

THE ENTROPY OF BONES

AYIZE

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Chapter One

The Time I Choked Out a Hillbilly

*Last time I'd been this deep in the Northern California hills I was on a blood and bar tour in a monkey-shit brown Cutlass Royale with Raj. Now I was distance running from the *Mansai*, his boat, to wherever I would finally get tired. From Sausalito to Napa was only sixty or so miles if I hugged the San Pablo Bay, cut through the National Park, and ran parallel to the 121, straight north. About a half a day's run. Cut through the mountains and pick up the pace and I could make it to Calistoga in another three hours. From downtown wine country I'd find the nicest restaurant that would serve my sweaty Gore-Texed ass and gorge myself on meals so large cooks would weep. The runs up were like moving landscape paintings done by masters, deep with nimbus clouds hiding in craggy sky-high mountains. Creeks hidden in deep green fern and ivies that spoke more than they ran.*

Narayana Raj had taught me in the samurai style. You don't focus on your enemy's weakness; instead, you make yourself invulnerable. My focus was to be internal. In combat, discipline was all. But in the running of tens of miles, that discipline was frivolous. My only enemy was boredom and memory. Surrounded by such beauty, how could I not split my attention? Nestled in the California valleys, I found quiet, if not peace.

I also found guns. Halfway between Napa and Calistoga, the chambering of a shotgun pulled my attention from the drum and

bass dirge pulsing in my earbuds. The woods had just gone dark, but my vision was clear enough to notice the discarded cigarette butts that formed a semicircle behind one knotted redwood. Rather than slowing down, I sped up and choke-held the red-headed shotgun boy hiding behind the tree before he had time to situate himself, my ulna against his larynx, my palm against his carotid. He was muscular but untrained. Directly across from him was an older man, late thirties, dressed for warmth with one of those down jackets that barely made a sound when he moved. His almost Fu Manchu mustache didn't twitch when he pulled two Berettas on me. I faced my captive toward his partner.

“Wait . . .,” Berettas said, more scared than he meant to sound.

Drop them, I commanded with my Voice. The gun went down hard. I used the Dragon claw, more a nerve slap than a punch, to turn the redhead's carotid artery into a vein for a second. When he started seizing, I dropped him. To his credit, Beretta went for the kid rather than his weapons. I continued my run, mad that I'd missed a refrain from Kruder and Dorfmeister.

As an indication of where my head was, I confess to not thinking about the scrap until a week later. Finishing the run, swimming ten miles a day, keeping the *Mansai* in shape, and avoiding my mother at the other end of the pier as much as possible, covered the in-between time. Even when I went back up the same route for my big run, the redhead was an afterthought.

It was only when I hit Calistoga, almost desperate for my calorie load for the run back to the Bay, that I had to deal with the consequences of my chokehold. I liked hitting up the nice tourist joint restaurants for grub when I was sweaty, and paying cash for double entrée meals. The place smelled of wood and fire, but most of the fixtures were constructed out of industrial iron and brass. Servers dressed in white shirts and black slacks prayed the heavy-fingered piano player's jazz standards would cover the clang of their dropping silverware on the brass tables. Most patrons came in dressed in

THE ENTROPY OF BONES

custom suits and designer dresses. Me, I've always been a sweats 'n' hoodies girl. Usually I was the most out-of-place-looking person in the spot. But not that day.

I was devouring two orders of BBQ oysters, fries, and half a broiled chicken when a bear-looking man walked in. Seriously, he was 6'9", three hundred pounds of muscle with another twenty-five pounds of fat for padding. He was local. I'd seen skinnier versions of his face in the area, long in the cheekbones, bullet marks where eyes should be. He wore a large red flannel shirt and Carhartts fit for a bear. But what stood out was his facial hair. It made a mockery of any other beard I'd ever seen. His hair started on his head and covered every part of his face, from pretty close to his eye sockets to well past his collar line. It seemed almost bizarre that a mouth existed under all that fur. But it made him easy to read. As soon as he saw me, the hair moved into a smile. All the waitstaff and bartenders seemed to know him. It wasn't until he sat at my table facing me that I saw any relation to the redhead in the woods. I'm not usually one for weapons, but I palmed my butterfly knife on the off chance the bear tried to maul me in public.

"What do you weigh in at? One hundred and twenty pounds? Sopping wet?" he asked after it became obvious I wasn't going to stop eating.

And you care because?

"I'm just wondering where all that food goes," he said with a laugh. "What? You one of those bulimics or something?"

Mind not talking about gross shit while I'm eating? I snapped.

"Apologies. Didn't realize you were so sensitive."

The waitress delivered a slice of key lime pie and a glass of red wine so casually I knew she'd supplied the same to him dozens of times before.

That's going straight to your hips, I said while shoving a handful of fries in my mouth. He laughed for a while before he could take a bite of pie.

“I knew this teacher, Filipino chick or something. One of those goody-goodies. Worked at a private school in Frisco. Coached soccer, taught all day, would drive up here and take dirt samples all around my vineyard, acres and acres. All for her thesis. She never broke a sweat.” He looked at me like I was supposed to get it. I kept eating.

“Turned out she had this hyperthyroid condition. Made her super strong, super fast, sped up her metabolism something fierce . . .”

Like a superhero, I said, laughing and chewing my chicken.

“Exactly,” the bear growled back. “Only if she hadn’t have gotten it fixed, it would have killed her.”

Believe me, I was listening for the threat. I stopped eating and stared the bear down. To his credit, he didn’t blink. But he didn’t keep eating either.

I get the sense you’re trying to tell me something, I said after I pulled my arms under the table.

“Then you misconstrue me entirely, young lady. I’m filled with nothing but questions.”

Better you ask straight away, then.

“Was that you that choked out my nephew not nine miles from here while his uncle stood by and watched?”

Your nephew the sort to chamber a pump-action on a jogger while she’s minding her own damn business?

“It took him two days to fully recover.”

But he recovered. I leaned back in my chair, spinning my knife to my wrist, ready for whatever came next. The waitress poured another glass of Syrah.

“My brother, the one with the mustache, said he’d never seen anybody adjust to a threat as quick as you did.” I nodded. “He’s been in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan. But you impressed him. My nephew took a different path. Did six years in Angola—the prison, you understand, not the country. Another three in San Quentin before he got smart about his game. You got the drop on him, and he saw you coming. Now you eat like a horse, but aside from that you don’t

THE ENTROPY OF BONES

say much, seem tough as nails and can obviously handle yourself. Type of business I'm in, I can't help but ask if you're looking for work."

First time I met Narayana the entire pier was being threatened by snakes. Some idiot independent filmmaker decided he wanted to make a sequel of a movie that he didn't own the rights to. He was shooting it "guerilla style," meaning without a script, a proper crew, or a clue. Oh yeah, and it involved snakes on a boat. The majority of houseboats on our Sausalito pier were like the one I grew up in, more house than boat. You'd have better luck finding alcoholics and '80s radicals living off the grid in those forever-moored houses than a sailor or anyone with a hint of grit in them. So when the pock-faced twenty-something filmmaker's snakes escaped after a drunken wrap party, let's just say things got chaotic.

Screams of panic didn't rouse my mom from her drunken snoring back then. But I got curious. Not yet fully dark and all I could see were squirming shadows darting to and fro on the dock, in the bushes, out of people's boats, falling in the water. Some of the snakes were thinner than a pencil and lightning quick; some moved so heavily across the port they seemed to dare you to touch them. Folks were grabbing their children and pets and locking themselves in their boats or trying to run past the snakes to get off the pier. I turned to go back inside when a coil hissed at me.

It was a hooded cobra. Don't ask what kind, I wouldn't be able to tell you. I just know it was banded, tan, and hissing. It stood between me and the walkway that went down to my houseboat. I tried backing up but in doing so I dragged my foot, a sound that agitated the snake. It raised its head a little more and hissed in a lower tone than I thought it would. What freaked me out more was that I thought I heard my name in its hiss.