

BONE LAKE



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LAKE***



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For Art



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Author's Note

Bone Lake, and its characters and events, is a work of fiction. The True Word Brethren is a fictional entity, an amalgam of several so-called Aryan groups including but not limited to Christian Identity. These groups are characterized by an interpretation of Christianity supporting a violent and racist agenda.

The views of the True Word Brethren in no way reflect my own.

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ISABELLE CALCULATED that there were roughly seven hundred and twelve highway miles between San Diego and Santa Rosa, and the only stoplights were on the road between the ranch and I94, which meant that except for LA, where anything was possible, it would be fast driving all the way north. She divided the distance by eighty miles an hour and came up with a minimum trip of eight and a half nerve-shredding hours.

But they had to go. Immediately, even if it was the middle of the night. FBI agent Billy Horne had been her husband's friend for years, but the tone of his call was peremptory, leaving no room for argument.

"You stay home," Eli said, dropping toiletries into his dopp kit. "I'll be okay. I've got a book to listen to."

A bitchy corner of her heart thought this was a fine idea. He had lied to her and deserved to be alone, brooding on his mistake. She watched him bend over and dig around under

the bathroom sink. She knew he was looking for a small tube of toothpaste, and she knew where there were several, but at that moment his frustration gratified her.

He found the toothpaste, and she saw him wince as he straightened up, holding the tube hard in his hand like a relay runner with the baton. The long drive would be hard on his back.

She blurted what was on her mind. “You told me your brother was dead. You told me you had no family.”

“Hurting you was never my intention.”

“Did I say I was hurt? Did you hear me say that?”

“Okay, I get it; you’re pissed.”

More like mean as snakes, but confused too. It was not like Eli to deceive her, and if he had lied about having a brother, maybe he had been keeping other secrets.

“We promised to be honest with each other.” She tried not to sound whiny.

“I didn’t lie. I never mentioned him.”

“He’s your family.”

“No, he’s not. You’re my family. I left him behind a long time ago.”

“You can’t just leave a brother behind.”

“He was my half brother. My mother got together with his father after my dad left. I’ve told you, Isabelle, we weren’t a Norman Rockwell family. When I met you I wanted to forget it all. My life began with you, with my work and the ranch and the horses. All that time before . . .” He shrugged. “Don’t blame me for this, Izzy. I’m talking survival here.”

Eli was a great writer and respected the power of words. If he said survival, he meant precisely that.

“That settles it. I’m coming with you. If this brother was so important you had to pretend he didn’t exist, then you can’t go through this alone. Whatever happened between you two, whatever he did—”

“Darren,” Eli said. “His name is Darren.”



“He’s dead. And so is his wife.”

Eli felt relief.

Behind federal agent Billy Horne a square of window framed Santa Rosa’s modest skyline under a heavy sky; flags whiplashed in a cold wind, and an ominous cloud bank crept over the foothills between the town and the Pacific.

He felt no grief, no regret. And now maybe he wouldn’t have to feel guilty either.

“What did Darren have to do with the FBI?”

Horne pinched his nose between his thumb and forefinger. Though he was roughly Eli’s age, a man in his early fifties, his face was deeply lined.

A young woman came in with a tray of coffee and sweet rolls and placed them on the desk. Horne waited a moment after the door closed behind her.

“When’s the last time you saw your brother?”

“He was in high school.”

“And you never saw him after that?”

The memory of their last meeting still stung.

“Well, let me tell you a little bit about him.” Horne took a swallow of coffee. “After your last visit to Great Falls, he stuck around town for a year or so. Turned out he was a gifted mechanic, and he made out okay fixing cars and motorcycles.”

In Great Falls, Darren had worked at a Harley dealership called Hog Heaven; when he could, he bought a bike of his own and took off, driving from one small western town to another, stopping to work only long enough to stake his next ride.

“Eventually he landed in the hospital after a spinout in a place called Red Bird, in Idaho. Broke his collarbone, so he was stuck there through the winter. Two things happened to him in Red Bird. First off, he met a girl named Barbara who worked nights at the hospital as a nurse’s aide. Days she helped out at a day-care center in exchange for a room.”

Eli listened, and with his writer’s imagination he saw his brother, scrawny and long boned with pouting James Dean good looks, blond and blue-eyed like his father, riding a motorcycle, lying in a hospital bed, making love to a girl.

“He fell pretty hard for her, and right away she was pregnant. They got married by a justice of the peace. The other person he met in Red Bird was Edgar Barrett. Barrett was a witness at the wedding and so was his daughter, Andrea. Called Andy.”

Horne did not have to remind Eli and Isabelle who Barrett was. A few years back he had made headlines when federal agents found firearms, ammunition and bomb-making

supplies hidden in an underground bunker behind his house in a small town in eastern Oregon. Eli remembered a news photo of a snarly old man with a bad set of false teeth.

“He died in prison four years ago. But not before he wrote something called ‘The True Word Manifesto.’”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Eli said.

“The True Word Brethren are militant white supremacists. Cockeyed, so-called Christians whose declared goal is to bring down the government of the United States,” Horne said. “Their brand of Christianity isn’t like anything you’ll encounter in your friendly neighborhood church. They believe that when the Bible says, in Genesis, that God created the animals first, it means dogs and cats and birds and bugs *plus* all the nonwhite races. Adam was the first Aryan, and he was created to be master over everything that came before. If you’re not an Aryan, the Brethren say, you don’t have a soul and you’re an animal, a mud.”

When True Word Brethren talked about animals, they meant people like Eli’s beautiful dark-eyed wife, Irish on one side and Mexican on the other.

“The Brethren especially hate the Jews. It’s the usual Christ-killer garbage, and they deny the Holocaust, of course. Jews don’t even count as animals in their mythology. They’re the offspring of Eve and Satan, and they get blamed for everything bad that ever happened in the world. The Brethren call the government ZOG, for Zionist-Occupied Government. And their stated goal is to bring it down.”

The atmosphere in the room was stale, and the coffee had

left a foul taste in Eli's mouth. He wished he were home, riding Zarahas up the mountain behind the ranch in the clean morning air.

"Barrett's daughter, Andy, is even worse than her old man. He was a talker, but she's a doer. And she's smart. If she were mainstream, she'd be president of some big corporation."

With her father in prison, Andy Barrett had organized the scattered groups of True Word Brethren in the West. There were a few Brethren groups in the upper Midwest and the South, a few in Texas, but the majority were in the small towns west of the Rocky Mountains.

"Normally the Brethren wouldn't like it, a woman in charge. But Andy is Edgar's anointed and tough as any man."

"Okay," Eli said. "There's this group—a group of groups—and they want to overthrow the government. Because they're Aryans and everyone else is an animal."

"That's pretty much it."

The conversation was hard to take seriously. "Are you guys running out of work? Not enough kidnappings and bank heists to keep you busy?"

Horne stood up, shoved his hands into his pants pockets and turned to stare at the raindrops slipping down the window behind his desk. To the west, where the clouds and the summit of the coast range met, a bolt of lightning illuminated a fortress of clouds. Eli felt the prickle of anticipation that real weather always brought. It had been the same when he was a kid in Great Falls, standing in the vacant lot next door

to the duplex, shivering and smelling snow on the wind from Canada.

After a moment Horne again sank into his desk chair. Through the continuing silence the only sounds were the clicking of the heater and the beat of rain on window glass.

“What I’m going to tell you is classified, and I’m only doing it because we go back a way and I want you to know what you’re getting into.”

“I didn’t know we were getting into anything,” Isabelle said.

“Just hear me out. Okay?”

A flash of lightning illuminated the window. The ceiling fixture dimmed and brightened. Later, Eli would remember the lightning as a portent. He and Isabelle could have stood up right then and made it clear they wanted no part of whatever Horne had in mind for them. Instead, they let their curiosity rule the moment—curiosity and, for Eli, a peculiar excitement akin to what he had felt as a kid waiting for a storm.

Perhaps to give himself time to order his thoughts, Horne collected their empty coffee cups and the napkins covered with flakes of pastry and dropped it all into a gray plastic wastebasket.

“For a long time the Bureau dismissed the Brethren as a bunch of harmless malcontents. Around here, in the mountains north to Oregon, there’s lots of weirdos. You can get lost in northern California, and that’s what most of these people want, to drop off the map. But after Barrett went to prison,

Aryan Nation guys started coming out, talking about this Manifesto like it really mattered. They took it seriously, so we decided we should too.” He shook his head as if for a moment even he thought the story was too wild to believe. “What we found was a wake-up call, let me tell you. The True Word philosophy may be crazy, but the men and women who believe it aren’t. Thanks to Andy Barrett and the inspiration of 9/11, they are confident and organized and committed to their cause. Willing to die for it, if necessary.”

“Even so,” Eli said, “you’re still talking about a small group—”

“The core group is maybe no more than ten or fifteen. But small’s good. Barrett says in the Manifesto that the bigger the group, the more vulnerable it is. He favored many small groups, scattered around the country.”

“Like Communist cells,” Isabelle said.

“That’s right. Andy Barrett’s the only one who knows how they link up. But we know how they work. They move into small towns, and right off they establish themselves as good, quiet neighbors and hard workers. According to the Manifesto you can’t be a full member of the Brethren unless you’ve got a trade. They want nothing to do with welfare. It says somewhere that if you can’t earn your living—preferably with your hands or your strong back—you’re either a child or an animal.

“These people make ideal neighbors. They work hard and they don’t disturb the peace. Their kids are well behaved. If

they attract attention, it's the good kind. In every town they pick up a few converts, and if these people stick long enough, they maybe hear about the Manifesto; and if they like what they hear, it makes them feel powerful. That's roughly what happened to Darren in Red Bird."

Eli had virtually raised his younger half brother, and he supposed the clannish Brethren had felt like family to him. But so what? Eli was impatient and had to remind himself that Billy Horne would not have called them to Santa Rosa to waste their time.

"One of the big mistakes we make in this country is believing that people who don't think like us are stupid," Horne said. "That's why we're always getting caught with our pants down, looking dumb as dirt. The True Word Brethren know how *not* to be noticed. With them it's practically an art form. They don't stay put for more than a couple of years at a stretch, and when a group moves, it breaks up, scatters to other towns. They start all over. New names, new identification."

"That must cost a bundle," Eli said. "Where's the money coming from?"

"I'm getting to that." Horne put his elbows on his desk, steepling his hands. "But first, I want you to know you can back out. It's not too late."

"Shit, Billy, we don't even know what you're talking about."

"What I say can't go outside this room. We clear on that?"

Eli looked at Isabelle. "Okay."

"If it does get out, the Bureau will take away my gun and bounce me up to Deadhorse, Alaska."

Eli, still irritated but interested now, held up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

Horne chewed his lower lip.

"You remember the bombing up in Olympia? Washington?"

Someone never identified had planted explosives in the underground garage where state employees parked their cars. The wife of a state senator had been killed, several million dollars worth of vehicles and structure destroyed and the city thrown into a crisis that now, eighteen months after the event, still reverberated.

"They tried the same thing in Sacramento six months ago, but a parking attendant got suspicious and called the bomb squad in time."

"I never heard that."

"Eli, my man, there's lots you never hear."



Horne rolled his chair back, put his feet on his desk then put them back on the floor. Isabelle didn't think she'd ever seen anyone wound so tight.

"The Manifesto says the stability of this country, any country, isn't about government and human rights. What really matters to people is predictability: knowing that when they flip the switch, the lights go on; that there's water in the

tap; that the phones and electricity work and that the mail gets delivered on time. You take away predictability, and this country's closer to the edge than any of us want to believe.”

From her own experience Isabelle knew this was true.

A few months back someone had shot out the stoplights along Pico, Santa Monica and Wilshire boulevards. LA police later claimed it was a gang event and nothing to worry about. But no one driving in the city that day would forget the jam caused by the vandalism. She and Eli had just come from an exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and were caught in traffic on Wilshire for four and a half hours. Since then, whenever she saw a traffic light out of service, she felt a frisson of anxiety.

“Edgar Barrett believed that if the True Word Brethren can create a mood of distrust and fear in the country, the people will happily give up their rights and liberty to whoever promises to restore order.”

“How does this connect with my brother?”

“Darren was good at engines—brilliant, actually. And a certain kind of bomb—it's like an engine. You fit the parts together and bang, it works.”

“Darren killed that woman in Olympia? He made bombs? I don't believe it.”

“The thing about bomb makers is that most have big egos, and they're real proud of their work; and when they're successful, they get pissed because no one knows who they are. They don't like being anonymous, so they can't resist leaving a signature. Kind of a gotcha thing to the cops or the feds.