

HOME GROWN

BY
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Prologue



As he fumbled in his pocket for the keys to lock the office door, Jim Bingham sensed rather than heard someone step out of the shadows behind him. When he turned and saw the man's face, the 69-year-old career journalist's heart began to bang away in his skinny chest like a cook whapping a metal spoon inside a pot to call the hands to supper.

Jim recognized the sudden copper taste of terror in his mouth. The *Callison County Tribune* editor had felt that airless, hole-in-the-belly sensation before, too—the day he took pictures of the writhing black twister as it roared up Chicken Run Hollow, and all those dark nights with bombs exploding around him in London.

A wet-behind-the-ears war correspondent, Jim had covered the Battle of Britain, watched tracers light up the sky from the window of a closet-sized office in a building across from Westminster Abbey. The considerably-larger office he now occupied was in a building across from the Hair Affair Beauty Parlor and next door to the State Farm Insurance Agency. And the story he'd just hammered out, hunkered over his worn-out Royal Electric typewriter, was about the winner of the Brewster Elementary School spelling bee.

But the contrast was what made the big story he was working on so delicious! The irony was half the fun—a shot at a Pulitzer Prize for investigative journalism as an old man. Not some young buck, but a *senior citizen* at the tail-end of his career. And here! While he was running a weekly newspaper in a little five-traffic-light Kentucky town that didn't have a McDonalds, a Wal-Mart, a movie theater or an open-24-hours *anything*. In Brewster, a community where everybody waved, whether they knew you or not, where you could pass along the juiciest tidbit of gossip with a clear conscience as long as you called it a prayer request, where you shoveled your neighbor's sidewalk along with your own and he spanked your kids for you if they needed a backside-tanning and you weren't around to do it yourself.

Who'd ever have guessed he'd unearth a national story this big right here in Callison County?

When he picked up his hat and stepped out into the muggy darkness, he'd been thinking about his daughter. He'd tried to call her, wanted to talk to her about the big story, but she wasn't home so he'd left her a message.

It was probably best he didn't talk to her, though. She'd have been worried about him, scared for him, the way he was now—so scared it tasted like his whole mouth was full of pennies.

Jim never saw the gun in the man's hand, just the smile on his face, a cold smile that never reached his dead, shark eyes. He heard the thundering bang, though, and felt the .45 caliber slug tear into his chest and rip open his heart. Felt it for one agonizing moment before everything began to fade. Then his world dimmed, grayed out and went black.

CHAPTER 1

Callison County, Kentucky

July 1, 1988

Bubba Jamison reached down and scratched Daisy under the chin, just above the scar on her neck where he'd slit her throat when she was a puppy. Most dogs didn't survive, maybe one out of a whole litter. But those that did became the perfect weapon—with slit larynxes, they couldn't bark. Bubba didn't want anybody to hear his guard dog coming.

A drip of the perspiration beaded on the big man's forehead skated down the ridge of his hawk nose to the end and hung there, dangling off the tip. Bubba shook his head like Daisy climbing out of the river and splattered a spray of sweat on the sumac and crepe myrtle leaves he was hiding behind.

Even the chainsaw-cry of the cicadas in the nearby sugar maple trees seemed turned down a notch, like maybe the sweltering heat had sucked all the energy out of the bugs, too. And it wasn't even noon yet.

'Course, he could have been sitting in air-conditioned comfort right now instead of roasting out here in the woods with chiggers chewing on his ankles. He could have gotten all dressed up and gone to the funeral home in Brewster where Jim Bingham was laid out for visitation.

Bubba made a *humph* sound in his throat. Yeah, right. He and the newspaper editor hadn't exactly been on friendly terms the last time they—

He suddenly froze, stopped breathing. The panting Rottweiler at his feet had stiffened. The dog rose slowly, would have growled, too, if she could have. The hair on her shoulders bristled; she bared her teeth in a silent snarl.

There was a rustle of leaves; a branch snapped. Somebody was out there.

His shotgun cradled like a toy in his muscular arms, Bubba peered out through an opening in the brush and strained to hear through the throbbing hum of the cicadas in his ears.

A twig broke, and then he heard the sound of shoes scuffling on rocks. Somebody was coming all right, somebody who was making no effort at all to conceal himself. The idiot was actually whistling the theme song of *The Andy Griffith Show!*

Rival dopers intent on stealing or destroying his crop wouldn't come waltzing into the woods announcing their presence to every critter between here and the Tennessee line.

Neither would the law.

A squirrel hunter. Had to be. Illegal, too; the season didn't open for another month. Bubba heard the distinctive pop of a .22 rifle and a mumbled expletive to his left and down the slope. Another shot. Another expletive. Obviously, the fool couldn't hit the broad side of a tobacco barn, either—some "outdoorsman" wannabe down from Louisville or Cincinnati trying out his brand new Father's Day rifle. Probably had a copy of *Field and Stream* stuck in his hip pocket open to the page titled "Squirrel Hunting For Clowns."

The intruder switched tunes, started belting out *High Noon* loud as a train whistle coming into a station. Bubba shook his head. Did the idiot think squirrels were deaf? That the furry little buggers were all gonna line up on tree limbs with "Shoot Me" signs dangling 'round their necks? That moron'd given enough warning so's ever squirrel in the county had time to build a fort out of acorns to hide in.

Pop!

The shot was a little farther away this time. The hunter was angling along the bottom of the hill where Bubba sat on a hollow log concealed by bushes. He'd hit the dry creek bed in another 50 yards or so, below the spot where there was a small waterfall when it rained, which it hadn't in a month. The rock outcrop there prevented access to the hill, so he'd be forced to follow the creek bed down toward the road. If Bubba just kept still, he'd be gone in 10 minutes.

Bubba and his dope were safe. The fool didn't trip over it; had no idea it was there. He'd get into his car in a couple of hours, might even bag a squirrel, too, if one had a heart attack and dropped dead at his feet. Then he'd drive home without ever knowing he'd wandered within 75 yards of half a million dollars worth of marijuana on the hoof.

But he'd be back. Next weekend or next month. Might bring some friends.

Bubba leaned over the Rottweiler and whispered into her ear.

"Git 'im!"

The black dog tore out of the bushes and down the hillside. She didn't make a sound.

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The smell of roses, gardenias, gladiolas and mums combined to form a single cloying fragrance, the signature aroma of every funeral home in America.

Elizabeth Bingham had always hated that smell, but today it wasn't just an anonymous assault on her senses. It was personal. The shiny silver casket beside her held the body of her father.

She'd been in Singapore when she learned he'd been murdered and had only stopped briefly in Los Angeles to pick up Ben before flying to Louisville. Now, she was perched on the edge of an uncomfortable chair—*Why did the furniture in these places always look like it came from a French Chateau?*—in a big, windowless room at Beddingfield's Funeral Home. The funeral director waited at the other end of it for her signal to open the double doors so the people lined up outside could come in for the viewing.

And Elizabeth absolutely did *not* want to see all those people. She'd never met most of them and wouldn't likely remember the ones she had. She didn't want to make nice with a horde of strangers right now, not jetlagged and exhausted, and with a headache she was trying desperately to pretend wasn't jack-hammering a hole in the back of her skull.

As if he could read her mind, Ben patted her reassuringly on the shoulder. It was such a tender gesture from a 16-year-old boy she was afraid she was going to burst into tears again. Instead, she took a deep, shaky breath and nodded to the funeral director. He turned and opened the doors and the dressed-in-Sunday-best crowd surged quietly forward to pay their final respects to the man who'd been a fixture in their community for more than half a century. And to get a look at the daughter Jim Bingham was forever bragging about.

The next three hours were a blur of faces and mumbled condolences. At one point, Elizabeth wondered in semi-hysteria if the people leaving were actually just going out one door, changing clothes and then coming back in the other.

Aunt Clara and her tribe of children and grandchildren arrived late and set up shop in the receiving line on the other side of the casket. Elizabeth had come to the funeral home straight from Standiford Field and hadn't yet spoken to any of her relatives. She searched the crowd of adult cousins frozen in her

memory as children, looking for one face, for eyes that gleamed with a sparkle mere years couldn't possibly have dimmed. But she recognized no one.

And after shaking hands with dozens of other equally unrecognizable people, Elizabeth checked out, went on autopilot. Her mind recorded short movie clips, though, a minute or two here and there. One day, the clips would be precious beyond measure to her. The images on them would breathe life into the words from her favorite Jim Bingham column, the one she'd framed two Christmases ago so he could hang it on his office wall.

"Life in the big city? Naa, I think I'll pass. I'll take a small town any day, a community as close knit as steel wool where lifetimes of shared experiences have so marked people's faces most everybody looks like family. A place where you can count on your neighbors to show up at the significant events in your life and to look for you at the significant events in theirs."

The turtle man was sure to be on one of the clips. Short, round, bald, long neck, hooked nose, no chin, dressed in a dark green jacket and brown pants. He cocked his head to the side in slow motion when he stopped in front of her, and gazed at her with eyes that appeared to have no lids at all.

"Make no mistake 'bout it, Miss Sarabeth," he said in an emotionless monotone, "your daddy's with the Lord."

"Well, actually it's *Elizabeth*, and I know—"

"It's still hard, though, ain't it." The man patted her arm with fingers as long and thin as flippers. "When the good Lord sends you tribulations, you got no choice but to tribulate."

Hard to argue that.

Behind the turtle man was an enormous woman wearing a flowered dress that looked like it was made of upholstery fabric.

"My gracious but you shore do favor your daddy, Sarabeth. He was so proud of you!"

"Uh, it's *Elizabeth*, and I'm the one who's proud!"

And she was, too, fiercely proud of her father. For 51 years, Jim Bingham had described and transcribed the life of Callison County, told his readers what was happening around them and then helped them figure out who they were in the context of those events. Her father had been her hero. Now he lay in a shiny silver casket a few feet away. Elizabeth felt the chill of grief work its way deep into her bones.

She gripped the arms of the chair and struggled for control, scrambled for something to say to keep from crying.

"Did you live next door to us when I was little?"

"Oh, no Sugar, I was your third-grade teacher," the woman gushed. "You're thinking 'bout Edna." She looked up and beckoned a slightly smaller woman wearing an equally-ugly flowered-upholstery-fabric dress. When the

pair stood side-by-side, they looked like a couch and matching loveseat. “Edna, say hello to Sarabeth Bingham.”

“It’s *Elizabeth*.”

After a dozen “it’s *Elizabeth*’s,” she finally gave up. The byline on her column in the *LA Times* notwithstanding, here in Callison County, she wasn’t Elizabeth Bingham; she was Sarabeth, her father’s daughter, the little red-haired girl who grew up in Brewster. After she got used to the sound of the name again, it felt normal. And ... real, *comforting* in a way she was too upset to analyze.

Her mind filmed the line of law enforcement officers, too, all of them with their hats respectfully removed. Gray-uniformed Kentucky State Police troopers. Blue-uniformed Brewster Police Department officers. Brown-uniformed Callison County Sheriff’s deputies.

A stocky, bulldog of a man with a kind face and a big badge on his brown shirt shook her hand, offered his condolences and then said gently that he’d like to talk to her about her father’s case later, somewhere more appropriate.

“Right here and right now are fine with me,” Elizabeth told him resolutely. “If this is about my father’s murder, I want to hear it.”

Callison County Sheriff Sonny Tackett nodded, an acknowledgement that Jim Bingham’s daughter had obviously inherited his salt.

“I just wanted you to know that we’ve made an arrest, Ma’am. The man’s name is Joe Fogerty.”

“What makes you think this Fogerty guy did it?” Ben fired the words in a tone that aimed for strong and mature but came to rest a little south of rude and abrasive. Elizabeth reached up and patted his hand resting on her shoulder.

The sheriff looked Ben square in the eye. “Joe Fogerty’s a mean, foul-mouthed drunk who went off on Jim about a week ago in the clerk’s office in the courthouse.” He answered the boy’s question respectfully, didn’t treat him like a kid. “Jim had published Fogerty’s DUI arrest in the *Trib*’s court news and Joe was ticked.” Tackett shook his head. “Don’t know why in the world he’d care; it’s not like he had a reputation to damage. Still, I had to escort him to the street to keep him from taking a swing at Jim. He was the first person I went looking for after Jim was shot.”

Elizabeth winced at the word *shot*. As a journalism professor, she taught her students that pussyfooting around reality was usually harder on victims’ families than just telling it straight out. But she’d never been a victim before.

“The morning after the shooting, dispatch got a call saying Joe was lying next to the dumpster behind the Esso station on Phelps Road. I found him there in a blackout, didn’t even know his name. He had a .45 caliber pistol in

his pocket. We'll have the ballistics test results on the gun from the state police lab by the end of the week, and ... ”

He stopped. Unexpected pain was etched in the creases around his eyes and in the firm set of his mouth. Though some of his sorrow had settled, it was plain what he was about to say was stirring it all back up again.

“And what?” Elizabeth prompted.

“It wasn't just the gun. We also found your father's hat.”

“My father never wore a hat.”

Tackett smiled, a wide smile that revealed toothpaste-commercial white teeth. When Elizabeth remembered this conversation later, she would recall the fondness for her father she saw now on the sheriff's face.

“Oh, yes he did! The ugliest hat I ever saw. It was a straw thing he won at the ring-toss booth at the county fair last summer, had this big green parrot feather in the band. Soon's your daddy realized how much everybody hated it, he wore that hat everywhere he went just to be ornery.”

The good humor drained out of the sheriff's voice. “Joe Fogerty was wearing that hat when I found him lying by the dumpster.”

Elizabeth felt like somebody had punched her in the belly. She bit her lip hard, determined not to burst into loud, sloppy tears. Her father would have wanted her to be strong.

“Will you excuse me, please,” she managed to whisper before she turned and bolted out of the room.

Sheriff Tackett's voice echoed in her mind as she stumbled through the crowd, blinded by tears. What he'd said was forever etched in her memory, but her instinctive response to his words was not. It descended slowly to the bottom of her consciousness, floated downward the way cold water sinks because it's heavier.

My father didn't die at the hands of some old drunk! He was murdered for a reason.

That intuitive conviction never resurfaced. Not even later, when it turned out she was absolutely right.

