To the Reader

Alta’s Curse is based on a true story. The information comes from research I conducted over a period of three years, beginning in 2014, and from interviews with those who observed or were involved in the events that transpired in Tallapoosa, Georgia from 1975-77. My research also includes public information from FBI files held at the National Archives at Atlanta on the gas tapping surveillance and trial. Two of the characters in the book, Lamar Tate and Virgil Pettigrew, were given fictitious names to protect the privacy of any remaining family in the area. Further details on my research can be found in the Acknowledgements at the end of the book.

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Prologue
Without Prohibition, moonshine would never have amounted to much. It had been around forever and was rather harmless, a staple of every subsistence farmer, especially in the South. This is the story of Sam Alta Dryden from Tallapoosa, Georgia who made a fortune in moonshine.

The push for prohibition started in the early 19th century, when well-intentioned citizens urged the nation to become more temperate. By 1913, income-tax revenues were substantial, so the federal government was no longer dependent on alcohol tax. Yielding to teetotalers, they passed the Volstead Act prohibiting the manufacture and sale of liquor. There was indeed a brief dip in alcohol consumption, accompanied by a significant increase in organized crime in the big cities of the North, having to do with smuggling foreign liquor into the country.

Meanwhile the South, still reeling from the Civil War and the horrors of reconstruction, was devastated by the infestation of the boll weevil. Cotton acreage on plantations was cut in half in the 1920s, and tenant farmers lost their only cash crop. The Great Depression followed in the ‘30s, leaving most southerners desperately poor and struggling for any way to make a living. The Red Cross reported widespread starvation among both white and black families. Hard times indeed! Though the wincing brutality of the Great Depression, did little to build better citizens, it did foster a breed of big-hearted outlaws—Bonnie and Clyde, Pretty Boy Floyd, and Baby-Face Nelson. Alta Dryden took note.

In 1933 Prohibition was repealed, primarily because the Treasury needed alcohol revenue to end the Great Depression. Income tax, the main source of revenue at the time, had all but disappeared due to business failures and unemployment. With the repeal of Prohibition, states and counties had the right to remain dry or wet. Hundreds of counties across the Bible belt voted to enforce “dry” laws, banning the manufacture and sale of alcohol. Though it was legal to drink whiskey even in dry counties, the price became exorbitant. Federal tax on bonded whiskey rose to $10.50 a gallon, pushing the retail price to over twenty dollars a gallon. Moonshine, or “white lightening,” on the other hand, sold for around five dollars a gallon. Never had forbidden fruit been so tempting.

A firestorm of unintended consequences followed. Most obvious was the creation of an enormous market for affordable, yet illegal whiskey. And when you throw into this odd equation, a dirt-poor Georgia boy like Alta Dryden, with the mind of a wizard and the heart of an outlaw, well then, you’ve got yourself a surefire empire in the making.

Making big money in moonshine required a corporate structure with three parts: the boss, the still operator and the distributor. They worked together like a three legged stool. By far the most critical leg was the boss, the man with the money. In Haralson County, Georgia, Alta Dryden was the man. No one went without a turkey at Thanksgiving or a gift at Christmas when Alta was around. Beyond funding the operation, he built relations in the community. Locals, often turned a blind eye to the “likker bidness.” Some were suppliers, some were family, and most were beholden. The “local law” could be helpful as well. At times, it was no more than flashing their headlights at a bootlegger roaring down the mountain, warning of a road block. At times it was helping a supplier with a load of sugar to find his way to the still. And now and again, the county sheriff might tip off a still operator when federal agents were planning a raid. Of course, these shady alliances changed directions like the wind. A co-conspirator could become an informant, and an informant could become a co-conspirator. Tricky business.

When the three legged stool was working, a big operation could produce a thousand gallons of whiskey a day. More than a million gallons a year flowed into Atlanta alone. By 1950 the Alcohol Tax Unit of the IRS declared war on moonshiners, arresting bootleggers, seizing stills, and raw
materials coming into the stills.

Many of the bootleggers became famous stock car racers “Lightening” Lloyd Seay, a close personal friend of Alta Dryden ran whiskey from Dawsonville into Atlanta. When a deputy pulled Lloyd over for speeding with a load of moonshine, legend has it, Lloyd gave him two five dollar bills. “Dammit Lloyd,” the deputy said, “You know the fine for speeding ain’t but five dollars.” Seay replied. “Yeah, but I’m gonna be in a hurry coming back, so I’m payin’ an advance.”

Lloyd Seay, Daytona Beach

From 1954 to 1964, the ATF destroyed over seventy-two thousands stills and arrested over seventy-one thousand violators in the Southeast region alone, while illegal liquor sales continued to boom. The battlefield constantly shifted, as agents intensified their surveillance and moonshiners countered with new still sites and new routes to market. West Georgia nights were filled with the roar of bootleggers racing down “Thunder Road,” the wail of the law in hot pursuit, and the rumble of blown stills.

Sheriff Pink Allen and Federal Agents Jimmy Satterfield and Doug Denny raiding a West Georgia moonshine still.

Alta Dryden made a fortune in moonshine in the ’60s and ’70s when he wasn’t in the Atlanta Federal Prison. By the mid-seventies moonshine was on the way out. The high price of sugar had taken the profit out of the business. At the same time, drugs had come along and quickly proved to be more profitable with a lot less effort.

By 1975, Alta Dryden claimed he’d seen the light. When he got out of prison, he vowed, he was heading home to sell off his moonshine empire, to win back the love of his dying wife Shelby, and to revive Tallapoosa, a border town with a checkered past. He’d be returning, however, to a world that had changed, a world he’d only read about in prison. Though he was up for parole, he had two critical issues to deal with. First, he had to get out of his whisky business inside the prison, and then he had to decide if he would return to Tallapoosa. The warden had warned against returning home.

Run from the one’s I love? No way!

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Part 1

CHAPTER 1

Atlanta Federal Prison, July 1975
At ten sharp, an electronic signal released the locking mechanism in the cellblock door, accompanied by a piercing alarm. Red lights flashed in every guard tower, sending armed guards scurrying across the catwalks. The cellblock door rumbled open, and row upon row of inmates in soiled orange jumpers shuffled into the sweltering heat. The bloom of Pine-Sol partially masked the stench of human confinement. The morning walkabout had begun.

Alta Dryden, as always, found his way to the front of the line and sauntered across the yard in a spotless, starched jumper. Half-moon glasses hung from the end of his nose. Below a full head of finely parted gray hair, he looked more the warden than the inmate. He claimed his spot in the yard, a spot that was hard to cover from above, a shady spot, a spot where business was done.

Every con in the yard stole a glance at Alta: the iron jaw, the poker face, the captain of the ship. He nodded on occasion but held the stare until they looked off.

Inside he floundered: water up to his knees, plugging leaks, bailing hard.

Am gonna do-right; am gonna get back to Shelby.

As the morning sun moved across the yard and inched toward his spot, he edged deeper into the shade. His mind wandered more and more these days, always seeking to understand how he’d fallen into a life of crime. As Dr. Dorothy Epstein, the prison psychiatrist, continued to remind him, “To get out of a hole, you need to figure out how you fell in.” He understood the business of the hole, and in theory, he understood the concept of introspection she recommended, but he had yet to master it.

He’d grown up poor in the foothills of Appalachia, on a one horse, forty-acre farm. As a boy, he did his chores, fed the chickens, gathered the eggs, chopped firewood, and whatever else needed to be done. Then he was off to school. He was a bright student, and very gifted with numbers. Not much of an athlete, he caught the early school bus home from high school and helped out with the planting and picking, mostly cotton and vegetables. Pretty damn normal, he thought.

Those were the good times, but they never lasted. It was one thing, being warm and well fed, listening to a preacher, shouting about good and evil…and everyone in the church jumping around and chanting Amen! And Hallelujah! Alta got that. Good was good, and evil was evil, and that’s the way it was. But, when the mill shut down and the crops failed, and they were all cold and hungry, then his chores had changed. Then, Daddy told him to lug big bags of sugar from the trailhead to the whiskey still deep in the hollow. And son, he’d said with a wink—don’t get caught.

Things had changed, but he didn’t know why. If he’d crossed the line legally, he never noticed. When the sugar was stacked at the still, he chopped wood for the still fire, dammed the creek, and trenched culverts to the condenser box. Later, he filled one-gallon milk jugs with moonshine, and hauled them down to the trailhead. And later yet, he loaded the jugs by moonlight into battered cars with souped-up engines. There were, after all, new chores to learn, new skills to master. Work to be done. Soon enough, while still in high school, he kept the books, ordered raw materials, and made the big deals with Atlanta bootleggers.

He put his reflections aside as Raylee Toms, a lifer, sidled up. Stooped and undersized, Raylee was far from imposing—easy to underestimate. They’d done time together, in and out, here and there, over the years. Early on, a cell warrior had messed with Raylee. They found the fool dead inside a locked cell with multiple stab wounds. Around the yard they said, “Raylee can smell fear and knew how to work it.” In his prime he’d made a fortune bootlegging and robbing banks. Last fall, he had
a stroke that stretched his face like a snare drum. These days he was a lifer with nothing to lose.

His head rocked fitfully as he struggled with his words. “How you...how you do-in’?”

Alta pursed his lips while scanning the yard. “Not so fine, thank you. Doc Dorothy says my heart’s plugged up, may need a bah-pass. So, how you do-in’?”

“Up...up and down...mostly up...since ah got right...got right with de Lawd,” Raylee said as he gazed up through razor wire and crossed himself.

Alta nodded politely. Raylee had of late declared himself saved; a born-again Christian, but he had yet to work through his occasional swings of violence.

“The stroke was...was a sign.”

“What about my par-dun? Was that a sign?”

Their banter was overlapping and never ending like a braided rope. With few transitions, they’d drop a strand here and pick up another there.

“She cud...kill you...you know...young Mandy cud. Your heart...your heart can’t...can’t take it...to say nuttun...nuttun ‘bout the rest...the rest of your ‘quip-ment.”

Raylee convulsed, caught, it seemed, between choking and laughing.

Alta smiled and turned serious. “Now Raylee, we been over this before. Shelby’s the best woman I ever known, and Mandy, well, she’s been awful kind to me. But then again, before I got locked up this last time, Shelby threw me out.”

“Shelby was right,” Raylee nodded. “She’s way too fine...too fine a lady...to be hangin’ ‘round with a backslidin’ hillbilly.”

——

Alta knew it was Doyle before he got there: the jangle of keys, the clap of a nightstick against a flashlight, the squawk of a two-way radio, then a tidal wave of Aqua Velvet.

Doyle, the yard sergeant and a partner of sorts, was old school: no black leather cases on his duty belt, everything hanging off—a mess, but he considered himself ready. He was wide and squat like a tree trunk that had been sheared off by a twister. He got lost in the underbrush until you bumped up against him.

Both Alta and Doyle were Civil War buffs; both had lost family in the war. With Doyle every encounter was a quiz. Doyle stepped up close to Alta and whispered, “Good mornin’, Captain. Does bell ring a bell?”

Alta pursed his lips and nodded slowly. “Bell! That’s good. Yes sir, right up the road here, General John Bell Hood destroyed his own supply depot and torched eighty-one rail cars of ammunition. Damned if he was gonna let them blue-bellies get our supplies.”

They both grumbled.

“Gawd-dam William Tecumseh Sherman,” Alta spit out.
Doyle pointed up to the cupola that sat on top of the prison entrance. “This mornin’ I climbed to the top.”

Though Doyle was in his pocket, Alta never knew if he was telling the truth. But he was awful good at his Civil War history. “So what did you see up there, Sergeant?”

“I saw the Bell Tower at the Oakland Cemetery. General Hood’s headquarters was right there where the tower stands. That’s where he made the decision to blow up the train shed and the ammunition cars. The right thing to do, but a sad, sad day for the South.”

“You saw the Bell Tower, didya?”

“Hell yes, it’s only two miles up the Boulevard from here.” Doyle stepped back and puffed out his chest. “Anyway, the Cobras shorted the Aryan Brothers. They’re formin’ up across the yard.”

Alta’s head snapped up. “You sure?”

“Your golden boy, Lamar Tate, shorted the Cobras, so they had to short the Aryans,” Doyle said, grinning.

Alta glanced at Raylee, who shook his head. “Are the Cobras packin’?”

Doyle cocked the visor of his hat to the side and nodded. “The Cobras, the Aryan Brothers, the whole damn yard. Storms a-comin’.”

“Where’s Fa-row Cash?” Alta asked calmly.

“Stirrin’ the shit.”

“Get him oh-va here.”

With keys jangling and nightstick clapping, Doyle swaggered off, then turned and snickered. “Aye, aye Captain.”

Raylee reached up the sleeve of his jumper and fingered his shank. “Arma...arma-geddon.”

Alta’s heart went into overdrive as he saw the gangs coming at each other. He caught himself and exhaled deeply. His heart thundered on.

Raylee flinched uncontrollably. “Ah said Arma...Arma-geddon. Like in the Bible.”

“I know, I know,” Alta frowned. “Armageddon, that’s where we’re headin’.”

The PA system boomed: “This is Doyle. Break it up. Walk away. Separate!”

The gangs drifted apart as a troop of guards from the main block marched across the yard.

Hoping Doyle had calmed the uprising, Alta continued, “So where were we? Shelby and Mandy, right? You see, I’m stuck. Shelby being a lady and me being a felon. We had, it seems, ir-rec-on-cil-able dif-fer-en-ces. So picture this: there’s poor ole me, out in the cold, and then young Mandy comes soarin’ in on angel’s wings, providing shelter from the storm.”

“Thou shall not commit adultery,” Raylee blustered. “That’s a commandment of de Lawd!”
Alta grunted. “When it comes to being a felon, I don’t think the Lawd cares about adultery.”

Raylee raised his hand with two fingers extended. “Two things: first, it’s none of my business; and second, the Lawd does care.”

“You’re right, it’s none of your business, but I’ve decided. Seriously, I’ve decided, I’m goin’ back to Shelby—that’s if she’ll have me. Best woman I ever known, and she’s right. I’m goin’ straight, strictly lee-git. You’re probably right about Mandy; she’s probably too young for me, and I’m not sure her divorce has gone through with Lamar, the playboy prince.”

Alta’s head dropped to his chest as he deliberated. Nothing set his heart to pounding like the thought of Lamar Tate, Mandy’s ex. When Lamar, a heartthrob on a Harley, was on the prowl, no woman was safe.

“Worst decision I ever made, gettin’ Lamar involved in the moonshine business.”

Raylee nodded, pleased he’d steered Alta in the right direction. His eyes narrowed as he scanned the yard. The gangs had pushed back together and were taunting each other.

“It ain’t too late...too late, to lay ole Lamar straight.”

Alta chuckled. “When I hear you talk that way, you bein’ reborn and all. It sounds like some of the old-you came along with the new-you.”

“Could be?” Raylee shrugged. “I may...I may do it over, bein’ reborn and all. Anyway, when you...when you gettin’ out?”

“Twenty days—that’s twenty days, eleven months and three years this time. The pardon has got-ta be a sign of some sort.”

Raylee crossed himself. “If you don’t go straight, you’re a damn...a damn fool.”

“A damn old fool.”

Alta winced as the yard parted, and Pharaoh Cash stomped toward them, black, burly, and violent. An armed robbery conviction and a blown knee had ended a promising football career. These days he led the Cobras and controlled bootlegging inside the prison. He bought moonshine, of course, from Alta.

Alta nodded to Raylee. Pharaoh brushed against a set-up man as he cleared the crowd.

Raylee eased his right hand over his left, extended his fingers up under his sleeve, gripped his shiv, and whispered, “He’s packin’, boss.”

Pharaoh lurched to a stop just short of where Alta stood, but in clear view of the rest of the yard. At his side, stood Pharaoh’s lieutenants, two towering hulks.

“Hey Alta, your golden boy shorted us again, and we’re hearin’ ‘bout another price in-crease. What the hell is goin’ on?”

Alta felt the ground shifting under his feet, yet he tempered his response. “Now, now, Fa-row this is quite simply the nature of business, the ebbs and flows of the market...supply struggling to catch up with demand--a minor hiccup. We are pard-ners, are we not?”
Pharaoh stomped back and forth for all to see. “Your system is broke, old man, and you’re a short timer. Things gonna change...forget about ebbs and flows...we’re talkin’ a rip tide.”

For the first time, Alta felt alone caught between letting go and reaching out for a better life. He’d hoped to simply walk away from the past. His eyes narrowed as he looked across the yard. The Cobras, a knot of black men with dreads and red serpents inked around their necks, were faced off against the Aryan Brothers, a knot of white thugs with long hair and scarred faces. The tops of their jumpers hung from their waists. Most had AR inked across their chest. The rest, cons and guards alike, swung their heads back and forth from Alta’s spot to the gangs across the yard.

Alta stepped from the shadow into full view. “I’ll get you what you missed and throw in ten extra cases.”

“That’s the old deal,” Pharaoh hissed. “The new deal is...I’m in charge, mutha-fuck-a.”

Jaws clenched. Alta stepped back into the shadows.

Both gangs stood their ground, sneering and scowling, eyes tightened, teeth flashing; then the chanting and taunting began, followed by subtle shifts in weight, catlike circling, inching forward, seeking the prime attack angle. Alta had seen it all before; part of it was real, part of it was a power play, and part of it was routine violence. His instinct told him to attack. Yet he paused. His heart was pounding.

Pharaoh was a ticking bomb. His head swiveled around the yard. He paused then looked up directly into the sun. This seemed to be his signal. The gangs exploded, a blur of arms and legs, slashing and kicking. Shanks flashed in the sun. Cries and screams, mixed with the thud of lead pipes on flesh, echoed across the yard. Alarm bells screamed out of every cellblock. From the tower above the fight, Doyle barked into a bullhorn, “We’ve got us a situation in the southwest corner!”

A riot squad poured into the yard, another marched across the catwalks, some with guns, some with fire hoses.

Again, the bullhorn barked, “What’ll it be? Water or guns?”

The gangs froze, considered for a moment, and then vanished like roaches on a linoleum floor, leaving a trail of blood and weapons.

After cuffing some of the rioters and getting the injured to the hospital, the riot squad closed in on Alta’s spot.

Doyle marched up with a squad of troopers in tow and quickly cuffed Alta and Pharaoh. Everyone knew Pharaoh had set off the riot, but Doyle wanted to stage it right.

“So, prisoner Dryden, who set this thing off?”

Alta paused, trying to calm his racing heart, then lied, “I can’t say.”

Doyle rocked back on his heels and shook his head. “You can’t say?”

Pharaoh winked at Alta as he turned to Doyle. “Sumtime shit happen.”

Doyle's face tightened as he glared at Alta and Pharaoh. “If this ‘shit happen’ again, both of you are lookin’ at hard time in solitary, and Alta, your pardon is gone. Clear?”
They nodded.

Though he couldn’t explain it, Alta knew instantly: he had blinked. He also knew in a more humbling way that everyone knew he’d blinked. Things had changed.

Two blasts of the horn signaled that the morning walkabout was over. Inmates tramped slowly back through the cellblock doors. Time for lockup. Time for a cell count. Surely time for a weapons shakedown. Alta shrugged, another day in the slammer.

He struggled to calm the pounding in his chest as he shuffled back to his cell. As they got back to their cellblock, Alta whispered to Raylee, “Bring me the whiskey numbers tonight.”

Raylee nodded and then went off like an evangelist at a revival, “You’re right…Lamar’s got to…got to go. And Mandy...Mandy’s got to...got to go, too. Get back to Shelby...and get right with de Lawd.”

Still shaken, Alta stretched out on his cot and puzzled through the showdown with Pharaoh His first response was anger. How in hell did I let Fa-row bully me?”

“I know the game,” he crowed aloud. “Hell, I invented it.”

In the early days, it was about the money, but no more.

I’ve tucked away more than I can spend. Maybe I’m broken? It’s true some part of me is lured by the hunt, the clever scam, the jolt of power that comes with beating the system? And by Gawd, I’m good at it.

His mind went blank as he stared out the cell window. Then it hit him.

Shee-yet, the old game is oh-va!

CHAPTER 2

Tallapoosa Water Tank, Same Day

Lamar roared to a stop below the water tank that loomed above town. Tallapoosa: The Dogwood City was painted in four-foot red letters across the eighty-thousand-gallon tank. He shoved his Harley back on its stand, pulled off his goggles, and brushed back his long blond hair. He stooped over and admired himself in his bike mirror, then chuckled. Yeah that’s me, a heartthrob on a Harley.

He grabbed his pack and paused. Then stepped back to admire his new bike. African wild dogs were painted on the gas tank: ears pointed; fangs, razor-sharp eyes, red glowing embers. All in all, a savage pack of carnivores circled a statue of Lady Justice, fending off other predators. It pleased Lamar that the message was unclear. African wild dogs, he’d learned, were apex predators, the vigilantes of the African savanna.

Lamar was head smart but no student, partly a deranged dreamer, partly a cunning carnivore. He’d passed Biology 1A and little else at West Georgia College. The concept of the apex predator was his lone takeaway. Like a pig in a puddle, it was enough. He learned that when two species
compete for an ecosystem, an apex predator preys on both and creates stability. His brain snapped shut on that revelation. It gave purpose and direction to a disturbed mind. After all, he was out there, in the midst of the fray, seeking stability between moonshiners and revenuers, honest citizens and corrupt politicians, local merchants and corporate retailers—all fierce contestants on an unstable planet. He was an avenging angel in the struggle for world peace.

Lamar pushed through a hole in the cyclone fence and climbed the tank. Clouds drifted to the south. The sky was a radiant blue. He would enjoy the moment before turning to business.

Tallapoosa clung to the shag end of the Appalachian Mountains, known as the Piedmont region. To the north, hills rose to granite peaks, narrow valleys, and rocky soil. Red clay covered the ground, rich in iron but none too fertile. It quickly eroded when trees were cleared for crops. Yet, cool mountain springs ran over beds of limestone, and the protection of towering trees and deep hollows made it a fine place to cook whiskey, raise pigs, and get the drop on strangers.

Lamar eased round to the south side of the catwalk. Off in the distance, a trace of the other Georgia, the Coastal Plains, could be seen or imagined. Further south, Columbus marked the western edge of the fall line that ran east through Macon and over to Augusta and on to the Atlantic Ocean. Rolling hills gave way to flat, fertile land, what had been Big cotton country. Some believed that folks from the plains had better manners than those from the high hills. Everyone agreed it was ungodly hot and swarmed with tiny man-eating gnats called no-see-ums. To the west, Tallapoosa, the Dogwood City, was poised for action, open for business from all directions, textile mills or moonshine stills.

As the sun began to set, he edged to the west side of the water tank. Pulling field glasses from his pack, he scanned the countryside. The Tallapoosa River wandered by like a ribbon of gold. Most of the counties in these parts, Lamar recalled as he chuckled to himself, were dry. They’d voted to prohibit the sale but not the consumption of alcohol and thereby created a prime moonshine market. Nice. He checked the schedule he’d inked on his forearm. He had six bootleggers hauling shine into Alabama that night. They’d meet at the American Legion post later.

Raising the field glasses, he smirked. “Let’s see what the good folks of Tallapoosa are up to.”

Of late, Tallapoosa looked a lot like any other small town in the South: a tidy grid of four or five city blocks, split down the middle by a highway and train tracks. Mixed neighborhoods skirted the town: clapboard shacks, brick ranch-style bungalows and, here and there, a grand Victorian gem with a shaded wraparound porch. Small farms and woodlands rolled on for miles. Like the rest of the south, Tallapoosa struggled to recover from the Civil War and Reconstruction. It blossomed in the 1880s when the railroads linked it to Atlanta and Birmingham. Back then, cotton was king. By 1907, the jenny at the Tallapoosa Cotton Mill never stopped spinning. Horse-drawn wagons loaded with cotton bales lined the dusty roads leading to town. The hiss and rattle of spinning jennies blended with the click-ety-clack of trains leaving town, crammed with spools of yarn. Then, in the 1920s, the boll weevil cut cotton acreage in half. The Great Depression followed in the 1930s, leaving most Southerners desperately poor and searching for any way to make a living. They weren’t the best of times. Yet, these days, as Lamar looked out on the town, there were many fine things going on in Tallapoosa: proper churches, clubs, schools and some damn fine stores: Lipham’s Department Store, Thrower’s Flower Shop, Hildebrand’s Pharmacy. Added to that, teeming pockets of industry had arrived: the American Thread Company, Southern Can Plant, Stoffel Seals Corporation, Hoover-Hanes Rubber Corporation, Darsey Manufacturing, and more. All in all, many fine local institutions were pulling the community together.

Lamar snickered. “Let’s see what’s happening on the shady side of town.”
Just west of town on Highway 78, lights came on in an old tin warehouse. Out front, a two-ton truck was being loaded with what looked like bags of sugar, large sheets of aluminum, and wooden mash barrels.

“Yes sir,” Lamar snorted, “a new still’s goin’ up. Fed’s blowing ‘em up by day; moonshiners rebuilding ‘em by night—an unstable eco-system. I got to save ‘em from themselves.”

He sharpened his focus as he moved the glasses into town. Club 78 was below the tank. Jacked-up trucks and juiced-up sedans were parked outside, driven by bootleggers or ATF agents on the prowl. Anything could happen in this freewheeling honky-tonk. A George Jones “she-done-me-wrong” song drifted up from the jukebox. On any given night, you could meet the girl of your dreams or get shot, plan a robbery or get busted. Neither sin nor salvation had the upper hand. Club 78 wasn’t in the business of making better citizens.

Across the street, the lights shone bright out the bay doors of Smith’s Garage. A Dodge Coronet howled as they tried to synchronize the carbs. The body sat low on the frame, and a tarp covered the backseat.

Lamar tightened the focus. “Well, how about that. It’s Billy Chitwood and his badass Coronet.”

Billy, one of Lamar’s bootleggers, would be hauling tonight.

“That a boy, Billy, get that hemi tuned.”

Setting aside the field glasses, Lamar tried to untangle his thoughts. Could he really save the homeland? There had indeed been ups and downs in the local economy and endless conflicts between the feds and the moonshiners: stills were destroyed, agents shot, moonshiners jailed. He had scavenged from both, making good money snitching to the feds on Alta and, lately, making good money skimming off Alta’s moonshine business. How else could a po’ boy afford handguns, Harleys, and pole dancers?

He ran his hands through his hair. Time was running out. With Alta’s connections, he’d be out of prison soon and put an end to the skimming. And then there was Mandy, his ex-wife. He hadn’t sent an alimony check in a year. He’d heard she fancied Alta. Billy Chitwood, who knew everything local, said Alta had helped her out now and then with the bills and groceries. Funny thing about Alta, he was a generous soul. You never knew what he was up to.

Lamar’s lips curled. His eyes narrowed. He snarled at the rising moon and trembled with excitement. He needed one big hit, a grand slam. Then he’d pack his bags and skedaddle. Softly at first, and then louder and louder, he howled a wild-dog howl. Soon he was at full wild-dog alert and hustled down the ladder. Let’s run some likker tonight!

CHAPTER 3

ER, Tanner Hospital, Same Day

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It was 11p.m. when Mandy Tate collapsed on the bench in the women’s dressing room. She peeled off her scrubs, her third and final change-out of the day, and hurried to the shower. The momentary silence was shredded by the wail of an incoming ambulance. It was her week to work grave shift, but she’d swapped off with another nurse and pulled a double shift so she could get off
at eleven. Struggling to avoid bankruptcy, she desperately needed to catch up with her ex-husband Lamar at the Legion Post.

She pulled on a flannel shirt and jeans, washed her hands again, removing the last traces of betadine, and shook out her salt-and-pepper mane. On her way out, she glanced in the mirror. Tightly pursed lips and a hollow stare greeted her.

Good Lawd, is that me? I'm supposed to be in control.

She crumpled on the bench, thought about crying, rejected it, and then quietly sobbed. Lately, her pain pulled her back to her youth. Unknowingly, she searched for clues to her misery, something that could get her back on her feet. She'd had her share of ups and downs. Long ago, Cyrus Chauncey, her grandfather, had homesteaded forty acres of hard scrabble land in Haralson County. Her father, Vassar Chauncey, struggled to make a go of it. The boll weevil in the ‘20s and the depression in the ‘30s, put an end to the cotton crop.

Mandy came along in ‘43. Sadly, her mother Elizabeth, died in childbirth. Vassar did the best he could as a single parent. He wasn’t around much, but when he was, he showered her with dolls and dress-up clothes. At five years old, she'd arrive for breakfast as Doris Day with a blond bob wig. She’d be back at dinner as Debbie Reynolds in cutoff shorts and a bouncy ponytail. She’d wear any get-up to make her Daddy laugh. Doris and Debbie, her celebrity sisters, neither replaced her mother nor helped her figure out who she was.

Interrupting Mandy's childhood recollections, Bridget Mulligan, the head nurse and Mandy's relief, hurried in, all round, white, and starched. She eased next to Mandy on the bench, a swan cap on her head and a crucifix around her neck. She was the mother Mandy never had. At sixty-three she was a formidable force in the community. Everyone asked for Bridget, even whiskey haulers bleeding out from gunshot wounds. She handed Mandy a tissue and gave her a hug.

Bridget studied Mandy's shirt and jeans. Then she jumped up with a grin and said, “Lemme guess, you’re not goin’ dancin’ tonight?”

Mandy dabbed her cheeks. “I’m tryin’ to catch Lamar at the Legion Post.”

Rolling her eyes, Bridget shot back, “Did that backslidin’ tent show say he’d join you?”

“Not exactly. Most nights, he meets his bootleggers at the Post before they do their run.”

“Sooooo...he’s makin’ a dollar or two. Are you gettin’ your alimony?”

“Hell no, and the court is threatening to garmish my wages.”

“Dear me. Let me see if I can get some help for you on that. Is he still doing his animal thing?”

Mandy blushed. “Says he’s a wild dog, saving the planet.”

“Seriously, Mandy, does he know when he’s being a wild dog?”

“What d’ya mean?”

“Hmm. I'm not sure I'm sayin' this right, but does he know when he stops bein' Lamar and starts bein' a wild dog?”
“His eyes glaze over, and he starts ravin’ about savin’ the planet. But no, he doesn’t start peeing on fire hydrants.”

“Just wondering. He may be delusional, like he’s not aware that he’s not Lamar anymore.”

“Delusional?”

“I’m not sure if that’s the right word, but it’s serious.”

“Well, he’s not Frankenstein. He’s just a fruitcake.”

The light above the door flashed red, and a siren echoed down the hall as another ambulance arrived.

Bridget pulled Mandy to her feet. “Come on, girl. Go get him.”

Mandy’s eyes lit up. “Here I go!”

Bridget gave her another hug and headed for the door.

Moments later, another ambulance screamed in. Mandy’s head snapped up at the wall clock. It was 11:15 p.m. and she was running late. She grabbed her day-log and headed for checkout. No one was at the admission desk. She leaned against the counter, checking her log against the duty board: three overdosed teenagers; four car accidents with major lacerations and broken bones; three assaulted women, looked like domestic violence; three gunshot wounds at a convenience store holdup; two knifings, one dead on arrival. All within miles of Tallapoosa. The trauma and treatment rooms were packed, and triage was overflowing. Muffled moans and cries came in all directions.

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It was 11 p.m. Lamar emerged from his single-wide trailer after a late afternoon nap. Ready for some midnight whiskey hauling, he hopped on his Harley and roared through town. He was cocksure he owned Tallapoosa. He was equally sure, at the ripe age of thirty-four, that he owned the hottest bike on the planet. Pleased with his grand entrance, he paused for a moment in front of the Burger Inn and wrapped out the Ironhead engine, then rumbled into the Legion Post, a cinder-block fortress adorned with American flags and Pabst Blue Ribbon signs. A rusting World War II tank stood guard out front. The solid working-class folks from the mills and farms stayed clear of the Post.

He strolled across the dimly lit back porch that reeked of stale beer and cheap perfume. Soldiers on the prowl, bad-boy bikers, conspiring outlaws, and lonely hearts of every stripe filled the tables. Fights were routine, with shootings now and again. Lamar strutted to the far side of the porch and marked a table with his leather jacket. His whiskey haulers would be in soon. Slipping off his red bandanna, he shook his hair free, and swaggered over to the bar, preening like a peacock. These moves, he’d found, gave him maximum exposure to the ladies. The lead singer from the band let go with a country favorite, “Don’t Give Your Heart to a Rambling Man.”

Lamar smirked and sang along. “Don’t fall in love with me darlin’, I’m a rambler.”

It was payday, and the Legion Post was jumping. He waited in line at the bar, watching Virgil Pettimore, the bartender and bouncer, mix drinks. Virgil was a local legend, a big fellow with a gray flattop, who had done hard time in Atlanta Federal Prison. Red braces, stretched over an
ample paunch and struggled to keep up his trousers. For years, Virgil had been an enforcer in Alta's moonshine army, an empire that stretched across the Southeast. Both had made money, big money, and both had done several stretches in prison for, as they say, conspiring to violate federal liquor laws. On his last stretch several years back, Virgil was found guilty of operating a handful of thirteen-thousand-gallon stills in Haralson County, Georgia, and Cleburne County, Alabama.

Lamar flashed an evil smile. He'd been heavily involved in all of this but somehow had never been charged. Sure, some folks said he'd snitched to the feds for immunity, but hey, he thought, what do they know? He nodded to Virgil as he reached the bar. “Gimme a beer, old man.”

Virgil scowled as he wiped down the bar. “Hey son. You haulin’ tonight?”

Lamar fiddled with a bottle cap. He needed to pass on a price increase, however unwarranted, and it needed to start with Virgil. He took a deep breath and cocked his head to one side. “Haulin’, yeah, we’re haulin’...but we need to talk...you see, costs have gone up...sugar’s up, yeast’s up, copper line has never been cheap, and lately the feds are takin’ down stills as fast we put them up...sooooooo it follows that our prices have got to go up.”

Virgil crossed his arms and leaned back against the cash register. “Run along, Lamar, don’t be hustlin’ this ole dog. Jest gimme my regular order, at the regular price, or I’ll make scrap iron out of that candy-ass bike of yours.”

Lamar's lips curled back as his ears perked up. Though a predatory fire roared through him, he became cool and cunning.

“Virgil,” he hissed, “its only normal that you’d resist a price increase, and, well...” he paused, catching his reflection in the bar mirror, and ran his hands through his hair, “and, well, become unpleasant...ah reckon...ah reckon it must be a blow to you personally, that I’m runnin’ the show these days.”

As Lamar rambled on, Virgil turned to mix a drink. He turned back with a beer in one of his massive paws, and the other lay flat on the bar, concealing a .38 revolver, “Have your beer and run along, sonny.”

Lamar’s eyes narrowed to slits. He was caught off guard. Something had changed. Normally there would be some shouting and screaming, maybe a punch or two, and usually he'd bully Virgil into an agreement. Collecting himself, Lamar retied his bandana, winked into the mirror and shifted gears. “You see how anger consumes you. Not good for your blood pressure. Let's just talk facts for a second. Fact one, there’s sixty-four ounces in a gallon, which serves thirty-two, two-ounce shots of whiskey. Okeydokey? And at a dollar a shot, which is far too cheap, you make thirty-two bucks a gallon. Fact two, you buy from me at ten bucks a gallon, so that’s over three hundred percent profit. So what in hell you cryin’ ’bout?”

Without blinking, Virgil eased back the hammer of the .38. “Cryin'? Who's cryin'? You see any tears, son? You want to talk facts, let's talk us some facts. With a thirteen-thousand-gallon still, your finished cost per gallon of shine is around three bucks. And you been sellin' it at ten bucks a gallon; that's, say, three hundred percent profit? Okeydokey? And if you figure in the overhead it costs to run this pleasure palace, we’re lucky to break even most of the time. So, run along, greedy boy. Just give me my regular order, at the regular price.”

“Have it your way. We’ll talk some more. Just understand, Tallapoosa is my town...and if...” Lamar paused. “And if you mess with my bike, I’ll burn this shithole down.”
Virgil stuck the .38 under the bar and smiled. “You can’t burn cinder block stupid.”

“Your right. Ah Guess I’ll have to blow the sumbitch up.”

Lamar shuffled back to his table, making a mental note to stop delivering to the Legion Post. By now, everyone was up and shouting as a riff from the lead guitar thundered across the porch.

da-ta-DA da-DUM

da-ta-Da da-DUM

da-ta-DA da-DUM

The band then broke into “Midnight Rider,” an Allman Brothers favorite.

Lamar tapped his beer bottle on the table and sang along. “No, I’m not gonna let ‘em catch the midnight rider.” He was sure Virgil would come around once he ran out of moonshine for a week or two. What the hell, he thought, its simple economics. He smiled as he heard the familiar whump, whump of Billy Chitwood’s Dodge Coronet roll into the lot. Lamar pulled the sleeve of his shirt up and checked the trip sheet he’d inked on his forearm. Billy would be hauling forty cases of whiskey tonight. Each case contained six one-gallon plastic jugs, a total of 240 gallons.

Clutching a long-neck beer, Billy strutted up to Lamar, wearing grease-stained overalls and a goofy smile. “Hey hey. How you?”

“Hey, Billy. I’m lovin’ that hemi. You got her tuned for tonight?”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

Lamar winked. “Shee-yet boy, I know everything that’s goes on.”

“I truly believe it. Yeah, that four-twenty-six hemi is so fine! Got me a second at Carrolton Speedway Sunday last. Truly fine. She’s ready to roll. Billy coughed and cleared his throat. “Seriously Lamar, seriously, I’m gonna need more runs to make the payments.”

Lamar gently tapped his beer bottle on the table. “Look, I busted my ass to git you a big load tonight, and I don’t want any screw-ups.”

“You know, it weren’t…” Billy paused and seemed to collect his thoughts. “It weren’t like this when Alta was runnin’ things.”

Lamar tapped the bottle harder. “The hell, Billy Boy, the hell. These are hard times, hills crawlin’ with feds, sugar’s gone high-dollar, more and more wet counties. Tonight’s the last run at the old price. We been losing our ass for the last year. You’re not just a bootlegger, Billy, you’re a goddamn salesman, so get your ass out there and sell the new price, or it’s coming out of your pocket.”

Billy chugged his beer down and shouted loud enough for all to hear, “You know, this here was one sweet business when Alta was around. And you’re sure-nuf screwing it up!”

“Try to remember Billy Boy, a hungry dog hunts best. Now, say goodnight.”

Moments later Skeeter Tatum rumbled into the parking lot in a jacked-up ’51 Ford pickup with a
tarp over the back. He lumbered across the porch to Lamar’s table, where Lamer spewed the same arguments and the same threats. By midnight, five more trippers came and went, and Lamar had roared off on his Harley. A surge of adrenaline flashed though him like a bolt of lightning, further masking his uncertainty. Nooooo, they’re not gonna catch the midnight rider.

CHAPTER 4

American Legion Post, Tallapoosa, Same Day

It was 11:30 p.m. when Mandy finally signed out of ER. Running late, she rushed down the hall, skirted ventilators and CPR carts, and sprinted for her Plymouth Fury. It was a twenty-minute ride to the Legion Post. She tried to focus on the road, but her mind kept slipping back to her childhood, searching for answers.

When she was twelve, her after-school time was split between farm chores and devouring copies of Ardent Love. By fifteen, she had blossomed into a pretty young miss, a born pleaser. She was a big girl, just over five foot ten with an angelic face and a striking body, sometimes the Doris Day princess, sometimes the Debbie Reynold’s charmer. Adolescence wasn’t easy. At first, she swooned over privileged southern gents—the Ashley Wilkes types. Suffering through a string of heartbreaks, she switched direction and fell hard for the dangerous Rhett Butler types. Fortunately, a high school counselor got her into girls’ basketball. She became the starting forward at West Haralson High, and went on to become a conference all-star at West Georgia College.

The only ring she had these days was her college conference championship ring, which swung on a chain from the rearview mirror. She’d never forgotten the time her coach pulled her aside after the final game and asked her how she felt about her play. She shrugged uncomfortably and asked the coach if he was pleased.

“Mandy,” he said, “it’s not about pleasing me. You had a great game and a great season. As you go forward, you have to decide what you want out of life. You decide what pleases you. Set your goals and go for it.”

Her mind snapped back into focus as she rattled across the railroad tracks coming into town. She gripped the steering wheel at the stop sign and sighed. Those were the glory days.

Glory days, all right, and poor romantic choices. Her worst choice was running off with Lamar Tate, the self-proclaimed playboy of Tallapoosa. Lamar was both handsome and dangerous, part dreamer part schemer. He loved fast cars, fast women and Southern Comfort. When he wasn’t running whiskey for Alta he was scheming against him. Over the years he’d been in and out of prison, always on the same charge: conspiring to violate federal liquor laws.

Mandy fell hard for Lamar, yet was sure she could tame him, and she did for a while. Somehow, she’d earned a nursing degree as she battled through an abusive marriage. With Lamar it was feast or famine. There were always money problems, and they sunk deeper and deeper in debt. When he scored big on some shady deal, he’d buy a new car and soup it up for the dirt track racing and running moonshine. Lately, he was into Harleys.

They’d separated two years back, then filed for divorce, and then endured several painful attempts to reconcile. The divorce was finalized last year, along with a court order for alimony.
Just before midnight, Mandy skidded to a stop at the Legion Post and shot inside. Pushing through the crowd, she spotted Virgil Pettimore sprawled out at a table in the corner, clutching a Pabst Blue Ribbon. He’d finished pouring for the night, and now seemed intent on drinking. He pulled himself up and gave her a hug. “Hey, shugah, how you doin’?”

Mandy glanced around the room. “Looks like I missed him again?”

Virgil frowned. “Not by much. He just roared off.”

She dropped into a chair. “Darn.”

“So, how’s basketball going?”

She smiled. “Haralson County women’s team is having another good year. We beat Carroll County last week. We play Polk County this week.”

“And you?”

“Had a triple double against Carroll County.”

“Damn girl, you still got it. And how’s ER?”

She shrugged. “Car wrecks, domestic violence, some shooting’s, drunks. Same old problems. Y’know what? I really gotta run.”

Mandy, paused, then threw her head back and laughed. “Say, Virgil, you know Inez Folsom?”

He sighed and shook his head. “Inez, sweet lady, comes in now and then, usually a little banged up.”

“So, here’s the story. Inez finally gets fed up with Tommy Lee, her no-good, wife-beating husband, and signs up for a self-defense class.”

After many dark years in a six-by-ten cell, Sam Alta Dryden finally saw the light. He headed home from prison and swore he’d go straight even as the warden warned, “Going home is not the best place to start over.” Alta nodded politely, but was determined to sell off his moonshine empire, win back the love of his dying wife Shelby, and to revive Tallapoosa, Georgia, a town with a rather checkered past.

Alta’s new success was legendary: he regained Shelby’s trust, launched a major home building company, and was elected Mayor of Tallapoosa. But he was haunted by the advice of his prison psychologist: “Alta, yours is the curse of genius. You want to be the smartest guy in the room and that makes you a sucker for every crooked deal that comes your way.”
Can Alta stay legit when his moonshine buddies try to draw him into an illegal gas-tapping deal? Can he break the curse, or will it break him? *Altä’s Curse*, a novel by Patrick Curran, was inspired by the life of a notorious West Georgia outlaw.

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