

BULL MOUNTAIN

BRIAN PANOWICH



❧ CHAPTER ❧

1

WESTERN RIDGE, JOHNSON'S GAP
BULL MOUNTAIN, GEORGIA

1949

1.

“Family,” the old man said to no one.

The word hung in a puff of frozen breath before dissipating into the early-morning fog. Riley Burroughs used that word the same way a master carpenter used a hammer. Sometimes he just gave it a gentle tap to nudge one of his kin toward his way of thinking, but sometimes he used it with all the subtlety of a nine-pound sledge.

The old man sat in a wooden rocker, slowly squeaking it back and forth on the worn and buckled pine slats of the cabin's front porch. The cabin was one of several hunting shelters his family had built all over Bull Mountain throughout the years. Rye's grandfather, Johnson Burroughs, built this one. Rye imagined the elder statesman of the Burroughs clan sitting in that very spot fifty years earlier and wondered if his brow ever got this heavy. He was sure it did.

Rye pulled a pouch of dried tobacco from his coat and rolled a

smoke in his lap. Ever since he was a boy, he'd come out here to watch Johnson's Gap come to life. This early, the sky was a purple bruise. The churning chorus of frogs and crickets was beginning to transition into the scurry of vermin and birdsong—a woodland changing of the guard. On frigid mornings like this one, the fog banked low over the veins of kudzu like a cotton blanket, so thick you couldn't see your feet to walk through it. It always made Rye smile to know that the clouds everyone else looked up to see, he looked down on from the other side. He reckoned that must be how God felt.

The sun had already begun to rise behind him, but this gap was always the last place to see it. The shadow cast down from the Western Ridge kept this section of the mountain almost a full ten degrees cooler than the rest of it. It would be well into the afternoon before the sun could dry up all the dew that made the forest shimmer. Only thin beams of light broke through the heavy canopy of oak trees and Scotch pine. As a kid, Rye used to believe those rays of light warming his skin were the fingers of God, reaching down through the trees to bless this place—to look out for his home. But as a man, he'd grown to know better. The children running underfoot and the womenfolk might have some use for that superstitious nonsense, but Riley reckoned if there was some Sunday-school God looking out for the people on this mountain, then the job wouldn't always fall on him.

The old man sat and smoked.

2.

The sound of tires crunching gravel soured the morning. Rye tamped out his smoke and watched his younger brother's old Ford flatbed pull up the drive. Cooper Burroughs climbed out and snatched his rifle from the mount on the back window. Cooper was Riley's half-

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brother, born nearly sixteen years after him, but you wouldn't know it by looking at them side by side. They both had the chiseled features of their shared father, Thomas Burroughs, but carried the weight of life on Bull Mountain heavy in the jowls, making both men appear much older than they were. Cooper pulled his hat down over his shaggy red hair and grabbed a backpack from the front seat. Rye watched as Cooper's nine-year-old son, Gareth, appeared from the passenger side and walked around the truck to join his father. Rye shook his head and breathed out the last of the cold smoke in his lungs.

It's just like Cooper to bring a buffer when there is a chance of tempers getting flared. He knows I wouldn't put an ass whuppin' on him in front of his boy. Too bad he can't use them smarts when it matters.

Rye stood up and opened his arms.

“Good morning, Brother . . . and Nephew.”

Cooper didn't answer right away, or bother to hide his disdain. He curled up his lip and spit a slick string of brown tobacco juice at Rye's feet.

“Save it, Rye, we'll get to it soon enough. I got to get some food in me before I can stomach listening to your bullshit.”

Cooper wiped the sticky trail of spit from his beard. Rye dug his heels into the gravel and balled his fists. The boy standing there be damned, he was ready to get this thing done. Gareth stepped between the two men in an attempt to ease the tension.

“Hey, Uncle Rye.”

Another few more seconds of stink-eye, then Rye broke his brother's stare and squatted down to acknowledge his nephew. “Hey, there, young man.” Rye reached out to hug the boy, but Cooper shuffled his son past him and up the front steps of the cabin. Rye stood, dropped his arms, and tucked his hands into his coat. He took another solemn

look out at the Sawtooth oaks and clusters of maple, and thought again on his grandfather. Picturing him standing there, doing the same thing Rye was doing now. Looking at the same trees. Feeling the same ache in his bones. It was going to be a long morning.

3.

“You got to keep stirrin’ those eggs,” Cooper said, and took the wooden spoon from his son. He carved off a chunk of butter and dropped it into the bubbling yellow mixture. “You keep stirrin’ it ’til it ain’t wet no more. Like this. See?”

“Yessir.” Gareth took the spoon back and did as he was shown.

Cooper fried some fatback and bacon in a cast-iron skillet and then served it up to his son and brother as if that pissing contest outside hadn’t just happened. That’s the way brothers do things. Gareth was the first to speak.

“Deddy said you killed a grizzly out by this ridge back in the day.”

“He said that, did he?” Rye looked at his brother, who sat shoveling eggs and fried meat into his mouth.

“Well, your Deddy ain’t right. It wasn’t no grizzly. It was a brown bear.”

“Deddy said you killed it with one shot. He said nobody else could’a done that.”

“Well, I don’t reckon that’s true. You could’a took it down just the same.”

“How come you don’t got the head hanging up in here? That would sure be something to see.”

Rye waited for Cooper to answer that, but he didn’t look up from his food.

“Gareth, listen to me real good. That bear? I didn’t want to kill it.

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I didn't do it to have *something to see*, or a story to tell. I killed it so we could make it through the winter. If you kill something on this mountain, you better have a damn good reason. We hunt for necessity up here. Fools hunt for sport. That bear kept us warm and fed us for months. I owed it that much. You understand what I mean by 'I owed it?'"

"I think so."

"I mean that I would have dishonored the life it led if I killed it just to have a trophy on that wall. That ain't our way. We used every bit of it."

"Even the head?"

"Even the head."

Cooper piped up. "You hearing what your uncle is telling you, boy?"

Gareth nodded at his pa. "Yessir."

"Good, 'cause that's a lesson worth learnin'. Now, enough talking. Eat your breakfast so we can get on with it."

They finished the rest of the meal in silence. As they ate, Rye studied Gareth's face. It was perfectly round, with cheeks that stayed rosy no matter the weather, peppered with freckles. His eyes were set deep and narrow like his father's. He'd have to open them real wide just for someone to tell the color. They were Cooper's eyes. It was Cooper's face, without the calico beard, or the grit . . . or the anger. Rye remembered when his brother looked like that. It felt like a hundred years ago.

When their bellies were full, the two older men grabbed their rifles and stretched cold morning muscles. Cooper leaned down and adjusted the wool cap on his son's head to cover the boy's ears.

"You stay warm, and you stay close," he said, "You get sick on me, your mama will have my ass in a sling."

The boy nodded, but his excitement was setting in and his eyes were fixed on the long guns. His father had let him practice with the .22, to get used to the recoil and feel of the scope, but he wanted to carry a man's gun.

"Do I get to carry a rifle, Deddy?" he said, scratching at the wool cap where his father had pulled at it.

"Well, I don't reckon you can shoot anything without one," Cooper said, and lifted a .223 rifle down from the stone mantel. The gun wasn't new, but it was heavy and solid. Gareth took the weapon and inspected it like his father had taught him. He made a show of it to prove the lessons had stuck.

"Let's go," he said, and the three of them took to the woods.

4.

Cold dirt. That's what morning smelled like on the mountain. The air was so thick with the smell of wet earth, it clogged Gareth's nose. He tried breathing through his mouth, but within minutes he was licking grit off his teeth.

"Here," Cooper said, and handed his son a blue bandana. "Tie this around your face, and breathe through it."

Gareth took it and did as he was told, and they walked.

"I'm not gonna let you do it, Rye," Cooper said, shifting gears from Gareth to his brother. "And before you start carrying on, don't try to give me your normal line of shit about it being what's best for the family. Mama or some of these young punks around here might buy into that nonsense, but you're not about to convince me what you're wanting to do here is right. It's not. It's the goddamn opposite of right."

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Gareth listened but played deaf.

Rye was prepared and well rehearsed; he'd practiced this sparring session all morning to an audience of trees from that squeaky rocking chair.

"Anything that takes the worry out of having to put food on the table is the right thing to do, Coop. It's in our best interest to—"

"Oh, stop that shit, right now," Cooper said, "You best have something better than that. We eat just fine around here. There ain't nobody on this mountain starving. You sure as hell ain't." Cooper motioned to Rye's belly.

Gareth let out a small chuckle and his father gave him a sharp smack to the back of the head. "You mind your business, boy." Gareth went back to acting deaf and Cooper returned his attention to Rye. "The trees on this mountain have done right by our family for damn near seventy years. *Seventy years*, Rye. I would think respecting that—protecting that—is what's in our best interest. The idea that you done lost sight of that pains me deeply. You actually think selling off timber rights to land you were born on, to a bunch of goddamn bankers, is good for us? Well, that breaks my heart, Riley. What the hell happened to you? I don't even recognize you anymore."

"The money is more than we will ever see in a lifetime," Rye said.

"And there it is."

"Damn it, Cooper, listen to me for a minute. Stop being so damn self-righteous and just listen."

Cooper spit.

"It will give our children, and our children's children, something to build on: a future. You don't seriously think we're going to survive for the next fifty years runnin' corn whiskey into the Carolinas?"

"We've done okay so far."

“You’re not seeing the big picture, Coop. We should be doing better than *okay*. We should be working smarter, not harder. The stills ain’t bringing in what they used to. Drinking ain’t illegal no more. We can’t survive off the backdoor bars and pool halls. The money’s drying up. I know you know this. It’s not the same business it used to be. The rest of the world is getting smarter, and we’re staying the same. The odds are against us. This deal with Puckett is going to be triple what we’d make in ten years of runnin’ shine. It’s a chance for our children to—”

“Hold up a second. You keep saying ‘children’ as if you got a dog in this race. The last time I checked, that boy right there was the only child on this mountain named Burroughs. You’re telling me you want to have a bunch of machines come in here and rape *his* mountain so *he’ll* have a better future?”

“Somebody has to look out for him.”

Cooper stopped walking.

“Deddy,” Gareth said, and tugged at his father’s sleeve. “Deddy, look.”

Cooper looked down to where his son was pointing, then bent over to pick up a small clump of black mud. He held it to his nose, and then held it to his son’s nose.

“Smell that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s fresh. We’re getting close. Be ready.”

They kept walking. After a few minutes, the conversation resumed, but with hushed voices.

“The money will strengthen the family, Coop. We can take the money and invest in legitimate businesses. We can stop living up here like outlaws. You have to see the logic in this. We can’t live like this forever.”

“I’ve got other plans.”

“What other plans? To plant that ragweed over by the north face?”

If Cooper was surprised that his brother was aware of his intentions, he didn’t show it. He just shrugged.

“Yeah,” Rye said, “I know all about it. I know everything that happens on this mountain. I have to. I also know that ridiculous idea will have us moving in reverse. Bringing that kind of business up here will only bring more guns, more law, and more strangers—worse than any banker. Is that what you want? Is that what you want for him?” Rye motioned to Gareth. “Besides that, what’s the difference between you clearing a few hundred acres to farm that shit or Puckett clearing it—legally?”

“Wake up, Rye. Do you honestly believe they’ll stop there? Do you really think we’ll ever be rid of them once they get their hooks in this place?”

“Yes, I do. That’s what they agreed to.”

For a moment all the anger and tension fell from Cooper’s face. He looked at his brother and then at his son. “It’s what they agreed to do?” he said, calmly.

“That’s right.” Rye said.

“So that means you met with them already. You done hashed out terms.”

“Of course I did.”

5.

They walked quietly for the next quarter-mile. They stayed on the overgrown trail, stopping every so often for Cooper to show his son proof of the animal they were tracking: broken twigs, hoofprints in the mud, more crumbled deer shit. They were almost to the mouth of

Bear Creek before Cooper said another word to Rye. He spoke in a whisper.

“You already made the deal, didn’t you?”

Rye felt more relieved than ashamed. It was finally out there. “Yes,” he said, “it’s done. They’re sending one of their people down with the papers today. I know you don’t see it now, but someday you’ll thank me for it. I promise you. You’ll see.”

Cooper stopped walking again.

“Come on, now, little brother, how long do we—”

“Shhhh,” Cooper said, and held a finger to his lips. He was looking past his brother at what Gareth had already spotted. Less than twenty yards to their right stood a massive eight-point buck drinking from the rushing water of Bear Creek. The sound of the small rapids covered up the men’s approach. Cooper silently motioned for his brother to move upstream while he set Gareth up for the shot behind a deadfall of rotten pine. Rye obliged. He crept through the woods, keeping his eye on the buck. Cooper dropped down next to his son, who already had his rifle trained on the deer. Cooper put his hand on the boy’s shoulder and reminded him to breathe.

“Relax, son. Put the crosshairs on the thick muscle under his neck. Where the fur turns white. Do you see where I mean?”

“Yessir. I see it.”

The buck looked up from the creek as if it heard them talking, and looked toward their position. Rye was about thirty feet to the left of Cooper and Gareth’s perch. No one took another breath until the deer dropped its head back to the water.

“When you’re ready, boy. Take the shot.” Cooper held his own rifle across the fallen pine, shoulder to shoulder with his son. Gareth was still and ready. As the boy’s finger squeezed the trigger, just like

his father showed him, Cooper swung his own rifle to the left. Two shots echoed through the forest. Two shots that sounded like one. The big buck staggered backward from the impact, then bounded forward in an attempt to defy its fate. Its back legs quivered under its weight, and finally the animal fell.

Riley Burroughs didn't stagger at all when Cooper's high-caliber bullet pierced his neck. His body dropped immediately with a hard thud and he bled out into the clay.

6.

Cooper cocked his rifle and chambered another round before cautiously approaching Rye's body. He gave it a hard kick in the gut. It was like kicking a sand bag. Once he was assured Rye was dead, he lowered his gun and looked back at his son. Gareth had already dropped his own rifle to the ground and was trying to process what just happened. There were no tears—not yet, just confusion and adrenaline. Cooper looked down at his brother's graying hollow face and spit a stream of glistening brown tobacco juice across it.

And that was that.

Cooper propped his rifle against a tree and sat in the damp grass beside Gareth. The boy briefly considered running, but knew better. That thought left his mind as fast as it had come. Instead, he sat and watched his father pull the plug of chew from his lip and toss it into the brush.

“Look around you, boy.”

Gareth just stared at his father.

“I'm tellin' you to do something, Gareth. You best listen. Now, take a look around you. I'm not asking a third time.”

Gareth did. He looked at the deer he'd just shot on the banks of the creek, and then turned to the trail they'd come in by. He purposely avoided the direction of his dead uncle. Cooper fiddled with a foil pouch of chewing tobacco.

"What do you see?"

Gareth's mouth was coated with chalk. He cleared his throat twice before he could speak.

"Trees, Deddy. Trees and woods."

"That it?"

Gareth was frightened of saying the wrong thing.

"Yessir."

"Then you ain't seein' the most important thing. The trees and the woods are only a part of it."

The tears were starting to show now in the corners of Gareth's eyes.

"It's home," Cooper said, "our home. As far as you can see out in every direction belongs to us—to you. Ain't nothing more important than that. Ain't nothing I wouldn't do to keep it so. Even if it means I gotta to do a thing that ain't easy to do."

"Ain't it Uncle Rye's home, too?" Gareth squeezed his eyes shut and steeled himself for the backhand, but it didn't come.

"Not no more," Cooper said. He reached over to adjust his son's cap again, then wiped the tears off the boy's rosy chapped face. "I'll give you this one time to cry, but then I won't have no more goin' on about it. You understand?"

Gareth nodded.

"Do you?"

"Yessir."

"Good. Then we got us one more thing to do, before we dress and

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drag out that deer you shot.” Cooper loosened the fisherman’s knot on his pack and pulled out an old Army surplus folding shovel.

He handed it to Gareth.

Cooper Burroughs sat and chewed tobacco while he watched his nine-year-old son dig his first grave. There was more lesson in that than in killin’ any eight-point buck.

↔☉ CHAPTER ☉↔

2

CLAYTON BURROUGHS
WAYMORE VALLEY, GEORGIA
2015

1.

Well, isn't that how it always goes down? You spend all week, and damn near most of the weekend, too, either cooped up in an office shuffling paperwork, or checking off the honey-do list, all for a few hours alone on a Sunday morning, just to have it shot to shit with a phone call.

I should have let it ring.

Clayton wheeled the Bronco into the parking place marked *Reserved for McFalls County Sheriff*. He stepped out and stood in the empty space his deputy's car should be in—and wasn't—and dropped his chin to his chest. The sun was nudging up behind the motor inn and post office across the street, not the way he wanted to take in the sunrise this morning. He should be hip deep in the creek right now. He let out a slow, disconcerting whistle of breath, hoisted his sagging gun belt, and walked into the office.

“Good morning, Sheriff.”

“Well, that’s up for debate, Cricket.”

Cricket, Clayton’s receptionist, was a tiny little thing in her early twenties, and somewhat of a hidden beauty. If the light hit her just right she might be worth a longer look, but most days, with her mousy brown hair pulled back tight in a librarian’s ponytail, she had the chameleonlike ability to become one with the wallpaper. She pushed her thick plastic-rimmed glasses up on her nose and closed out whatever she was doing on the station computer.

“Sorry to get you in here on a Sunday, sir, but we thought you’d want to deal with this as soon as possible.” Cricket stood up from behind her desk and handed Clayton a file folder.

“S’okay, Cricket. It’s not your fault,” Clayton said, thumbing through the papers in the file. “You got me out of having to go to church with the in-laws, so it’s not a total loss. I was hoping to do a little fishing, though.”

Cricket was all business, as was her way. “Our guest is in cell one.” Cricket motioned down a small hallway leading to the two small lockups, a couple cells barely big enough to house a cot and stainless-steel commode each.

“And where’s Choctaw?”

“He’s waiting in your office.”

Clayton peered down the hallway and then at the door to his office, contemplating which headache to tackle first. He chose the devil he knew.

2 .

“Okay,” the sheriff said, and sipped his coffee. “Start at the beginning.”

Choctaw sank down in the chair opposite the sheriff’s desk and

pushed his Stetson back on his brow. The deputy was the kind of skinny that made his skin look shrink-wrapped to his bones, and he squirmed in his seat like a high school student called before the principal.

“All right,” he said, “I was out a few nights ago with my buddy Chester. You remember Chester? We served together in Iraq. He come down from Tennessee a few weeks back, after he got home from his last tour. I brought him around the office when he first got here.”

The sheriff nodded. “Yeah, I remember the guy.”

“Cool. Anyway, we got a way of messin’ with each other that goes way back to when we were fixing Humvees in the desert—just clownin’, you know? Anyway, last week I bought me one of those blow-up dolls—”

The sheriff put a hand up. “Hold on, like a sex-toy thing?”

“Yeah, exactly. A Fuck and Suck Sally. Them things ain’t cheap, by the way.”

“Good to know. Where the hell did you find one of those around here?”

“The Internet, boss. I even got me one of those PayPal accounts just for that reason.”

“A who-pal-what?”

The deputy looked a bit dumbfounded. “A PayPal account . . . ?”

Static played across the sheriff’s gray-green eyes as he sat and stroked his beard.

“Look, it doesn’t matter. That’s not the point. The point is I bought this blow-up doll to mess with Chester. I should have bought a bicycle pump, too, because I damn near gave myself an aneurysm blowing the thing up.”

“What does any of this have to do with last night?”

“I’m getting to that. Bear with me. A few days after I bought the thing, I set it up all pretty-like in the passenger seat of Chester’s ride right before he come out of The Pair O’ Jacks—that joint headed up I-75 toward Roswell. You know the place?”

The sheriff nodded again. “Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, right, so when he comes out to the car, he’s expecting to see me, but instead he gets an eyeful of Fuck and Suck Sally. He totally lost his shit. Straight up busted his ass trying to get back out of the car.” The deputy waited for the sheriff to laugh, but it didn’t happen. He just stared at the younger man blankly, as if he was trying to gauge his level of stupid.

“Is this remotely leading to why we’re sitting in my office this early on a Sunday morning, when we both would clearly rather be somewhere else?” He pushed his own hat up a few inches, leaned back in the swivel chair, and crossed his arms.

“It was funny,” Choctaw insisted. “I guess you had to be there.”

“I guess so.”

“Anyway, now the ball’s in Chester’s court to get me back, and that brings us to last night.”

“Finally.”

Choctaw took off his hat again, pushed back his shiny black hair, and reseated it deep on his brow. “So I’m out on patrol, and I’m letting Chester ride along with me.” Choctaw put up both his hands palms out to fend off another dirty look. “I know you don’t like that sort of thing, so don’t bother sayin’ so.”

The sheriff bit down on his lip and sighed through his nose. He took off his hat as well, freeing a head of bushy, rust-brown hair, and set the hat on his desk. “Go on,” he said, scratching at his temples where his hat had been pressing down, where the first hints of gray were beginning to appear.

“Chester is all on my case about stopping at the Texaco on 56 to get some chew and whatnot.” The deputy paused and thought on what he’d just said. “You know something, boss? I should have known right then. He normally wants to go way out to Pollard’s Corner so he can sneak peeks at Old Man Pollard’s daughter working the counter. She just turned eighteen, you know, but I swear she looks a lot older than that. I don’t see how Old Man Pollard—”

“Focus, Deputy.”

“Right. Anyway, I should have known something was off about that, but I missed it.”

“The world’s finest detective.”

“Whatever. So I pull into the Texaco, and Chester hands me a few bills and asks me to go in, like I’m his do-boy, but whatever, he’s lazy, I know that, so I go inside.”

“Where was Chester?”

“In the car.”

“You left Chester in a county-owned vehicle?”

“I trust the guy, boss.” Choctaw was spectacular at missing the point entirely. “So I go in and leave the engine running.”

“You left the engine running in your patrol car with a civilian in it?”

“Yeah, boss, like you ain’t never done it.”

The sheriff pulled at his beard. “Go on.”

“Yeah, like I was sayin’, I walk in and wouldn’t you know it, there’s this dumb-shit crackhead with a peashooter .22 holding up the place. I about shit and fell back in it. I knew looking at him he wasn’t from around here.” He raised an eyebrow at the sheriff to emphasize the perpetrator’s darker persuasion. “A brother, probably picking up some quick cash on his way back to Atlanta.”

Because all brothers originated from Atlanta. Everybody knew that.

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“Talk about terrible luck, though. What an idiot. Anyway, he gets all freaked out seeing a deputy of the law walk in, so he aims that little toy pistol at me. I’m like, ‘Dude, what the hell? I’m a cop. Put that thing on the counter and assume the position.’ I’m sure he knew how to do it, probably been doing it his whole life.”

“You know, Choctaw, for a minority like yourself, you sure are quick to profile.”

“I’m only fifty percent American Indian, boss. The rest of me is one hundred percent good ol’-fashioned redneck.”

“That’s a hundred and fifty percent.”

“Right.”

The sheriff arched his eyebrows and sighed again. He doubted there was any American Indian in there at all. Choctaw’s skin color was tinted enough to notice only if it was pointed out to you. He could even be Mexican, but whatever.

“Did you draw on him?”

“Had no time. As soon as I tell him to put his gun down he starts getting all jittery and starts popping off rounds into the ceiling. Drop-ceiling panels and dust start raining down all over the place and I couldn’t see nothing. I drew my gun then, but I didn’t shoot it.”

“Then what happened?”

“In the pandemonium, this jackass bolts. Before I know it, he got around me and made it outside. As it turns out, this idiot is on foot, so he hops into the first car he thinks he can haul ass in.”

“Your running patrol car?”

“Yup. By the time I get outside after him, he’s tear-assin’ out of the parking lot.”

“Where’s your friend?”

“Chester?”

The sheriff spoke into his lap. “Yeah, Chester.”

“Chester is totally oblivious to what’s going on inside, because he’s too busy exacting his revenge for the goddamn blow-up doll.” The deputy leaned forward in his chair. “Get this, Chester stashed two big-ass bags of packing peanuts behind the Texaco ice machine earlier that day, and that’s why he was so hopped up about stopping there. As soon as I walked inside, he went and dumped ’em all into my patrol car.”

Silence filled the sheriff’s office like ocean water.

The sheriff narrowed his eyes. “Peanuts?”

“Not real peanuts, *packing* peanuts, you know, that white Styro-foam shit you get from FedEx.”

“Right, packing peanuts.” His head was starting to hurt.

“Yeah, right. So this retard just jacked a cop car full of packing peanuts. That guy’s got to have the worst luck of all time. He got that Crown Vic up to about forty miles an hour before it looked like a fuckin’ snow globe.”

The sheriff coughed up a sudden laugh against his will. He didn’t want to, but he did. Choctaw joined in.

“I kid you not, boss. This asshole can’t see a damn thing when the peanuts start flying and *boom*, straight into a telephone pole across the street. I couldn’t make this shit up if I tried. That’s why there’s a black kid all banged up in cell one, and car three is in the shop. That’s what happened, boss. Honest truth.”

“Where’s your friend now?”

“Chester?”

This time the sheriff just waited.

“He’s at my place, scared to death you’re gonna lock him up for obstructing justice, or something like that. At the very least, make him pay for the damages to the car.”

“Well, you can tell him to relax, he doesn’t have to worry about the damages.”

“Thanks, boss, I knew you’d—”

“Because you’re going to pay for it.”

Choctaw deflated like an untied balloon animal. He squinted and studied the sheriff’s bearded face for a hint of sarcasm. Maybe he was joking. He wasn’t.

“Oh, come on, Clayton. It was circumstances beyond my control.” The deputy was interrupted by a beep on the sheriff’s intercom, and both men listened as the timid voice of Cricket from the front desk cracked out of the speaker.

“Sheriff Burroughs, there’s a federal agent here to see you.”

3.

The sheriff looked at his watch.

“It’s nine-thirty.”

“I’m aware of that, sir.” Cricket’s lo-fi voice crackled over the intercom.

“On a Sunday.”

“I know that, too, sir. Would you like me to tell him to come back tomorrow?” The sheriff thought on that and wondered if it was possible. Maybe he could just climb out the window.

“Sir?”

“No. No. Send him in.” The sheriff put on his hat and looked at his deputy, who shrugged. A few seconds later the door opened and in walked a handsome man in his mid-forties, maybe younger, with sharp features, dark close-cropped hair, and stormy gray eyes. Cricket, who always wore her hair back, had managed to shake it free and

even took off her glasses to smile at the agent before closing the door behind him. Clayton found that amusing. Choctaw shifted uneasily in his chair.

The agent was wearing a dark blue blazer, a matching tie, and a starched white shirt tucked into blue jeans. Wearing a tie with blue jeans spoke volumes about a man, but Clayton gave him points for trying to country it up. Most of these Feds never even took their designer sunglasses off when they found their way into Clayton's office.

The agent stuck his hand out and flashed another pearly white salesman smile at the sheriff. Clayton thought it made him look like a cartoon shark from one of those kids' movies, but he stood up anyway. His deputy did not. Choctaw just eyeballed the agent with an expression similar to that of a man who's just eaten a spoonful of shit.

"Sheriff Clayton Burroughs?" the agent said.

"Unless I'm wearing someone else's badge, that would be me." The sheriff shook the agent's hand and matched his firm grip. Every Fed that ever walked through that door felt it was necessary to conduct a dick-measuring contest with a viselike handshake. This G-man was no different.

"And you are?" Clayton said, pulling back his hand and calling it a draw.

"My name is Special Agent Simon Holly."

"You got ID?"

"Of course." Holly held out his badge, and the sheriff nodded. Choctaw tried to take a peek, but Holly intentionally snubbed him and tucked the ID back into his blazer.

"Thank you for seeing me this early . . . and on a Sunday." He winked at the sheriff in an attempt to let him know he was privy to the sheriff's intercom conversation with Cricket. Of course he was. The building had only two rooms. Clayton thought it was an odd

thing to do, but he sat back down and motioned for Holly to do the same.

“No problem, Special Agent Simon Holly. I wasn’t doing anything important. My deputy here was just on his way out.”

Choctaw peeled his eyes off the agent slowly, like removing a Band-Aid, and took the hint. “Right, boss.” He made his way to the door, then paused and turned around, “Is this about the black kid I got locked up there in the back?”

Clayton raised an eyebrow and looked at Holly for the answer to that, as well.

“No, Deputy Frasier,” Holly said. “No, it’s not.”

All the color drained from the deputy’s face. He stood in the doorway, mentally racing through every shady scenario that would have put his name on the Fed’s radar. Holly broke into his shark’s grin. The sheriff watched his lone deputy squirm like a little kid who’d just got caught shoplifting, hoping he would be smart enough to figure it out on his own. Clayton felt the ache building behind his eyes. He took another sip of his coffee. Cold. He pushed the mug across his desk. “It says Deputy Frasier on your nametag,” Clayton said to Choctaw, clearly embarrassed to have to point it out. Holly nodded in agreement, pursed his lips, and steepled his fingers in his lap. “Right there on your shirt, Deputy.”

“Right,” Choctaw said, drawing the word out, not entirely convinced but ready to get gone all the same. He tipped his Stetson to the sheriff and slipped out the door like a shadow.

“The world’s finest detective,” Clayton said.

“I suppose good help is hard to find way up here.”

“He’s not as bad as he looks.”

Holly looked at the office door, then back to the sheriff. “He looks pretty bad.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a lot to be said for loyalty. But you’re right, the pickin’s are slim.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it, Sheriff.”

“You don’t have to take anything. I don’t care either way. I’ve known that man since he was a boy. He’s like family around here, so I’d appreciate your withholding judgment in my office.”

“No disrespect, Sheriff. I’m sure he’s a fine deputy.”

Clayton waved away the small talk like a gnat buzzing in his face, and leaned back in his chair. “Are you here to size up my staff, or do you want to tell me what the FBI wants with my office?”

“I’m with the ATF.”

“Okay . . .”

Holly stiffened up a bit and gave Clayton a practiced hard-case stare. The sheriff was unimpressed. “Spare me the intensity, agent. It makes you look a little silly. I know why you’re here. I wish it was something else, but it’s not. It never is. Just get to it.” The throbbing behind Clayton’s eyes was on the brink of becoming a full-fledged headache, and he could feel his Sunday morning going straight down the crapper.

“Right to the point. I can appreciate that. In a nutshell, I’m here to take your brother out of the game.”

Clayton sipped his coffee again, forgetting it was cold, and spit it back into the mug. “I wish that could have been the zinger you wanted it to be. I mean, here you are, so excited to sit there and say that, you couldn’t even wait until Monday.”

“I don’t think I’m making myself—”

“Let me go ahead and stop you there,” Clayton said, and fished an aspirin bottle out of his desk. He popped two chalky white pills into his mouth and chewed them dry while he spoke. “Every few years or so, some young FBI or *ATF* agent, much like yourself, comes poking

around my office all beady-eyed and barrel-chested, looking to drop a hammer on one of my brothers. The only difference this time between you and them is I don't need to ask you which brother you're targeting, since one of your people already shot Buckley to death last year." Clayton let that hang between them and hardened his own stare. "And by the way, how much changed after that?"

"We had nothing to do with that, Sheriff. From what I understand, that was a state-level entanglement. I believe the Georgia Bureau of Investigation was the agency involved."

"Same difference. FBI, GBI, you all look alike to me." Clayton's voice was as callous as the hands of a construction worker.

"I'm terribly sorry for your loss."

"I'm sure you are. But like I said, you people accomplished nothing then, and I can't imagine you'll do much other than get more decent people caught in the crossfire this time, either."

"You keep saying 'you people.'"

"And?"

"You're a sheriff. You swore to uphold the law, same as me. Doesn't that make you one of *us people*, too?"

Clayton got up from his chair and walked over to a small coffee-pot on the counter next to the sink. He dumped his mug and filled it fresh without offering any to his guest, and thought about how nice it would be to add an inch or two of bourbon. It wasn't too long ago that that was his morning routine, and sometimes he could still smell it in his cup. He took a sip, unsatisfied, and returned to his chair. He leaned forward, aware for the first time all morning of how tired he was, and gave Holly the autopilot speech he'd given at least six other agents already.

"Listen, Holly. I'm nothing like you. I'm just a guy born and raised less than fifteen miles from where you're sitting right now. I'm no

hotshot lawman looking to save the world from the *evil that men do*.” Sarcasm dripped from his voice. “I don’t care much about what happens out there in your world, Agent Holly. I’m a hick sheriff in a small town doing my best to keep the people of this valley—the *good* people of this valley—safe from the never-ending river of shit that flows down that mountain, *and* the trigger-happy frat boys that think they can come here and show us hillbillies how badass they are. In my opinion, all of you, cops and robbers alike, pose the same threat to my constituency, and *that* makes you and me the very definition of ‘nothing alike.’”

Clayton sat back and blew into his coffee.

“Sheriff, doesn’t McFalls County butt up against Parsons County up around Black Rock?”

“It does.”

“And isn’t your office responsible for policing the entirety of McFalls County?”

“I’m sure you already know it is.”

“So that means Bull Mountain is under your jurisdiction, not just Waymore Valley. It also means that what’s coming down that mountain is coming directly at you. It would be contrary to everything I believe in if I didn’t come here and talk to you about it first. Not as some hillbilly sheriff, but as a fellow law enforcement officer. There are a lot of folks that think you’re a puppet for your brothers, a way to control this office, but I’m not one of them. The people of this county voted you in for a reason, despite your family, and that says something. It says they want you here. It says that they trust you, and that’s good enough for me. I don’t mean to scrape dog shit on your welcome mat.”

“I can’t help you.” It was a line Clayton was tired of having to say.

“I understand that, Sheriff. I’m sorry I sounded like an ass for a minute there. It’s automatic. Let me start again.”

Aspirin wasn’t going to cut it. Clayton fiddled with the childproof plastic bottle, wondering exactly how many he’d have to eat to get rid of the headache sitting in his office. He expected Holly to stand up, shove a finger in his face, and spout off some self-righteous bullshit about how he ‘owed it to the people’ and ‘the county he loved’ to stop the bad men—blah, blah, blah. That was normally the routine with these guys, but Holly stayed seated. He was respectful. Clayton reckoned Holly was at least smart enough to play by the sheriff’s rules until he had his say.

“I can’t help you,” Clayton said again.

“I’m not asking for your help, Sheriff.”

“Than what do you want, Agent Holly?”

“Call me Simon.”

“Go ahead and make your speech, *Agent Holly*.”

“Okay, Sheriff. Like I said, I’m not here for your help, but maybe you can help yourself, and that could work out for both of us.”

Clayton said nothing and scratched at his beard.

“Maybe if I start from the beginning, I can paint you a better picture of what I’m talking about.”

“Good idea.”

“I’ve been with the ATF for two years. In that time, I’ve focused on one case.”

“I’m guessing Halford Burroughs.”

“No, your brother didn’t pop up on my radar until recently. No, for two years I’ve been building a case against an outfit set up in Jacksonville, Florida, which, among other things, has been supplying your brother and his people with guns—lots of guns. And for the past few

years, they have also been your brother's pipeline to the raw materials he's using to process methamphetamine."

Clayton felt the pressure in his head release. Not much, but some.

"A gentlemen by the name of Wilcombe is at the top of the food chain down there. You heard of him?"

"Nope."

"They use some low-rent bikers who call themselves the Jacksonville Jackals to transport the goods. They're dirtbags, smart and loyal dirtbags, but dirtbags nonetheless. They've been at it a long time. I've got them in business with your family dating back to your father's days of hustling weed in the early seventies. Do you know who I mean?"

"Nope." Clayton wasn't as convincing with that answer.

"Well, you're lucky. These people are bad news. They've got their hands in some heinous shit. Dope, money, guns, you name it. Recently we're getting intel that shows them involved in human trafficking as well, and they're getting bigger and richer for the effort. Your brother Halford knows these people well. He has intimate knowledge of their entire operation and they trust him implicitly."

Everything else Holly was going to say clicked in place before he could say it.

"You want to flip him." Clayton almost laughed. "You want Hal to give up your boys in Florida, so you can close your case on this Wilcombe fella."

"Yes," Holly said.

"In exchange for what?"

"Conditional immunity."

"What's the condition?"

"He opts out of the meth trade."

“It won’t happen,” Clayton said. “Halford isn’t your average drug dealer. It’s against his warped sense of honor. He’d die before turning over on anyone he considers family. If these bikers have been in bed with my kin for as long as you say, you can bet they fall into that category. He’d never rat them out. Never.”

“Well, if his sense of honor is skewed, then we appeal to his other sensibility.”

“Which is?”

“His money.”

“Halford doesn’t care about the money.”

“Don’t be that naive, Sheriff. The money is paramount. The money is *all* that matters.”

Clayton shook his head. “No, it’s not, and that’s why you people will always lose, Agent Holly. Because you don’t understand how it works up here. Money isn’t the end game for my brother. It never was. It’s simply a byproduct of the lifestyle my father raised him on.” Clayton leaned way back in his chair, lifting his arms and interlacing his fingers at the back of his neck. He let himself feel the stretch down his back, and debated what road he wanted to walk down with this Federal. Most of the time, it didn’t matter to these guys how he tried to explain things. They just sat there behind their dark sunglasses and pretended to listen, while they waited to blurt out whatever they were itching to say next. Clayton brought his arms down, and used an index finger to rub the dust from the edge of a small framed photograph on his desk. It was a picture of him and Kate taken by a stranger on their honeymoon on Tybee Island. It was the first, and only, time either of them had ever been to the beach. He couldn’t say he was much of a fun-in-the-sun guy, but that was a good day. He smiled, and decided to take the long road. “Are you married, Agent Holly?”

“I was. It didn’t take.”

“Girlfriend?”

“For the moment,” Holly said, leaning back in his chair as well, settling in to the small talk, “for however long that lasts.”

“A girlfriend, good, that’s good.” Clayton leaned forward and picked up the picture of him and Kate. “You ever pack her up, or the ex, for that matter, back when you were hitched, and just get out of town for a few days? Get away from the daily grind, and just go get lost, find a place off the map to just relax, enjoy each other?” Clayton talked more to the picture of him and Kate than to Holly.

“Not as much as either of them would like, I’m sure, but yeah, I try to get away a few times a year.”

“Okay, good. We’re tracking. Now imagine the feeling you had last time you took a few days off and packed the car, your girl, maybe a few beers and a camera, and set off to find a secluded spot in the mountains, or by a still pond or lake somewhere. You with me?”

Holly nodded, waiting for the point.

“This is the break from most people’s lives that makes the burdens and pressures that come from all the responsibilities we heap on ourselves the rest of the time worth enduring. Would you agree with that?”

“Sure, Sheriff. Everyone needs a vacation sometimes. What does—”

“Bear with me, Agent Holly. Now imagine that same setting, that pretty picture you got in your head, imagine that as the basis for your everyday. Imagine it’s the foundation for work, family, relationships, wisdom, pain, all of it. It’s a different mind-set. It’s not a break from life for these people. It *is* life, and the urge to protect it, and hold on to it, can be fierce.”

Holly began to say something, but Clayton kept on.

“There is a subtle symbiotic relationship between the land up here

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and the people who call it home that folks like yourself never seem to fully understand, no matter how many files you read, or training scenarios you run. It's not your fault, you're just not from here. It goes way beyond simple pride or honor. Pride is a brand-new red bike or a better-paying job. Up here it's something different. It's something deeper than bone. It's not something that they earned or had to fight to get. They were born into it and the fight comes on real hard when someone threatens to take it away. It's an integral part of who they are—who we are." Clayton wiped the dust from his finger on his pants, took his stare off the picture and put it back on Holly.

"The point is, the money absolutely does not matter. And that's not me being naive, that's me telling you how it is. No one gets to tell them what they can and cannot do on their own land. No one's going to take what God gave them. Not on *their* mountain. And believe me, Hal thinks it's *his* mountain. He would burn his money before he would give up his home, or his people. Your plan is flawed. He won't betray his kin."

"Even you?" Holly asked.

Clayton didn't have an answer for that.

"Then let me put it another way," Holly said. "The United States government is putting together a multiagency task force consisting of well over a hundred people ranging from the FBI, ATF, the DEA, all the way down to the state police. Homeland is even involved. They're educated, trained, willing, and able to set the entirety of Bull Mountain on fire. That's not a threat, Sheriff. It's a fact. We know the locations of all sixteen cookhouses and we know the routes heading into Florida, Alabama, both Carolinas, and Tennessee. The finger is on the trigger, they are intentionally leaving you out of the loop, and a lot of people are going to die. It's a brand-new ball game. The post-9/11 rules give us the teeth we need to get it done with close to zero

accountability. This operation was already supposed to happen. It's been in development since your brother Buckley was killed and exposed Halford's involvement with Wilcombe. The powers that be want the revenue being generated on that mountain so bad they would rather burn it down than see your brother get over on them one more day."

"So what's stopping them?" Clayton said.

"Me." Holly's shark smile returned. "I am." He sat back and let his words dangle between them before setting the hook. "I have a better plan, and that's why I'm here, Sheriff."

"Go on," Clayton said.

4.

"Nothing makes a U.S. federal law-enforcement agency drool more than a huge pile of money. Nothing, except, of course, a bigger pile. That's what I've got in Florida—a bigger pile. If we can take that down, this place dries up by default."

"Couldn't Hal just find new suppliers?"

"Sure, he could, but would he want to? You said it yourself, he was born into this dance with these boys from Florida. He didn't have to go through the bloodshed and double-crossing most entrepreneur types like your brother have to go through. It takes a long time to build that kind of trust, and your father just handed it to him. Do you think he's up to going through all that at his age? Fifty-three is no time to go back to the drawing board. He has no children that we know about. There are no young up-and-comers ready to take his place as far as we know, and the bloodline ends with him." Holly paused and corrected himself. "Well, other than you, of course."

Clayton nodded and spun one finger in the air like a wheel, signaling for Holly to keep going.

Holly said, “He’s practically cut off from civilization up there. Take Wilcombe out of the equation and Halford Burroughs could just retire. Take his winnings and cash out.”

Clayton hesitated for several moments before speaking. “And you’re telling me that you would leave him be?”

“Yes,” Holly said without a bit of hesitation.

“And there’s paperwork to back that up?”

“Yes,” Holly said. He sat back and let the prosecution rest.

Clayton’s eyes slowly became skeptical slits as he studied Simon Holly. There was a lack of pretension about this man that Clayton found himself admiring. This wasn’t just a chance to put a commendation in his jacket; at least it didn’t feel that way to Clayton. This was a chance to do some real good on the mountain. If it wasn’t all bullshit, and normally, Clayton could smell bullshit a county over. He got the impression this meeting was more important to Holly’s case than he was letting on. The agent was presenting well, but fidgety. His knee bounced slightly, and Clayton could tell he was a touch nervous. *This case must be a career maker*, he thought. “Why do you care?” Clayton said. “If you have all the intel you need to pick him up, then why don’t you just go in and take him out? Why do you care what happens to the people up here?”

Holly looked mildly surprised, then genuinely hurt. “Why would I not care? You don’t have a monopoly on keeping people safe, Sheriff. You said before that you’re nothing like me, but with one fell swoop we could shut down the biggest flow of guns and dope in the history of the East Coast—one that floods over six state lines. I won’t lie to you and say it wouldn’t be nice to be recognized as one of the men

who did it, but if you're the man I think you are, living in the shadow of your family's legacy can only make this all the more important to you. The number of lives we'd save, a lot of whom live in your backyard, is the reason I do this job. I would say we're a lot more alike than you think."

Clayton scratched at his rust-colored beard, hardly noticing his fading headache. "And Hal walks?"

"Anywhere he wants."

"If I can convince him to be a rat."

"Listen, Sheriff, I just told you why I'm invested in this, but for the sake of total disclosure, the truth is nobody is interested in this place. No offense, but it's just a big rock in the hottest, stickiest state in the union. No one I work with would dream of being stuck in this place if your brother wasn't breaking the law, and breaking it so well. If that stops, we stop. Period."

Clayton opened the bottom drawer of his desk, the place that used to be reserved for the *good stuff* when he was drinking, and took out a can of long-cut snuff tobacco. He pinched out a wad and seated it between his lower lip and gum, then spit into an empty Styro-foam cup.

"Nice speech."

"Thanks. I practiced all the way here."

"So you got all dressed up in your Sunday best to walk in here and give the brother of the big bad wolf all your plans to take him down, and you're calling that a better plan?"

"Yes, Sheriff, that's about the size of it, but in all fairness, my mother would never have let me wear jeans to church on Sunday, and to be honest, I didn't think you'd be here today. I was going to make an appointment for tomorrow."

Clayton smiled.

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“Well, Holly, in all fairness, I ran unopposed.”

Holly laughed. “I know.”

The sheriff stood up, walked over to the coat rack, and pulled on his jacket.

“Come on, you can tell me more over some biscuits and gravy. I’m starving. This early, we can get a seat at Lucky’s before the church crowd takes over.”

“Sounds good, Sheriff.”

“Call me Clayton.”

“All right, then, Clayton. Lead the way.”

Clayton opened the door to the front office, where Cricket and Choctaw had done everything short of holding a glass to the wall to eavesdrop.

“Cricket, will you call Kate and tell her I’m not going to make it to her mother’s this morning?”

“She’s not going to be happy.”

“I know. That’s why I want *you* to call her. Choctaw, call up Darby to come swap out watch over your prisoner back there. If we’re all here on a Sunday, he might as well be, too. Then call in to Lucky’s for some breakfast for our guest and I’ll have it sent over.”

“Yessir, boss.”

“And while you’re at it, order up some grub for you and Cricket, too. Sky’s the limit. Eat your backs out.”

“Feeling generous this morning, boss?”

“Nope”—Clayton winked at Holly—“but the federal government is.”

↔☞ CHAPTER ☞↔

3

CLAYTON BURROUGHS

2015

Clayton stared at the ceiling. Thirty-five heavy timber logs made of the same white pine that grew not twenty feet outside his bedroom window. He and his father had built the house together as a wedding gift for Kate before she and Clayton were married. His father was nearly seventy then and still worked like a man in his twenties. That was more than a decade ago and not once did that purlin roof ever let in a single drop of rain—not once. Clayton stayed on the top floor of a fancy hotel in Atlanta once, and took notice of the water spots and discoloration growing from the edges of the popcorn ceiling. He thought about that all the time. Two hundred dollars a night in a tower of steel and glass, and they couldn't do what he and his father had done with a couple of hammers and a few nails. It was a small example, but it echoed through everything he was ever taught, every lesson Gareth Burroughs ever tried to instill.

“You're gonna need a real house, boy,” his father had said. “If

you're gonna take that woman and give a go at being a real man, then you're gonna need a house to match."

A real man.

Clayton's lip curled at the memory. It was always that way. Every good thing Gareth Burroughs ever did for his youngest son came tainted with what he really thought of him. That he didn't measure up. That he was nothing like his older brothers, Hal and Buck. Gareth never came right out and said it, but he didn't have to. It was in his eyes. They were filled with the gray storm clouds of disappointment.

Kate had always seen this place as the kindest thing her husband's father ever did for them, but she didn't know they'd built it in silence. A father following through on his obligation to shelter his son no matter how big a letdown he turned out to be. Those laughing rafters above his bed, the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes at night, were his penance for turning his back on his family. It was also a way to keep Clayton exactly where Gareth wanted him—rooted to Bull Mountain.

Clayton shifted his attention from the pockmarks made by his father's ax in the ceiling to a much more pleasant view of his wife, Kate, drying herself off in the open cedar archway of the bathroom. She had a routine. She would wrap one towel around her body before pulling back the shower curtain, and another around her head in that turban wrap only women knew how to do. Then she'd sit on the edge of the tub and rub lemongrass oil on her freshly shaved legs. That part would take a little longer if she knew Clayton was watching. Then, like a magician's final act, the two towels would hit the floor, and they'd be replaced by one of her husband's *McFalls County Sheriff's Department* T-shirts. The motion was so fluid, if Clayton

blinked he'd miss the split-second shot of her bare ass before she hit the light and nestled a mound of damp chocolate-brown curls on his chest.

Kate never wore panties to bed. Just the thought of that still did it for Clayton even after eleven years of marriage. She adjusted one leg over her husband and nuzzled her cheek against his chest. This was their tried and true sleeping position and she waited for his hands to start roaming her, but they didn't come. "We missed you at Mom's today," she said.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I swear that boy is going to be the death of me."

"Choctaw?"

"Yeah."

"He's a good kid, just a little misguided is all."

"Misguided." Clayton chewed on the word. "That's one way of saying it."

Kate shifted gears. "You remember my appointment is Thursday, right?"

"Huh?"

"My appointment," she repeated.

"Oh, right. Of course." Clayton warmed up to her a little in an attempt to stifle his cynicism about their "appointment." It wouldn't be the first time in the past ten years they got their hopes up just to be disappointed. Parenthood didn't seem to be in the cards for them, and they were about out of time.

She lifted her head to look at him. "Where are you, Clayton?"

"I'm right here, baby."

"No, you're not. Your body's here, but your head's somewhere else. You've been staring up at those rafters for almost an hour like they're fixing to come crashing down."

BULL MOUNTAIN

“They might be, Kate.”

Kate looked up at the rafters, too.

“You want to talk about it?”

“I do, but I’m not sure you’re gonna want to hear about it.”

“Try me.”

Clayton ran his fingers through her damp hair and let his hand rest at her neck. Her skin always felt warm as a fever and softer than spun cotton.

“A Federal came to my office today, wanting to talk about Halford. They’re going to try to take down the mountain.”

“Again?” Her tone was low and cautious. It always was when talk of Clayton’s family started up.

“Yeah, again.”

“And they want your help?”

“Sort of. This guy, Holly, doesn’t want information. They already seem to know everything they need to know. According to this guy, they don’t even want Hal.”

“So what’s the story?”

“They want his connection. Some guy in Jacksonville.”

“Florida?”

“Yeah, if they shut this guy in Jacksonville down, they stop the flow of meth off the mountain as a bonus.”

“So why are they up here talking to you? Shouldn’t they be in Florida, making that happen?”

Clayton didn’t have time to answer before she figured it out herself.

“They want your brother to flip,” she said.

“Yup. They think he can be persuaded to give him up. If he does, they leave him be. That simple.”

“Do you really think he’d do that?”

“No. No, I don’t.”

“But they want you to try and convince him anyway?”

“That’s the gist of it, yeah.”

Kate rolled over onto her back, leaving Clayton’s bare chest cold and wet. “We’ve been down this road before, Clayton. There’s no convincing that man of anything. He’s crazy. You know that.”

“You’re right, unless . . .”

“Unless what?”

“Unless he thinks it could benefit him.” Clayton sat up and faced her. “Listen, he doesn’t need the money. Hell, he never has. He’s probably got millions buried in coffee cans all over this mountain. If I told him he could finally stop looking over his shoulder, maybe he’d consider it.”

“Wait a minute.” Kate sat up, too. “You’re not seriously thinking of doing this thing, are you?” Kate backed away from Clayton to study his expression.

“Well, yeah. Maybe. This could be my last chance to save him.”

“Please, Clayton, your brother is a murderer and a drug dealer. He doesn’t need saving. He’s beyond saving.”

“It’s not his fault.”

“Don’t start with the it’s-the-way-he-was-raised routine. I thought we agreed on this. You were raised by the same man he was, and you don’t sell poison to children.”

“You asked me to talk about this, remember?”

“Well, I think I changed my mind.”

“Listen, Kate. The few times I’ve seen him since Buck was killed, he looked, I don’t know, different. Older. Tired. I think Buck’s dying might have changed him somehow.”

“He threatened to kill you at Buckley’s funeral.”

“He was grieving.”

“You were grieving. Mike was grieving. Big Val was grieving. He was just drunk and hateful.”

“People grieve in different ways. He’s alone up there now, running things by himself.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know my brother. He doesn’t trust anybody.”

“But you think he’ll trust you?”

“I’m his brother.”

“And you think he cares about that?”

“I think he knows I’m the only blood kin he’s got left, and at the end of the day, I think that’s *all* he’ll care about. He still carries the weight of Deddy’s death on him. Maybe I can convince him to retire. He can just live up there, hunt, drink his shine, and give this outlaw bit a rest. Right now he thinks that can never be an option. If he thinks it can be, he might just set the whole thing down like a sack of bricks. No more looking over his shoulder for the next federal sting. No more worrying about being killed by tweakers looking to rob him.”

Kate pulled her hair back into a makeshift ponytail. “Okay, just assume Halford does buy that fairy tale, which he won’t, but assume that he does. Doesn’t giving up those thugs in Florida put him in a new set of crosshairs? Isn’t that how it works? Retaliation after retaliation, and it never stops.”

“Baby, the Burroughs have been able to keep ourselves protected from the bulk of federal law enforcement for almost a century. I think we can hold our own against some geeked-up motorheads.”

“We?” Kate said.

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t think I do, Clayton. What I am clear on, though, is that you’re thinking of getting into bed with the same Feds that killed

one of your brothers already, to try and convince your other brother, the self-proclaimed hillbilly godfather of Bull Mountain, to just drop his lifelong criminal enterprise, and what? Go fishing?"

Clayton sank back into his pillow and rubbed his temples. He thought about the bottle of whiskey in the cupboard above the fridge. He'd been thinking about it a lot today. The idea of a drink always sounded better than the actual act of drinking itself. He'd quit drinking so he could have conversations like this one with his wife without ending up on the couch thinking about how to apologize for being an asshole, but still, it sounded good. Kate leaned in over him like a terrier. "Those bastards will get to go back to wherever the hell it is they came from, and you'll end up cleaning the mess they make of our lives. You know all this already, Clayton. We went through this when Buckley died." Kate was practically shouting now, and she took a minute to calm herself. "I know you want things to change up here. I do, too, especially now, but what makes you think this time is going to turn out any different than the last?"

"The agent I met this morning. This Holly guy. Something about him is different. He's not like these high-speed super-cops that come up here thinking they can bulldoze a bunch of rednecks because they got high marks at the academy. He's, I don't know, Kate . . ." Clayton stumbled for the right word. "He's genuine," he finally said.

"Genuine," Kate repeated coldly.

"Yes, I got a gut feeling. He's done his homework on this thing and he's figured out the right way to get it done. I think I trust this guy. I think I want to, anyway. If what he's saying is true, this is a shot at doing some real good. I should at least try, right?"

Silence.

"Besides, they're going to do this with or without me, so it makes

sense for me to try, right?” It was the second time he’d asked that question and the second time she didn’t answer.

“Kate, right?”

Kate swiveled her legs out from under the quilted comforter and sat on the edge of the bed with her back to her husband. Clayton reached out to touch her, but decided against it.

Kate finally spoke but didn’t turn to face him. “I love you, Clayton. You know that. I knew what your family was when I met you and I hated it, but I loved you anyway. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t want to help it. Every cell in my body screamed at me to pack up and move as far away from this place—away from you—as possible. But I couldn’t. My heart wouldn’t let me. My mama told me not to marry you because of where you came from. *Who* you came from. I told her she was wrong. I knew it was a gamble, and I’m not ashamed to admit some part of me was even turned on by who you were. What girl doesn’t want to be swept away by the outlaw? So I stayed and I married you. You wanted something different for your life. Something honorable. It was the biggest leap of faith I ever made, and it scared me to death, but I did it anyway.”

“Baby, I know this.”

“Right. You *do* know this. But what you don’t know is that it *still* scares me to death. Yes, eleven years later, I’m still scared that one night you’re going to come home and tell me you’ve decided to follow in your daddy’s footsteps or, worse, you’re not going to come home at all. Then I’m going to have to wonder if you’re buried in a holler somewhere next to everyone else your family didn’t agree with. Men with badges like yours killed Buckley, so I get it. You feel compelled to stop it from happening to Halford, too, but it’s not up to you to save anybody.”

“Baby . . .”

“Let me finish.” She turned to face him. “I’m your wife. I swore to stand by you for better or worse and I don’t take that vow lightly, and believe me, anything that puts us in direct contact with your lunatic brother is the very definition of *worse*. That being said, you do what you have to do. But hear me, Clayton Burroughs, I will not let some cop, no matter how *genuine* he is, drag you down a hole you can’t climb out of to help a man who doesn’t want or deserve your help.”

“He’s my brother, Kate.”

“He’s goddamn crazy, is what he is.”

“That doesn’t make him any less my brother. No less my family.”

“*I’m* your family now. *I* come first. That’s what you promised me when you put that ring on my finger, and you aren’t getting out of it. Ever. Do you hear me, Sheriff?”

“I hear you, woman.”

Clayton grabbed a handful of T-shirt and pulled her down on top of him. He loved it when she called him Sheriff. He pushed her down on her back and slid himself on top of her. That way, he wouldn’t have to look at the rafters.

↔ CHAPTER ↔

4

KATE BURROUGHS

2015

The digital clock from Clayton's side of the bed showed 2:15. The glow of the numbers washed the room in a soft orange hue and seeped into Kate's restless eyelids. Clayton normally covered the clock with a T-shirt or something to block the light, but tonight he hadn't, and the damn thing always kept Kate awake. She was a light sleeper anyway, not that she would be getting any sleep tonight. Not after the bomb Clayton had just dropped on her. She loved him, of that there was no doubt, but she'd never once claimed to understand him. At what point in your life do you just accept a spade for being a spade and move on? Every time her husband raised a hand to help the people on this mountain he'd had it slapped away, but he always jumped at the chance to try again. It reminded her of the *Peanuts* cartoon where Lucy holds the football for Charlie Brown to kick. Everyone knows she's going to snatch it away at the last minute and poor Charlie is going to land flat on his back; even he knows it, but he does it anyway out of sheer faith in the goodness of the world. She'd heard once that

the definition of insanity was doing the same thing over and over but expecting different results. If that was true, than her husband was insane. Hell, maybe she was, too. After all, this whole lawman thing was her idea.

It was one of those moments in time that sneak up on you from nowhere, without warning or provocation, and change your life forever. She and Clayton had been dating for a little more than a year and he was bound and determined to prove to her, to everyone, that he wasn't anything like his father. Even so, he still seemed lost. That might have been what initially attracted her to him in the first place. It was clear to her, by the way he cut conversations about his childhood short or took hard left turns whenever the subject came up, that he'd seen, and maybe done, things he wasn't proud of, and it had changed him, robbed him of the things that make falling in love with a girl across a diner table enjoyable. He always acted like he didn't deserve the good things in life that other people take for granted. He was broken, and she liked fixing broken things. She didn't know that about herself then but she knew it now, and this close to forty, she might as well start admitting it. She also knew Clayton would have done anything for her back then. Anything. And that kind of power over a man, in the hands of a twenty-six-year-old woman, could be dangerous. She liked that, too.

They'd been sitting in Lucky's after church—that was saying something right there. Clayton Burroughs had never stepped foot in a church before her, but there he was, hair combed and shirt tucked in, pretending to be comfortable—the two of them sharing a massive plate of cathead biscuits, peach preserves, and fresh butter. Kate had the figure for that kind of thing back then. That memory made her reach under the covers and pinch at her love handles, then cup the pudge of her belly with both hands.

The gossip in the air that morning at the diner was about Sheriff Lemon's stepping down. Ned Lemon had been the law in McFalls County since she was a little girl. Something about a bad shooting, him being drunk or something, was forcing the old man into retirement, and the gossip hounds were out in full force. Kate remembered as if it was yesterday how she'd casually formed the words that would change both her and Clayton's lives. She originally said it as a joke, but the look on Clayton's face when she said it, as if she'd just solved all the world's problems with a single sentence, was enough to wish she could freeze time and erase it from his memory.

"You should run, Clayton. You'd make a great sheriff," she said, and after that there was no stopping him. Come November, they both added shiny new accessories to their nightstands—a modest diamond engagement ring for her and a silver sheriff's badge for him. He ran unopposed and considered that a lucky break, although the whispers that coated the edges of every conversation through the election were that no one dared to run against a Burroughs—even the good one. The next ten years were filled with the sleepless nights of a cop's wife. A cop whose primary goal was to buy back the soul of a family that had grown accustomed to being soulless. And it was her fault.

Kate got out of bed, crossed the room, and laid a towel from the floor over the maddening glow of the clock. She walked to the bathroom and quietly lowered the toilet seat with mild annoyance. She sat down, letting her head fall into her hands. *And after that fiasco at Buckley's funeral?* she thought. *Is he out of his mind?* Buckley had been completely psychotic, as far as Kate was concerned. He scared her more than Halford ever did. If Clayton was the good, and Halford was the bad, then Buckley was the ugly in spades. It didn't surprise her or anybody else to hear he was shot to death in a gunfight with the police. Buckley was the shoot-first-think-never type, who most

likely deserved everything that happened to him, but he was still Clayton's brother. He was still family, and Clayton had the right to pay his respects, no matter what Halford and the rest of them thought.

Kate was supportive of Clayton's attending the funeral; she even insisted on being there with him, but even she'd tried to change his mind about wearing his dress uniform. She groaned and ran her hands from her head to the back of her neck, pressing down on the tense knot of muscle. She pictured him standing in front of the bathroom mirror, decked out in starched polyester with military creases and polished brass, wrestling with a tie for maybe the first time in his life. His well-worn hat was traded in for a stiff-brimmed sheriff's hat she didn't even know he owned. Standing in the doorway watching him like that, all she could think about is how this thing—this bad decision—would be the thing that got him killed. He insisted without urging that it was a way to honor his brother and in no way a massive *fuck you* to Halford and his cronies, and maybe, deep down, some of that was true, but she knew better. It was Burroughs piss, spite, and ego. Only he couldn't see it. None of them ever could. None of them ever thought they were wrong. She could smell the whiskey on him, too, no matter how much mouthwash he swigged to cover it up. She knew if she'd searched the cabinets and drawers, she'd find at least one, if not more, drained half-pint bottles of cheap bourbon. She let it go. She always let it go.

They were the last to arrive at the funeral, if you could even call it that. Outwardly it looked more like a crowd who'd turned out for a cockfight. Just a bunch of unkempt men standing around in a circle in their dingy work-coats and boots, holding jars of corn whiskey, smoking and carrying on. The few women who'd been allowed to come sat silent, bound together by expressions of profound sadness

BULL MOUNTAIN

that were in no way inspired by the departed. They all looked much older than they were, tired and bleached out, the color of summer hay bales. Kate felt equal parts compassion and resentment toward them all, but also found herself trying to tug a few extra inches out of her skirt to cover more of her bare legs. No reason to rub it in.

Halford wouldn't allow his brother's body in a church, or a preacher to be present, so the men just stood together out on the banks of Burnt Hickory Pond, telling their stories and pouring whiskey on the ground. Soon they would just dump the body in a hole next to the one his father was buried in.

Clayton's grandfather, Cooper, had been buried in a field near Johnson's Gap, intending it to be the burial site for all the Burroughs to follow, but his son, Gareth, Clayton's father, had wanted to be buried here, at Hickory pond. No one knew why. The graves spoiled memories she had of this place when she was a girl. Swinging out on the old tire swing with silly teenage boys, beating their skinny bird-chests, being loud and young. This place used to be a symbol of her childhood, of summer, something dear. Now it was the burial ground of murderers and thieves. She was surprised that the lush grass and bright green moss around the pond wasn't rotting and brown, considering the amount of bad blood in the dirt.

From the moment Clayton pulled the truck up next to the line of primed pickups and ATVs, every set of eyes locked on them. First on her, in her not-so-conservative black dress, then on Clayton, in a uniform that instilled the purest form of disgust and hatred these people could muster. The crowd broke in half as she and Clayton approached, revealing Halford Burroughs hunched over a plain pine box next to a freshly dug hole. The box held a man shot to death by men dressed the way her husband was dressed now. Halford's eyes

were red and swollen from crying, and it was maybe the first time since meeting Clayton's family all those years ago that she'd ever seen the big man show any type of emotion that wasn't fueled by spit and vinegar, but his face faded back into the slab of cold granite she was used to seeing when he laid eyes on his little brother. Right then, in that moment, Clayton said something to her under his breath, but she didn't hear it. Maybe it was an admission of this having been a bad idea after all, but she couldn't be sure. She did ask him when it was all over what he had said, but he told her he couldn't remember. It was the first time, to her knowledge, that Clayton had ever lied to her. The crowd either stood silent or whispered and pointed as she and Clayton joined the group, but it was Halford who verbalized the mood with just three words.

"How. Dare. You." He fumbled to draw the gun poking out of his pants, and Kate had thought she might pass out right then and there. She felt the tingle in her fingertips and saw the flashing black starbursts in the corners of her vision. It was the most frightened she'd ever been in her adult life. Thankfully, Halford's men grabbed him and held him back. He roared a string of obscenities at them and fought to get at Clayton, but, thank God, his people were successful at keeping him in check. Clayton never flinched. He never reached for his own sidearm, he simply reached a hand across Kate's abdomen and calmly pushed her back a step behind him. Kate remembered in the middle of all her panic how sexy he'd looked at that moment.

"He was my brother, too," Clayton said, "and I deserve to be here."

Halford spit at them, getting most of the slick brown spittle on the pine coffin. One of the men Kate recognized and knew as a good man at least on the surface, a man Clayton called Scabby Mike, yelled back while struggling to contain Halford's gun arm. "Well, be quick about it, Clayton, or we'll be burying two of y'all today." Kate believed

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that, and nudged Clayton forward. An eternity could be fit into the time it took her husband to say his piece to that simple closed pine box and rejoin her at the truck. She couldn't remember even taking a breath. But he did eventually come back, and they left, driving slower than she would have liked. She saw the men gathered around Halford, letting him up off the ground, and saw that he'd started crying again. Maybe it was proof of a soul in there somewhere, but she didn't want to stick around to find out. She just wanted to go home. She put her hand on Clayton's leg and went to speak, but saw that he was crying, too.

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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