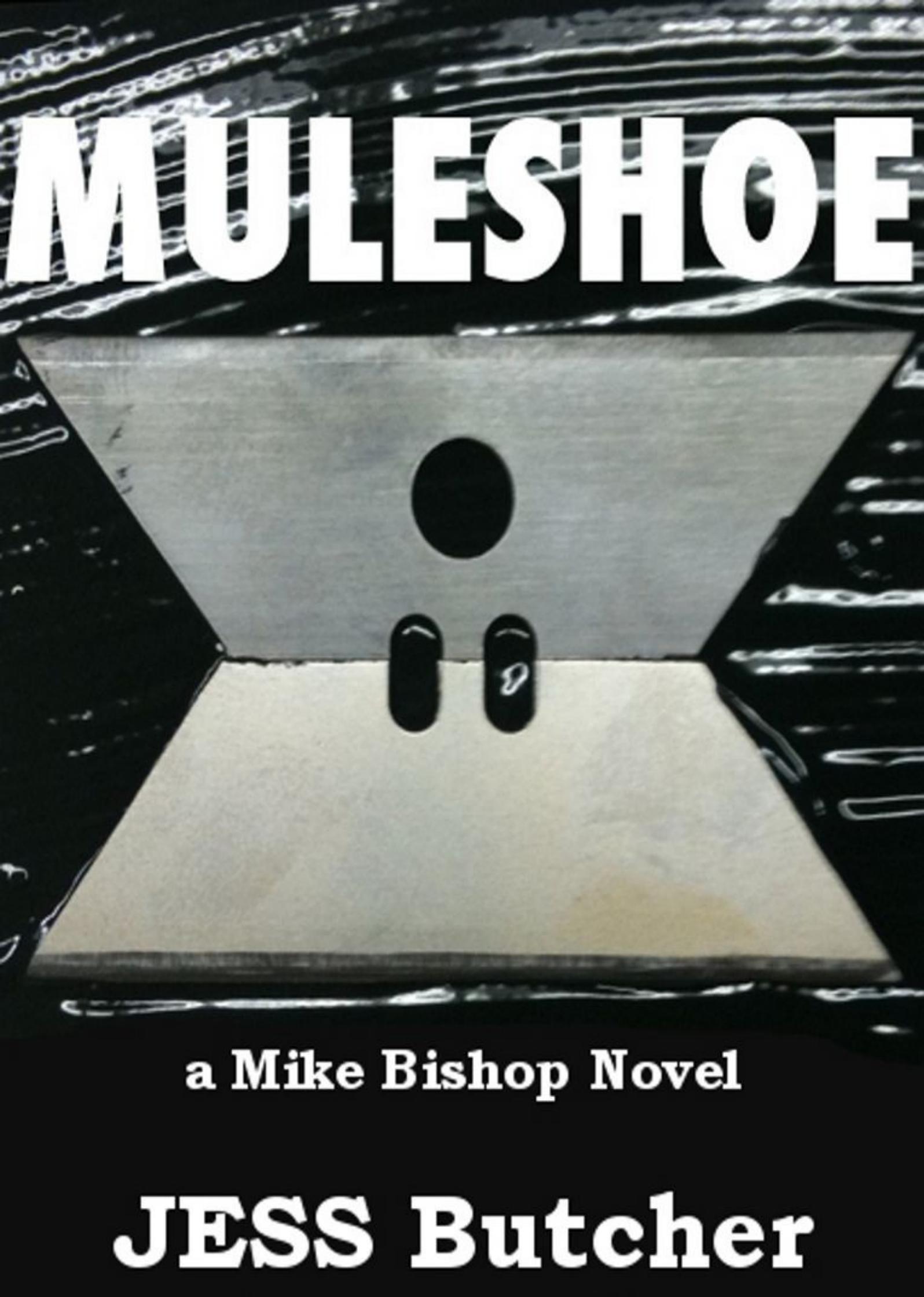


# MULESHOE



a Mike Bishop Novel

**JESS Butcher**

# **Muleshoe**



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## Prologue

Saul Levy's expression was remarkably composed given his circumstances. His head had been severed from his body six hours earlier. By the time a Tulsa Police officer discovered Levy's predicament, the steel fence post the head now called home had turned from army green to a sticky shade of maroon.

The early morning June sun did little to diminish the chill experienced by an assortment of police personnel as they cordoned-off the parking area behind Levy's pawn shop; the swarming press contingent was exuberant.

After being thoroughly photographed by the Tulsa Crime Lab team, approximately seven pounds of Saul Levy was placed in a body bag, the small one designed for a child, and transported to the Tulsa Morgue. For obvious reasons, a full autopsy would have to wait.

A homicide detective located the larger piece of Levy within the hour. Mr. Levy, a widower, lived alone in a secluded area west of Tulsa. The body was found on the floor of Levy's two car garage, next to an ancient Mercedes.

By nine AM, the ghastly details of Saul Levy's demise were being broadcast by every Tulsa radio and television station. *“Saul Levy, well-known local businessman, has been murdered. Mr. Levy, shown here at a party celebrating his sixty-sixth birthday last month, is survived by two daughters. Tulsa Police are withholding details surrounding Mr. Levy's death pending investigation. However, reliable sources report he was decapitated in his west Tulsa home last night and ...”*

By noon the same day, CNN began showing helicopter film footage of the gruesome sentinel posted in the pawn shop parking lot. It remained CNN's top story until three PM when the Levy footage was dethroned by film of a pit bull battling an alligator in the front yard of a Florida home.

In the initial hours of the investigation, the Tulsa police decided to withhold two important pieces of information regarding the pawnbroker's death. First, crime scene footprints indicated two persons had held Levy down and cut off his head with a tree pruning saw. The bloody snow-angel left on the floor by the old man's flailing arms and legs made it clear he was alive when the sawing process began. Second, the police chose not to reveal what they found when they searched the area behind the pawn shop. Less than two feet from the bloody fence post where Saul Levy's head had been impaled, they found a gold coin. The valuable coin, blackened by Levy's dried blood, dated back to the Civil War.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Claude Applewhite, the senior detective on the case grunted as he read the section of the preliminary forensic report that gave details about the gold coin. The detective sat for a moment. “Hey, Ben,” he called across the room to his partner. “Who do we know knows anything about gold coins?”

“Saul Levy,” Ben shot back.

“That’s real damn funny, Benny-boy,” Applewhite snarled.

**“The lab guys say the coin's worth big money. They've got a book down there tells how many of 'em were minted and what they're worth, depending on their condition.”**

**“So what's it say about this one?” Detective Applewhite said.**

**“Book says the coin’s worth five to seven thousand bucks retail to a coin collector. According to the lab-boys, the coin is a 'LARGER INDIAN-HEADADDRESS TYPE, 1861D'; they say it could be worth even more than 7K depending on the condition.”**

**“Is there any way to trace it, who owned it last?” Detective Applewhite asked.**

**“No, there's no serial number or anything, just the date minted.”**

**“Well, let's get this out in the system. Find out if any more of these coins have been turning up. Also, let's start putting together a list of area coin dealers. Maybe we'll get lucky.”**

**\*\*\*\*\***

**A hundred miles west of Tulsa, a late model GMC pickup pulled into the parking lot of *The Lariat*.**

**“That's his truck over there,” Mike Bishop said, nodding toward the mud-splattered Chevy four-wheel drive parked near the front of the bar.**

**The big German in the passenger seat grinned, “This guy must've been tough to locate.”**

**The conspicuous Z-71 was equipped with huge off-road tires and an Oklahoma vanity license plate that read, “MUDWISER.” A camouflage-painted Honda 4-wheeler was strapped securely in the back of the bright orange pickup.**

**Bishop chuckled but Karl knew his friend had a special passion about this sort of assignment. The meth dealer and felony sex-offender driving the big truck had introduced a junior high student to his product a year earlier. Bishop’s research had revealed this as a familiar pattern for *Mudwiser* as he’d previously avoided two felony unlawful-sex-with-a-minor convictions; both cases had been dismissed as the young Jane Doe witnesses were too frightened to testify against him.**

**Mudwiser’s latest thirteen year-old victim had become an addict and *he* had become obsessed with the young teenager. The girl’s grandfather, a retired district court judge, had intervened and supported his granddaughter through a painful rehab-experience. After her ordeal, the girl had tried to avoid Mudwiser, but he was consumed by desire to control her. Now the girl was just home from Rehab again. During a May golf outing the judge had asked Mike to look into the matter.**

**At eleven AM, the gravel parking lot in front of the Mustang, Oklahoma tavern was nearly deserted. The orange pickup truck was flanked by a BMW with extreme, low-profile wheels and wide tires, and a primer-laden late model Corvette.**

**“He'll be amped-up this early?” the blonde German asked, extending his huge hands forward and intertwining his thick fingers. When the knuckles cracked,**

Mike flinched.

“That's a bad habit, Karl; you nervous?”

“Good idea, being nervous.”

Mike nodded in agreement and paused thoughtfully.

“Yeah, Mudwiser and the black guy with the fancy wheels and tires, they'll both be high by now. I can deal with them. You handle the pretty-boy driving the 'Vette. He's a former cop, he's smarter than the other two; he'll be *almost* sober. Watch for the Airweight in *Corvette's* ankle holster.”

“Uh huh,” Karl said, looking straight ahead.

Mike had visited *The Lariat* on three previous occasions and had explained the layout carefully to Karl. The 290-pound German was extremely quick. Mike knew he'd handle *Corvette*. The rest should be easy.

Without further comment Bishop reached in the toolbox behind the seat, then donned a soiled baseball cap advertising *Mack Trucks* and stepped out into a blast of hot Oklahoma June. Karl Pfaff would wait in the dusty parking lot for five minutes before following his friend inside.

As Bishop entered the bar, four sets of eyes turned toward him. As on his previous visits, Mike kept his own gaze lowered and took a seat at the bar. The three meth dealers watched from their table as the bartender glided toward Mike.

“Coors,” Bishop said; “In a bottle.”

As the bartender dipped a fleshy forearm in the beer cooler, Bishop focused his attention on the baseball game in progress on the blurry television above the bar. The drug dealers had grown less wary of Mike with each visit. They'd correctly concluded he wasn't the law. By the time the bartender returned with Bishop's beer, the three had returned to their hushed conversation.

Mike ignored the dusty glass and took a long pull on the Coors as he pushed five, one hundred dollar bills toward the swarthy little man. Brief eye contact confirmed Mike's assumption; the bartender would gladly excuse himself from the upcoming proceedings. No questions would be asked, no police contacted.

Moments later, a halo of amber late-morning light preceded Karl Pfaff as he opened the tavern door and stepped inside. Without hesitation, the menacing German charged. He covered the ten feet separating him from the Mudwiser group as the three watched, for a split-second paralyzed. The former collegiate wrestler crashed his full weight onto *Corvette* and the table and the other two occupants spilled to the floor in a clatter of wooden chairs and beer cans.

Bishop moved quickly as well. The former Marine Corps Close Combat System Instructor pulled the three-pound blacksmith's hammer from beneath his denim shirttail. Before Wheels could get to his feet, the long hickory handle of the hammer cracked across the bridge of his nose; blood sprayed as Wheels cried shrilly and collapsed in a heap. Mudwiser was scrambling on all fours as Mike pivoted toward him. In one swift overhead motion, Bishop brought the hammer down on Mudwiser's outstretched hand. Bones crunched and the man collapsed

screaming, face-first on his wounded fingers. Mike rolled him over. A spray of crimson decorated Mudwiser's cheek and a pink-purple chunk of meaty flesh dangled from his chin; Mike wondered if he'd swung too hard.

Karl had landed a devastating elbow directly on Corvette's left temple, knocking him out cold. The German outweighed his adversary by 100 pounds but harbored no regrets about how hard he'd swung. His was an imprecise craft.

"Well, Mr. Mudwiser," Bishop said as the younger man lay clutching pulverized fingers, "what do you suppose the moral of this story might be?"

Karl snorted laughter in the background. The German moved to collect the side-arms of the fallen while maintaining eye-contact with the bartender. The little man was no threat; he stood frozen behind the bar.

Mudwiser didn't respond to Bishop's question. Instead he rolled on his side, cradling the smashed fingers of his left hand. He rocked back and forth, moaning softly.

"You hear me now, don't you?" Bishop rested the hammerhead on the young man's forehead as darting rodent-eyes, eyes full of terror looked up at him. Mike's question was answered with a quick nod.

"Good, that's good," Bishop said flatly, his voice low, his tone earnest. "Now, you see how easy it was for us to get to you, right?"

Again, his question was answered with a quick, sobbing nod.

"Okay, remember this. If Amanda ever hears from you or any of your friends again, I will find you and use this hammer to crush a very tender part of your anatomy. Do you understand me?"

Mudwiser responded with a third and final nod.

"Good," Bishop concluded solemnly. "Let's hope we never meet again."

For the moment at least, Mudwiser was a believer, Wheels was pretending to be unconscious, Corvette wasn't pretending, and the cowering bartender was five-hundred dollars richer. Bishop and Pfaff were gone as quickly as they had arrived. The entire incident lasted less than two minutes.

They drove for a while before either man spoke. Finally, Mike said, "It's nice to have a multi-cultural experience now and again." He glanced at his big friend and smiled.

"Think we did any good?" Karl asked.

"Maybe," Mike said thoughtfully. "Can't stop Mudwiser from being a dope-peddling creep, but we might have persuaded him to stay away from this particular little girl. There are plenty of others he can seduce with meth."

"Will you tell the client what happened?" Karl asked.

Mike shook his head without taking his eyes off the road. "I'll tell him we did our best."

"What if Mudwiser won't stay away from the granddaughter?" Karl asked.

Mike paused, thinking of the photograph of the battered, shrunken eighth-

grade girl the judge had shown him. He knew he must have had the same vacant look after his first few months in Huntsville.

“I gave my word to someone I respect ... let's just hope for the best,” Mike finally said. Then, smiling mischievously, he flipped on the truck CD player. Karl flinched and closed his eyes as one of Mike's favorite *Martha and the Vandellas* tunes from the '60's washed over them.

When they slowed for the Oklahoma City turnpike toll-booth, the big German said, “Might be cool enough to play nine by the time we get home.”

Mike nodded, but before he could answer, the cell phone in his pickup rang.

“Hello. Yes, of course I remember ... the Dunbar Western Museum,” he answered. “Actually, Miss Dunbar, I'm traveling today but I'll be back in Tulsa by about two o'clock.” After a long pause, “Okay, I'll see you in your office around four.”

Returning the cell phone to its cradle, Mike glanced at his friend. “Business is good this week,” he said, his expression puzzled.

Karl rubbed the tip of his bruised elbow. “Seldom anything *good* about your business,” he said.

## Chapter One

William Clarke Quantrill was a frustrated school teacher, turned gambler, petty thief, and bushwhacker. The four-hundred men he led included “*Bloody*” Bill Anderson, a homicidal maniac without equal in the Confederacy. Although Frank and Jesse James and the Younger Brothers were also part of Quantrill's Raiders, Bill Anderson set the tone for the murder and mayhem Quantrill's band of mercenaries wreaked on Kansas and the Indian Territory.

In August of 1862, four days after Quantrill's successful capture of Independence, Missouri, he received a field commission to the rank of Captain, C.S.A. In an emotional letter to Major General Sterling Price, Quantrill pleaded for the rank of General. He argued that such a Confederate declaration would serve to legitimize his activities and counter the 'terrible lies' spread in the Yankee press about his command. He was told to be patient.

Three months passed and finally Quantrill was summoned to Richmond to receive his prize, the rank of General. However, his ego was severely bruised when Major General Price presented him with a mere Colonel's commission.

On the evening following the ceremony, Colonel Quantrill succumbed to the excess of spirits that frequently assisted him in his efforts to sleep peaceably. The ghosts of the many innocents he and his men had slaughtered haunted him. Upon awakening, he intended to immediately begin his return trip to Missouri but his head ached so mightily he spent the morning resting sullenly, sipping at camp coffee.

Just before noon, General Sterling “Pap” Price climbed from his mount in front of Quantrill's temporary quarters. The General opened the tent-flap and peered in at the sullen Quantrill.

“Good morning, Colonel,” he shouted with a bit too much gusto. “How's the Confederacy's newest officer feeling this fine morning; a bit too much celebrating last night?”

Quantrill was not amused by the General's comments, and his expression signaled faint contempt. General Sterling Price was an educated, sensitive man, twenty-eight years Quantrill's senior. He was well aware of Quantrill's disappointment but the General was a realist; he knew command had to handle this commission carefully. Quantrill was no gentleman by Confederate standards, or by any other. In better times, the man would have been hung by the Confederacy, but these were dark days.

“I realize you're disappointed, son. Believe me I have empathy for the difficult circumstances you've faced in Kansas and the Indian Territories. Be patient; things will work out given ample time.”

Quantrill listened carefully to the General's remarks and begrudgingly nodded his acknowledgment.

“Perhaps there is something I can do to show good faith, Colonel. As a man of letters, you must realize the gamble our Confederacy has taken in regard to the issuance of *paper money*.”

Quantrill was silent but well aware that his own men preferred northern greenbacks to the paper money circulated by the Confederacy.

“I have recently been given responsibility for the secure distribution of all Confederate currency printed in Charleston,” the General said as he sat on the edge of an empty cot. “I have reason to believe certain of that currency will have great value after the war, regardless of the victor.”

“I am afraid I don't understand your logic, General. Should the South lose the war, why would Confederate currency retain any value?”

“The value will be in the rarity and historical significance of some of the issues. I believe one beautiful and *very* limited printing in particular will be of great value, the *Indian Princess* twenty dollar bill.”

Quantrill watched the General as the older man rose and removed a small, leather satchel from his waistcoat. Walking to the table in the center of Quantrill's tent, the General opened the satchel and removed six, stiff new Confederate bills.

“These six,” he paused for emphasis, “these are uncirculated bills from the one and only printing of the *Indian Princess*. Only a handful of these bills were produced without flaw and I believe these six will be worth many times their face value after the war is over.”

William Quantrill looked at the beautifully engraved currency the General had spread on the table in front of him.

“Why are you doing this, General?” Quantrill asked.

“I believe you know why, son. The toughest fighting of the war lies ahead for both of us. I believe the Confederacy can prevail, but it will take all our focus and resources to wear down the Union. I can't provide you with the emotional equivalent of a General's commission, but I can give you this financial incentive. Perhaps, in some small measure, I'm giving you these to buy your continued support for our cause ... or perhaps I feel badly about ... your circumstances. In either case, I'm confident with the passage of time, these monies will bring you good fortune.”

Quantrill was silent, looking past the General into the hazy morning beyond the tent flap. He nodded then said, “I can assure you, General, the Confederacy is my life. With or without these tokens, I intend to defend her with every drop of my blood.”

“Fine, Colonel, but take the bills. After the war, you'll need to find a new life,” the General paused, “regardless of the victor.”

General Price knew Quantrill was an outlaw and thought it likely the Colonel would end up on the gallows, even if the young man were lucky enough to survive the war. Abruptly, the General saluted, turned on his heel and left the tent. By

three o'clock, Quantrill had begun his long ride west, with the six Indian Princess bills tucked safe in his correspondence pouch.

Quantrill's Raiders continued their bloody assault on Kansas and the surrounding territory for the next eighteen months. However, as Confederate strength dwindled, Civil War historians note that Quantrill embarked on a new and desperate mission; a plan to assassinate President Abraham Lincoln.

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Wiley Patrick was content. He didn't stay in Muleshoe because he liked the Kansas weather. He stayed because he could make a good living without taking any crap from anybody; period.

Wiley had moved away once to Memphis. He'd worked at a topless joint near the airport for about six months. He'd served as both a bouncer and drug dealer handling the Federal Express crowd that filled the place eighteen hours a day.

During his sixth month in Memphis, Wiley had a disagreement with one of his cocaine customers. The *accident* that followed led to Wiley's early retirement and return to the Kansas prairie.

At six-one, two-forty, Wiley had always had physical power as his ally. His stab wound could have been fatal, but he'd been lucky. Within a year, most of the feeling had returned in his left arm. Only his fingertips remained numb. Ever stoic, Wiley never complained. He knew nobody gave a shit about him anyway.

Because of Montgomery County Junior College, Wiley could easily find work that suited him, even in a town of only eleven thousand. There were plenty of bars and plenty of kids who'd buy drugs from him and never try to stab him. He had a reputation in Muleshoe even before the story got around that he'd blinded the punk who stabbed him in Memphis. Wiley never told anyone about Memphis, but the story seemed to follow him and grow like it had a life of its own.

Two years after returning to Muleshoe, Wiley had sold enough cocaine to sign a lease on an old building near the JUCO campus. He planned to open his own bar there. The place had been a service station in the '50's but the two mechanic bays had been crudely converted into a convenience store in '91. That dream and the Pakistani chap who'd dreamed it hadn't lasted long. The building had been empty for a long time and needed a lot of work. It suited Wiley just fine.

Working behind his soon-to-be tavern, Wiley was using a chain saw to remove a tree limb that had crashed onto the parking lot. The limb was enormous, but easy to cut. It had been lying there for nearly a year. He was loading the pieces into his pickup truck when he found the gold coin just off the edge of the dry, crumbling asphalt. Slowly, he turned it over on his numb fingertips. Like everyone in Muleshoe, he knew the legend of the Quantrill gold. Although he showed no emotion, he knew this could be something, something big.

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Only remnants remained of the commercial real estate empire Susan Dunbar had inherited from her father. There had been other substantial assets as well,

especially works of art depicting vivid scenes of the American West. Virtually all the valuable art had been sold to collectors over the course of the past ten years. Even the museum property had been sold to developers.

The Dunbar Building, a thirty-story structure in downtown Tulsa, no longer bore the Dunbar name. It too had been sold to shore up Susan Dunbar's steadily eroding cash reserves. The Japanese buyers had renamed the building Fuso Tower.

Susan Dunbar still maintained an office in what had once been The Dunbar Building. She was limited to five-hundred square feet on the twentieth floor facing the river. Her prepaid lifetime lease was stipulated in the sales contract with Fuso. Susan was in her mid-fifties. The lease gave her some peace. It allowed her to spend less time wondering which might run out first, her money or her life.

The Dunbar's were one of a handful of Tulsa families who had become legends during the boom years of Oklahoma petroleum exploration. Susan's father was a frugal investor. He had made millions investing in oil and gas exploration. He also invested heavily in a number of very successful Tulsa real estate ventures.

Her father had attempted to instill his appreciation for the art of the American West in Susan. He had also tried to imprint his staunch moral code and work ethic; all these attempts had failed miserably.

Mr. Dunbar gave Susan responsibility for the day-to-day management of his real estate business so that he might focus all his energy on his true passion; collecting art of the American West. He founded The Dunbar Western Museum and spent nearly three decades acquiring and exhibiting some of the finest works of the late nineteenth century.

Following her father's death, Susan's excesses increased. Unsuccessful marriages followed by unsuccessful Rehab visits followed by unsuccessful marriages ... she embraced her drug and alcohol addictions and metered them carefully so as not to lose total control of her life. She had only cruelty to offer others. With each passing year, her bitterness grew like a cancer, driving her deeper and deeper into an abyss of madness.

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On Wednesday afternoon, Susan Dunbar sat, eyes fixed on the horizon, jaw clenched, watching the afternoon haze that had settled over the spot in the distance occupied by the Tulsa airport. She hadn't been able to employ a secretary for nearly three years now. She let the machine take the few phone calls she received as she listened without emotion to the rookie brokers or insurance agents foolish enough to pursue her.

Saul Levy's phone message was a jolt. Susan's head and arms reacted with a spasm at the sound of the pawnbroker's voice. As Levy spoke, Dunbar sat, frozen on the edge of her father's chair. After a long moment, she clutched the phone. Struggling to project a friendly tone, she asked Saul Levy to repeat his news, the news about the ten "Larger Indian-Headdress Type 1861D's" he'd purchased. It

had been eight years since he'd sold her the first three coins. Levy wouldn't trick her this time, she thought. *This time he'll pay for his betrayal.*

## Chapter Two

“Ten thousand ain’t enough for a job like that,” Chigger Sanders stated flatly. “Besides, it’ll take at least two of us to do it that way. I’ll have to pay a hell of a lot for a partner I can trust. This isn’t like burning down some vacant building.” Chigger raised his eyebrows and looked at Dunbar. “This is A-1, first fucking degree murder and you know it.”

“If you can’t handle it, I’ll get someone else. I thought you were a pro, that’s all,” Susan Dunbar responded. The two of them were sitting in the front seat of her Volvo sedan. At 6:45PM, a low, blinding sun glinted off the windshields of the cars surrounding them in the crowded Wal-Mart parking lot.

“I didn’t say I couldn’t handle it. I can handle it, but it’ll take twenty-five to get it done the way you want. I know a guy can help me.”

Dunbar knew Chigger Sanders wouldn’t ask too many questions. Sanders had worked for her several times before; a homeless woman and child had burned to death in a downtown building he’d torched for her the previous year. Sanders and Dunbar had never spoken of it; fire can be an unpredictable solution.

“Even if I get a solid name from Levy, you still want me to waste the coin that way?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Make him tell you where he obtained the coins. Then, use one the way I described, UPS the other nine to my office. I’ll expect them along with the name and address on Friday. Remember, *I must know where Levy got the coins.*”

“Sure. What about the money? I’ll need front money to hire the guy I need.”

“Here, I have fifteen thousand. I came prepared to negotiate but I thought you’d be a little more reasonable. I’ll pay you the other ten within a week. I’ll have to sell the coins to raise the cash.”

“No problem,” Chigger said, nodding his massive head. At five ten, Chigger was only an inch taller than Susan Dunbar, but he weighed in at two-sixty. He didn’t count the money; he’d learned to trust Dunbar. He felt a strange sense of loyalty to her.

“This partner you plan to use, you’re sure about him?”

“Absolutely,” Chigger said. “We’ve worked together before. He can handle this; he’s like me, Cherokee. He’s good with a blade; he won’t mind the work as long as the money is fair.”

“Whatever,” Dunbar responded. “Just make sure you leave my name out of it.”

Chigger was insulted by Dunbar’s last comment but he only grunted as he climbed out of the Volvo into a blast of ninety-seven degree Oklahoma June. Talltree would help him do the job for ten grand, leaving Chigger fifteen clear.

Chigger had never intentionally mutilated anyone, but he knew Tree would enjoy doing the job for him.

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Chigger Sanders always hired John Talltree when someone had to die. Tree hung out at a biker bar near the entrance to the Oklahoma City Turnpike west of Tulsa. His Harley was easy to spot. Like Tree, the Harley was bruised and battered. Neither the bike nor the man looked very impressive, but Tree used his appearance to his advantage. He was a five-foot-six package of explosive evil.

Chigger parked his pickup facing the street at the entrance to the small, gravel parking lot. He deliberately distanced his truck from the half dozen bikes leaning near the front door of the bar. Chigger could handle himself, but this was a bad crowd. Like always, he carried a Taurus 9mm automatic tucked under his shirttail.

It was still light at 8:15PM as Chigger entered the bar. He had to pull twice on the reinforced steel door before he could open it and step inside. All was quiet. The bikers were subdued, stoned or drunk. They eyed Chigger carefully as he paused in the doorway, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. The thick, cool air smelled of belched-beer and urine.

Chigger saw Talltree immediately. He was seated at a table with two women. The women looked at him vacantly. One of them had a botched jailhouse tattoo on her left biceps. Chigger figured *Lemons* was meant to read *Demons*.

Tree got up and walked toward Chigger at the bar. As the Indian approached, Chigger could smell the little man; he was filthy. Unconsciously, Chigger touched the Taurus under his shirt with the tip of his elbow.

“Hey, Slim, how you doing, man?” Talltree drawled.

“I’m fine, Tree, how 'bout you?”

“Can’t complain,” Tree said looking back at the girls as he took a seat at the bar next to Chigger.

“Are you lookin’ for me or you just out for a night on the town?”

Chigger grinned. “What are we drinkin’, Tree?”

“Bud.”

The bartender was standing directly in front of them. He opened two bottles of Budweiser, placed them on the bar and moved away. The Cardinals were playing somebody on TV. Only the bartender seemed to have any interest.

“So, what you want?” Talltree asked.

“I’ve got some work for tonight. There’s ten grand in it for you if you’re interested.”

“Who we gotta’ kill?” Tree said too loudly. Chigger’s expression was somber and Talltree laughed. “Shit, man, now don’t go all serious on me; I know you too good,” Tree chuckled.

Chigger smiled at Tree’s remark. “It’s worth twenty-five K. I’ll split it with

you sixty-forty, like always; but it's gotta' be done tonight.”

“No problem, Slim. Why you so fuckin' bummed? It ain't your momma or nothin' is it?” Tree grinned, showing Chigger his small assortment of broken yellow teeth.

“It's the way we gotta' do it, Tree. We gotta' cut the guy's head off,” he whispered.

Tree took a long drag on his Bud before responding casually. “No fuckin' problem, Slim,” Tree said, lifting the cuff of his filthy Levi's to reveal a bone-handled hunting knife with a serrated, eight-inch blade. “*My people are always ready ... to take scalp ... from white-eye,*” he quipped mechanically.

Chigger grinned and shook his head slightly as Tree turned to glance at one of the women slumped at his table. When she smiled faintly he said, “I got somethin' important I gotta' take care of first, Slim. What time you need me?”

\*\*\*\*\*

The white Chevy sedan drove slowly by Saul Levy's house a few minutes after midnight. Levy lived in rural west Tulsa, just inside the city limits.

Chigger did a U-turn at the intersection and drove by again, stopping the Chevy Caprice about ten car-lengths beyond the driveway entrance. He'd stolen the Caprice from a Days Inn parking lot an hour earlier.

Chigger was nervous, dreading the task ahead. He glanced toward Talltree. Tree was fiddling with the compact disc player, his attention focused on a Conway Twitty CD stuck inside.

Saul Levy was awake, watching television in his front room. The killers could see him sitting in a recliner as they walked up the driveway toward the house. Even if the pawnbroker had turned his head and looked out the window, he probably wouldn't have seen them approaching in the dim light.

Chigger and Tree had two-way radios clipped to their belts, Motorola P100's with headsets. Chigger had stolen the radios from a construction site. If they had to split up to gain access to Levy's house, the radios would help.

Standing in the shadows, just off the driveway, Chigger motioned to Tree that he would go around back and try to find a way inside. Tree nodded and took up a position where he could watch Saul and notify Chigger on the radio if the old man started moving around.

About three minutes passed before Tree saw Chigger appear in a flash behind Saul Levy. Chigger was wearing a ski mask over his face. He clasped his left arm around Levy's neck and used his free hand to press his 9mm against the old man's temple. Tree ran toward the back of the house the moment he saw the old man subdued.

By the time Talltree made his way inside, Chigger was dragging a sobbing Levy through the kitchen toward the garage. The stranglehold Chigger had secured around Levy's neck eliminated any possibility the old man could let out a scream. The pawnbroker was gasping an occasional “God” or “Please” with an

escaping breath, but could manage nothing more.

John Talltree stood waiting for Chigger and his captive just inside the kitchen door. He didn't bother to wear a mask. Tree's milky eyes reflected the faint light coming from the flickering television in the living room. Chigger hesitated for an instant when he saw his accomplice standing there. He could see Talltree was enjoying this job; Chigger was not.

The scene in the garage was dreamlike. Chigger forced the old man face-down on the cool cement floor. The door to the kitchen stood open. Light from the TV spiked through the narrow doorway in eerie flashes.

Chigger sat astride the old man's back and used his weight to jolt the air out of Levy's lungs. As Levy gasped for breath, Chigger tried to reassure him.

"Tell us what we need to know and we'll let you free. We don't want to hurt you. Do you understand?"

Levy nodded wildly.

"Where are the gold coins you purchased today?" Chigger asked flatly. Tree had moved away into the darkness.

"They're here ... right here ... in my car." Saul gasped.

"WHERE!" Chigger shouted.

"Plas ... plastic ... bag ... under ... seat."

"Which seat?"

"Driver's ... side ... underneath."

Tree materialized out of the darkness, moving around the front of the old Mercedes. As he passed close to the car, something clattered to the hood, something metallic.

The dome light of the gold 240D didn't provide much light, but Tree found the ziplock bag without any trouble. A strip of masking tape held it around a seat spring.

"Got it, Slim," Tree said. His tone revealed nothing. He might have just as easily been referring to victory over a tangled fishing line or a cantankerous spark plug.

The dome light went out with the *thunk* of the car door closing. Again, Chigger heard metal scraping against the hood of the Mercedes. Seconds later, Tree was kneeling next to the pawnbroker's head.

"Who sold you the coins?" Chigger hesitated, fearing his voice sounded higher than usual. He hoped Tree didn't notice.

"Just ... a guy," Saul said, laboring for breath. "He didn't give ... a ... name."

"Bullshit!" Tree shouted, raising the saw. Chigger could clearly see the outline of the bow-shaped pruning saw Talltree had found hanging on the wall of the garage. He repeated his question, more urgently.

"Tell us who sold you the coins, old man. If you don't--"

Tree grabbed the old man's hair with his left hand and raked the jagged edge of the saw blade across the back of Levy's neck. The old man shrieked in pain.

"Tell us, Goddammit!" Tree whispered.

Suddenly Levy began thrashing with an unexpected strength, strength borne of fear. Chigger was nearly pitched off his perch atop the old man's back. Tree bellowed as he fell forward, grinding the saw blade deep into Saul Levy's neck; a frantic spasm of arms and legs, then silence.

"God fucking damn," Tree's words were mixed with his laughter. "Guess we won't be gettin' any more info outta' this ol' fucker. I do believe I done cut his motors."

The unplanned downward stroke of the jagged saw blade cut a deep groove in the back of Saul Levy's neck and nicked his spinal column. Chigger and Talltree sat there in the near darkness for a few seconds. Gurgling sounds were coming from somewhere inside Saul Levy.

Chigger was the first to speak. "Shit, Tree," he sighed. "We didn't get a name."

"Big fuckin' deal," Tree responded, angry. He was breathing hard now. Suddenly concerned, he said, "I still get paid, name or no name, right?"

"Right," Chigger reassured him. He could feel Levy's warm blood soaking through the knees of his jeans. "Let's just finish up and get out of here. We've still got to drive across town before we can put this to rest."

Chigger stood and moved away. Tree began sawing.

An hour later, it was over. They'd changed from their bloody clothing while standing in Levy's garage. After a fifteen minute drive to the pawn shop, it only took a moment to place the coin on the fence post and stuff the severed head down over it. Tree did that job. He was careful not to get blood on his fresh T-shirt and jeans. He didn't notice the coin as it fell to the ground.

They'd already placed their bloody shoes and clothing in a plastic garbage bag. Now they added a second bag, the one that had briefly held Levy's head. Minutes later, a few broken bricks found at the roadside completed the package. Chigger tossed the grim package over the railing into the Arkansas River.

The killers were silent as they drove the Chevy ten miles to an abandoned boat ramp on Keystone Reservoir. They'd left Chigger's pickup there earlier. After checking the car over carefully, Chigger put the transmission in gear and let the Chevy roll down the ramp, windows down. With any luck, it wouldn't be found for a long time.

By two-thirty, Chigger parked in front of the bar where they'd met earlier. There were still a few bikes parked there. In the dim light, Chigger silently counted out ten bundles of twenty dollar bills on the seat between them.

"Let's do this again sometime," Tree grinned as he picked up the money and climbed out of the truck. He hesitated at the window for a moment, then said, "You wanna' come inside? I got some real good pussy in there if you want a

little.”

Chigger shook his head and started the engine. As he turned out of the parking lot, he glanced in the rearview mirror. The wiry little man was disappearing through the door of the bar. Chigger hoped he'd never see John Talltree again.

As he drove toward the bypass, Chigger felt for the coins in the plastic bag lying on the seat beside him. He had few regrets about the way he'd lived his life, but this night had been nearly too much for him. He decided then and there. As soon as he got the other ten thousand from Susan Dunbar, he'd point his pickup toward Florida. Maybe the Gulf of Mexico could wash the smell of Levy's blood from his skin.