

CHAPTER ONE

Roydell D. Jones was the toughest five hundred dollars I ever earned.

Roydell was a six-foot, four-inch redbone hailing from Lafayette, Louisiana. He had a reputation for being a mean drunk and a fondness for driving fast cars belonging to somebody else. Fat Wally Sadler, the bail bondsman, had hired me to take a drive up to Corbin, Kentucky, on a hot, sticky Friday in August to find Roydell and bring him back to Nashville in time for a Monday morning court date. If Roydell didn't show, Fat Wally stood to lose the twenty-five-thousand-dollar bail he had posted to get Roydell sprung. If he did show, Roydell stood to lose the next three to five years out of his young life for crossing a state line with a brand-new, arrest-me-red Corvette he had appropriated from a Chevy dealer's lot after closing time.

I locked my office a little after four o'clock and headed north and east, toward the Kentucky state line. I stopped for gas and a greasy, all-you-can-eat catfish dinner at a roadhouse outside Somerset before finally arriving in Corbin about nine-thirty that night. Fat Wally had given me the name and address of a woman Roydell was known to be friendly with as a place to start looking. The woman's name was Glory. The address turned out to be a peeling, four-room shotgun shack across the road from the former Louisville & Nashville Railroad yard. In the Kentucky darkness, blue and yellow CSX diesel switch engines rumbled back and forth as they shuffled loaded coal hoppers recently down from the mines in Harlan County. I rapped on Glory's sagging screen door and waited.

The romance had evidently cooled since Fat Wally had gotten his information. Glory came to the door holding an ice bag against a nasty black eye and a split lip that had taken a couple of stitches to close. In her other hand was a half-empty bottle of Southern Comfort that she waved around like a conductor's baton as she talked. However, between the lip and the liquor, she wasn't able to express herself very clearly, except to say that Roydell had left her sometime in the late afternoon.

"You find that son-of-a-bitch, you cut his balls off and send 'em back here to me in a coffee can. I'll pay you a hunnerd dollars if'n you do." I gave her my sympathies and said I'd see what I could do. Then I waved Glory goodnight and drove off into the night, no closer to my man than when I had started.

Four hours and half a dozen roadside taverns later, I turned up Roydell in a nearly deserted country and western bar out on Route 25. The Corvette, now with its fiberglass right front fender shattered and partly dragging on the ground, was parked outside along with a couple of rusty pickups and a Harley Hog with ape-hanger handlebars that must have set somebody back close to thirty K. When I went inside, I found Roydell sitting by himself in a booth in the back, with a dozen empty longneck Pabst Blue Ribbon bottles on the table and a Jerry Jeff Walker song, "Mr. Bojangles," on the jukebox to keep him company. He was very, very drunk. His eyes were half closed, so that only the whites were showing through narrow slits, and his massive body was rocking back and forth in languorous time with the music. Like an old friend sharing

the burden of some deeply personal sorrow, I slid quietly into the booth across from him. As a show of goodwill, I folded my hands on the table where he could see them.

After what seemed like a suitable interval, I said in a low voice, "Fat Wally says you need to come back, Roydell. He says I got to bring you." I smiled sympathetically. "You want to have another Blue before we go, that's okay with me."

Nothing happened at first, and I thought maybe he had already passed out right there in the booth. But then, like faded cherries in a worn-out slot machine, his eyes rolled uncertainly back into focus. He looked me up and down, the way a barracuda sizes up a prospective meal. Then he grinned and shook his head from side to side.

I said, with more confidence than I felt, "Look, Roydell, I'd like this to be easy for both of us. This isn't some middle-school field trip, you're out on bail. Even if you hadn't boosted that 'Vette, you broke three or four laws, I could name you just by crossing the state line. As an agent of the court, I have the authority to bust you right where you sit. I don't want to do that, but I will if you make me."

He made a low, rumbling noise that could have been a laugh. Then he shrugged, took one last swallow of his Blue Ribbon, and started unsteadily toward the door. I followed, about three steps behind.

Four or five steps would have been smarter, but it was late, and I was beyond tired. We were nearly outside when Roydell dropped his shoulder and turned sharply on his heel. By the time I saw it coming, it was too late. He caught me alongside the jaw with a roundhouse right that lit up the inside of my head like a flashbulb in a broom closet. He had me by three inches and an easy fifty pounds. I hit the deck, fast and hard. My mouth filled with the brassy taste of blood, and there was a noise in my ears that sounded like an ambulance on its way to a four-car pileup.

When I got back to my feet, Roydell was waiting for me. He was holding a ten-inch kitchen knife for courage and had a look on his face that said he wasn't going to be bashful about using it. The few customers still left in the bar had prudently cleared out of their chairs and retreated to safer ground on the opposite side of the room. I had my .380 tucked into a shoulder rig beneath my jacket, but since I had no wish to turn a routine roundup of a bail skipper into a justifiable homicide, I left it where it was. Instead, I reached for a foot-long piece of galvanized pipe wrapped with heavy tape that I had stuck in my belt. I managed to get that into my hand as Roydell started for me.

He came at me pretty much the way a drunk will do, lurching full speed ahead and swiping haphazardly back and forth with the pig-sticker. The beer had slowed him down just a bit, so I didn't have any trouble getting out of the way of his lunge. As he went by, I took two quick steps to my left and whacked him hard above the wrist with the pipe. He dropped the knife and grabbed his injured arm with his good hand, howling like a wolf in a trap. I cut that short with a second rap behind his right ear.

While he was still on the floor, I cuffed his hands behind his back. Then I horsed him to his feet and waltzed him clumsily outside to the parking lot. I loaded him face down into the back seat of my car. I tied his ankles together with some mechanic's wire I had in the trunk and used another length of it to hog-tie his ankles to his wrists. I was on the road and out of town before anybody had a chance to telephone the cops. Roydell snored like a lumberjack all the way back to Nashville.

I turned Roydell over to Fat Wally in the parking lot of the West End Avenue Denny's about the time the sun was coming up. Then I went home to pour half a quart of bourbon over four molars Roydell's haymaker had loosened up and to try to get some sleep.

Monday morning, I was parked in a dentist's chair. Including his fee and a prescription for some Hydrocodone, the bill was four hundred and fifty-eight dollars and some change. That left me with a little over forty-one dollars plus gas and meal money, a wicked bruise, and a badly swollen jaw to show for my night's work.

Tuesday morning, I was back in the office. The swelling in my jaw was down, and the ringing noise in my ear was almost gone. I was hoping my next job would be simple.

