

CRYING
Moon

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Kathie McMillan June 1948 – February 2014. As you bravely fought the disease that would eventually take your life you never once stopped encouraging me to complete this writing. Throughout 21 months of aggressive treatments and debilitating side effects, you made me promise to finish this book. On the evening of May 22, 2014, I went to your gravesite and read you the final three chapters. This was a promise that had to be kept. Thank you for 43 years of marriage.

CHAPTER 1



G Geoff Boxer always enjoys his early morning walks; Punta Gorda, Florida, is one of those unspoiled old Florida towns that is coveted by a small but very loyal group of locals and tourists affectionately known as Snow Birds. In the early morning hours the air is warm and heavy with the ever-present humidity, but there is something very peaceful and serene about it. His constant companion for the last six years, Gator, a mixed breed Australian shepherd, is constantly by his side, sniffing and marking every little thing he can lift his leg to. Geoff found him after the fires of 2006; he was severely burned and no one thought the puppy was going to make it. Recovery took about six months of constant care and many trips to the veterinarian but he survived and has been the perfect companion ever since.

Approaching the house, the sound of the telephone ringing disturbs the quietness of the morning. Geoff's trade in life is that of a tracker, so when he hears the phone it usually means that a prisoner has escaped from one of the state or local prisons down here.

"Geoff, this is Captain Tom Walker with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources office in Talking Rock, Georgia. We have a missing child in the forest up here and our local guy is in the hospital recovering from a hernia operation and we need your help."

Geoff could only be described as a good old boy with strong southern roots and has been a freelance tracker for the last 22 years. He has been employed at one time or another by almost every state and federal law enforcement agency in the country. In Geoff's mind social graces are not one of the requirements of the job; getting right to the point of the matter is what's important.

"Captain Walker, where in the hell is Talking Rock, Georgia?" Walker explains that it's a densely forested area located about an hour north of Atlanta, in the Appalachian Mountain Range. "You know it will take me about twelve hours to get there from Punta Gorda."

Walker responds by saying, "Geoff get your

gear ready. I have a long-range helicopter en route to Charlotte County Airport and it will pick you up in about an hour. Arrangements have also been made with the Florida Highway Patrol to pick you up at your house and transport you to the airport.”

“Captain, you know I work with a dog; can the helicopter handle the both of us plus gear?”

“That won’t be a problem. The governor has authorized the local Georgia Army Air National Guard to provide whatever you need to get you up here. Apparently the missing girl’s parents are somehow related to a local politician and some strings have been pulled.”

“The last thing you know my fees are \$2,500 a day plus expenses, with a two-day minimum. I work alone and do not get involved in any media circus or with anyone who is trying to do some political grandstanding whether I find anyone or not.”

Captain Walker responds with a very matter-of-fact “Done. I will see you in a few hours.”

When Geoff heads to the storage shed to get his gear, he hears Gator barking in anticipation of this new adventure. Thinking out loud, *I’ll never understand how he knows when it’s time to go to work but he is never wrong.* Geoff and Gator tracked a bank robber through the roughest parts of the

Rocky Mountains for the better part of a week, which almost got both of them shot, but they got their man. A homegrown terrorist in Oregon got so nervous when they found him hiding in a cave that he accidentally set off his pipe bomb. He is now permanently blinded and lost both his hands in that explosion; the old saying was true—an eye for an eye. Geoff grabs the knapsack off the shelf. Gator is running around in circles and yapping like a puppy; there is no doubt he is ready to go. In these kinds of searches Geoff travels light, with a sleeping bag, knapsack, food, water, and an altered Remington 1100 shotgun. To cut down on weight the barrel has been chopped to nineteen inches and the stock shaped into a pistol grip. The knapsack has been fitted with a customized quick release holster for the shotgun and a GPS transmitter that sends signals back to his home computer. The GPS serves two purposes: the first is so that any command post with computer access can track his whereabouts at any given time, and the second is that he can review his searches at a later date. Throwing some water in his face and brushing his teeth, he sees the distinctive red and blue lights of a patrol car pulling up front.

Florida Trooper Matt Simmons is a fine young man but he has a habit of talking a little too much.

Geoff knew him when he was the quarterback of the local high school football team and was happy when he returned from a tour of duty with the U.S. Army in Iraq. As Geoff gets in the patrol car, Trooper Simmons' mouth goes into overdrive, talking about anything and everything. It's a good thing it only takes about 15 minutes to get to the airport so he can finally have some peace and quiet. As if on cue, the moment Geoff steps out of the patrol car the helicopter makes its final approach and lands within 100 feet of him. When the back door opens, Gator jumps out and runs toward the first Airport Security car he sees and pees all over the front tire. "I guess he's ready to fly," Trooper Simmons, who has seen this before, says with a smile. It takes only minutes to board the helicopter and get the standard safety briefing. Gator goes to the back of the chopper, makes a few circles, sniffs the area, and settles in for the flight to Georgia.

The flight takes about three hours to reach the command post. Carters Lake can be seen below as they make their final approach and it shines like a blue gem in a forest of green. If it wasn't for the missing child this would surely be one of God's greatest achievements. When the wheels touch down, Geoff's mind goes back to the matters at hand. A child is missing and his job is to find her.

Captain Walker meets Geoff at the landing zone and escorts him to the Command Center, where a briefing is getting ready to take place. Radio chatter and maps on the wall indicate that a large-scale search is already under way and any chance of picking up a fresh scent is probably non-existent. Giving the watch stander the password for the GPS tracking software allows him to follow Geoff's every move. Going online, he types in the password and confirms that it's up and working.

Bobbie Sarat is a nine-year-old girl who was last seen at Little Falls campground last night right around dusk. It was reported by her mother that she was wearing a light-colored pair of shorts and purple top when she disappeared. Geoff's immediate concern is that she might succumb to the elements as the temperatures drop to the low forties at night in the mountains. At the end of the briefing Captain Walker tells him the Sarat family is waiting to talk with him before the search. Talking with the family of a missing child is something Geoff doesn't do. To keep himself sane Geoff builds an imaginary wall between himself and those who are emotionally involved. This isn't the movies, where everything works out fine and everyone celebrates a scary event; this is real life and it's not always pleasant. Captain Walker is not happy with

Geoff's decision not to talk with the family but he knows better than to push the point.

Getting into the captain's Humvee for the trip up to the campground, Gator is on high alert; it's time to go to work and he knows it. At the campground a large crowd is helping in the search, and although it looks impressive, any chance of finding anything that might help is being lost to the well-intentioned volunteers. "Captain, how about getting all these people out of the woods so I can do what you pay me for? These people are screwing up any scent or track that might have been there." As the door opens Gator goes flying out of the vehicle; he's ready for the hunt. Captain Walker produces a blouse that Bobbie wore the day before she went missing. Geoff puts the blouse in front of Gator's nose so he can get a good scent of the little girl. Strapping on the knapsack and loading the double-ought buckshot into the shotgun, he looks over at the volunteers and walks into the woods. Once they go about 100 yards in, Geoff starts an expanding square search, making a complete circle of the campground, looking for anything that might help him locate the missing little girl. The forest is beautifully green and you can smell the sweetness of the pines and the pungent odor of the moss in the air.

As the first hour of searching passes, Geoff gets into the rhythm of the forest, seeing and sensing things that the average person would normally miss. It's time for their first break and he pours some water from the canteen into his cupped hands for Gator to drink. The water from the new plastic canteens is so much better tasting than the old metal ones with their tinny aftertaste. After about fifteen minutes they start off on the second leg of the search and very quickly realize that the forest has become oddly quiet, like there's a secret it doesn't want to give up. The underbrush is getting heavier as they work their way down the side of the mountain. Although it seems improbable that the little girl would have come this way, they still need to rule out any possibility. Stepping into a small clearing, Gator sits down and starts a low whimpering noise that indicates he has found something. Kneeling down next to him, Geoff methodically checks the pine straw on the forest floor. The search reveals a few small drops of blood mixed in with the pine needles; it appears Gator has found a starting point. Geoff plants a small orange flag next to the area where the blood is found as a reference point should it be needed in the future. Standing up, a chill surges through his body when he sees the disturbed pine straw indicating

drag marks on the forest floor. Geoff calls the command post and advises them of his position and that he and Gator are following a promising track in a southwesterly direction. The reply acknowledges his call and confirms his position is marked on the computer. Slowly and very carefully he takes the knapsack off and removes the shotgun from its holster. These types of drag marks are typically indicative of a bear moving its kill to a more secure area to feed. Gator is given the command to follow the tracks; his ears and tail are laid back close to his body and his posture tells Geoff that he is on high alert. This is not the first time Gator's internal alarm system has sounded a warning, and the hair on the back of his neck is standing straight up. Even though you know something is terribly wrong, you keep pushing yourself to keep going. Suddenly a low growl comes from a concealed den in the side of the mountain, and without a moment's notice two coyotes break cover and charge them. Without really aiming Geoff quickly points the shotgun, clicks the safety, and pulls the trigger. The lead coyote lets out a loud yelp as the buckshot tears through its heart and lungs, quickly ending its life. Turning to face the second coyote, Gator—without a thought for his own safety—grabs it by the throat and shakes it until it lies motionless on

the forest floor. It takes a few minutes for Geoff's heart to return to normal and he can't help but wonder what's going through Gator's mind right now. Gator is right by his side jumping up and down like they just won some sort of weird martial arts tournament. After a few minutes the sound of coyote pups comes from the concealed den, and Geoff's heart sinks at the thought of killing those pups' parents. Knowing that if the pups are left on their own they will probably not survive the next few days, he makes a decision to try and save them. He is not prepared for what happens next.

Putting his hand in the den, he grabs the first pup. Geoff has seen some hurt in his days, but this is something that will haunt him for the rest of his life. As he pulls out the first pup, a small human leg with tan shorts comes out with it, and a purple top comes next. At that moment he knows what has to be done. Killing the pups is a necessary task. They have tasted human flesh and it is now imprinted in their minds as a food source.

When he calls Captain Walker on the two-way radio, Geoff says, "It's hot out here." This is a pre-arranged signal indicating an unhappy conclusion to the search. At the Command Post they pinpoint Geoff's position from the GPS signal and send the Recovery Team to his location. He cries his eyes

out for that little girl while awaiting the arrival of the Recovery Team. When they show up, his job is done; there are crime scene photos to be taken, evidence to be collected, and the coyotes will be tested for rabies. Walking out of the forest, he is met by Captain Walker, who tells him that he has advised the Sarat family of their loss but did not mention the circumstances surrounding Bobbie's death. A pastor from a local church has been called in to attempt to put some meaning to this terrible loss. As Geoff boards the helicopter for the long flight back home, Gator goes right back to the same area he had settled into before. Saying his goodbyes, Captain Walker looks at Geoff and says, "I understand why you don't meet the families." Geoff nods his head, says goodbye, and climbs aboard.

On the flight back Geoff can see in his mind the male coyote acting like a playful puppy to get the young girl's attention. Once the coyote had that, he slowly lured her to the edge of the forest before making his fatal attack. Coyotes are cunningly smart animals and the little girl had no clue that this game would end in a very short and deadly struggle. The coyote was only thinking of how to feed its pups; in their world this was just a way to provide food. All kinds of animals are re-evaluating a large food source that has gone unnoticed

by them in the past. The Sarats will always live with the guilt that accompanies the unexpected and needless loss of a child.

The helicopter makes a slow left turn just south of Port Charlotte, Florida, and heads inland to the Charlotte County Airport. Trooper Matt Simmons meets Geoff the moment he steps off the helicopter and as is his customary style, Matt picks up the conversation right where he ended it some 20 hours ago. Geoff thinks to himself, *It's good to be home.*