

# AL CAPONE'S BONES



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# CHAPTER 1

“You’ve just got to visit Pea Ridge and see all those old battlefields,” the man said. He had been lecturing me for some time as we sat together on a bench in Arlington Park.

“There was this tour guide, and he would point and say, ‘Here’s where a small band of rebels wiped out a whole Northern division. Over there’s where Albert Pike sent the Cherokees to hack up another flank. The rest of the Yankees were rounded up and shot.’ Now, I’m someone you might call a Civil War nut, if you couldn’t tell, so I ask the guide, ‘Didn’t the North win the Battle of Pea Ridge?’”

He looks me in the eye and says, “Not on my tour.”

The Arlington Hotel stood ahead in the distance. Between us ran Fountain Street, lined by shady sidewalks and rows of Magnolia Trees and old parking meters. In every other direction loomed large historical buildings and landmarks that have been standing as early as the mid-1800s.

Businesses of all flavors - eccentric and straight, luxurious and meager, honest and corrupt all occupied the old buildings, sending a living buzz pulsing down the sidewalks of Central and through the arteries of the side streets and neighborhoods.

Central Avenue was the main strip through downtown - a noisy four-lane street that keeps traffic in check with the duck boats, bicycle cops, horse carriages, scrambling tourists, non-stop construction and other ruckus.

For such a tiny swath of a much larger city, downtown Hot Springs, Arkansas is massive in spirit and boasts an impressive history. Aside from the countless volumes of fascinating episodes from its past, it was also one of the favorite getaways of Al Capone and the gangsters. Prohibition, gambling and whorehouse chaos was legendary. It was still considered a little tucked-away Sin City until the 1960s, when all gambling

was outlawed except for the horse races at Oaklawn Park.

It's the hometown of ex-President Bill Clinton, actor Billy Bob Thornton and inventor of the Po'boy sandwich, Matt Crouse.

Of course, the main attraction is the hot springs itself, which once peacefully gathered tribes of Indians to soak in the healing waters without fear of violence. Hernado DeSoto and his friends even hiked through and took a bath while exploring the new country.

The area was originally named the "Valley of the Vapors" and from heaven, it looks like a giant cereal bowl filled with hot air. And like any good cereal, the city is packed with fruits, nuts and flakes.

It was summer, and despite the wet southern heat, I enjoyed the atmosphere of Arlington Park. It calmed me to watch the tourists and locals drifting around, sitting in the grass or watching the hot water trickle down the mountain. The trickle eventually scattered into a steaming little waterfall that filled a stone wading tub at the base. It was usually full of coins during tourist season. Wishes and dreams.

Haydon Loudermilk had given up on wishes and dreams. He steals the coins to buy cigarettes and Adderall. He's just 15

and has already decided the world is nothing but a “big bucket of horse puke.” He quit going to school and decided the life of Fun and Games was his calling.

He’s a rotten kid, but he doesn’t mean real harm. Sure, he tags crude slogans on old buildings and sets fire to dumpsters and throws rocks at cars, but he’s happy. Even while being popped for stealing coins out of the fountains, he’ll still snap up as much money as possible before spastically running away in a laughing fit.



The dreamers must have been a little thrifty the afternoon I met Haydon. After kicking around the pool without much luck, he strutted towards me. He picked up an old half-smoked cigarette and stood next to my bench. He was tall and lanky with a skinny head.

“Heyhow'sitgoing?” He smiled, lighting the nub.

“Decent,” I nodded. I instantly liked him.

“Do you think I could get five bucks?” he asked. No phony small talk, no bogus sob story, no cards up the sleeve. He probably asks his probation officer for beer money.

I slapped him a ten. "Have fun," I said.

"Thanks!" He wadded the money into his pocket like a gum wrapper and tore down the sidewalk.

After that day, he and I became acquaintances. We never crossed outside the park but we were always happy to see each other. Sometimes we would sit and talk, other times we'd just nod hello. He gave everyone hell except me, which I found endearing.

I would watch him pick pocket, prank and sexually harass men and women of all sizes, races and professions. He seemed to live in a protective bubble that was allergic to retribution.

I wouldn't call his existence particularly charmed, because Haydon Loudermilks can only be Haydon Loudermilks for so long before they end up reformed, defeated, dead or in prison. I could say with certainty that reformed and defeated didn't stand a chance.

People like Haydon don't leave quietly, and that he was prepared to self-destruct at such a young age was captivating.

"This park used to be open 24 hours a day. My big brother would party here every night," Haydon told me. "Now it

closes at 10 P.M. and the cops guard it like it's the county jail.”

“Why is that?”

“This stupid hippie named Crazy Rob got busted bathing naked in the water tub one night back in the 90s and it freaked out the tourists.”

“Stupid,” I said, imagining a nice midnight stroll.

“These tourists,” he scoffed, tossing his hand. “They don't know us. They don't know Hot Springs. They sure make the rules, though, don't they? And they bring in all the money so these fat rich people can buy boats and swordfight with their twinkies.”

I started laughing.

“You think *that's* funny?” he asked, breathing funny. “Watch this.” I sat back on the bench. Something stupid was about to happen. Haydon needed only a semblance of an audience before he skipped whatever masterpiece he could have performed and fired straight to the grand finale.

He stood up, stripped down to his boxer shorts, and belted a scream so obnoxious that the ghost would've been scared clean out of the back of Hitler's skull. Every face in every direction stopped and looked. Haydon raised his hands like a champion and bolted for the hot water tub. Bodies scattered and voices

rose in confusion as he full-on sidefloppeped into the shallow pool.

That water is hot. I've touched it, briefly. Some folks soak their feet. Others just touch it and giggle. They say it's around 150 degrees Fahrenheit, more than one-third again the temperature of the human body. I swore I saw a smile on his face as he sank beneath that special Indian water.

Gasps and several screams followed the splash as Haydon thrashed around, flinging his body as if being stung to death by scorpions. The hot water flew in every direction, raining on those too slow to escape.

"I'm boiling! I'm boiling alive! Oh, God! Save me! Please!"

Moustache Hero, who at first shielded his family from the commotion scrambled over and fell to his knees, reaching into the water to save the boy's life. His clothes became drenched. He cussed some, but finally got a manly grip on Haydon's armpits and yanked him free.

"Oh *God*," Haydon moaned in mock pain as people ran to him, holding his arms and firing a symphony of questions.

"What just happened?"

"Are you ok?"

"Did he just jump in?"

"Someone call Dr. Hannon."

Mustache Hero was being congratulated by his kids, and he took to it with pride, while his wife explained that he'd always had an adventurous, selfless streak.

Haydon's face slowly contorted into revulsion as he pointed towards a businessman wearing a suit and tie. "Why did you push me in?" he screeched. The man looked confused and somewhat humiliated as a crowd of people stood and stared.

"I didn't push you, I—" The man tried to respond, but Haydon had already gathered up his clothes and flew across Central Avenue, weaving through four lanes of downtown traffic, laughing and whooping in a pair of wet boxer shorts.

"Hey!" Moustache Hero gasped. "Where's my wallet?" His hands were slapping his chest and pants in a panic.

"Mommy!" cried a little girl. "What happened to my wish?" Of course, the tub had been cleared of coins.

That afternoon, Haydon Loudermilk bought himself the most expensive home stereo the Hero's stolen credit card could buy. Within a week, of course, it was vandalized and thrashed, except for one speaker, which he traded for six tallboys of Miller High Life and a fistful of Adderall.

## CHAPTER 2

Hot Springs feels like the big city to me. I moved from a nameless county in a nameless flat state. Nowhere within a hundred miles of my roots had any indication of personality. There wasn't even a landscape.

I was educated at home by my grandparents who barely spoke. I read lots and lots of books, but can't remember most of them, except for *Dracula*. It scared me worse than any movie I'd ever seen.

I walked up and down the empty highway more than anything and worked at the only gas station in town, but never had anything to buy.

One afternoon I arrived home from work and was met by a man in a suit and tie. He informed me my father had died and left me his entire fortune. I never knew my father or anything about him,

but that day I learned he was worth enough money to bribe Christ. Now it belonged to me. The man asked me if I had any questions, and I said no, so he handed over some legal documents and drove away. I walked inside and watched TV.

My grandparents, my father's parents, who barely qualified as living beings, never mentioned my father and I eventually got used to it. They died shortly before he did, and of course, he didn't come to their funerals. I didn't go to his either, but not out of revenge. I just didn't feel like going.

The newspapers wrote that he locked himself in the basement of an unassuming house in some suburb and never emerged. They exhumed his dried yellow corpse from his prison of psychosis. He ended up just another unknown eccentric sad-sack millionaire.

I eventually learned my father was the inventor of Silly Putty. He also invented something called the Whiz Bang but it never caught on like Silly Putty.

Apparently, the Whiz Bang connected to your air rifle so that when fired it belted out a bullhorn scream so obnoxious that adolescent forest wars began to sound like a nonstop succession of touchdowns at a Razorbacks football game. Woodland creatures began losing their hair and it

wasn't uncommon for birds to fall from the sky.

Inevitably the Whiz Bang flopped. Besides the disruption of peace and wildlife, no kid wants to draw attention while firing a bb gun. There's just never a valid reason.

On a whim brought on by the eventual shock of my new fortune, I decided to load up my meager belongings and head east to live. I was aiming for a scenic drive to New England, but my van broke down in Hot Springs.

I had the ability to charter a private jet to anywhere in the world, but I wouldn't touch my father's money. It merely sits in a bank, alone. I'll die with it. Let someone else dance circles around it for all I care.

I decided to stay in Hot Springs. I got a job as a dishwasher at the Arlington Hotel which pays enough to cover rent on my little house off Ramble Street. I don't have friends, but I've never had friends, so I just roam around downtown keeping my thoughts company, kicking around the rocks or sitting on benches until it's time to go to work.

The hardest adjustment of moving from the Blank and into the Rainbow was the job part. Back home at the service

station, customers quietly bought gas or a pack of smokes and went about their way. The loudest noises were the refrigerators buzzing or the bug lights zapping. If someone happened to screech their tires, or if a backfire popped, my boss and I would jump over the counter and look out the window to see what horrible tragedy had befallen us.

My first night washing dishes at the Arlington was probably comparable to a gladiator facing his first adversary.

Before I was given instructions, before I clocked in, before I met with the manager, an old plastic apron was slung at me from behind, followed by four laughing cooks filling my arms with dirty pots and pans. The busboys were bringing in tubs of dirty plates and silverware and stacking them everywhere, even the floor.

Sandia, my co-worker who spoke not a syllable of English, was waving her arms and hollering in Spanish and sweating like crazy. The sound of silverware clanging inside those stupid brown tubs began to rattle my bones.

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Don’t just stand there! Scrub!” Some burn-out kitchen boss was barking at me as more tubs hit the ground. I picked up a pan of old red sauce and stood, dumbfounded. “Scrub! Scrub!”

I grabbed the spring-fed spray nozzle from the wall and aimed it into the pan. I

barely squeezed the trigger when a blast of hot water fired with enough raw power to knock over a bull moose. My face and neck became soaked, and as I rubbed my eyes I stepped in a bus tub, sending it sideways and shattering the plates and glasses.

“Jason!” the burn-out boss called to a cook. “Get over there and help those morons wash dishes. I’ve got no clean pans over here.” He sighed angrily as he looked at me. “Where do they find deadbeats like you? *Get to work!*”

I should have quit. I should have bounced those precious pans off that boss’ face. I should have jumped up on the cook line and told them all that I could buy the whole Arlington and fire everyone in it.

But I didn’t. I worked. I washed dishes. I cleaned human waste and foodscum for nine hours straight, dodging a lunch break because I was too ashamed to sit next to anyone. They’d all watched me freeze while that boss talked to me like a dog, so I just worked through my lunch, free of charge.

I arrived home, laid on my wood floor like someone who’d been shot and passed out cold.

The next evening I stood outside the Arlington, my shoulders slumped. It was

beautiful in every direction and the summer breeze whispered against my body. A horse and carriage galloped past carrying a couple of lovers. Traffic was heavy with the barrage of headlights and commotion. None of it made a difference. I was in for a night of work that would border on torture.

I walked into the kitchen. The entire crew stopped working and stared at me. They started laughing and cheering and I looked around to make sure there wasn't someone else nearby.

"You came back," that jerk boss said as he proudly put his hand on my shoulder. "Most dishwashers last between, oh, three to four hours. Not only did you make it through the shift, you even came back for another round of hell. I've gotta hand it to ya."

I sort of smiled as the crew laughed and made jokes and pointed. I felt like I belonged. I looked at each of their faces, and with every microsecond, I contemplated their lives. I looked at them as human beings, and not scenery. The fact that they took the time to give me a hero's welcome for coming back to scrub dishes for seven bucks an hour was amazing.

I wasn't used to this kind of chaos and didn't know how to react, so I grabbed