



An excerpt from *The Edge of the Coin*, which is part of *The Collected Bubba Gumble*.

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CHAPTER SIX

The thump of a slamming car door woke me. I'd been napping on the bed. I got up, went to a window and saw Mrs. Dowling walking to the house with a bag of groceries. She went in through the kitchen door. I yawned and turned to go to my computer.

I thought of the ghost in the stable below and wondered how long it would take me to finish my job there. If I pushed I could be done and gone in a day, but then I remembered that my next scanning appointment was more than a week away. And I didn't have a place to stay in the meantime.

The old guy I was going to work for next owned a collection of hundreds of autographed pictures of movie stars. Or that's what he told me over the phone. I hadn't met him yet or seen the pictures, but he said he wanted me to scan the whole collection. He mentioned some big-name actors, and when I asked if all his pictures were really autographed he said, "Yep. I signed ever' one of 'em." Definitely my kind of client. Probably good for a week's room and board, though I doubted his food would be as good as Mrs. Dowling's. He said he'd stock up on steaks for us, but I suspected that meant a fresh case of dog food.

I sat down at the desk and scanned the next picture in the stack I was working through, and when the image came up on the monitor something caught my eye. The screen showed a group of adults, but squeezed in among them was a chubby teenaged girl with a self-conscious smile. She looked familiar. I thumbed down to the bottom of the stack and found another picture of her, a portrait. She was about the same age in it as she was in the group photo on the monitor. I flipped the portrait over and saw "Gwendolyn Purvis, age 14" written on the back. Both the portrait and the

picture of the group were black and white, and the girl's hair was the same light color in each. Blonde. I studied the two pictures more closely, trying to figure out why the girl looked so familiar. I clicked back through the other Dowling scans on my computer and found two more images of her. One was from the photo marked "Age ten," and the other was from the family portrait where Mrs. Dowling was about five and . . .

A chill shot up my spine. I clicked from the family portrait, to the picture of the girl at ten, then I looked at the portrait I held in my hand. It was a picture of Mrs. Dowling's sister, Gwendolyn, at fourteen. I saw her in yet another pose, too. She was older, still heavy, and her blonde hair was dark with blood. She was the ghost from the stable.

I thumbed through some more pictures and found one marked "Elizabeth Purvis, age 13." Mrs. Dowling as a girl. It was a companion to the shot that showed her sister at fourteen. Same backdrop, same studio stamp. So the two pictures were probably taken on the same day, which would make Mrs. Dowling a year younger than her sister.

I was looking through the pictures of Gwendolyn again when a sense of relief came over me. The ghost probably *was* a product of my imagination. I had seen the pictures of Gwendolyn Purvis while working on the scanning project, and then later my wasp-venomed brain conjured up a vision with her face on it. I went back to work, satisfied that the mystery of the ghost was solved.

My mind moved on to other things. I adjusted the saturation on a scan, mooned over Callah, and then I thought of my most recent trip to Wasp World. I wondered what Pancho could have meant when he said he took care of "that thing" for me. On one of my visits he told me he took care of a thing, and it turned out he simply watered my plants while I was away. Another time the "thing" involved a corpse found floating wings-up in a lake.

But Pancho's things are usually somewhere between those two extremes. Not that the zone between is safe. One time he was kneeling behind me and waving a bloody pair of scissors when I popped in. He said, "That takes care of *that* thing," then he described how he'd cut the head off a giant screwworm that was burrowing its way out of one of my butt cheeks. The only problem with his story was that there *was* no screwworm. He just *thought* there was because of the especially powerful stuff he was smoking that day. And then, as if not being able to sit on my mutilated ass during that trip wasn't bad enough, he kept saying, "At least you weren't *facing* me when I cut the head off the worm."

Some time later I shut off my scanner and was wrapping the second finished stack of photos with a rubber band, when I felt a twinge of doubt about the ghost. My confidence that it had been a product of my imagination began to waver. Was I forcing myself to believe something because I was afraid of the alternative?

I thought back over the events of the previous evening—did a moment by moment recreation of the incident in the stable—and I decided that what I'd seen had been real. If there'd been any venom in my system the amount would have been negligible by then, and my flashlight lingered on the apparition too long for there to be any doubt that it was actually there. But the light beam passed *through* the apparition, too, so that meant it was only half there. A ghost. That was the only possible explanation.

Seeing a ghost was a new experience for me, and I needed to talk to someone about it. Mrs. Dowling wasn't an option, and Callah and I weren't speaking, so that left Preston Feerce. He's my computer technician. I had to discuss a technical issue with him anyway, so I dialed him on my

computer phone and then waited as the call went through to Waco.

The phone rang, rang again, and again. It always takes Preston awhile to answer. He works in a shop with a dozen computers plugged in, and he never knows which one is hooked up to his phone.

He finally appeared on my screen. His eyeballs flitted up and down, from his monitor to a camera mounted on top of it.

“That you, Bubba?”

Preston always knows it’s me when I call, because of his tracking programs, but he always asks if it’s me anyway.

“No, Mr. Feerce, this is Waco sex crimes. You need to bring your car in for an emissions test, and I don’t mean the exhaust system.”

“Real funny.” His eyes flitted. “Why can’t I see you?”

His brow wrinkled, and that’s a lot of wrinkling because his brow stretches to his shirt collar in back. But he’s not completely bald. He has a patch of black hair on each side of his pale head, and he keeps those hairs long so he can do the most bizarre two-way comb-over I’ve ever seen. His hair was down at the moment, and he had a screwdriver in his hand when he reached to adjust something on his monitor. I must have interrupted him while he was working.

“Haven’t you hooked up the camera I gave you?” he asked.

I hadn’t.

“Of course I did. Can’t you see me?”

“No. Did you hook it up right?”

“Sure. Callah helped me. Didn’t you, babe?”

Preston perked up at the mention of Callah. He’s a short, dumpy little guy, and he did what he could to suck in the bulge around his middle.

“So Callah’s there with you?”

“Yeah. And I’m glad my camera’s *not* working

because . . . Time's up, Callah."

Preston did a quick comb-over and smiled what I guess was meant to be his most seductive smile. Or he could have been grimacing in pain. He'd forgotten to take the screwdriver out of his hand when he was fixing his hair, and he left a two-inch gash on top of his head. Beads of blood began to well up along the length of it.

"Hi, Callah," he said.

"She can't talk right now, Preston. She's finishing her nude yoga exercises."

Preston gulped, then he whacked the side of his monitor. The camera on top shook. It looked like Waco was being rocked by an earthquake.

I said, "Callah, don't point that at the camera. You'll embarrass him."

I chuckled at the sight of Preston's bugging eyes.

"What's she pointing at the camera?"

"Huh? Oh, her . . . Quit that, Callah. Or at least put some panties on."

Preston reached forward and grabbed his monitor. Waco shook with an aftershock.

"Okay," I said, "See you in a few minutes."

Preston let go of his monitor and looked at the camera.

"Is she going somewhere?"

I watched as blood from his gash trickled down his forehead, encountered wrinkles and channeled sideways in both directions.

"Yeah, she's, uh, she's going to get us some ice cream."

"Oh." He let his gut relax and went sulky. "You need to get that camera working."

"I will. But that's not what I called about. I need a way to slow down my system."

"Your computer system?"

"Yeah. I need to slow it down."

"Why would you want to do that?"

“Well, most of my clients don’t know computers, but a couple weeks ago I ran into one who did. And he knew I was trying to milk the job after I gave my demo run-through. He did the numbers when I said it would take a week, and . . .”

“Did he have a good place to stay?”

“Yeah. Pool house, donuts, the whole works. But he wouldn’t leave me alone after the demo. Just told me to get busy, then he stood right behind me, so I had to work at the pace I used during the demo. And you know how fast my computer and scanner are.”

“Of course. I built them. They’re as fast as . . . as fast as . . .” I waited for him. He can get pissy if you don’t let him finish his thought. “They’re as fast as thought.”

“Right. And this guy knew that. So he stood there until I was done, then he deducted for the time I’d spent looking over my shoulder at him. And when I tried to argue, he deducted for the time I’d spent lying to him when I was going through the demo.”

“Sounds like a real hard-ass.”

“He was. Smart, too. His folks said he might skip the third grade. So I could use something like . . . I don’t know . . . a ‘slow’ switch, for the demo.”

Preston nodded and said, “Yeah, I can rig something like that. A plug-in. It’ll take a day or two, if I have the parts.”

He reached forward and dug through some stuff below my field of view. “You need a new game?” He held up a disc. “I have copies of ‘SWAT Team in Paradise’ and ‘Nunnery Gunner.’”

“No thanks. I’ll be playing ‘Navel Maneuvers’ in a few minutes.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a game where I put a scoop of ice cream in Callah’s navel and . . .”

“Forget it! I don’t want to know.”

He stepped to the left, off my screen, then after a moment the camera panned sideways. It followed him as he moved from bench to bench around his shop. He sorted through clutter and held onto a computer chip, a coil of wire, and a soldering iron. Then he paused and looked at me from across the room. "Well?" he said. "You notice anything new?"

"Sure. You're parting your hair different."

He scowled and put on an old red baseball cap that was near at hand.

"The camera," he said. "It's following me."

"So?"

"So it's new. I built it using a motion detector."

He continued his trek around the shop and tripped over a cable. A nearby monitor went dark. He plugged the cable back in and a poof of smoke came from a monitor on another bench. He shrugged and moved on.

I had happened across Preston years before. He can do some amazing things with computers, but his social skills are somewhat lacking. One time he thought I was talking about masturbation when I mentioned a homecoming dance.

He completed his circuit of the room and returned to the camera/monitor with a handful of parts. He held them up for me to see.

"I should be able to piece together some kind of delay device with these. You need anything else?"

"Well . . ." I didn't know how to bring up the topic of the ghost. "Yeah, there is one other thing. Do you know anything about . . . specters?"

"Specters?"

"Yeah. You know, uh, ghosts."

"Your screen is ghosting on you?" He passed a hand back and forth in front of the camera. "Is this motion clear or blurry?"

"Not ghosting, *ghosts*."

“You mean *real* ghosts? Spooks?”

“Yes. Do you believe in them?”

Pause.

“Are you on the wasps again?”

“No.”

“Are they on you?”

“No. But last night I thought I saw something.”

“A ghost?”

“Yes.”

Preston looked intently at the camera. Another pause, then he snorted.

“Real funny. You just wanted to take a little time off from cavorting with Callah so you could give me a hard time. Where is she, anyway? How far’s the store she went to?”

I really wanted his thoughts on the ghost, so I decided to tell him the truth about Callah. Then maybe we could get back to discussing the supernatural.

“She’s not here. I mean, she’s not with me at all. Not doing yoga, not going to the store. The truth is . . . it’s over. I’m not seeing her anymore.”

Preston’s eyes twinkled but he scrunched up his face sympathetically. The sympathy looked as real as his comb-over.

“Sorry to hear that, buddy. You want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Come on. It might do you some good to get it off your chest.”

I shouldn’t have told him about the breakup. Now I wouldn’t be able to get back to the topic of ghosts until I fed him the soap opera details of my love life. I’d make it short.

“Fine. You see, we . . .”

“Will she go out with me?” he interrupted.

That was short, all right. The pig. He didn’t know why Callah and I split up and he didn’t care. He just wanted to swoop in and take up with her where I left off. Forget the ghost, he needed to be

taught a lesson.

“Yes,” I said, “I think she’ll go out on a date with you.”

“Can you fix it up?”

He was getting that bug-eyed, naked yoga look again.

“I don’t know. We haven’t seen each other in a while and... Wait a minute, there *are* some formalities we still need to take care of. Maybe you could help out.”

“Formalities?”

“Yeah. Ceremonial separation stuff. It’s complicated, but you can do my part, as a stand-in. Let me think... Right now she’s on the Greenland to Texas flight. She ought to be landing at Dallas-Fort Worth in a couple of hours. If you hurry, you should be able to get there.”

“To the airport?”

“Yes. Can you make it in two hours?”

He smiled.

“Sure I can make it, to meet Callah. But what should I wear? What should I say?”

“Wear suspenders and a bow tie. She likes those. Oh, and polka dots. The bigger the better.”

“Pants or shirt?”

“Uh, polka dots for the shirt, plaid pants. Hurry up, buddy.”

He hung up, even though we hadn’t discussed his “ceremonial” duties yet. If he didn’t call back in a minute or so I’d call him, before he could dash out the door.

Preston is so easy to manipulate. One time I told him they’d condemned the bridges across the Brazos River in Waco, then I convinced him to go down and ask a high school football team practicing at the river where he could find a ferry. The team took time off from practice to kick his ass.

My phone beeped and I answered. Preston was halfway dressed—plaid pants, polka dot shirt,

a bow tie clipped to the bill of his cap. A line of blood trickled out from under the cap and down one of his temples, but he was too wound up to notice. He held up a pair of zebra-striped suspenders for me to see.

“I have brown suspenders or these. Which ones do you think I should wear?”

The jerk was wasting no time moving in on my girl, *and* he was hoping to impress her with zebra suspenders.

“Wear those. She loves animals.”

“Great.” He began putting on the suspenders. “By the way, I called back because you didn’t give me the details on that ceremony you mentioned.”

“Oh, yeah, the ceremony. Callah told me about it when we started going out together. It’s an Egyptian ceremony, I think, or Panamanian. I don’t remember. But for us to officially separate, I need to repeat a phrase to her. A secret phrase only the two lovers know. It’s like a bond between us. But if *you* show up and repeat the phrase, then that means I told it to you, and I’ve given you permission to take my place in her life. Weird, huh?”

Preston had finished getting dressed while I spoke. He nodded at the camera.

“Yeah, weird. What’s the phrase?”

“Back up a little. Let me see how you look.”

He took a step back. Red baseball cap, bow tie, polka-dot shirt, zebra suspenders, plaid pants. I couldn’t see his feet.

“What kind of shoes are you wearing?”

“My purple basketball shoes. But I have some others that are green if that’s better.”

“Wear one of each. Callah told me that’s the style with the jet set right now.”

“Okay. What’s the phrase I need to repeat to her?”

“Get something to write with.”

He found a notepad and poised a pen over it.

"It's three words," I said. "The first one is meebee."

"Meebee," he repeated, writing.

"Boyho."

"Boyo."

"No. Boyho."

"Boyho."

"Foyu."

"Foyu."

He squinted at the notepad.

"What does this mean?"

"I don't know. It's Egyptian. Or Panamanian. Anyway, her flight will be landing pretty soon, so you better get going. And once you're there, stand in the middle of the airport and holler that phrase over and over until she acknowledges you as her new man."

"I have to *holler* this? In public?"

"It's part of the ceremony. Public acknowledgement."

He looked at the notepad and repeated the words he'd written. "Meebee boyho foyu. Meebee boyho foyu."

"Perfect," I smiled. "Yell it real loud, so she can't weasel out of the ceremony."

"This is a strange language, whatever it is."

"Yeah. Now get going. And change that shoe before you leave."

He stuffed the notepad in a pocket and switched off the camera. The image of his bug-eyed, grinning face seemed to linger on the screen for a moment.

I chuckled.