every day, sometimes two a day.”

“You’re a strange man, JC Brucey.”

He smiled and handed me his empty beer bottle. “I’ll send you the first copy.”

“What are going to call the book?”

“The working title is *BirdDog Boogie*.”

“That’s a real lousy title,” I said. “But a hell of a good story.”

## EPILOUGE

In my world, there were simple rules for when to celebrate and when to not. If a player hits a walk-off home run, celebrate. If a player hits a third-inning home run, when down by five, don't celebrate. If a pitcher strikes out a batter with two on and two out in the ninth, celebrate. If a pitcher strikes out a batter in the fourth inning with one out, don't celebrate. It's simple.

So I had no idea why Catfish had called me up on a Tuesday afternoon to tell me he was headed over with dinner and good whiskey for a celebration. Alex was invited as well.

It had been more than ten days since I'd filled them both in on what JC Brucey had discovered about Shoestring and his footlocker, so I didn't think it was about that, but then again, it was free food and whiskey, so who was I to argue if he wanted to celebrate?

I finished up my last order and cleaned up the shop earlier in the day. As we eased into September, the heat had backed off, but it was still warm, so I left the big garage door open as the sun began to sink over the skyline in the distance. I told Chance that Alex was coming, so he sat at the door and waited. He didn't have to wait long.

Chance led Alex into the shop. She carried a bottle of wine in one hand, and under her other arm was a poster-sized package, wrapped in brown paper.

"That's a big pizza," I said.

"Not a pizza," she said. "Show you later." She plopped the bottle of wine on my workbench. "This is the good stuff. You have anything other than paper cups?"

I dumped some nails out of an old coffee can. "Knock yourself out."

“Any idea why Catfish is calling us up to celebrate?”

I heard his big truck pull up outside. “None. But we are soon to find out.”

Catfish rolled in with large bags under each arm and sat them down on the bench. We pulled up stools. He handed out plates of pulled pork, beans, okra, corn, a full side plate of hush puppies, and a gallon of sweet tea. From the bottom of the second bag he pulled out a tall bottle of Old Ripy Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey.

“The good stuff for our little celebration,” he said. He handed out paper cups.

“Expensive whiskey in paper cups,” I said. “This is a celebration.”

“What are we celebrating?” Alex asked.

“Dig in.” Catfish took a big scoop of the beans. We all dug in. Silence took over while we ripped into the pulled pork.

“Did that guy Gibby send you the ball back?” Alex asked me with her mouth full.

“No.”

“I can’t believe you gave away a baseball that could be worth that much money.”

“Didn’t have any proof it was worth anything. I just felt like it belonged with him.”

“Sometimes I wonder about you.”

Catfish reached for the hush puppies. “You can leave the porch light on all night, don’t mean anybody’s home.”

“What?” Alex looked at me. I shrugged.

“You going to tell us why we’re drinking good whiskey on a Tuesday night?” I asked.

“Tucker Boone,” Catfish said.

“What about him?”

“Going down for the count.”



“How’s that?”

“They arrested him today.”

“You mean Perry County is going after him?”

“Think bigger. Much bigger.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“FBI,” he said with his mouth full. “The feds pulled him out his Cadillac, put the fat boy in cuffs, facedown, right in the middle of Ponce.”

“The FBI? For what?”

“The big one. Racketeering.”

“What does that mean?” Alex said.

“For Tucker Boone? It might mean fifteen to twenty years.”

“For doing what?”

“Loan sharking, violation of the RICO Act,” he said. “You can get away with murder, but mess with the Feds and money, them boys will find a way to put your butt deep inside a prison.”

I lifted a paper cup of Old Ripy in a toast. “To Tucker Boone and his band of goons.”

Alex joined in. “May his big butt rot in some jail cell.”

Catfish lifted his cup. “And may he become the love mate of some big guy they call The Torpedo.”

We laughed, drank the good stuff, and finished off the hush puppies.

“I have something good to share tonight as well,” Alex said. She took the package wrapped in brown paper, laid it out on the workbench, popped the tape on the corners, and opened it. It was a framed photograph, maybe 20 x 30 inches. She tilted it for us to see.

“Take a look at this,” she said.

We did. It was a night shot of a ridge at Bull Killer Shoals. The trees were just a tad blurred, a limb stuck out on the left side, completely out of focus. In the center of the shot, a rock boulder and a very dim wisp, a smudge, maybe smoke, fog or a light flare.

“What the hell are we looking at?” Catfish asked.

“Look closer,” Alex said. She pushed it forward and ran her fingers across the smudged area in the middle. “Follow my finger, take it in, look at the overall image in the middle.”

It slowly came into focus. She traced it with her finger. A very thin, very soft outline of a tall man, a rifle held low on the right side.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I said. “You did capture him.”

“Hoke The Hunter,” Catfish said with a grin. “Never doubted it for a second.”

I looked at it again. “How?” I asked. “There was nothing in all your frames.”

“A friend over at Georgia Tech,” she said. “Some high-end digital imaging program. Six hundred and fifty something frames, and this was the only one he appeared in. Just one frame.”

“One frame of a ghost,” I said. “This has got to be worth a lot of money.”

“Sort of like your baseball from that Gibson guy,” she said. “I don’t have any proof, plus it’s really hard to tell what it is.”

“But you know what, or should I say *who* it is.” Catfish smiled at her.

“I do indeed,” Alex said. “I do indeed.”

“So, what are going to do with it?” I asked.

“Put it on my wall, so the next time you ask me to join you in some crazy deal, it will bring me to my senses and I’ll say no.”

I gave her a look. “But if you added the back story to it, then you could sell it, right?”

“But the story is free to keep, and I would rather have the story than the money.”

“Now you talking some good sense,” Catfish said. “Told you this lady would come around sooner or later.”

“Come around to what?” Alex asked him.

“Getting rid of them old Midwestern ways,” he said. “Like I done told you, in the South, the corn grows tall, the cotton strong, the taters deep, and the stories are all free.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I asked.

“It means”—he pointed his fork at Alex—“when life gives you lemons, down here, you squeeze them, mix them up in some damn good sweet tea, get down on your knees, and thank the man upstairs that you’re a good lookin’ woman living the good life in the great state of Georgia.”

Alex laughed out loud.

“The more I listen to you, the less I understand,” I said.

She stood up, leaned over, and kissed him on the cheek. He winked at her.

**Make A Note: When I am dead and gone and come back as a ghost, I’m coming back as Catfish.**



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cliff Yeargin has spent his life as a storyteller, traveling the U.S. as a Writer, Producer, Photographer, and Editor in broadcast journalism.

His travels have taken him to dozens of Major League ballparks, World Series, Super Bowls, NCAA Final Fours, NASCAR, NCAA Football National Championships, and more musty locker rooms than he can count.

He began his career in the mountains of western North Carolina, where he shot the only video of the first 3-point goal in the history of NCAA College Basketball. This is NOT fiction...you can look it up!

Currently he works as an Editor & Producer for CNN and lives in a downtown Atlanta neighborhood not called ChickenBone.

There is no neighborhood known as ChickenBone...but there should be.

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**Follow Jake and the gang in all their adventures**

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*Online Reviews and comments are greatly appreciated and will be rewarded with a toast of fine sipping whiskey!*



