

BLUETICK REVENGE

A Pepper Keane Mystery

"The greatest happiness is to vanquish your enemies, to chase them before you, to rob them of their wealth, to see those dear to them bathed in tears, to clasp to your bosom their wives and daughters."

-- Ghengis Khan

CHAPTER 1

I'd been scoping the place for a week. That seemed a long time, but this wouldn't be a traditional dognapping. Not that I had much of a basis for comparison. I had never dognapped before, though I had taken a few catnaps.

I focused my binoculars on the area between the cabin and the million-dollar mountain home. They were a good fifty yards apart. It was an old two-room cabin and its windows were protected from the winter wind by faded pine shutters. But for a dozen empty antifreeze containers piled near the door, there was no sign the cabin was in use.

The animal was chained to a tall pine about halfway between the cabin and the residence. He had maybe thirty feet of slack. He lay in a plywood doghouse, his muzzle resting near its entrance. His expression showed boredom and sadness. The water in his metal bowl had long since frozen.

There were two Harleys parked in front of the home – the fewest I had seen yet. I'd been there four hours this day and seen only two men. One was about fifty and looked like Jerry Garcia a few years before his death. The other was a lanky, ponytailed man in his early thirties who walked from the house to the cabin every few

hours with a machine pistol in one hand. Both displayed tattoos on their faces and hands, and they probably bore more beneath their winter clothes. Neither fit Bugg's description. I decided I would make my move tonight.

It wasn't quite dark enough. I walked through the dense pines about a half-mile back to the F-150 I'd parked just off a county road. Had anyone looked through the shell into the back of the truck, they would have seen a chain saw, a few dozen logs, and some camping gear. My hope was they would assume I had been cutting firewood.

I placed the binoculars on the passenger seat, then removed my parka and tossed it into the truck as well. If things got hairy, I didn't want bulky winter clothes slowing me down. A down-filled vest over a flannel shirt over a high-tech undershirt would keep me warm enough. I clasped my hands together, then brought them to my mouth and blew on them to keep them warm. Tiny clouds of mist spiraled before me as I exhaled. It was the third Tuesday in November – Thanksgiving was two days away – and though there was little snow on the ground, there was moisture in the air. The thermometer in my truck showed twenty-six degrees.

It was overcast. No stars were visible and the moon was nowhere to be seen. As the last remnants of the day's light vanished, it became wonderfully dark. There would never be a better time to do it.

I climbed into the truck, placed the keys in the ignition, and started her up. I waited a few minutes, then exited the vehicle, leaving the driver's door slightly ajar, but not enough to cause the dome light to come on. If someone came along and stole it in the next twenty minutes I'd be shit out of luck. Chances of that happening on a

Tuesday night in a National Forest were slim. I checked my Velcro shoulder holster; the Glock was still there.

The hike back to Bugg's secluded mountain home took ten minutes. The wind hadn't changed, so I was able to approach without the dog picking up my scent. The trees surrounding the home had been cleared to a distance of one hundred in an effort to make it more defensible in the event of a forest fire. I stopped before I hit the clearing and surveyed the area one last time. I donned a black ski mask to protect my identity, then got down on my belly and started crawling toward the dog. He was awake, but resting on his side with a vacant look. I was within twenty feet when he raised his magnificent head and scanned the area. I didn't want him barking. Still on my belly, I removed a roast beef sandwich – one I had purchased at the B&F just for this purpose – from my vest pocket and tossed it at him. Then I sprinted.

He let out two melodic barks, then went to work on the meat. I unhooked the chain from his collar and snapped my leash into place. With the dog now under my control, I started running back to the trees. He ran alongside, as if we'd been friends for years, gulping the sandwich as we went. As we hit the trees a man inside the home yelled, "Fuck!"

We continued toward the truck. I heard a door slam. Floodlights suddenly illuminated the house and cabin, but I was back into the trees by then. "Something's going down," the man yelled, "check the cabin." One of the Harleys roared to life. I continued running, dodging the pines as best I could. It was incredibly dark in the forest and my forty-something face took more than one hit from low branches weighed down by accumulated snow. The bike noise grew faint as the rider headed to the highway.

The dog dropped what was left of the sandwich and tried to go back for it, but I yanked the leash hard. By this time I had my second wind and was running at a good clip given the darkness and rough terrain. It was a good thing I had the dog with me because mountain lions can be unforgiving if you startle them.

I smelled the exhaust from my truck, then saw the truck itself. I reached the truck and opened the driver's door. The dog jumped right in and I followed suit. Headlights off, I drove down the dirt road at a moderate speed toward Colorado Highway 72 just west of Ward. All I had to do was make the highway without coming into contact with the bike.

I was less than two hundred yards from the pavement when a single headlight appeared and started toward me. Think fast, Pepper, I told myself. I didn't want to shoot the guy, but I didn't want him to get a look at my truck either. I could have clipped him with the truck, but somebody might have noticed the damage to my vehicle and put two and two together. I punched the accelerator and went straight at him. When I was twenty yards away I turned on my brights. He held one hand up to his eyes to dim the glare. It was Jerry Garcia. I blasted my horn and swerved to the right just as I met him. He took a nasty spill and ended up in the drainage on the side of the road. I killed my headlights, turned right at the pavement, and headed home to Nederland.

I had trouble sleeping that night. Dognapping gets my adrenaline flowing. This is particularly true when the dog is a champion Bluetick Coonhound owned by the leader of the Sons of Satan.

