The Bulldoggers Club

The Tale of the Ill-Gotten Catfish

THE BULLDOGGERS SERIES
BOOK 1

Barbara Hay

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"A man that don't love a horse,
there is something the matter with him."

— Will Rogers,
Oklahoma humorist
(1879 - 1935)

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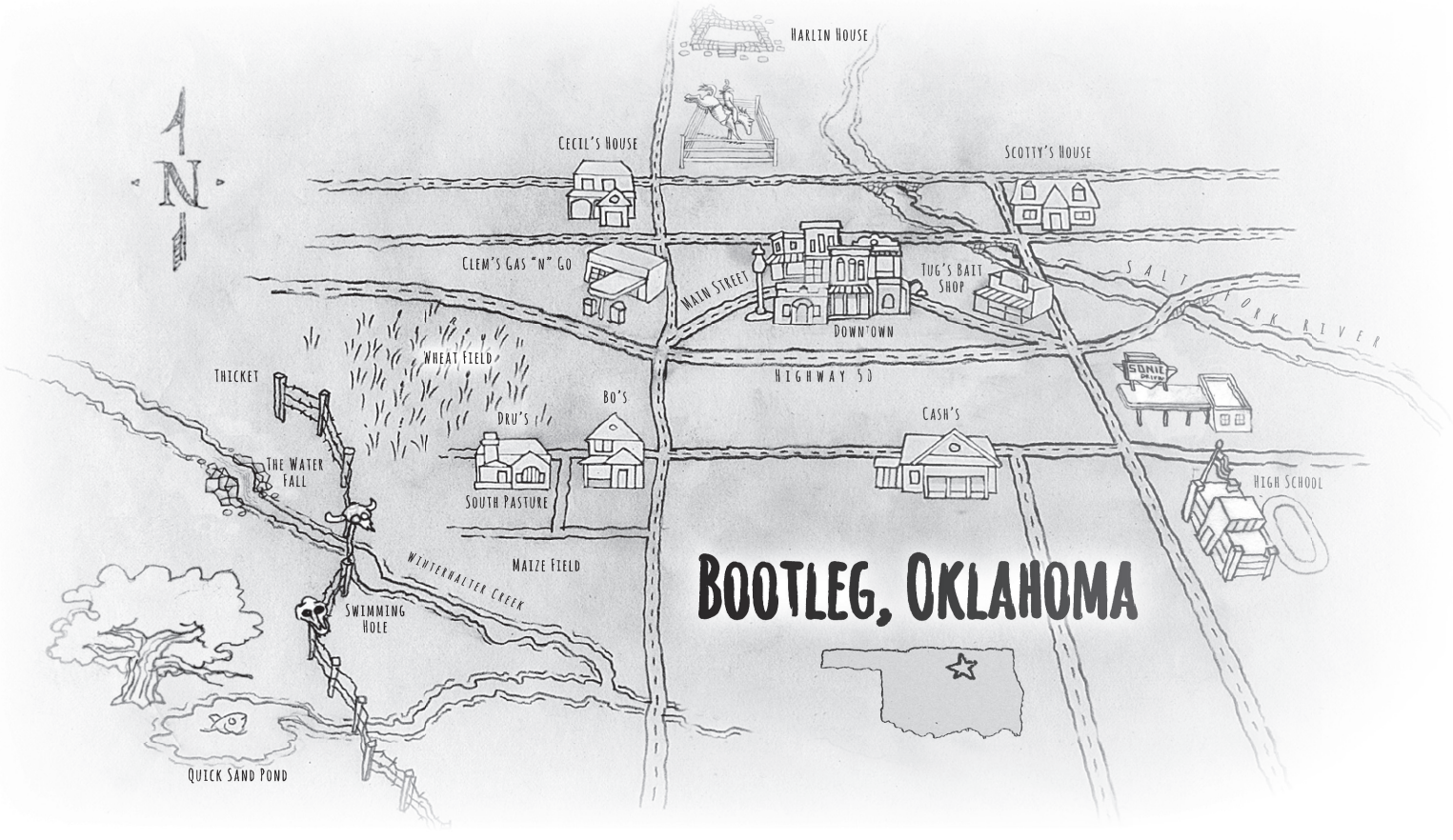
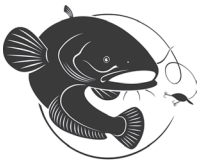

Harlin House
Cecil's House
Scotty's House
Clem's Gas "N" Go
Main Street
Tug's Bait Shop
Down'town
Salt Fork River
Highway 50
Wheat Field
Thicket
Bo's
Dru's
Cash's
The Water Fall
South Pasture
High School
Maize Field
Wewerhalter Creek
Swimming Hole
Quick Sand Pond
Bootleg, Oklahoma



Chapter 1

The Winterhalters

I WOKE TO OKLAHOMA SUNSHINE blasting, like a blow torch, through my window and Kevin screaming "Doodoo" in my ear. *Would the kid ever learn to say my name right*, I wondered. I rolled over and pulled the pillow over my head to block out the noise coming from my baby brother and the sunbeams bearing down through my bedroom window.

"Doodoo!" Kevin shouted, louder if that's possible.

The only way to make him stop was to get out of bed, even though it was Saturday and by rights I could have slept in. I sat up and pulled my blanket around me, like a cape. It was the beginning of May, but the early morning air was chilly and the wood floor was cold.

Kevin had already sensed my surrender. He toddled over and dropped my slippers in my lap.

"Sippers," he said.

How could a guy stay mad? I tousled the red curls on his head. He grinned and I grinned back. I had just about gotten over being

called "Doodoo" when Mom hollered from the kitchen.

"Dru, you up?"

"Yup," I called back.

"Could you please keep an eye on Kevin while I run your dad's coffee to the barn."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes, you have to."

For now, little brother was quietly playing with a pile of wooden blocks on the braided rug by my bed. Kevin accounted for, I turned and looked for some clothes to put on. My jeans hung on the chair by my desk. I grabbed them, slid my legs in, and pulled a camouflage T-shirt from the dresser drawer. When I turned back around, Kevin was gone.

I headed for the kitchen.

"Kev, where'd you go?"

The question was no more out of my mouth when I heard the screen door slam. I figured it was Mom leaving. I heaved a big sigh and began checking Kevin's favorite hiding spots: Behind the television set in the living room. No Kevin. Under the dining room table. Nope, not there, either. Just to be thorough, I gave a shout through the screen door at the back porch.

"Kee-viiiii-nnn."

"Yup," Kevin answered.

His answer came from outside. I traded my slippers for my boots, grabbed my cowboy hat off the peg by the back door, and headed in the direction of his voice.

"What are you doing?" I hollered, trying to get a bearing on his exact location.

"Eatin' 'cans."

" 'Cans" is Kevin-speak for "pecans." I walked around the side of the house, listening, trying to think where there still might be pecans on the ground that the squirrels hadn't found.

"What *are* you doing?" I asked again.

Then I saw him. He was standing by the rabbit hutch.

"Eatin' 'cans." He said between chews.

His back was to me, and I had a sinking feeling in my stomach as I ran over to him.

"Stop eating those! Those aren't 'cans. They're rabbit poop!"

I peeled open his fist and brushed the remaining black droppings to the ground: "Oh, that's gross."

Kevin looked up at me, scared. His face clouded over and his bottom lip quivered. Tears the size of marbles popped out of his eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He let out a loud wail, loud enough to make Mom run the rest of the way from the barn, probably convinced I was skinning him alive.

"What's going on?" Mom asked, taking in the situation with one swift glance. She bent down, stuck a finger in Kevin's mouth, and dug out the last, now mushy, 'cans.

"He ran outside after you," I said.

"I told you to watch him."

"I did. That's how come he's crying."

She took a deep breath. I could tell she was fighting to keep her temper. "First of all, watch how you talk to me, young man. And second, this isn't the first time he's gotten away from you, Dru. You are almost thirteen years old, old enough to know just how dangerous a ranch can be, especially for a three-year-old. Remember that little boy who drowned last summer in the horse trough? His mother and father were right there. It can happen so fast."

Tears wet the corners of her eyes, and I could tell she was imagining how those parents must have felt when they found their lifeless son facedown in the water. She cleared her throat, brushed her eyes with the backs of her hands, and turned her attention back to me.

"When you finish breakfast you can pull the dandelions and mow the front yard. And when you get done with that, you can pull the weeds in the pumpkin patch. That should give you plenty of time to think about what it means to be responsible and what you've done wrong today."

She took Kevin by the hand and led him inside, fussing at him for putting such nasty things in his mouth.

I headed for the barn. The list of chores she had asked me to do were a lot worse than anything I had done to Kevin, but all the while a voice in my head also kept saying, *I should have been more careful with Kevin*.

The barn door slid open with one pull, and I stepped into the shadows, walked past the stalls to the other end of the barn, and slid open another door. Checkers, my quarter horse, stood under the scrub cedar at the far end of our small pasture. He's called a quarter horse because that's his breed, or the kind of horse he is, not because he's one-fourth horse or anything like that. Seems the British brought their horses over here to America, bred them with the Spaniards' horses, and then raced them on quarter-mile tracks. That's how they got their name: American Quarter Horse. To this day, there isn't nothing faster on the quarter-mile.

Just about everybody I know around here rides quarter horses because of their grit, their speed, and their ability to read a steer's mind. Checkers is as much a part of the family as anyone. I raised him from a foal, even helped to break him to the saddle, but I can't take all the credit. My dad trained him to be a roping horse, and I think Checkers might know more about roping than I do.

At the sight of me, Checkers's ears pricked up and he trotted towards the barn. The rest of the horses followed him. I opened the doors on four stalls and, as the horses went in, I closed the doors behind them one by one. I filled a bucket with rolled oats, using a coffee can to give each horse a serving. The smell of the oats made my stomach growl with hunger, but I had a feeling it was a little too soon to return to the house—better to give Mom time to cool off before facing her again.

Instead, I headed to the tack room, where we house our gear: saddle blankets, ropes, bridles, bits. We keep our chaps there, too.

I found Dad there, rubbing down the saddles with a soft rag dipped in Neatsfoot oil.

"What's all the commotion about?" He didn't bother to look up from what he was doing as he asked.

"Nothing."

I fiddled with the fringe on the Western saddle he was working on, but if I thought my morning slipup had gone unnoticed I was wrong.

"I remember when you were Kevin's age and your poor Mom about lost her wits every time you were out of her sight."

"The guys and I were planning to go fishing," I said, in an effort to change the subject. "After I get my chores done."

He didn't need to say anything more; I already felt bad enough. And, with all the extra chores mom had assigned me, I would be lucky to go fishing at all, Saturday or not.

"The usual place?" Dad asked as he stood to put up the rag and oil on one of the plank shelves.

"Down by the swimming hole," I said.

The sound of mom ringing the cowbell on the front porch cut me off. Dad led the way out of the tack room.

"Breakfast is ready."

Chapter 2

The Bulldoggers Club

AFTER I FINISHED MY breakfast, I knew I would have to work fast, because we were having a Bulldoggers Club meeting, and the other three members—Bo, Cecil, and Scotty—were due to arrive shortly after noon. We planned to discuss the junior roping event coming up in a week's time, over a little fishing.

Since it was my idea to name us The Bulldoggers Club, I am the president. We gave ourselves official offices and titles so folks would know we are serious about rodeo. Kids don't always get taken serious about stuff, you know.

Here in Bootleg, Oklahoma, everybody works cattle, or raises horses, or works the land in one way or another. Roping and riding come with the territory.

Rodeo, you could say, is mainly about making fun out of the hard work it takes to keep a ranch running. There is always some reason to be rounding up cattle, whether it is springtime when we cull and sort the herd or fall when we are getting ready to go to the

stockyard sale. Year-round, we get a lot of practice roping steers and riding horses as part of daily life in Bootleg.

My dad says that we Winterhalters have been ranching this land since the days when the first settlers came to these parts, and that would be more than a hundred years ago. My great-grand-daddy, Gunther Winterhalter, hiked clear across Germany to England and hitched himself a ride on a ship that was sailing for America way back in 1893. He had heard they were giving away free land to anyone tough enough to make a go of it, and we have been here ever since.

By the time my buddy Bo rode up the lane, I had pulled the dandelions, mowed, and was almost done weeding the pumpkin patch.

"Hey Dru. Where's Cecil and Scotty?" He asked as he swung down off Ranger's back and tied him to a fence post.

"They should be here soon," I said.

Bo took one look at what I was doing and pitched in to help me finish pulling the last few weeds. I had been putting them in a wheelbarrow. Bo grabbed its handles and wheeled it over to what was fast becoming a good-size brush pile, a short piece away from the barn. The brush pile had last been burned in December, after a big snow. Bo, Cecil, Scotty, and I had taken turns watching it so the fire wouldn't get out of hand. Five months later it still smelled like charcoal.

Bo and I have lived next door to each other since the day we were born: July fourth. (He's two hours older than me; something he never lets me forget.) His horse, Ranger, and my horse are also twins, so we figure we're related in a strange cosmic sort of way.

Bo's sort of a history buff, being that his great-grandpa came here as a freed slave after the Civil War and found work on Melbourne "Bootleg" Harlin's Ranch. The famous African-American-Cherokee rodeo cowboy Bill Pickett worked alongside Bo's great-grandpa, rounding up cattle, breaking horses for riding, and whatnot. Pickett's father, Tom, was born a slave, too.

Bill Pickett is credited with inventing bulldogging, or steer wrestling. They say he bit the lip of steers to bring them down and that he got the idea from watching dogs do the same thing when herding wayward cattle on the range. Pickett would bite a big ol' steer's bottom lip with his teeth and wouldn't let go until the steer laid down. Pickett's bite-'em style made him a legend in rodeo circles. Though lip biting is a no-no in the modern arena, according to Bo.

Bo loves roping and riding and the taste of dust in his teeth, but since his dad took a fall from a bull at the Bear Creek Rodeo, he has been busier than a one-armed hog-tier trying to keep up with chores around their place. He reminded me of those broncos at the rodeo just before a run, twisting and snorting and chomping at the bit to get the show on the road.

Bo was acting that way now as we waited for the other two Bulldoggers to arrive. Luckily, I saw Cecil come galloping up on Rocket as we came back from stowing the wheelbarrow in the tool shed. Rocket is part thoroughbred and part quarter horse and runs like, well, a rocket.

Cecil was off Rocket before he came to a stop. He tied him up to the fence and sidled over to us, fishing pole in hand.

"Hey," he said, with a friendly nod.

"We're waiting for Scotty," I said.

Cecil Rill is vice president of The Bulldoggers Club. He moved to Bootleg when he was five. He lives on a wheat farm with his grandma and two of his uncles a mile or so north of Winterhalter Creek. He is shorter than I am but stocky and sure-footed, and he can throw a rope and hit any target, moving or not.

When his mom ran off with his dad's best friend, his father couldn't take care of him and work his shift at the oil refinery in Bear Creek, so his grandma said, "Come on and live with me and I'll take good care of you." As far as I know, she's done just like she promised.

Before I introduce you to any of our other members, I guess

I should explain exactly what we do in The Bulldoggers Club, for those who have never heard of us or our club before.

Basically we are a bunch of guys who like to ride horses and like to rodeo. Bulldogging is a rodeo event that calls for a cowboy to jump from his horse, grab a steer by the horns, and flip him onto the ground—the faster the better.

Unfortunately, none of my fellow Bulldoggers or myself are old enough yet to compete in the rodeo's bulldogging competition, but we all agreed that "The Calf Ropers Club" didn't sound half as cool as "The Bulldoggers Club."

Bo says we're carrying on history. Back in the 1700s, bulldogging literally meant working cattle with bulldogs. Yep, the dogs were trained to drive cattle and guard stock. An experienced eighty-pound bulldog could topple an eighteen-hundred pound bull—and that's no easy feat.

In the United States, cowboy contests have been around since the 1820s, but bulldogging dates to 1903 when Bill Pickett supposedly laid down that ornery longhorn.

Bo's told us a lot about rodeo history, but I'll spare you the lesson since this is no classroom.

Anyway I could tell Cecil and Bo were getting antsy.

The weather looked right for hooking fish, but in Oklahoma there was no guarantee that it would stay that way. The last weather report I had heard had storms headed our way in the next few days.

Fish get awful hungry right before a storm.

Might turn out to be a decent afternoon, after all.