

**BONE
DEEP**

ONE

A BIG CHUNK OF CENTRAL FLORIDA IS KNOWN AS BONE VALLEY TO GEOLOGISTS and antiquities thieves, as I was reminded by a stranger wearing braids and wrangler denim who appeared on my porch one stormy June morning.

The man claimed to be on the trail of artifacts stolen from Crow tribal land in Montana.

“Stone carvings about yay high,” he said, holding his fingers apart. “They didn’t come from Bone Valley, but Florida is where a lot of tribal stuff ends up.”

My stilthouse on Sanibel Island, the Gulf Coast, is four hours from Orlando, and two thousand miles from Big Sky Country. “You sure you have the right Marion Ford?”

“You’re Doc?”

“Yeah, but not the kind you need.”

“A marine biologist who doesn’t read his horoscope, that’s what I heard. You could be just the guy.”

I was standing outside my lab, water slapping at pilings below

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my feet, thunderheads sliding our way. “What does astrology have to do with stolen artifacts?”

The man, who had introduced himself as Duncan Fallsdown, said, “Tonight, at what’s supposed to be a sweat lodge, it would be nice to have a buffer. You know, someone who talks about something other than Mother Earth and spirit quests—all the standard stuff I’ve heard a million times. A hawk circles overhead, a guy like you figures the bird’s hungry, looking for a mouse. A snake, maybe. No big deal. Am I right?”

I said, “A sweat lodge in June? If that’s an invitation, no thanks.”

“Not the best timing ,but I’m committed,” Fallsdown replied, his eyes moving to the bay where a sailboat was anchored. The boat’s boom was strung with laundry that flapped in the breeze: a tie-dyed shirt, several sarongs, and what appeared to be women’s lingerie. Suddenly, the nonsensical was redefined as commonplace.

“Tomlinson’s behind this,” I said. “How long have you known him?” I was referring to a lecherous, cannabis-growing anarchist turned Zen master who lives aboard the sailboat, an old Morgan, *No Más* in faded script on the stern.

“Long enough to leave last night, when he chugged a tray of Jell-O shooters and invited some women to go skinny-dipping,” the man replied. “That was around one. I flew in late yesterday afternoon.”

Yep—definitely bras and panties clipped to the Morgan’s hal-yard, all doomed to be soaked by the rain rumbling toward us. “You *do* know him,” I said. “How many?”

“Women? At least one that was married, so I didn’t bother counting. They’re here because of the sweat lodge.” Fallsdown considered the squall, then looked beyond me through the screen door. “Man . . . you’ve got a bunch of aquariums in there. As a kid, I always wanted one. What kind of fish?”

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It was a request to escape the rain, so I opened the door, asking, “What time did Tomlinson start drinking this morning?”

Fallsdown’s shoulders filled the doorway, his Indian braids black on blue cowboy denim, and I got a whiff of what might have been smoke—mesquite, maybe, not tobacco or marijuana.

“Answer that one,” he replied, “I’d have to know what time he stopped last night, wouldn’t I?”

DUNCAN FALLSDOWN, who told me to call him Dunk with a *k*, accepted a bottle of Gatorade after refusing a beer, saying, “I’m hop-tose intolerant,” which might have meant ten a.m. was too early—or the gentle rebuff of an alcoholic. A man in his mid-forties acquires seismic markers at the corners of the eyes—harsh winters, smoky bar-rooms, is what I saw.

I dumped my coffee and made fresh while wind blew the first fat drops of rain against the roof. Twice, while water boiled, I went to the door and whistled, then made small talk until Fallsdown followed me outside, across the breezeway, into the old ice house I have converted into a lab. I showed him around, explained what I do for a living—collect and sell marine specimens, plus environmental consulting—then went to the door again, “When you crossed the boardwalk, did you happen to see a dog swimming around near my house?”

“That was a *dog*?” Fallsdown replied.

Surprise with a tinge of wariness—the typical reaction of a newcomer who thinks he has seen what is probably an alligator but could be a giant otter. A few minutes later, I returned, and my yellow-eyed retriever was drying in the breezeway, a fresh bone to occupy him, while Fallsdown and I talked above the hiss of rain.

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“These stone carvings, someone I know wants them back. Dollarwise, they’re fairly valuable, but that’s not the reason. The person’s in a hurry. Tomorrow, there’s a flea market near Venice I want to hit. Then a gun show in Lakeland.”

“You don’t know where the artifacts are?”

“I’ve got some contacts, and Tomlinson’s working on some others—that’s why I’m here. MapQuest says the trip’s three hours.”

Over an hour to Venice, then two hours to Lakeland, I guessed. “But double that if Tomlinson’s driving.”

Fallsdown, focusing on fish tanks along the wall, kept his back to me. “You know the guy better than I do. He’s not as flaky as he pretends, sometimes. He’s got good instincts, too, and people trust him. Better than having just me show up, a cowboy-Indian dressed like Billy Jack, asking questions about artifacts that might sell for fifty, sixty grand. See what I’m saying?”

I was surprised by the numbers. “At a flea market?”

“It’s the sort of place dealers use now. Used to be, the quality stuff was sold at auctions or antiquities shows. Coins, arrowheads, fossils—Florida had some of the biggest shows in the country. Vegas was big. New Mexico used to be, but the Indian relics trade has mostly gone underground. States are cracking down, Florida included, but it’s still one of the world’s best places for *finding* fossils and relics. The money’s here, so the dealers keep coming.”

I was sitting at my computer and broke a personal rule by turning on the Wi-Fi before I’d finished the morning grunt work required of an aquarist who owns two boats. “These artifacts, do you have a link where I can find photos?”

“I’ve got a folder in my rental car when the rain slows down. The carvings don’t look like much—black soapstone—steatite, it’s called. Some say the pieces look like owl faces.”

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“Just the face?”

“Judge for yourself, but they’re plain-looking stones. Not nearly as pretty as agate coral. They find a lot of that near Tampa, but other areas, too. Phosphate quarries are best.”

There were plenty of quarries. . Phosphate mining has been a major Florida industry since the early 1900s, which Fallsdown already knew.

“A million years ago,” he said, “inland Florida was high ground with rivers, and animals that collected there in the river basins and watering holes died there. That’s why they call the area Bone Valley. Awesome fossils mixed in with stone tools from the Paleo era—sort of one-stop shopping. Spend an afternoon digging the right spot, you could buy a car with what you find. Hell, a ranch, if you really got lucky.” Fallsdown looked around, his expression congenial; he had the easygoing confidence of a plumber or a electrician, but that didn’t quite mesh with his knowledge of Florida geology.

“Are you a private investigator?”

“Not hardly.”

“Studied the field sciences in college?” On the computer screen I had opened photos of agate corals, all polished pink, silver, or cinnamon by the pressure of eons, each piece uniquely hollowed like a geode or miniature cave.

Fallsdown replied, “Nope. But I did three years in the joint, two as library trustee—Deer Lodge state prison. Lots of reading time.”

I said, “Oh,” while he focused on a hundred-gallon tank where I had isolated three fingerling snook—a triad of silver blades suspended above a mangrove diorama.

“But you are a . . . a *member* of the Crow tribe.”

“I’m an Indian—a Skin, if that’s what you mean. You don’t have to be careful around me. I make decent money putting on shows for

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tourists, and the politically correct bullshit really gets old. That's how Tomlinson and I met. Sedona, Arizona. Sedona attracts every UFO kook and crystal worshipper around, but we hit it off. That was back in my drinking days, so I forgot what a pain in the ass he can be." Fallsdown put his face closer to the aquarium glass. "What are those spiny things?"

He meant the sea urchins. Then he asked about tunicates and barnacles—their rhythmic, feathered appendages were actually modified legs—and the anomaly of pregnant male sea horses, before he got back to the subject. "Look up 'Mastodon tusks' and see what they sell for. Most are from phosphate quarries, or rivers south of Orlando. Maybe 'Clovis tools,' too, or 'Charmstones,' but don't get your hopes up. Dealers have stopped selling over the Internet."

The man sipped at his Gatorade while I banged away with two fingers at the keyboard. Then Fallsdown decided to trust me with more information.

"It's my aunt who wants the carvings back. She did some crazy stuff after she ran off and left her husband and kids. Organized protests, the whole nine yards, even got her picture in newspapers when AIM had a standoff with the feds. Which sort of puts me in an awkward spot."

I stopped what I was doing and chose my words carefully. "Awkward because of what your aunt did? Or because she . . . *knows* Tomlinson?" My strange pal is a womanizer, and had mentioned his involvement with the American Indian Movement many times.

The man from Montana thought about that for a few seconds. "Maybe that hippie snake did sleep with her—it would explain a lot. But, no, what I mean is, she—Rachel—Rachel switched from being a radical to traditional a few years back. Now she has pancreatic cancer. She says she can't die in peace until the carvings are

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returned to the tribe. That's why I can't waste time with Tomlinson's touchy-feely bullshit."

"You have to find the artifacts before your aunt dies," I said. Rather than add *But she'll die anyway*, I swiveled around in my chair, done with the computer.

"Find anything?"

"Enough," I said. "A few years back, a complete mastodon tusk was stolen from a private collection. No photos, but it had primitive carving on it, a sort of lacework thatching. The thing was insured for half a million. Also a flint spearpoint—'orange plains chert,' they call it—supposedly worth ten thousand. You're right, nothing currently for sale on the Internet. I had no idea that kind of money was involved."

"Fossilized ivory," Fallsdown said. "Is that the tusk they found in the Suwannee River? I heard it was a yard long and weighed fifty pounds. Paleo man—the early Skins—used ivory for weapons, but also as totems. That makes it a lot more valuable."

"Because it was worked," I said, but was guessing.

"Not only that, Ivory used by the Paleo Indians holds up better. I don't know why, but I'd take the time to find out if I lived here. Some believe there's an Ice Age graveyard where mastodons went to die. Mammoths, too, probably, but I'm not sure. Wouldn't that be something to find?"

I said, "In Florida?" The legend about elephant graveyards originated in Africa, not Florida, and it had been debunked long ago.

Fallsdown gestured to indicate he kept an open mind.

I said what I had been thinking: "Are you sure you're not here to sell something? Or do some collecting on your own?"

Fallsdown remained unruffled. "I might. Depends on how it goes tonight. I'm supposed to do that sweat lodge for the wife and

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daughters of a family in the phosphate business. They might know the names of serious collectors, because collectors drive the phosphate companies nuts, begging permission to hunt, trespassing. These women, or whoever runs the business, might have access to a list.”

I said, “And you just happened to remember your good ol’ hippie buddy from the Sedona days.” My tone was cool enough to be an accusation.

Fallsdown took it calmly, even smiled. “Don’t worry. I know all about that pond owned by a friend of yours, and the arrowheads, pottery, and other stuff you found in a cave. Tomlinson even offered to take me diving there, but no thanks, man. Find the two pieces I’m after, I’m outta here.”

For Tomlinson—who had nearly died in that pond—to risk another dive said a lot about the respect he had for a man I had just insulted. I said, “Sorry. It’s a bad habit of mine, thinking when I should be listening. It’s just that you know a lot about the relics trade for someone who’s not an investigator or a tribal cop.”

Fallsdown was pleased, not offended. “See? You’re a man who uses his head. That’s what I was hoping. Why not tag along with Tomlinson and me, at least tonight? Might be good for you.”

I asked, “How?”

“Well . . . I’ll just come out and say it. I heard you got dumped by your girlfriend, and it might get your mind off things. The women are damn good-looking—twin sisters and a blonde—their step-mother, I guess. Used to be a big-time fashion model according to Tomlinson. We’re taking a water taxi to a private island they own north of here.”

As he spoke, my dog banged the door open with his nose . . . trotted toward Fallsdown, gave his hand a sniff . . . did the same to

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me . . . then spun a few circles in the corner before collapsing on the floor.

“He’s not what you’d call an affectionate animal, is he?” Falls-down remarked, but sounded impressed. “What’s his name?”

Instead of answering, I replied, “Tomlinson has a big mouth. I wasn’t dumped—in fact, I had dinner with the woman he was talking about last night.”

“Oh. Then you are still dating.”

“Umm . . . not exactly,” I said, “but it was a mutual decision. We’re still good friends.”

“Mutual, huh?” He smiled, amused by the lie. “Then invite her along. You’ll understand why I need a buffer when you hear the whole story.”

“If I want to sweat, I’ll wait ’til this rains stops and go stand in the parking lot,” I told him.

Fallsdown’s faith in me had been validated. “*Perfect,*” he said. “You can help me calm down Tomlinson after he finds out what I really have planned.”

TWO

AN HOUR BEFORE SUNSET, THE FISHING GUIDES CROSSED THE FLATS, THREE boats in formation, so I put away the photos Dunk Fallsdown had loaned me—stone carvings that did, indeed, resemble owls—and walked to the marina to enjoy the show.

Business hours at Dinkin's Bay Marina are seven a.m. to six p.m., but Mack, the owner, doesn't lock the parking lot gate until later, especially in summer. Tourists were gathering on the dock to watch the guides clean fish, and tourists have money.

Mack, a big man with a cigar, was standing at the office door, surveying what his eyes perceived as profit. He waved and pantomimed pulling the lever of a cash register as I passed. Jeth Nicholes, one of the guides, had gone inside to use the toilet, and I walked with him to the cleaning table—a slab of wood with a wash-down hose—where captains Felix and Neville were sharpening their knives.

“There was a school of spinner sharks off the lighthouse,” Jeth said, stuttering some but not worried about it. “I brought one back for steaks, if you want to check its stomach.”

I did, but said I would wait for the crowd to thin. A semicircle

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had formed around the cleaning table, people snapping photos, clients posing with fish, while gulls bickered with terns, and a flotilla of pelicans waited below, their heads swaying as if fillet knives were a conductor's batons. Captains Felix and Neville, buckets at their feet, had had a good day catching sea trout, mackerel, pompano—a big cobia, too, that might weigh sixty pounds.

Jeth said, "I saw Hannah's boat near the river. Her clients were fly-fishing. Two guys—but they weren't what you'd call good-looking."

He was referring to Hannah Smith, an elite fly-fishing guide, and the woman, who according to rumor, had dumped me. Which is why Jeth had stuttered a little more when he described her clients.

"We had dinner last night," I reassured him. Then asked if he would remind Felix to save the cobia carcass so I could have a look inside its belly.

Jeff is built like a farm boy linebacker, but he's sensitive, so he showed his relief. "Sure," he said, "Good." Then he maneuvered his way through the crowd and got to work.

When there was no one around to offend, I opened the bellies of the spinner shark and the cobia. The shark had been feeding on thread herring. The cobia was loaded with crabs and two sea horses. I washed my hands, and said hello to Rhonda and Joann, who live aboard an old Chris-Craft yacht, *Tiger Lilly*. The stop required another reference to my date with Hannah to defuse the gossip. Same when Eleanor intercepted me at the Red Pelican Gift Shop and offered a consoling piece of fudge.

Mack, at least, had other interests when he took me aside and asked, "You meet Tomlinson's Indian pal from Montana? Nice fella. Not like most of the oddballs who show up asking for His Guruness."

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After what Fallsdown had told me, I couldn't help chuckling. "He stopped by the lab."

"Yeah? What's so funny?"

I didn't have permission to share details, but I could say, "Tomlinson's driving the poor guy nuts."

"Nothing unusual about that," Mack said, waiting for the punch line.

"Duncan will be back in the morning. Get him to tell you."

"*Dunk*, you mean? He did tell me something. Tomlinson thinks Dunk is a big shot with his tribe back in Montana, the head medicine man or something. So Tomlinson volunteered him to put on a show for some rich folks, the ones who own Albright Key. The two of them left to catch a water taxi half an hour ago."

"The Albright family, yeah," I said. "Twin daughters, both out of college, and Mrs. Albright, the wife."

"Are those the three blondes from last night?" Mack smiled when I nodded. "Okay, now it sort of makes sense. But sitting in some tent—a sweat lodge—in June?"

"That's the funny part," I said and told him that Tomlinson was in for a disappointment. Duncan was conducting a shaman drum ceremony, not a sweat lodge.

Mack got the joke. "Hah! Wish I could see the look on the horny bastard's face when he finds out. No sweat lodge means the women won't have to take their clothes off, right? Mosquitoes will be bad enough as is."

I said, "That's why I'll be wearing pants and a long-sleeved shirt."

Mack sobered. "You're going?"

"Wouldn't miss it," I said. "Jeth will let my dog out, once you lock the gate. I'd take him, but people who own islands are fussy about dogs."

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Mack, relighting his cigar, said, “You don’t give a damn about any shaman drum ceremony. And that island’s forty minutes by water, even in your boat. What’s the real reason?”

“I’ve never been on Albright Key,” I answered, which was true, but not the whole story.

Fallsdown had asked me for a harmless favor—or so it seemed at the time.

IN THE CRIMSON DUSK OF A JUNE SUNSET, I left the mouth of Dinkin’s Bay and flew my boat northeast, pretending the quickest route was backcountry past the village of Sulfur Wells. The detour was a silly excuse to wave at Hannah, the long-legged fishing guide, if she happened to be on the dock, or topside on her small blue live-aboard cruiser.

She wasn’t—but a sleek runabout I recognized was tied there, which suggested Hannah was below, entertaining a guest. A male guest. I knew the runabout and I knew the guy. He was a wealthy Brazilian who kept his yacht at Dinkin’s Bay when he wasn’t traveling the world, one or more fake passports in hand.

Hannah trusted that bastard?

Worse, while I rubbernecked, my port engine snagged a crab trap and nearly threw me out of the boat, so it was dark, and Fallsdown was already drumming, when I got to Albright Key. The island was forty acres of foliage intersected by a shell ridge where, by day, a Mediterranean mansion spread itself on columns, bone white, above the bay, but now showed only windows and a lighted portico of marble. There was a boathouse off the channel where *No Trespassing* signs included threats of prosecution.

I tied up anyway. Through the trees, I could see a golden bounc-

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ing light that was a ceremonial fire. The Albright family, plus Tomlinson, would be gathered there, so why interrupt? My clothes were soaked after going overboard to cut that damn crab trap free, so I pawed through the emergency bag I keep aboard and soon stepped onto the dock wearing a chambray shirt and jeans.

Only then did I notice a man coming toward me from the shadows. A very tall man who spoke articulately but sounded weary when he said, “Unless you’re invited to this circus, get back in your boat. I’ve got the local deputy on speed dial.” He had to raise his voice to be heard over the thumpa-thumping of the drum.

I introduced myself, and looked toward the fire. “That noise has to get on your nerves after a while,” I said.

“Then why are you here?” The man’s tone insinuated *All the way from Sanibel . . . at night?*

“I’ve passed this island a hundred times and wasn’t going to miss an invitation to come ashore. I was hoping to meet the owner and have a look around.”

He made a sighing sound. “My daughters own the place, apparently. And my wife. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have to listen to that maddening bullshit. Any idea how long it’ll go on?”

From the elevated dock, I could see the fire and the silhouettes of four people, their backs to me. Tomlinson’s hair, tied Samaria style, was as distinctive as a woodpecker’s crest. Fallsdown faced his audience, a drum between his knees, but was dressed normally, not like a stage medicine man. “Not a clue,” I answered. “In my cooler, I’ve got beer on ice. Maybe it’ll take your mind off the noise.”

The man switched on dock lights to get a better look at me. “Never seen a rig like that,” he commented, meaning my twenty-six-foot rigid-hulled inflatable—a boat ringed with a heavy foam-filled collar. It had a T-top, twin Mercs, and an electronics tower. I’d

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bought it through contacts at the specials ops base at MacDill in Tampa—a confiscated drug runner’s vessel, supposedly, and that’s the story I stuck with when I told the man about it. But I was honest when I added, “It’s made by Brunswick in Edgewater, Florida. That’s where Boston Whaler has its tactical division.”

“I didn’t know Whaler made tactical boats,” he said. “It’s not a Zodiac?”

I had made the same assumption, which felt odd to admit, then explained that Brunswick, depending on the buyer, followed black ops protocols when it came to labeling. The manufacture’s name wasn’t on the registration. Impact was the model. Or B-Impact Tactical—BIT, for short.

“Military types love acronyms,” the man said, following along, then asked for permission to step aboard.

He liked gadgets, and we talked about the springy decking and seats for a while—*shock mitigation*, is the term, nice to have in rough seas. He claimed he was interested in buying a RHIB design—a rigid-hulled inflatable—but I got the impression he was bored, just wanted to talk. After I’d demonstrated the electronics—impressed him with the night vision system; FLIR thermal imaging, too—he said, “If you want to come inside and see the house, I’ve got liquor and beer. It’ll be quieter, and then finally told me his name.

I followed Leland Albright, heir to his grandfather’s fortune, up the ridge into the mansion.