

TONY HILLERMAN HUNTING BADGER



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HUNTING BADGER

Also by TONY HILLERMAN

FICTION

First Eagle
The Fallen Man
Finding Moon
Sacred Clowns
Coyote Waits
Talking God
A Thief of Time
Skinwalkers
The Dark Wind
People of Darkness
Listening Woman
Dance Hall of the Dead
The Fly on the Wall
The Blessing Way
The Boy Who Made Dragonfly (*for children*)

NONFICTION

Hillerman Country
The Great Taos Bank Robbery
Rio Grande
New Mexico
The Spell of New Mexico
Indian Country

For Officer Dale Claxton
Who died doing his duty, bravely and alone

AUTHOR'S NOTE

On May 4, 1998, Officer Dale Claxton of the Cortez, Colorado, police stopped a stolen water truck. Three men in it killed him with a fusillade of automatic-weapons fire. In the chase ensuing, three other officers were wounded, one of the suspects killed himself, and the two survivors vanished into the vast, empty wilderness of mountains, mesas, and canyons on the Utah-Arizona border. The Federal Bureau of Investigation took over the manhunt. Soon it involved over five hundred officers from at least twenty federal, state, and tribal agencies, and bounty hunters attracted by a \$250,000 FBI reward offer.

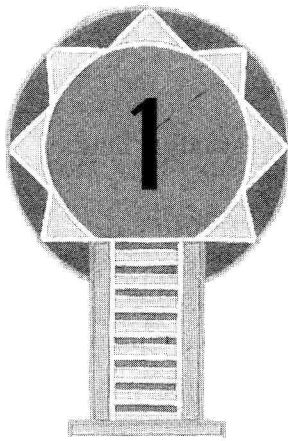
To quote Leonard Butler, the astute Chief of Navajo Tribal Police, the search "became a circus." Sighting reports sent to the coordinator were not reaching search teams. Search parties found themselves tracking one another, unable to communicate on mismatched radio frequencies, local police who knew the country sat at roadblocks while teams brought in from the cities were floundering in canyons strange to them. The town of Bluff was evacuated, a brush fire was set in the San Juan bottoms to smoke out the fugitives, and the hunt dragged on

into the summer. The word spread in July that the FBI believed the fugitives dead (possibly of laughter, one of my cop friends said). By August, only the Navajo Police still had scouts out looking for signs.

As I write this (July 1999) the fugitives remain free. But the hunt of 1998 exists in this book only as the fictional memory of fictional characters.

Tony Hillerman

The characters in this book are fictional with the exception of Patti (P.J.) Collins and the Environmental Protection Agency survey team. My thanks to Ms. Collins for providing information about this radiation-mapping job, and to P.J. and the copter crew for giving Chee a ride up Gothic Canyon.



Deputy Sheriff Teddy Bai had been leaning on the doorframe looking out at the night about three minutes or so before he became aware that Cap Stoner was watching him.

"Just getting some air," Bai said. "Too damn much cigarette smoke in there."

"You're edgy tonight," Cap said, moving up to stand in the doorway beside him. "You young single fellas ain't supposed to have anything worrying you."

"I don't," Teddy said.

"Except maybe staying single," Cap said. "There's that."

"Not with me," Teddy said, and looked at Cap to see if he could read anything in the old man's expression. But Cap was looking out into the Ute Casino's parking lot, showing only the left side of his face, with its brush of white mustache, short-cropped white hair and the puckered scar left along the cheekbone when, as Cap told it, a woman he was arresting for Driving While Intoxicated fished a pistol out of her purse and shot him. That had been about forty years ago, when Stoner had been with the New Mexico State Police only a couple of years and had not yet learned that survival required skepticism about all his fellow humans. Now Stoner was a former captain, augmenting his retirement pay as a rent-a-cop security director at the Southern Ute gambling establishment—just as Teddy was doing on his off-duty nights.

"What'd ya tell that noisy drunk at the blackjack table?"

"Just the usual," Teddy said. "Calm down or he'd have to leave."

Cap didn't comment. He stared out into the night. "Saw some lightning," he said, pointing. "Just barely. Must be way out there over Utah. Time for it, too."

"Yeah," Teddy said, wanting Cap to go away.

"Time for the monsoons to start," Cap said. "The thirteenth, isn't it? I'm surprised so many people are

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out here trying their luck on Friday the thirteenth.”

Teddy nodded, providing no fodder to extend this conversation. But Cap didn’t need any.

“But then it’s payday. They got to get rid of all that money in their pay envelopes.” Cap looked at his watch. “Three-thirty-three,” he announced. “Almost time for the truck to get here to haul off the loot to the bank.”

And, Teddy thought, a few minutes past the time when a little blue Ford Escort was supposed to have arrived in the west lot. “Well,” he said, “I’ll go prowls around the parking areas. Scare off the thieves.”

Teddy found neither thieves nor a little blue Escort in the west lot. When he looked back at the EMPLOYEES ONLY doorway, Cap was no longer there. A few minutes late. A thousand reasons that could happen. No big deal. He enjoyed the clean air, the predawn high-country chill, the occasional lightning over the mountains. He walked out of the lighted area to check his memory of the midsummer starscape. Most of the constellations were where he remembered they should be. He could recall their American names, and some of the names his Navajo grandmother had taught him, but only two of the names he’d wheedled out of his Kiowa-Comanche father. Now was that moment his grandmother called the “deep dark time,” but the late-rising moon was causing a faint glow outlining the shape of Sleeping Ute

Mountain. He heard the sound of laughter from somewhere. A car door slammed. Then another. Two vehicles pulled out of the east lot, heading for the exit. Coyotes began a conversation of yips and yodels among the piñons in the hills behind the casino. The sound of a truck gearing down came from the highway below. A pickup pulled into the EMPLOYEES ONLY lot, parked, produced the clattering sound of something being unloaded.

Teddy pushed the illumination button on his Timex. Three-forty-six. Now the little blue car was late enough to make him wonder a little. A man wearing what looked like coveralls emerged into the light carrying an extension ladder. He placed it against the casino wall, trotted up it to the roof.

"Now what's that about?" Teddy said, half-aloud. Probably an electrician. Probably something wrong with the air-conditioning. "Hey," he shouted, and started toward the ladder. Another pickup pulled into the employee lot—this one a big oversize-cab job. Doors opened. Two men emerged. National Guard soldiers apparently, dressed in their fatigues. Carrying what? They were walking fast toward the EMPLOYEES ONLY door. But that door had no outside knob. It was the accounting room, opened only from the inside and only by guys as important as Cap Stoner.

Stoner was coming out of the side entrance now.

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He pointed at the roof, shouted, "Who's that up there? What the hell—"

"Hey," Teddy yelled, trotting toward the two men, unsnapping the flap on his holster. "What's—"

Both men stopped. Teddy saw muzzle flashes, saw Cap Stoner fall backward, sprawled on the pavement. The men spun toward him, swinging their weapons. He was fumbling with his pistol when the first bullets struck him.



Sergeant Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police was feeling downright fine. He was just back from a seventeen-day vacation. He was happily reassigned from an acting-lieutenant assignment in Tuba City to his old Shiprock home territory, and he had five days of vacation left before reporting back to work. The leftover mutton stew extracted from his little refrigerator was bubbling pleasantly on the propane burner. The coffeepot steamed—producing an aroma as delicious as the stew. Best of all, when he did report for work there wouldn't be a single piece of paperwork awaiting his attention.

Now, as he filled his bowl and poured his coffee, what he was hearing on the early news made him feel even better. His fear—his downright dread—that he'd soon be involved in another FBI-directed backcountry manhunt was being erased. The TV announcer was speaking "live" from the Federal Courthouse, reporting that the bad guys who had robbed the casino on the Southern Ute Reservation about the time Chee was leaving Fairbanks, were now "probably several hundred miles away."

In other words, safely out of Shiprock's Four Corners territory and too far away to be his problem.

The theory of the crime the FBI had hung on this robbery, as the handsome young TV employee was now reporting on the seventeen-inch screen in Chee's trailer, went like this: "Sources involved in the hunt said the three bandits had stolen a small single-engine aircraft from a ranch south of Montezuma Creek, Utah. Efforts to trace the plane are under way, and the FBI asked anyone who might have seen the plane yesterday or this morning to call the FBI."

Chee sampled the stew, sipped coffee and listened to the announcer describe the plane—an elderly dark blue single-engine high-wing monoplane—a type used by the U.S. Army for scouting and artillery spotting in Korea and the early years of the Vietnam War. The sources quoted suggested the robbers had taken the aircraft from the rancher's hangar and used it to flee the area.