

Chapter 2

Standing in Louisiana's Little Bayou River, its muddy waters slapping up against his crotch, Josh Ingram was glad he had gone against Mary's advice and purchased the chest waders. When he first pulled the green boots out of the box, Mary's chin dropped. She told him that any self-respecting noodler knew to go barefoot with nothing on but maybe some old blue jeans and a T-shirt. She also told him that while he was at it, he should wipe that postage stamp smile off of his face. At times she came across as the rough-edged older sister, but he didn't mind; he'd never had one of those before and kind of liked it.

Josh was tall and lean, with a rugged air about him. His coarse black hair defied the laws of uniformity, and his steel-blue eyes carried a warmth and an intensity that was both disarming and unnerving. It was obvious his nose had been broken a number of times, with the resulting raised ridge giving off a distinct hawkish vibe. He could have been described as unforgiving, if not for his broad gentle smile.

Mary stood across from Josh, on the leeward side of the river, hidden in a clump of river reeds and cattails. She was pulling hard on a cigarette, her third smoke of the day, and had a tight grasp on a near empty mickey of Rugger's Lemon Gin. Mary always needed a smoke to get her day rolling, and she always needed a sip of gin too. Because, as she had told Josh years ago: "It tastes good." She took another puff, put the bottle of gin to her mouth and chugged back a couple of gulps, smacking her lips with loud, sloppy satisfaction.

Blocking out her antics, Josh stepped up onto a sandbar and felt the water level drop from his crotch to his knees. He took another step and the toe of his boot hit

something solid. As he bent down to check it out, his lower back muscle grabbed and knotted. “Ahhh man,” he muttered. It wasn’t the first time it had acted up and he knew if he waited, chances were it would soon release its grip. Bent over and clutching his knees with both hands, he waited while Mary, not twenty feet away, continued with her annoying morning ritual.

Mary was short in stature, five-foot-one, wiry, and walked like a lumberjack. Her hair was clipped to just below her ears, and her generous nose sat below her black smoky eyes.

After a long minute of listening to Mary, and satisfied a full spasm had once again been averted, Josh reached down and stuck his hands into the murky water. “Hey Mary—I have something here. I think it’s a log . . . and it has a hole under it,” he said, with a hint of excitement in his voice. “Whoa—something just nibbled at my fingers.”

Josh could hear Mary sloshing around in the reeds.

“Don’t go messing with it, I’m coming right over,” she said. “I’ll show you how it’s done.” She slipped her mickey back into her vest pocket and parted the bulrushes with her arms. She had on a faded yellow T-shirt, a lightweight open green vest, and baggy blue jeans torn at the knees. She clenched her lit cigarette between her lips as she sloshed over to where Josh stood. “Now don’t go getting your panties in a knot. Patience . . . that’s what makes a good noodler.”

She bent down, grunted, and slipped her hands into the water. “It’s a fine log all right,” she said, and ran her hands along the bottom of it until she found the hole. “Big hole, could be a big fish.” She wiggled her fingers over the opening, the only

time-tested way to get a catfish to strike. Nothing. She wiggled them again. Nothing again. She got down on her knees, grunting louder this time, and rammed her forearm deep into the nest. Josh winced in anticipation. No strike, not even a nibble. Determined, she drove her arm further in, until the river water rose to her chin. She rolled her cigarette upwards with her lips, like it was a tiny periscope. "An old hole, I got nothing moving in here," she said and smirked, just as water slapped up under her chin, some of it leaking into her mouth. She spat the water out the side of her mouth, careful to keep her smoke alive. "But—maybe that's what makes you such a fine writer, your wonderful imagination and all."

"Yeah, yeah," Josh said, and lowered his voice. "Oh . . . and speaking of that, I meant to tell you. I have to be in New York, to see Janis the day after tomorrow." He stopped, considered his options and then asked, "Any chance you'd be able to check in on Eddie for a few days?"

"Ahh yeah . . . I guess."

Josh knew that she'd just as soon not have to feed and walk Eddie and pick up his big turds. If there was such a thing as shit envy, Josh figured all the other dogs at the dog park had to be deliriously jealous. Eddie was a large chocolate lab, weighed 115 pounds, slept 23 hours a day, snored like a drunk, and shit like he was laying a pipeline across the prairies.

Mary stood up and locked eyes with Josh. The sun had just burnt through the morning mist, illuminating her face. Her cheeks had flushed to cherry red, as had the tip of her nose.

“Been nippin’ at the mash have ya, my love?” Josh asked, and immediately sensed Mary’s distaste. The obvious always pissed her off.

Mary’s short, raven-black hair was pinned back at the bangs, revealing her latest dye job that had bled out from her hairline. Her cigarette, still lit, hung from her lower lip. With her eyes still locked on his, she took a long drag, and let the gray streams of smoke escape out of her nostrils.

Josh went on. “Ya know, if your face was a baboon’s ass, people would say you’re in heat.”

“Oh, ain’t you the funny one . . . if your face was a baboon’s ass, they’d have to say your looks have improved.” Some real attitude materialized in her eyes, followed by a diminutive grin that soon evaporated.

Mary was small by any noodler standards. Not the frame that would be recommended for pulling a big catfish from its underwater nest. A fully-grown man found noodling tough enough, and she barely tipped the scales at 100 pounds. But it takes more than weight on your side to be a good noodler. Mary liked to say, if you’re going to stick your hand in front of a hole and wiggle your fingers hoping a fish half your size clamps down on you, you got to have nerves as hard as a coal miner’s lung.

And it wasn’t just the catfish you had to be worried about. All seasoned noodlers of the Deep South had their pet stories of fingers lost to snapping turtles. One particularly poignant story Mary liked to recant at Crawlies Pub after a draft or two, was that of Three Fingers Joe. A sad tale to be sure, but not as sad as his sister, Sally Two Fingers. Mary had all her digits and was proud of it.

The noodler rulebook had but one golden rule. Never noodle alone. You can get yourself dragged under, and if you do, you need your buddy there to grab you by your ankles and pull you to shore. At just over six feet two inches and 212 pounds, Josh pondered the logistics of Mary coming to his rescue, but decided to keep it to himself. Mary was like one of those scrappy little dogs, completely unaware of her limitations, and he had no intention of breaking that illusion. He liked her just the way she was.

Long before they could see the approaching vehicle, a dust cloud from its wake announced it was coming their way.

“It’s a three-quarter-ton,” Josh said. “It’s coming fast, bad news I suspect.”

“You’re so full of shit. It’s a half-ton,” Mary responded, then added, “and, it’s white with blue detailing.”

“Detailing? You’re so full of shit. It’s a three-quarter-ton, no doubt about it, and it’s blue.”

After a minute, a late-model four-door sedan, brown in color, with Sheriff stenciled in yellow on the driver’s door, pulled up and cut its engine. Sheriff Howard Jackson got out of the car and stretched. He was a tall man, in his late fifties, with thinning hair and a chest that had slipped to his belly. And when he’d been out drinking all night, he walked with a pronounced limp. Today Josh could see the sheriff struggling to keep a straight line as he approached.

“Morning, Josh. Mary. You two aren’t easy to find,” he said. “Having any luck?”

“Only thing we got so far is Josh’s imagination.”

The sheriff let the comment go. “Josh, I got a call from the Feds in New York this morning. It was a woman, she says they’ve been looking for you in a big way. She came across stressed, but she sounded darn good on the phone—called herself Rachael Tanner.” He shifted his belt. “Heck, with a voice like that I could’ve listened to her all day.”

“Well . . . she knows I’m not in the game, right, Sheriff?”

Sheriff Jackson didn’t reply.

“Howard, it’s the Noodle Bowl. Mary and I’ve been planning this since Christ was a cowboy.”

“I know that, and I told her it’s the Bowl, but she was real persistent. Said she had to talk to you, and if you were to give me any resistance, to tell you that . . . *O’Henry’s* back.” He paused, scratched at his bald spot, and a frown formed on his face. “Yeah, I think that’s right. Yeah, that was his name. Anyway, she said there’s more to it, but she wants to tell you in person.”

“Well, you can tell her thanks but no thanks,” Josh said. “And let’s be clear . . . if this really is *O’Henry*, he stepped on stage long after I’d left the Bureau. It’s been ten years, Howard. It’s not my problem.”

“She said they found a woman, thirty-one years of age, Harvard educated, her whole life ahead of her. Said it’s this guy *O’Henry’s* work, and it wasn’t pretty. She said she could really use your help before he takes another. She said that they—that is, the FBI—messed up last time and *O’Henry* disappeared. Now he’s back, and they’re going to need the best. She told me you’re the best there ever was.”

Mary rolled her eyes, leaned back, her thumbs stuck in her jean pockets, and said, "Oh, you *gotta* be shitting me."

Josh said, "Come on Howard, I've not heard a word from the Bureau in all these years."

The sheriff had a blank look on his face.

"Ah, goddamnit Howard, tell her . . . tell her I'll . . ." Josh glanced over and could see a storm brewing on Mary's face. "Just give me a second, okay?" He turned to Mary.

"Don't bullshit me Josh, I know that look in your eye; you're already getting ready to commit." Mary started to cough, a dry rasping hack that came upon her at least once a day. "You're unreal, you know that? Some broad strokes your little dick, and that's all it takes to knock you off the ball. It's the Noodle Bowl, Josh. It don't come but once a year."

Josh didn't respond.

"You're an asshole, you know that?"

Josh swallowed. "Look, I'll be in New York anyway to see Janis. I could catch the eight o'clock tonight, get there a day ahead and throw my two cents worth in. End of story. No harm, no foul. And if this is O'Henry, and he takes another life, I'm not sure I'd be okay with myself if I didn't at least talk to her. Maybe it won't make a difference . . . but it'll make a difference to me."

"Yeah, yeah sure, whatever," Mary said. "You know it's going to put you back in the hole. Took you years to climb out. You sure you want to go back in?"

“Thanks Mary, but you worry too much . . .” He could see she wasn’t buying it.

“Hey, come on. I’ll be fine.”

Mary shook her head and grunted.

Sheriff Jackson glanced at Josh and grinned. “Nice waders,” he said, and then climbed back into his car and drove off, leaving a trail of dust behind him.

Mary paused for a moment, rubbing the palm of her hand on her cheek. “I guess, if you’re catching the eight o’clock, we’d better get your tight ass home.”