

## KARSON'S SWAMP

Not much goes on in Baxter County. There are probably more alligator residents than people. Jerome Leshay seemed perfectly fine with that statistic. He kinda preferred the company of gators and snakes over the human equivalent.

Jerome lived about a quarter mile inside Karson's Swamp on a little island of Bald Cypress and Water Oak. When the rainy season came, he gathered up anything that might float away and moved up to the second floor of his little cabin.

One day, the man looked out across the swamp to see two strangers on horseback waiting at the edge of the swamp. After a little bit, a third horse and rider joined them. The three men didn't get off their horses or do anything other than talk. About an hour later, a fourth man driving a wagon showed up. The three men on horseback dismounted and walked to the back of the wagon. Two of them grabbed shovels, and the third helped the wagon driver follow with a large chest. They began digging a hole and eventually reached a depth that satisfied them. They lowered the chest into the hole and covered it up. Gathering brush from a short

distance away, the men worked diligently to hide the fresh dirt.

“Very curious,” said Jerome to himself. “They are trying to hide the spot, yet they are marking the spot with a cross ... perhaps ... Perhaps they’re trying to make it look like a gravesite from long ago. Not really a bad idea for concealing whatever it is in that chest. Most people would not think to look in a grave that’s been there a long time.”

The four men then left the site, apparently unaware that they were being watched. Now, intrigue rarely came to Karson’s Swamp, at least not of human origin. Maybe in the back of his mind, Jerome missed that part of civilization. His past contained years spent as a big-city police detective, as well as a brief time as a man of the cloth. Both occupations necessitated solving mysteries of a sort. So, after several days of thought, he could no longer resist finding out what was in that chest.

Loading a shovel into his canoe, Jerome began the trip around his island with his faithful dog, Lucky, at the front of the canoe. Lucky’s name used to just be ‘dog’, but his frequent encounters with gators that he always survived gained him a more fitting name. When they got to the back side

of the island, Jerome paddled for the spot of the cross.

“Well, Lucky, I wonder what’s in here,” said Jerome.

Lucky looked up at Jerome and cocked his head to one side.

“With a little work, I think we can satisfy your curiosity, boy.”

Jerome carefully cleared the brush and piled it up to the side. Then he began digging. With the dirt being fresh, it wasn’t hard digging, but then Jerome wasn’t getting any younger either. Lucky, on the other hand, showed no fatigue from supervising.

“At least, these boys picked a high spot, Lucky. Otherwise, this chest would be sitting in water.”

Finally, the shovel made a thud and Jerome knew he’d hit the chest. Carefully, he cleared enough dirt out from around it so he could open the lid.

“A lock ... I should have known that ... a problem, but not an insurmountable one, thanks to Rutherford Caldwell. You remember Ruddy, don’t

you, boy? ... No, I guess that was before your time. Well, Rutty was one of the best safe and lock men in the city. After I'd arrested him for the twelfth time, I guess I gained his respect, I think. Anyway, he showed me how to pick a lock. He seemed quite proud to be passing along some of his knowledge, though it was quite curious why he would be proud to be passing it along to the guy who kept arresting him. But here we are. It doesn't look too sophisticated, so if I use the small blade of my knife, I think ... there you go, click."

Expecting to see some kind of treasure, Jerome knelt on the fresh dirt, looking at a chest full of Bibles. Brand spanking-new Bibles.

"Now, why would somebody bury a chest full of new Bibles, Lucky? That just doesn't make sense. I can think of all kinds of spiritual metaphors for it, but these guys didn't look like the kind to attach any spiritual significance to something like this. There's got to be more to it."

After digging down through three layers of Bibles, Jerome was about to give up, when he noticed something slightly different about one Bible in the middle of the fourth layer. The Bible was the same as the others, but the gold, boldly embossed writing on the cover clearly stood out. He took it

out and began to thumb the pages, when his right index finger felt something odd. They had hollowed out a small chunk of pages in the middle of the book. In the hole, a brass key shone in the morning sun coming over his shoulder. Undoubtedly, it unlocked a treasure somewhere. But what kind of treasure would require such elaborate concealment of the key? With so little to go on, he might never know.

“Lucky, my friend, what do we do now? Do we, and I say “we”, put everything back like it was, lock the chest back up, and cover it back up with dirt? Look at me, Lucky. You don’t seem to be providing any answers.”

Lucky looked at Jerome and cocked his head to one side. He then barked once and said no more.

“Okay, here’s what we’re going to do, old pal. I don’t think these guys are going to be back very soon. They went to too much trouble just to come back right away. I think we should take everything back to the cabin. If we take all the Bibles out of the chest, it should be light enough for me to get it out of the hole. Then we need to do some serious thinking this evening. Hopefully, by morning, we’ll have an answer ... agreed?”

Lucky remained noncommittal.

By the time Jerome got everything moved into the cabin, it tired him. A light supper and he fell asleep in the comfortable chair that he made himself from old pillows and cypress wood. About three o'clock in the morning, he sat up. Lucky raised his head slightly and gave a look like, "you're not really going to start talking now, are you?"

"Okay, Lucky. Here's what I'm thinking. This key must unlock a treasure somewhere. Since we don't have the vaguest clue as to what that treasure is or where it could possibly be, the key carries little meaning for us. It means everything to these criminals ... oh, wait, you're probably thinking, 'How do we know they're criminals?'. Well, don't forget what I did with most of my life ... Oh, right, that was before your time. Take my word for it. Those guys had all the appearance of criminals. Everything they've done is rooted in deception. Sinister deception. From choosing a site out here by a swamp to marking the spot with a cross to filling a chest with Bibles to destroying Holy Scripture to hide a key. It's all conceived with the veil of secrecy because whatever they've done is wrong. Besides, I've never met a man who, if he's

decent and God-fearing, would ever consider burying Bibles in a swamp.”

Lucky laid his head back down and went to sleep.

“So, what are we going to do about it? This is a pivotal moment ... ah, of course. It’s all in the metaphors. Don’t you get it, Lucky? It’s all in the metaphors. Knowledge is everything.”

Jerome got up out of his chair and went to a closet. He pulled out three old suitcases of various sizes, dusted them off, and took out some old clothes he had been storing in them. Then he started filling the suitcases with the Bibles, except for one. He went to the old desk that he made from wooden crates and opened a drawer. He pulled out a wooden box and opened it up. Inside the box were dozens of keys—most of which were meaningless, but he could never allow himself to throw away a key for anything. Dumping the keys on a table, he searched for one that would come close to matching the brass key he held in his left hand. Finding one that came very close in appearance, he took it over to the remaining Bible. Jerome put the substitute key into the hole in the Bible. Then he wrote something on a piece of paper, folded it up, and put

it into the hole with the key. Putting the Bible back into the chest, he closed the lid and locked it.

When the morning light came, Jerome loaded the chest into his canoe and paddled back to the burial site. He placed the chest back into the hole and covered it up with dirt. He took the brush that he had piled up on the side and placed it back over the dirt as the men had done it. When he felt satisfied that it looked undisturbed, he got back into his canoe and paddled back to the cabin. As he walked in the door, he looked at the brass key he held in his hand. The polished key caught the morning light coming through the window and cast a flash of light on Jerome's shirt. He closed his hand, and the light disappeared. Then he went to his desk and opened the drawer with his box of keys. Pulling out a chain, Jerome fixed the key to the chain and hung it around his neck.

“Come on, Lucky. We need to go talk to Rags.”

They walked out the front door and followed a worn path to the stable, where they found Rags leisurely munching on some hay. Jerome poured out a handful of oats and gave it to his horse.



“Rags, old boy, how would you like to take a little trip? We’re likely to be gone for quite a while, but don’t worry, I’ll bring along an extra bag of oats. What’s important is that we’ll all be together.”

Jerome and Lucky went back into the cabin. The former pastor and police detective walked over to his desk and began taking it apart. By the time he finished, he had six good sized crates. Then he opened the pantry door and began filling the crates with all the provisions he had stocked up. He had one empty suitcase and two crates left. He filled the suitcase with some clothes and the remaining crates with tools and odds and ends. Lucky sat in the middle of the room watching everything his master and friend did. When Jerome had everything packed that he had room for, he sat down.

“Well, Lucky, I suppose you’re wondering what I’m doing. Do you remember early this morning when I told you it was all in the metaphors? When the light of dawn came through the window, it suddenly dawned on me. Here these guys had literally buried all these Bibles that held the key to the treasures of heaven. They thought they were being smart in hiding the key to whatever their earthly treasure is inside the Bible that held the eternal key.

I felt a little sorry for them and then I realized that I've been doing the same thing living out here on this isolated little island in Karson's Swamp. Don't get me wrong, my little friend, you've been great company. But there are folks out there that don't know how to unlock the treasure of life. And I've been lighting the lamp in my own life, so to speak, but putting it under a bushel. I've got to believe that when I found those Bibles, it was the Good Lord telling me to wake up and put the light on a stand, so it gives light to the whole house."

Lucky looked at Jerome and barked once.

"So, you, me, Rags, and those Bibles, we're going to head west. I've heard there are a whole lot of fields and pastures filled with sheep to shepherd or cattle to herd."

Lucky barked twice.

"That's right, boy. That's a metaphor, too."

With the rainy season still a few weeks away, they had Karson's Bridge to get everything across the swamp. Karson's Bridge, a narrow strip of ground that formed a natural path across the swamp, had limited use until the water in the swamp rose with the frequent torrential rains. The next morning, with everything loaded on the

wagon, Jerome, Lucky, Rags, and, oh yes, the Bibles began the trip west.

As far as the buried chest goes, there are a lot of questions. When did the men return to dig up the chest? When they opened the chest, were they shocked to see only the one Bible in there? Did they understand the note that read, “Woe unto you, lawyers! For ye have taken away the key of knowledge; ye entered not in yourselves, and them that were entering in ye hindered.” How did they react when they discovered that the key in the Bible didn’t unlock their treasure? Did they turn on each other?

That’s just the way it is. We’ll never know why some folks get it and others don’t. We’ll never know why some folks choose to live in a swamp and others don’t. I reckon there’s only One who knows that. For Jerome, the key he wears around his neck reminds him every day how meager earthly treasures really are. As for the rest of us finding the key to life, I reckon we got till our last breath to keep looking. After that, the search will be over, and you’ll know whether that key you’re carrying unlocks the treasure or not.

