

Somewhere But Nowhere

He stood in the fading light watching the caddis fly hatch emerge as the river made a left turn through the town of Riverbend, the county seat of Oxbow and neighboring districts. The rock was always the same, his favorite perch, and because he'd been there nearly a week, folks were starting to notice. He could cast to the far bank or the edge of the riffle, depending on where he saw the fat shadow of a fish, and his arm motion was always fluid. He dropped his fly anywhere he wanted. Locals watched him from the banks and overhead from the bridge, and occasionally someone saw him catch one of the native steelhead that were moving through. But he sure looked good, a silhouette through the mist, and someone you might believe in. He was an out-of-towner, of course, everyone was sure of that. They didn't know his name so most folks referred to him as The Crane. It was just a description, a tall guy on a rock, flicking a fly and hoping to bring a big, bright fish to the bank where he could cradle it in his hands for a few seconds, admire its muscular beauty, and then release it back into the current so it could find its way upstream toward a place to spawn.

He thought he saw some movement in a deep pool next to a grassy bank that edged out of the roots of an old willow shading a hole from the sun. He flicked his fly right where he saw a big shape that might rise from a slumber, and just when he noticed the slightest bit of recognition, two hands hit him in the chest and knocked him off his rock and into the water.

“Sorry, pal, didn’t see you. Grab my hand,” said a guy in bib overalls, no shirt, and shoulders that didn’t need one.

The angler reached for the extended hand, grabbed it firmly and allowed himself to be pulled three quarters of the way out of the water when the hand let go and he was back in the river.

“Looks like you slipped, buddy. Maybe you’re new to these parts.”

He was well versed in the etiquette of fly fishing—he always respected the water and where others were fishing—but this was something new. He glanced up at the meaty paw now offering him a hand, measured the guy’s sheepish grin, and remembered the scene when Robin Hood meets Little John for the first time. They could both stumble back into the water, wrestle around for a while and turn their lives into a buddy movie. No, this was different. He pushed up out of the water on his own power, set his feet, and wiped a wet sleeve across his forehead. Sure he was cold and his hip was hurting from when he’d fallen, but he wouldn’t show it because now he was looking about a full foot down.

“I didn’t get your name, friend,” said the drenched angler, and then he extended his hand.

The guy didn’t blink.

“Albert, but most people call me Bitmo.”

“Albert’s fine with me. Folks call me Pete. Surname’s Gathers. No known nicknames I can think of.”

“People been calling you The Crane”.

“I’ll make note of that,” said Pete.

The guy nodded and turned and hopped from rock to rock back to the bank and all Pete could think was this wasn't about fishing.

A crescent moon curved over the pasture, and a few horses whinnied and kicked up some dust. Even at night, the endless August heat kept the valley simmering, and the water table would hover at current levels with maybe a small spike if the fall brought any rain. Baxter Jacks farmed twelve hundred acres about 3 miles off the interstate and a half-mile closer to the river. The farm wasn't all that profitable, but he harvested enough corn, sorghum, and an assortment of hearty vegetables to keep a roof over his family's heads. He knew people downriver who were already feeling the pinch. Yields were low, fields were left fallow, and that put a lot of pressure on an already tough job.

"You got kids?"

"No, I haven't had that privilege," said the tall man whose bony elbows dug into the old piney table.

"Your people ever grow an acre of corn?"

"We had a garden once, but the bugs ate the tomatoes and the deer ate the rest."

Baxter nodded and said, "Least you ain't no liar, being a lawyer and all."

Pete let that one go. He was semi-hired by this man and a few of his neighbors, depending on how this initial interview went, so he thought it best to just listen.

“Don’t want to hear any talk in the courtroom about climate change and that global warming crap.”

“It’s real, Mr. Jacks,” said Pete. “It’s getting hotter, albeit at increments not everyone would notice.”

“You missed my point, Mr. Gathers. I’m sure we’re all gonna bake in hell, but what I’m worried about is watering my crop tomorrow. You got any ideas about that?”

“I’ll need depositions from you and the other landowners joining our suit, a declaration of harm to the litigants, if you will. Then we’ll survey the flows into the irrigation canals and compare those to historic levels to prove our claim that this current diversion of water resources is unprecedented, unlawful under various state and county codes and, most damning of all, malicious in nature. Finally, we’ll draft a letter to the prospective defendants in this case, the Bar None Ranch...”

“We call ‘em the rotten sumbitch Hardy clan.”

“...Um, yes, the Hardys...and we’ll threaten them with civil action to recover damages—including punitive damages for good measure—if they don’t cease and desist. In my experience, the mere suggestion of civil litigation is enough to make a sensible adversary settle.”

“You sure don’t know shit about the Hardys, Mr. Gathers,” said Baxter Jacks as he rubbed the stubble on his chin. He motioned to someone standing at the entrance to the kitchen and said, “Let’s have a beer and I’ll walk you through the squirrel holes in my pasture.”

“That’s fine by me,” said Pete.

“After you pushed the lawyer into the water, then what happened?” said Eli.

Bitmo took a long pull off his glass of milk and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

“I dropped him in again.”

Eli was the oldest of Lamar Hardy’s three sons, and therefore he was the titular head of the Bar None Ranch now that the old man had been put out to pasture. And that was a good thing because his two younger brothers had neither the temperament nor the smarts to run the operation. Clyde, the middle son was a hothead well-known to the local sheriff’s deputies as someone inclined to always settle any disputes with his fists. And Albert, the youngest, was, to put it charitably, slow. People called him Bitmo because he definitely could have used a bit mo in the brains department, though Albert never took offense because he liked the name and didn’t get the joke anyway.

The Bar None was just upstream on the irrigation channel from the Baxter Jacks spread and a handful of other farmers, and the two families had been neighbors for over fifty years. Early on, Lamar Hardy and Baxter Jacks hunted deer together and peacefully co-existed as friends, although it was always a tepid relationship at best. But now, after seven years of severe drought, the water level flowing from the river into the irrigation channel was getting so low that Eli had to divert more than ever to sustain his cattle and horses. The resulting trickle that went downstream to Jacks and the other farmers was an unfortunate circumstance, but he didn't see any plausible alternatives.

Okay, it was stupid to send Bitmo out on recon, but all he was supposed to do was watch the guy and see where he went.

"He's been hogging Rocker's Hole for a week so I washed him in it."

"That just means he knows his water," said Eli. "We don't care about that. I just want to know where he goes. Who he's talking to."

"Okay," said Bitmo, finishing his milk. "I followed him into town. He's staying at The Ripple Inn. Number 214."

"You did good," said Eli. After all, he was a brother, wasn't he? "Just follow him tomorrow and stay out of sight. Think you can do that for me?"

"Like a spy?"

"Yeah, kind of like a secret agent."

"That would be fun," said Bitmo.

He gave her a nod that said he'd drink from the bottle, so she handed him his beer and took a seat next to her father. She looked country, but maybe not so much. She put her mobile on the table like a talisman, and Pete wondered whether she wanted to see his. A dog barked at the door and she stomped her foot so hard he slinked over and sat by her feet.

"This is Kate," said Baxter Jacks. "My daughter teaches biology at the high school. In some ways she's smarter than me."

Pete saw the resemblance, someone much prettier than Baxter had ever been considered handsome, and wondered who he was talking to now.

"You ever get one out on your rock?" said Kate.

"A couple bright natives," said Pete.

"You let 'em go?"

"Natives? Always. I take a few hatchery fish each year, but even those I generally release."

Kate nodded. "I didn't know what to expect when my father said he wanted to hire you. Like most folks around here he's suspicious of city types. But I went to college in Seattle, so I'm a bit more open-minded. Want to know why I became a biology teacher?"

Pete gestured with his hand to go on.

"Because I've climbed trees, waded creeks, captured insects, and collected wild blackberries all my life. I learned how to fly fish before I was ten.

Some of my students grew up the same way. I suppose most of them think I'm just talking about plants and animals when really the subject is life."

"Katie's a bit of a tree hugger, Mr. Gathers," said Baxter Jacks, "but she's also a farmer's daughter, so she's a practical gal when needs be. She'd be the first to tell you them water rights we was talking on are what life's all about in this valley."

"Eli Hardy was the first boy I ever kissed. If I hadn't gone away to college, I might be married to him now. Daddy wants to make the Hardys pay for all the damage they're doing to us and the rest of the folks downstream. I'd just like to see them do what's fair."

"I see," said Pete. "Perhaps you could come along when I go out to see them. If we can avoid taking this to trial..."

Kate was shaking her head. "You ever had your heart broken, Mr. Gathers?"

"Please call me Pete if you're going to ask me questions like that."

"Same question, Pete."

"I'm divorced. Someone's heart was broken, but I'm not sure it was mine."

"Close enough. Eli's a good man, but he's got the weight of family on his shoulders. This might be about more than just water. Meet me tomorrow after school and I'll take you out for the evening bite. I know some holes that are a lot better than that rock you've been fishing."

Pete looked at Baxter and thought the old man might say something, but all he did was take a hit off his beer, so he turned his attention back to Kate, her

expression a mixture of sadness and hope. She was like an aspen holding its own in the wind but losing leaves quickly as winter blew through. Pete crossed his legs.

“What time?” he said.

Just as dawn was breaking, Bitmo went into the kitchen to prepare some provisions that would get him through his long day of surveillance. He'd seen enough cop shows and movies to know that he'd need to show some patience and not leave his post while he spied on The Crane. He always made the same sandwich whenever he went fishing or was going to be out driving around for any length of time. He started with two slices of Wonder Bread, then slathered both with a generous amount of mayonnaise. Next came a thick layer of cold baked beans and a slice of raw onion. Damn, thought Bitmo, it looks so good I better make two. And so he did. He packed his sandwiches in a paper bag, grabbed a half gallon of chocolate milk and went out to his truck.

He drove into Riverbend and parked in the far corner of the parking lot at The Ripple Inn, giving himself a clear view of room 214, but far enough away not to be noticed. Then he hunkered down and waited for The Crane to appear. And right around nine o'clock, there he was coming out of his room. But instead of going to his car, he went the opposite direction and entered the coffee shop next to the lobby. Okay, fine, thought Bitmo, if the lawyer was going to have

some breakfast, then I might as well eat half a bean sandwich. Waiting was easy for an uncomplicated guy like Bitmo. He didn't need to listen to the radio or read the sports page. He could just sit there like a family dog at the gate waiting for its master to come home, staring at the door of the coffee shop and watching for The Crane to come out and get in his car.

Eventually they hit the road, Bitmo following about a hundred yards back. The lawyer took the main highway out of town, and at first Bitmo thought he might be leaving Riverbend for good, which was too bad because then his job as a secret agent would be over. That's when The Crane surprised him and turned onto the access road next to the irrigation canal that led to The Bar None and the other ranches and farms downstream. Wouldn't that be funny, thought Bitmo, if I ended up tailing him to my own home. But the lawyer drove past the easement to The Bar None, then past Baxter Jacks' spread, and finally turned down the long entryway into the Colby farm. Bitmo knew he couldn't follow him in there without being seen, so he drove further down the access road to a cutout that would allow him to spot The Crane as he was leaving.

And that's how Bitmo's first day on the job as a secret agent went. After spending a couple hours at the Colby's, the lawyer went down the access road to the Martinez place, spent a couple hours there, and then moved on to the Chenoweth's, the last farm at the end of the road.

Finally, The Crane turned around and headed back toward Riverbend, stopping briefly at a roadside burger stand, and then returning to The Ripple Inn. Bitmo figured that his job was over for the day, but just to be sure he parked in

the corner of the lot again. Why not give it another half hour just in case the lawyer decided to go out again?

That proved to be a wise decision, because fifteen minutes later The Crane came out of 214, this time with his fly rod, fishing vest, and waders. Of course. With the long, end-of-summer days, he would be going back to Rocker's Hole just in time to catch the steelhead rising for the evening hatch.

Bitmo followed The Crane over the bridge above Rocker's Hole, expecting him to pull over anytime. But he didn't. Instead, he drove to Riverbend High School and parked out front. At just about 5 o'clock Katie Jacks met him at his car and the two of them drove off, heading downriver in the opposite direction of Rocker's Hole.

Uh oh. Katie Jacks was a local and knew how to fish all the glory holes down on that part of the river. Fishing from his perch in town was one thing, but now he would be an outsider armed with local knowledge, and that was just too much. And that's when Bitmo completely forgot that his brother Eli couldn't care less where the guy fished. Bitmo decided he needed to keep an eye on these two.

"Just keep going south till we reach the 20-mile sign," said Kate. "The river passes through a narrow gorge at that point, then widens out enough to fish.

The steelhead hold at that point, waiting for the next rain before continuing upstream.”

“They’ve been waiting a long time,” said Pete.

“Oh, some of them move through. They’re the ones you’ve been seeing in Riverbend.”

Pete glanced over at her and watched her bite her lip and twirl her finger through the ends of her hair as she stared through the windshield at the road ahead. She was out there, somewhere else, but she was determined to play the role as his fishing guide for now.

“It *will* rain again,” she said. “The fish will be much more active when it does. I hope you get to see that before you’re done.”

“That could take a while.”

“What? Waiting for the rain or suing the Hardys?”

“Same thing. Let’s say it rains enough that the Hardys divert more water into the canal. That dilutes...”

“Bad choice of words, counselor.”

“...weakens your argument temporarily. We need a long-term resolution.”

Kate semi-smiled and said, “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“I took preliminary depositions from your friends today. They’re all very eager to get started. The Colbys are solid. Like your dad, they’ll do what it takes. Mr. Martinez is very worried about what this will cost. I’m not sure what happens to him if it all goes south. And that old fellow, Chenoweth, said he’s in

for now, but wouldn't be opposed to—in his words—blowing the holy crap out of those canal gates with some good old fashioned dy-no-mite.”

“I assume you discouraged him from that notion.”

“Actually, I told him to sign my contract so that anything he tells me is privileged.”

“You're a helluva lawyer, Pete.”

“I also got followed all day as I made my rounds. Know somebody who drives an old blue pickup?”

“That would be Albert Hardy.”

“Short, muscular guy, goes by the name Bitmo?”

Kate shot him a look of mild surprise.

“I met him yesterday. He pushed me into the river and pretended it was an accident.”

“Don't worry about Albert. He's harmless.”

“Just tells me the Hardys know I'm here.”

Kate laughed. “Pete, the whole town knows you're here. You stood out on that rock for a whole week. People notice stuff like that around here. The one you need to watch out for is Clyde Hardy.”

“Who's he?”

“The middle brother. When he was ten, he shot our dog because she wandered onto their property. By the time he was a teenager, he was in and out of juvenile court all the time. These days he mostly hangs out at a roadhouse on the edge of town where he likes to pick fights with strangers who make the

mistake of stopping in for a friendly beer. The sheriff locks him up overnight on a drunk and disorderly, but nothing ever comes of it. He should have been sent away a long time ago but, as the sheriff always says, being mean isn't a crime."

Kate tapped him on the arm and said, "We're here. Pull onto that dirt road."

Pete parked the car and got out. Kate was still wearing the light summer dress she had worn to school that morning, so she stepped out on the other side of the car and changed into jeans and a blue cotton work shirt. They both pulled on their waders and fishing vests. Pete was mainly a solitary fisherman and only on rare occasions had he seen any women out on the water. Clearly that was his misfortune because he liked what he saw.

"Follow me," said Kate as she walked down the dirt road while Pete fell in step with her, pretty much a hapless puppy under her spell. The road ended at a ledge overlooking the river which was twenty feet below. To get down to the narrow beach just below the ledge, they climbed down a steep trail of rocky switchbacks. Pete was impressed. The narrow beach gave way to a sandy shoal from which it would be easy to wade out into the water and cast to the most promising spots where steelhead would be lurking. And to Pete's eye, there was a whole lot of promising water out there to be fished.

"What are you waiting for," said Kate. "It's Showtime."

Bitmo didn't have to follow too closely because he knew every downriver hot spot as well as Katie Jacks did. He liked to think he knew a few even she had never fished. Which made it easy. All he had to do was keep driving until he saw their car parked by the side of the road. And there it was. Of course she'd take him to 20-Mile Hole. It was annoying that an outsider would get to fish the secret waters of one of his very favorite places, but it was also an advantage for him. He could spy on them, unobserved from the rocky ledge overlooking the river.

Bitmo parked his truck next to the lawyer's car because he knew he'd have plenty of time to get back to it undetected as soon as he saw that they were packing it in. He hiked in on the dirt road to the ledge above the river and took a seat on a rock hidden in a small stand of alders. His sight line was clear, and he could see Katie pointing The Crane to all the best holes and slots where a big fish might be waiting. It didn't take long. The Crane tap, tap, tapped his fly on the water, each cast carrying a little closer to the perfect spot. Finally, he let it settle, mended his line, and in two seconds a giant buck breached the surface and the battle was on.

The Crane guided the big fish into his net and waded to the shore. There he removed his fly, refreshed the steelhead in the water, and then released him into the current.

And then Katie Jacks took her turn. She was downriver from the lawyer by about twenty yards and was working a tail-out where Bitmo had had more than his share of hookups over the years. He had watched her from afar many

times over the years, and he'd always appreciated the way she covered all the stretches of water before moving on to the next. He liked the way she fished and hoped she'd catch one for him while he watched, but then he started to feel a little creepy spying on her. Oh well, being a secret agent was tricky work.

And that's the way it went for about an hour, Katie catching a couple, but spending more of her time guiding The Crane to the exact spot where one fish after another hit his fly. They were laughing, having a romping good time getting into a lot of fish, and suddenly Bitmo wished that he could go fishing with Katie Jacks. Yep, it was time to bring this fishing trip to an abrupt end.

Bitmo looked around until he found a rock about the size of a grapefruit. The plan was that he'd throw the rock over their heads and into the pool where they were fishing. It would totally freak them out, while he scampered back to his truck unseen. The problem was that the rock was too heavy and he knew he couldn't throw it that far. But he could probably make it shot put style. He cradled the rock in the palm of his hand right next to his jaw, took three running steps, and heaved it with all his might on a high arc heading right for his target. Unfortunately, he didn't account for the fact that his momentum would carry him forward—which it did—and the next thing he knew he was sliding over the ledge and bouncing down the embankment to the rocky beach below.

"I think I'm going to be too spoiled to fish anywhere else," said Pete.

“Good. That’ll keep you coming back for as long as we need you. You said it would probably take a while.”

Pete might have answered, but two things happened all at once. First, something heavy splashed down into the pool they had just been fishing. Kate shrieked and Pete staggered, almost losing his balance. At the same time, they heard rocks sliding behind them and a voice cried out. They looked up in time to see someone bouncing down the embankment and onto the rocks below.

“What the fuck?” said Pete, but Kate was already wading out of the water, heading straight to the guy who was sprawled on the beach.

“Albert, can you hear me?” she said as she stooped beside him.

Bitmo, had a gash on his forehead, scrapes on his arms, and his right foot was turned at a hideous angle. Though he was dazed, he recognized Katie Jacks and said, “My foot hurts awful bad, Katie.”

“Your ankle is fractured. You’re not going to be able to walk on it.” Then she looked at Pete and said, “We’ve got to get him to the hospital.”

Pete got down on his haunches and said, “Put your arm around my neck, Albert. I’m going to pick you up and carry you out.”

And though it was a struggle climbing back up the twenty foot incline, that’s just what Pete did.

“He should be here by now,” said Clyde Hardy as he sipped on a pint of Southern Comfort. Clyde and Eli were sitting at the kitchen table and had been waiting most of the evening for Bitmo to return. But now it was getting late and neither one was willing to turn in until their younger brother came home. “I could go out looking for him.”

“Right. That’s a good idea,” said Eli, shaking his head. “He could be anywhere. Maybe he’s still chasing around after that lawyer, but it’s just as likely that he’s driving around gazing at the moon.”

Just then the dogs started barking and they could hear tires crunching on the gravel road leading to the ranch house.

“There he is,” said Eli, and they both got up and went out the front door.

But it wasn’t Bitmo’s truck that rolled up. Instead, it was a car that neither recognized. The doors opened and Katie Jacks stepped out while a tall stranger got out on the driver’s side. Then Katie opened the rear door and helped Bitmo get out and handed him crutches. His right ankle bulged under layers of tape and his forehead and arms were wrapped in bandages.

“Let’s get him inside,” said Eli, and the two brothers helped him up the steps and into the house, followed by Kate and her companion.

“What’d you do to my brother?” said Clyde, looking directly at the tall stranger.

“We took him to the hospital,” said Kate. “He took a bad fall and broke his ankle. Dr. Klein set the bone and immobilized his foot. When the swelling goes

down in a couple days, he's going to need a cast or a walking boot. He also got his bell rung pretty good."

"Something stinks," said Clyde, looking over at Eli. "This that sneaky lawyer you been telling me about?"

"Clyde, this isn't the time..."

"Oh no, this is the time all right," said Clyde, his face reddening and his voice rising. Clyde wasn't quite as tall as Pete, but he was a big man and now he was pushing him in the chest. "You come down here from the city, poking your nose into other people's business, and now my brother's all banged up."

Pete held up his hands and said, "Look, Mr. Hardy, we're not looking for trouble..."

Clyde grinned, loving where this was going. "The fuck you're not? What'd you expect was gonna happen? Turning our neighbors against us. Putting ideas in their heads. That's bad enough, but anyone hurts my little brother—he's half your size—that prick answers to me"

"He didn't hurt me, Clyde," said Bitmo, "I fell off the ledge at 20-Mile Hole."

"Shut up, Bitmo, nobody's talking to you."

"Eli, tell Clyde to cool it," said Kate. "We both know we're going to have sit down and settle our differences sooner or later. That's why my daddy hired Pete. Assaulting him will just make it worse."

"Well, I'm not sure about settling anything, but she's right, Clyde."

"That's so weak, Eli. You don't see it. She thinks she's so smart, playing you like she always did."

Clyde turned back to Pete and would've landed a roundhouse sucker punch, but never got the chance because Bitmo, standing on his one good leg, swung his crutch as hard as could, hit him on the back of the head, and knocked him out cold.

"Bitmo!" shouted Eli. "What did you do?"

The little guy looked surprised because everything seemed so perfectly clear now. The Crane wasn't here to hurt nobody. Surely Eli could see that. He'd carried him out of 20-Mile Hole. Bitmo placed his crutch back under his arm, rubbed his bandaged forehead, and said, "He was gonna hurt The Crane, Eli."

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