

THE DEVIL'S BACKBONE

Excerpt

It had taken CJ nearly an hour to quietly inch his way into position next to the driver's-side door of Bobby Two-Shirts's pickup. The Colorado evening sky was now peppered with stars, and coyote pups yelped in the distance. A crazy quilt of houndstooth burrs and thistle dotted the front of CJ's shirt. His Levis were soaked belt buckle to boot tops from a belly crawl through an icy mountain stream that he hadn't seen when he first charted his route across the meadow that separated him from Bobby Two-Shirts. Hugging the ground, he stopped at the left rear tire of Bobby's pickup and pulled the dark green trash bag he was dragging up next to his shoulder. He froze a moment, listening to the intermittent guttural snores coming from the cab of the truck. Assured that Bobby was asleep, CJ reached inside the trash bag and pulled out the dead rattler. The snake's rubber-hose pliability was gone. During the six hours that CJ had waited impatiently for darkness and for Bobby Two-Shirts to settle into his cab for the night, rigor mortis had given the rattlesnake the rigidity of a bamboo pole. Death had also left behind a nauseating God-awful smell.

During his three days of trailing Bobby Two-Shirts across the Rockies' Western Slope, CJ had methodically catalogued the frail bond skipper's habits. Each evening, after a day of hanging out in small-town gas stations and bars, bullshitting with the locals and guzzling beer, Bobby would pull into a heavily wooded U.S. Forest Service campsite, making certain there were no other vehicles or campers around, nestle his rig into a space among the trees, and then wolf down a couple of bologna sandwiches and three or four final beers. Before turning in he checked the .357 Magnum he strapped to his belt at sunset, slipped a couple extra clips of ammo into his shirt pocket, and climbed into the cab for the night. He always left the truck's windows cracked and locked the doors before stretching out across the front seat.

CJ fished the pungent rattlesnake out of the trash bag, still puzzled at why Bobby Two-Shirts had chosen Chokecherry Draw for his third Western Slope pit stop. The draw was as isolated a spot as Bobby could have found in Colorado, but the illegal contraband he was hauling wasn't plutonium. A horse trailer full of illegal fireworks could have been exchanged on any street in Denver. CJ's gut feeling that Bobby had to be trucking around a more dangerous commodity or that he was doing business with someone who didn't want to be seen. He was inching up on his haunches, rattler in hand, ready to spear the snake through the eight-inch window opening, when in the distance he heard a vehicle approaching. It took him a few seconds to peg the guttural sound of a tractor-trailer straining its way up the draw's seven percent grade. In the time it took for CJ to decide whether to fold his cards or complete his plan, Bobby also heard the diesel's throaty roar and inched up on his elbows in the cab.

Aiming for the window opening, CJ let the rattlesnake fly.

Bobby screamed, realizing there was a baseball-bat-length rotten-smelling animal of some sort now occupying the front seat with him. He reached for the cab light switch above his head with one hand. With the other he fumbled on the seat for his .357. Gun in hand, he burst from the cab with the barrel pointed twelve o'clock high.

His feet had barely touched the ground when CJ reached out, grabbed him around the neck and yanked him squarely to the ground.

"What the..." shouted Bobby.

Before he could say another word CJ had one knee across his neck, all of his 235 pounds pressing against Bobby Two-Shirts's Adam's apple. As Bobby tried to wiggle free, CJ slipped his .38 out of his back pocket and jammed the barrel against Bobby's right nostril. "Who's in the rig heading up the draw?"

Bobby smiled. "Your mother."

A few years earlier CJ might have thought about shooting the skinny bond skipper but recently he had made a promise to himself and Mavis Sundee, the feminine soft spot in his otherwise hard-edged life, that he would learn to control his temper. He dropped his thumb on the .38's hammer. "Who's in the rig?" he said, momentarily easing the full weight of his body off Bobby Two-Shirts's neck.

"Someone who'll kill your black ass. Count on it."

CJ shot a nervous glance in the direction of the diesel. He guessed the semi was still two or three minutes away. When Bobby suddenly began wriggling violently, CJ subdued him with another knee crush to the throat. Then he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a set of handcuffs. "Over on your stomach." He eased the barrel of his .38 against Bobby's forehead.

Bobby Two-Shirts rolled over obligingly before tweaking CJ once again. "She'll kill you, whoever the shit you are," he said, now flat on his stomach.

CJ slapped the handcuffs on Bobby's bony wrists and stood up, pulling Bobby with him. "Got a date with a judge in Denver, Mr. Fireworks Kingpin. We better get going."

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