

COPPERHEAD COVE

Copperhead Cove
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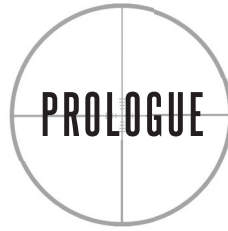
COPPERHEAD COVE



RON PARHAM



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PROLOGUE

It was a different world than when he was young, the days when you could whack somebody and get away with it, even gain the envy and respect of the other wise guys, maybe even move up in the chain of command. But now? Hell no. Organized crime was underground, invisible—corporate, for God’s sake. Anthony “Two Toes” Tonelli paced back and forth, mumbling to himself, occasionally slamming the wall with his open palm. He glared out the window of his sixty-second floor office overlooking Michigan Avenue.

All those empty suits down there, they don’t give a damn about us anymore. They don’t even think we exist. Television, movies, books, they all make fun of us now, write us off as a bunch of cafones, an embarrassment.

He stared out at the Chicago skyline, hands laced behind his back, then turned around and paced back to the other side of his well-appointed office. He was a top corporate lawyer, a respected pillar of the Chicago community, a donor to many charities, but in his heart and soul he was the Don of the Southside Family. He was the boss, the capo.

Tonelli looked at his reflection in the floor to ceiling window. He brushed his thinning, graying hair back and smiled. He saw a large man who filled out his double-breasted suit but carried it well. His smile turned to a frown as he peered down at Michigan Avenue again.

I’ll show those jamooks that we’re still around, still able to take care of our business, and put the fear back in all those empty suits down there in the street.

He had to do something, but what could he do in today’s world that wouldn’t bring the wrath of the FBI down on his head? The friggin’ feds

had no respect for them anymore, just a minor inconvenience in a world of terrorism. Wise guys were ancient history, little ants for the FBI to crush under their shoes. He pressed the button on his phone.

"Maria, tell Frankie to come up to my office."

"Yes, Mr. Tonelli," his secretary said, smacking her gum into the phone. "He may be at lunch."

"Just get him. And Maria, what's the date?"

"The day or the date?" she said, smacking on her gum again.

"The date, goddammit!" *I'm gonna shove that gum up her ass one of these days.*

"Well, it's May twentieth. Do you want the day or date?"

Tonelli punched the button to end the call. *I'm surrounded by morons.*

Tonelli began pacing again, his mind racing from one idea to the next. Goddammit! He was a crime boss, he had obligations. He had to make examples when someone crossed him, had to keep their respect, goddammit!

"Mr. Tonelli, Frankie's on the line."

Tonelli punched the lit button. "Frankie, where the hell are you?"

"I'm at lunch, boss. I didn't think you needed me for a while."

"Well, get your ass back up here. Five minutes." Tonelli slammed the phone down.

He began pacing and mumbling, waiting for the young punk to show up. He was just about to call his secretary when her voice came over the phone.

"Mr. Tonelli, Frankie's here."

Tonelli pushed the button. "Get his ass in here!"

Frankie Farmer walked into Tonelli's office, smelling of garlic, using his sleeve to wipe marinara sauce from his chin.

"What's up, boss?" he said, picking his teeth with a toothpick.

"Get that goddamned toothpick out of your mouth, you peasant!"

"What? Oh, sorry boss. What's up?"

Tonelli stared at his son-in-law, his blond hair and blue eyes and skinny ass a constant irritant. What his daughter saw in this loser he'd never understand. *And where did he get that Podunk name of Farmer? How can I get any respect when my only daughter is married to someone named Farmer? Goddammit!*

"What's up? I'll tell you what's up, you friggin' imbecile. You remember that bozo coach from Podunk U? The one that YOU said you convinced to shave points last March? You remember him?"

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“Podunk U?” Frankie said, scratching his head. “Oh,” he laughed, “you mean Midwestern University. That’s funny, boss.”

Tonelli stared at him. *I should shoot this bonehead right now, right here.*

“Did your mother drop you on your head when you were a baby?” Tonelli said, towering over the younger man.

“Uh, I don’t think so,” Frankie said, looking up nervously. “Course, I was a little baby, so can’t really remember.”

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up!” Tonelli rubbed his graying temples and closed his eyes.

Frankie stepped back. “Okay, boss.”

“What was the guy’s name?”

“The guy? Oh, yeah. Williams,” Frankie said. “Jerry Joe Williams. Why?”

Tonelli opened his eyes and glared at the young wannabe thug. “Because he didn’t do what he said he was gonna do, and he took our money . . . my money!”

“Well, boss, I hate to differ with you, but—”

“You hate to differ with me? Is that what you just said?” Tonelli’s eyes were blazing.

“Uh, well, yeah, ’cause he did bench his best player in the final period against St. Johns.”

“And why did he do that?” Tonelli said, taking a step toward Frankie.

“Well, I guess because he fouled out.” Frankie took a step backward, wiping sweat from his forehead.

“Exactly, he fouled out. Did the coach tell him to foul out?”

“I don’t know, maybe,” Frankie said. “Anyway, the guy couldn’t score anymore, so—”

“Shut up! The coach didn’t do what he told us he would do. You know why? The kid that replaced his star player scored twenty points in the fourth quarter! They covered the spread because some dipshit second stringer wanted to be a star. Where was the goddamned coach?”

“Hmm. Never thought about that.”

“You know how much we lost on that one game? That one game that we thought we had in the bag, that we paid that idiot coach fifty large to make sure they didn’t cover the spread?”

Frankie shrugged his shoulders.

“I dunno, boss.”

Tonelli walked up to Frankie and put his face an inch from his.

"A million, that's how much. We lost a million fucking bucks because one Podunk coach from Podunk wherever couldn't get a Podunk second stringer out of the game." Tonelli stepped back. "What should we do about that, Frankie?"

Frankie put his finger under his collar, pulled it out, and blew out a deep breath.

"I guess we have to talk to him and get our money back?"

Tonelli stared at him, finally throwing his arms up in the air.

"Our money? My money, you friggin' . . . Talk to him?" His face was deep red, the veins in his neck sticking out like twigs on a branch. "We don't talk to him," Tonelli said, putting his index finger on Frankie's temple. "We pop him! Bada bing, bada boom."

Frankie's eyes bulged. "We . . . we don't do that anymore . . . do we?"

Tonelli calmed down and looked toward his office door.

"C'mere, you little prick," he said, barely audible.

Frankie walked slowly toward his boss, the fear palpable in his eyes.

Tonelli grabbed him by his tie and pulled him close, putting his mouth next to Frankie's ear.

"We ice him and send a message to every other asshole out there that we won't be fucked with."

Frankie gulped some air, his face getting red as the tie tightened around his neck.

"And you're going to arrange it, you and Augie."

"Augie Stellato?" Frankie said, his eyes bulging again. "I thought he was dead." He gasped.

Tonelli let loose of Frankie's tie.

"No, he's not dead, you jamook. He's just been . . . in hibernation. I'll have him here tomorrow."

"But why me, boss?" Frankie said, rubbing his throat. "I ain't never killed anybody."

"Augie will whack him, but I want you to watch and learn. And be my eyes. Capisci?"

"Okay, boss. Uh, Capeesh."

Tonelli held his ears. "And find out where that Podunk coach is going to be in the next two weeks. We'll ice him when he's alone somewhere."

Frankie swallowed again and began backing out of the office. "Uh, okay."



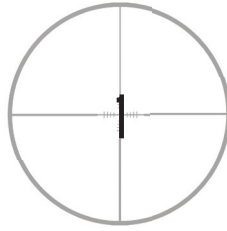
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“One more thing,” Tonelli said. “This doesn’t get out to anyone, and I mean anyone, and that includes my daughter. Understand?”

He gulped air. “Yeah, boss, er, Dad.”

Tonelli tensed as he picked up a stapler and threw it at Frankie’s head as the young punk ran out the door, the stapler shattering into tiny pieces against the wall.

“I’m not your dad, you friggin’ moron!”



The two brothers sat motionless in the cherry-red bass boat, staring at their respective fishing lines like hawks circling the landscape for their next meal. The water was as still as mirrored glass, with no ripples or abstractions, reflecting the setting sun overhead. The silence was broken only by the occasional song of a bird. They watched their lines on the surface, waiting for a slight dip or movement. The weighted hooks, with tube jig lures, were somewhere close to the bottom where the smallmouth liked to feed.

The stillness was suddenly broken by the whirl of a fishing line as something grabbed a hook and ran.

“Got one,” Bo Paxton said, jerking his fiberglass rod upwards and back in one smooth motion. “Good sized sucker, too.”

Bo fought the fish with an ease and confidence that came with experience. Ethan Paxton watched his older brother with envy and a little bit of annoyance. This was the fifth smallmouth of the day for Bo, and Ethan had only a single, tiny bluegill to show for his efforts.

“Way to go, big brother,” he said, with a hint of sarcasm. “You think the bass know I’m from the city? They want nothing to do with me today.”

Bo laughed as he reeled the fish in effortlessly, stretching the net out to capture it. He held it up over his head, smiling broadly as only Bo could.

“Good four-pounder, little brother,” he said, admiring his catch.

Ethan looked at him with the admiration one would give a professional athlete or world-class musician, witnessing a true professional at work.



"I thought you threw everything back under five pounds," he said, grinning. "Save some for the rest of us, bro."

Bo laughed the way someone would who loved what he did for a living. He was a fishing guide on a lake with a six-hundred-mile shoreline that straddled Kentucky and Tennessee, and he got paid for doing what most men did for relaxation.

"It's your last day, little brother," Bo said, taking the hook out of the bass's mouth and tossing the fish back into the lake. "We can't go home until you land one."

"You gave me a bad rod or something," Ethan said. "Lend me your rod, maybe the fish will think I'm you."

Bo reared his head back and laughed.

"You know how many times I've heard that from my clients? It ain't the pole, son, it's the man on the business end of it that counts." He threw a live cricket at his brother. "Here, use this guy. They like crickets."

Ethan ducked the flying insect and watched it hop on the bottom of the boat.

"You tell me this after we've been out here all day? Where was this information when we first cast out this morning?"

"Well, hell, little brother, I can't do everything for you. Watch and learn, son. Watch and learn."

Ethan put the cricket on his lure and shook his head as Bo cast his line back into the smooth water of Quail Hollow Lake. He enjoyed sitting back and watching his brother, getting more enjoyment out of that than the fishing itself. Bo had such an ease about him, a carefree spirit that Ethan had long admired. He'd been staying with his brother on his little farm in the southern hills of Kentucky for three days, taking a break from business meetings in the Midwest. He had to drive two hundred miles the next day, and he cringed at the thought. Chicago last week, Memphis this week.

"Well, Ethan, you can at least crack me another beer," Bo said. "You're good at that, son."

"Screw you, asshole," he said as he cracked another Pabst Blue Ribbon and handed it to his brother.

Bo laughed the hearty laugh of someone that was content with his life. Ethan envied him for his simple life, his enjoyment of the little things. Ethan had been working in the high-tech world for almost twenty years, traveling

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the globe and racking up thousands of flight miles. He loved coming to Kentucky just to decompress and clear his mind of the stresses and demands of his job. He suddenly felt empty and sad when he thought about leaving the next morning.

“Sure hate to leave tomorrow, Bo,” Ethan said as he made a decent cast into the smooth water.

“I keep tellin’ you, little brother, tell them to take that job and shove it. Move back here with me and Kathy and the kids. Hell, with the money you’ve made you could buy half of Crockett County.”

“Yeah, I wish it was that simple, Bo. I’ve got a son in college, a daughter in private school who’ll be going to college in a few months, and a half-million-dollar house to pay for. I can’t just say adios and move to the country.”

“Well, that’s what I did fifteen years ago, and I’m as happy as a pig in slop. Ain’t got much money, but son, I’ve got a hell of a lot more.”

Ethan nodded. His brother was the happiest, most secure, and content person he knew. Bo had his own little corner of the world here on Quail Hollow Lake and didn’t have a care. He had bills and expenses just like everyone, but he never worried about them like most of the civilized world. Ethan looked at his forty-eight-year-old brother, four years older than himself, sitting there waiting for the next smallmouth bass to hit his line. He loved his brother and his family and respected Bo for chucking it all and moving to this remote, rural area. Bo had been a mover and a shaker himself when he was in his twenties but decided early on that he didn’t want that kind of life, so he left California with his wife and two small children, found an eighty-acre plot of land close to the lake, and settled down. Kind of like the Beverly Hillbillies in reverse. Ethan always admired his brother for what he did and thought many times of taking him up on his offer.

“When are we going to head back in, Bo?”

“You gettin’ restless, little brother? Anxious to get back to the grind?”

Ethan shook his head. “No, but I have to make a couple of calls tonight. Work stuff. Believe me, I don’t want to leave, but it’d be nice if I had a smallmouth to show for being out here all day.”

Just then, Ethan felt a tug on his line. He held his six-foot rod in one hand and lifted the six-pound test line with his other, feeling the tension, just as his brother had taught him.

“Gently, son, gently,” Bo said. “Don’t wanna scare him off.”

Ethan waited, feeling the tension on the line grow. When it went taut, he jerked his rod upwards. The line whistled out of the reel as the fish began its run.

“Holy crap, Bo. It’s a big one.”

“Well, bring her in, son. Don’t talk about it, just do it.”

Ethan pulled on the rod and frantically spun the reel, the smallmouth putting up a fight. He pulled the fish closer and closer, each time setting the hook a little deeper. After several minutes of fighting the fish, he was exhausted. Suddenly, it quit struggling. He began reeling it in and then looked down into the clear, green water and saw the most beautiful smallmouth bass he had ever seen. Bo put the net into the water and brought the fish up in one swift motion.

“Holy crap!” Ethan said. “How big is it, Bo?”

Bo was grinning from ear to ear. “I think you just landed the biggest of the day, little brother. You got a seven pounder for sure.”

Ethan laughed as he held the wriggling fish up over his head with one hand.

“Hold it up while I get a picture of this,” Bo said, grabbing his little disposable camera. “May be the only one you ever catch, little brother.”

Ethan grinned broadly as his older brother snapped the picture.

“Way to go, son. Now we can go home.” Bo took the hook out of the bass’s mouth and put it in the live well with three other smaller fish. “And we’re having this baby for dinner tonight.”

Ethan grinned as widely as his mouth would stretch. He felt the glow of success. As Bo pulled the anchor up and started the motor, Ethan gazed at the quiet cove.

“What’s the name of this cove, again?”

“I call it Copperhead Cove,” Bo said. “I’ve been coming here for over ten years. It’s my own private spot. I never bring clients here. This is for me and my family. Hardly anyone else knows about it.”

As the boat sped out onto the main part of the lake, Ethan looked behind him at the idyllic cove. It was formed in a semi-circle and was isolated from the main lake by big pines and cottonwoods that towered over the cove, keeping it hidden from the average tourist or boater. Ethan hadn’t seen another boat in the cove all day.

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“Love this place, Bo. Why’d you name it Copperhead Cove?”

Bo pulled his right pant leg up and showed his brother healed-over bite marks.

“That’s why. A mean, old copperhead clipped me while I was pulling my pontoon boat up on the shore a few years back. That sucker wanted to bite me again, but I jumped into the boat before he could sink his fangs in me. Thank God I had a snakebite kit with me. I injected the anti-venom serum in my leg and took off for the dock. I was a sick puppy for a few days.”

Ethan stared at the two red welts on his brother’s leg.

“Damn, Bo. Glad you didn’t tell me that earlier. What would happen if you didn’t have the anti-venom serum?”

“Just be sick as a dog for a while. Throbbing pain, nausea, stuff like that. Copperheads have some serious stuff in their fangs, but unless they bite you more than once it’s usually not fatal. If you make ‘em real mad and don’t get away, they’ll clip you three or four times. That’s when it’s fatal. Every fishing guide on the lake carries a kit with him, and if they don’t they’re playing Russian roulette out here.”

Ethan narrowed his eyes as he glanced back at the cove, looking at it a little differently now. Bo looked at his brother.

“The cottonmouth is the one that scares the crap outta me. Those suckers pack a wallop.”

“You have those around here, too?”

“Oh, yeah. Some folks call ‘em water moccasins. They stay in the marshy stuff, like in creeks, rivers, sometimes in coves like Copperhead Cove. Never been bitten by one ‘cause one bite will put you down.”

“Damn,” Ethan said. “Such a beautiful little cove, but so dangerous.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t go on the shore much anymore, especially in the cove. An old dog learns his lessons well. I just stay out on the water and play with the smallmouth at the bottom. That’s good enough for ol’ Bo.”

They traveled in silence for a while, the hot June sun warming them and the wind whipping at their faces while they sped down the middle of the huge lake. Finally, Ethan broke the silence, having to yell over the out-board motor.

“How’s the guide business going? You making any money?”

Bo grinned at his brother, who was sitting in the back of the boat, hat off, the wind whipping his salt and pepper hair.

"Guess who I'm taking out in a couple days?"

Ethan looked at his brother. "Who?"

"You're a big sports fan, right?"

"Yeah."

"You follow college basketball?"

"Yeah."

"You heard of Sonny Daye, coach at Southern Tennessee?"

"Hell, yeah. They won the NCAA championship this year," Ethan said.

"No way! You're taking Sonny Daye out?"

Bo had a big grin on his face. "Yep. And another big-time coach from somewhere in Iowa or Indiana, can't remember which."

Ethan stared at his brother.

"I'll be goddamned, Bo. What's the other coach's name?"

"Williams, I think. He made the final four and lost against Sonny Daye's team."

Ethan nodded. "Yeah, Jerry Joe Williams, coach at Midwestern, in Iowa."

"That's him. And the best part is they're paying me double my usual fee,"

Bo said proudly. "It's going to be a big payday for ol' Bo."

Ethan grinned at his brother.

"I'll be goddamned."

The two brothers rode the rest of the way in silence, the sun almost down and the beer having its effect.



Bo picked at his plate, getting every last piece of the fish from the bones.

"That was a mighty nice bass you caught, Ethan. Best eatin' we've had yet this summer."

Ethan had finished his meal and was sitting back in his deck chair, looking out at the peaceful surroundings of his brother's farm. Bo had built a redwood deck just off of the kitchen, and that's where they spent every summer evening until the sun went behind the hills. Ethan especially enjoyed the small pond that his brother had dug and supplied with fish, frogs, and other wildlife. At dusk, the wildlife was active around the little pond, with ducks quacking and diving for fish, bullfrogs belching, and the occasional rabbit or furry critter wandering up from the creek.

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"I love it here, Bo. I really do," Ethan said, leaning back, his arms behind his head. "Sure beats sitting on an airplane for fourteen hours at a time and fighting with security and immigration lines."

Bo looked over at his brother, a contented smile on his face, along with barbeque sauce in his beard.

"Well, you know you can chuck it all whenever you want to and move back here. Hell, I'll clear off some land over there by the pond, and we'll build you a little shack. You can fish from your porch."

Ethan smiled at this. He'd dreamed of doing just that many times while crossing the Pacific or Atlantic oceans. He was forty-four years old, his children almost grown and on their own.

"It's real tempting, Bo. Once Molly goes off to college I might think about it a little more seriously. I do love it here."

"Speaking of Molly," Bo said between bites and licking his fingers, "how's she doin'? Did she get over that deal she went through a couple years ago?"

Ethan's smile faded as he thought about the nightmare of 9/11, when Molly was kidnapped by a crazed Mexican sex-trafficker. She had made it out thanks to his good friend Jake Delgado and lots of help from some ex-San Diego cops. Molly was sixteen when 9/11 happened, and it had taken her nearly a year to get over the nightmares. Now she was a beautiful seventeen, almost eighteen-year-old, in her final year at Santa Elena Academy in California, and due to graduate in a week.

"It took a long time," Ethan said. "She had nightmares almost every night for quite a while. But, like everything, they eventually faded away. She has a boyfriend." He frowned at that part. "But he's a good kid, a football player, nice family." He looked up at the trees surrounding the hollow. "She got a scholarship to UC San Diego, so I'll be an empty-nester in the fall."

Bo was staring at him. "That was hell on you, too, wasn't it? I mean, being in Europe and not able to get home, then finding out your little girl is kidnapped." Bo shook his head. "Hell of a deal."

Ethan continued to look up at the pines on the crest of the hollow.

"Two good things came out of it," he said, not looking at Bo. "My renewed friendship with Jake Delgado is strong. We talk about once a month. And Vicki."

Bo looked at him, his eyes softening.

"How's that going, her being in Mexico and all?"

Ethan lowered his head and looked at Bo.

"Well, guess I might as well tell you now." Ethan took a deep breath and blew it out. "We're getting married in September."

Bo straightened up as a grin filled his face.

"No shit? Ha! Congratulations, son, that's great news," he said. "Hey, mother, come out here. Got some news!"

Ethan grinned broadly as he waited for Kathy Paxton to step out to the deck. She was a handsome woman, big-boned but attractive, with flaming-red hair and an easy smile. She was the perfect mate for his brother. Kathy came out, wiping her hands with a dish towel.

"What's all the racket out here, you two?"

Bo was beside himself.

"Remember that gorgeous Mexican gal that Ethan brought out here last summer, the one he met in Mexico when, uh, well, you remember."

"Victoria? Sure, she was so nice, and she couldn't keep her eyes off of Ethan," Kathy said, smiling at her brother-in-law. "Why, what's—"

"They're gettin' hitched!" Bo said, unable to wait.

Kathy's mouth fell open, and a scream escaped that sent the ducks on the pond flying and quacking toward the trees.

"Ethan!" she yelled as she ran to him and gave him a big, long, bear hug. "Congratulations."

Bo, grinning like a boy at Christmas, just watched as his wife and little brother did a little dance on the deck.

"Son, I didn't think you'd ever take that step again. I mean, when Connie died"

"Bo, knock it off," Kathy said, frowning at her exuberant husband. "Your brother's getting married, nothing else matters."

Bo nodded at his wife of twenty-five years.

"Sorry," he said, like a scolded child. "But I'm just so damn happy for you, son!" His grin was back in a flash.

Ethan couldn't get the smile off his face as Bo and Kathy Paxton took turns hugging and jostling him. He had proposed to Victoria Calderon two weeks before, when she flew into Los Angeles on a charter trip. They had seen each other sporadically since the ordeal of 9/11, and Ethan had wondered if they would ever have a chance to build their relationship. As a charter pilot in Mexico, she was almost always gone and hardly ever had

time off. His travel and work schedule kept him flying all over the world, so it was a miracle that they both had three days free at the same time in May. They spent the entire three days on Catalina Island and rarely ever left their hotel room. When they finally emerged, they were engaged.

Bo popped open three Pabst Blue Ribbons and handed one to Kathy and one to Ethan.

"A toast to my little brother, who I thought would remain a bachelor forever. You hooked a good woman, son, and now you'll be able to skin her and—"

"Bo!" Kathy said, frowning again. "She's not a fish, for crying out loud."

"Ah, hell, woman, I was just using one of them, whatcha call, analogies. Ethan got me, right?"

Ethan was laughing so hard he couldn't speak. Bo broke out laughing, slapping his knee, and then Kathy smiled, chuckled, then laughed until she had tears in her eyes. Garth and Brooks, Bo's hunting dogs, looked up at the crazy humans, cocking their heads and whimpering. The ducks flew off the pond again, heading for a quieter environment. Finally, Bo got himself under control.

"What about Charlie and Molly? You tell them yet?"

Ethan quit laughing, the smile fading from his face.

"No, not yet. Charlie's taking finals at UCLA this week, and Molly is . . ."

Kathy grabbed Ethan's hand. "You think Molly will be upset because of, well, her mom and what happened in Mexico?"

Ethan's mood turned serious.

"She's not over her mom's death yet. The ordeal in Mexico riled things up inside of her, and she's been struggling with Connie's death, with her birth mom, and the lady she met in Mexico." Ethan pursed his lips. "I just didn't want to upset her right now, you know?"

"Does she like Victoria?" Kathy said.

"Oh, yeah, she loves her," Ethan replied. "But they haven't seen much of her since the . . . kidnapping, what with Vicki's schedule and living in Mexico . . . you know."

Bo walked over and clapped his brother on the shoulder.

"You need to trust her feelings. You shouldn't hide it from her or Charlie. They deserve to know."

Ethan looked at his brother and nodded.

"You're right. I'll tell them this weekend when I get home from Memphis. Thanks, you guys."

Bo slapped Ethan's shoulder again. "Now, let's party! My little brother is gettin' married!"

The ducks never came back that evening.



The next morning, Ethan got up early, showered and shaved, then tiptoed down the steep stairs and out of the house. His head was pounding from too many Pabst Blue Ribbons the night before, but he and his brother had had a great time. Kathy had given up before the first case of PBR was finished. He'd decided to let Bo sleep in and slip out quietly. Ethan hated goodbyes anyway. He opened the door to the deck and pushed it closed as gently as possible. The sun was barely peeking over the hills, the hollow slowly coming awake.

"Got the coffee brewin', little brother."

Ethan looked out on the deck, and there was Bo, sipping on his coffee and petting Garth. *I should have known I couldn't make it up before him.*

"Damn, Bo, I thought you'd be sleeping till noon today the way you pounded those PBR's last night."

"Well, I gotta admit, I feel some little fellas hammering nails in my head this morning, but I wasn't gonna let you sneak out without saying goodbye," he said. "I know you too well, son."

Ethan sighed and pulled out a chair on the deck and sat down. The coffee pot was on the table in front of him, along with his favorite coffee cup.

"Never could get up before you, Bo, but I thought I had a chance this morning."

Bo smiled, took a drink of the strong coffee, and gazed out over his domain.

"Sure is pretty, ain't it?"

Ethan looked out at the pond, the early morning steam rising into the air, and a couple of ducks waddling around.

"That it is, brother. You've made a nice life for yourself back here."

Bo just nodded, taking another swig of coffee.

"You ever miss California?"

"Not once in fifteen years. You can have all the traffic and yuppies and noise. I couldn't do it again, not in this lifetime."

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Ethan smiled, having heard the same thing from Bo for years.

"Well, maybe someday I'll join you back here." He gazed out at the tree-covered hollow, which they called "hollers" in Kentucky. He had an ache in his heart, knowing he was going back to the grind of meetings and deadlines and airplanes. He gulped his coffee down and stood up. "I've got to get on the road, Bo. I have meetings in Memphis this afternoon."

Bo just shook his head.

"Don't know how you do it, Ethan. But it's your choice. When you're ready, that plot of land next to the pond will be here waitin' for ya."

Ethan smiled and started walking toward his rental car. He had a four-hour drive ahead of him and an afternoon full of meetings. His shoulders sagged as he threw his suitcase into the trunk of the Buick LeSabre. He looked back and saw Bo slowly walking toward him, Garth at his side.

"Say hey to Charlie and Molly for me," he said. "Tell 'em I'm looking forward to them coming back again this summer. I got a houseboat reserved so we can park it in a quiet little cove for a couple days."

"Not Copperhead Cove," Ethan said, smiling.

"No, that's for fishing only. No swimming, camping, or exploring. We don't wanna run into the mean son-of-a-bitch that clipped me."

"I don't think they can make it this summer," Ethan replied. "Charlie is twenty-one now, heading into his senior year at UCLA, and may be doing some clerking for an attorney this summer. Molly's got a job for the summer, saving up for college in the fall."

"Ah, hell," Bo said, a grimace on his face. "Hope they don't forget about Uncle Bo."

"No chance. They'll be back someday." Ethan wiped a tear away. "Things change, Bo, that's the one thing we can count on."

"Well, goodbye, little brother," Bo said. "It's been fun, as always."

"Have fun with old Sonny Daye and Jerry Joe tomorrow," he said, hugging his brother and slapping his back. "Take some pictures and send 'em to me, will you?"

"Ah, hell, you know me and cameras. If it don't have a hook on it, I can't use it."

Ethan clapped his brother on the shoulder and climbed into his rented Buick.

"I love you, Bo."

“Love you, too, little brother,” Bo said, wiping a tear away. “Drive safe. See you in July.”

Ethan started the engine and backed out of the driveway. As he put it in drive, he waved to Bo, who was standing next to Garth, petting him behind the ears. He drove down the long, gravel driveway and made a sharp right turn next to the pond. He looked in his rearview mirror and saw Bo standing in the same spot, watching him, Garth still sitting at his side. The little farm disappeared from view as he crossed over the creek and onto the road that would take him back to civilization.