

The Mystery of Ritas Landing

A Novella by James Steele



*Follow the Sentinel Cypress River
Where the River Remembers & Truth Awaits*

The Mystery of Rita's Landing

*“Follow the Sentinel Cypress River
Where the River Remembers & Truth Awaits”*

By James Steele

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This is a work of fiction. While some characters may be inspired by real individuals, their portrayal in this book is fictionalized. Certain traits, habits, or experiences may reflect real-life influences, but the characters, events, and locations are ultimately products of my imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, beyond these influences, is purely coincidental.



Introduction

Sunlight filtered through the dense canopy onto the forest floor as Sarah, leaning closer to her father, listened with wide-eyed fascination. Her father's stories of exploring Florida's remote waterways painted vivid images of hidden trails, forgotten communities, and a legacy intricately woven into the fabric of the North Florida wetlands. The air was alive with the tales of adventure, and as he placed a worn clay pendant around her neck, its surface etched with ancient plant symbols, a warmth radiated from within Sarah.



"This belonged to your grandfather, Tom," he explained, his voice filled with a mixture of pride and a subtle undercurrent of longing. "It holds the whispers of our past, Sarah. Keep it close, and maybe someday you'll hear them too."

Years later, the pendant remained nestled against Sarah's heart, a constant reminder of her father and the unanswered questions he left behind. Driving through the aftermath of Hurricane Maya to check on her Aunt Fran at Sunset View RV Park, she felt a familiar warmth against her skin. It was a feeling she'd come to associate with moments where her life was about to change.

In the wake of Hurricane Maya's destructive force, Sarah Rivers uncovers an unexpected treasure amidst the devastation. A weathered journal and a well-worn map, relics of her long-lost grandfather, Tom Rivers. Sarah is propelled into a quest that promises to reveal the hidden truths of her ancestors. Joined by her partner Everett and a loyal group of friends, she embarks on an expedition that will test their resolve, deepen their bonds, and uncover the mystery of Renegade Bayou and Ritas Landing.

"The Mystery of Rita's Landing" is more than an adventure; it is a celebration of resilience, the power of community, and the importance of preserving history. As you turn the pages, you'll discover that the true treasure lies not only in the ancient artifacts they seek but in the enduring friendships they forge and the timeless wisdom they uncover.

Join us as we delve into the heart of the bayou, where every twist and turn reveals a new layer of mystery and every challenge strengthens the bonds of those who dare to seek the truth. This is a story of courage, discovery, and the enduring legacy of those who came before us. Welcome to the journey.

Meet The Characters

Everett 'Ev' Walker



At 74, Everett is the seasoned guide of the group, known for his deep knowledge of the river and its topography. A former surveyor and army veteran, he brings a methodical approach to every journey, yet his eyes still twinkle with the joy of unexpected discoveries. Everett's connection to Sarah, his lifelong companion, is as steady as the currents they navigate together, and his well-worn journal is a testament to his love for the natural world.

Sarah 'Moonflower' Rivers



At 65, Sarah is calm and nurturing, deeply connected to the natural world. Her silver hair and wise demeanor reflect her years of experience working with at-risk youth and her passion for herbal medicine. Sarah finds joy in simple pleasures like gardening, music, and crafting her own cocktails at home. Her bond with Everett is as steady as the rivers they explore together, and beneath her gentle exterior lies a quiet strength that resonates with all who know her.

Ritas

Remy 'Toker' Reyes



At 65, Remy is a former Miami cop turned laid-back paddler, known for his gruff humor and kind heart. Though he may have a beer gut and a fondness for medical marijuana, he's a seasoned adventurer with a deep love for the water. Leading his "Paddle Posse," a group of mostly single or widowed women, Remy brings camaraderie and laughter to every outing. His past is colorful, his spirit undimmed, and he's always ready with a helping hand and a story to share.

Maggie 'Salty' Thomas



At 65, Maggie is a retired postal worker and former sailor, known for her adventurous spirit and infectious laughter. With sun-bleached hair, a weathered face, and a warm smile, she's lived a life full of sea miles and stories. A close friend of Sarah, Maggie brings a wealth of experience to the group, sharing her wisdom and joy for life with everyone around her. Whether on the water or around a campfire, Maggie's enthusiasm and salty humor are a cherished part of the group's adventures.

Riley 'Cap' Cypress



At 40, Riley is a skilled tour guide and museum curator with a deep love for Florida's history. Her sun-kissed skin and wind-tangled hair reflect countless adventures on the water, where she shares her knowledge of the Timucuan past with her passengers. Beyond guiding, Riley is a creative spirit, transforming forgotten artifacts into museum-worthy pieces. Known for her artistic touch, and her skills at fishing, she brings both wisdom and passion to every adventure.

Ritas

Whitey 'Alligator' Yates



At 79, Whitey is a self-sufficient homesteader who left the city to embrace the simple life. Living in seclusion near Osceola Spring, he runs a fish camp, lives in harmony with nature, and supplies folks venturing out on The Sentinel Cypress River. His long white beard and sun-baked skin tell of a life of hard work spent outdoors. He shares a connection with Everett from his many weekly visits to The Herb Garden, which adds a layer of trust and familiarity to their interactions.

Wally



For over 45 years, Wally has been the quiet guardian of Rita's Landing, a secluded spot in Renegade Bayou. He cherishes the peace and community of the scattered inlets and waterways, where he's known for his trustworthiness and deep connection to the area. Wally was a close friend of Tom Rivers and was entrusted with Tom's journal and map, which he delivered to Sarah's Aunt Fran, many years later. Wally holds onto some of Tom's belongings which eventually reveals the Mystery of Rita's Landing.

Rita's

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1 - Wreckage & Revelation



Rays of sunlight sifted through the frayed edges of a worn blue tarp, casting intricate patterns upon the chaos-strewn landscape. Three days had passed since Hurricane Maya unleashed her fury from the Gulf of Mexico onto Cedar Key, disrupting the quiet lifestyle of this coastal town. Only residents and immediate family were now allowed back on the key. Sarah presented her ID as a family member at the checkpoint, and proceeded ahead to the storm-ravaged campground. Sunset View, nestled just off the main island, was a scene of complete devastation. Sarah gasped. She made her way to the heart of the park where Aunt Fran's cabin was located.

Exiting her truck, Sarah stepped gingerly amidst the remnants of shattered wood, fallen palm fronds, and twisted aluminum. She carefully avoided the fragments of family history peeking from beneath the debris as she quietly approached Fran. The spark that usually danced in Aunt Fran's eyes had dimmed under the weight of weariness, though her spirit shone as strong as ever.



“Sarah, thank goodness you’re here.” Fran gestured pointing to the remains of her RV park.. “The storm...” Her voice trailed off, the language of devastation echoing around them. After moving up from Dade City, Fran spent much of her adult life renovating an old worn out RV park into a thriving vacation spot for so many folks. Over the years, many visitors became good friends. Now, after evacuating before the storm, some may never return. Years earlier, Sarah had lived at the park and helped Fran rebuild Sunset View. Through this shared experience, they became quite close.



“I got here as quick as I could, Fran,” Sarah said with concern. “Are you all right?”

Fran managed a weary smile, her eyes momentarily lingering on the ruins. “I’ll manage, dear, but it’ll be a long road ahead,” she sighed. “There’s so much to be done—clearing the debris, disposing of the demolished trailers... and the landscaping! It’ll need to be completely reborn.” Her eyes brightened slightly. “On the bright side, Carter’s Market has reopened, so at least we’ll have access to water and other essential supplies. And some of the restaurants on Dock Street are serving as emergency kitchens to help feed the community.”

Surveying the wreckage, Sarah’s heart resonated with the toll the storm had taken, both physically and emotionally. Electricity was quickly restored, and the water receded from most streets, making them passable for vehicles. Fran’s cabin remained largely intact, except for a small section of the roof that had been torn away. Thousands of palm fronds were strewn along the ground. Her wooden storage shed, however, was totaled, revealing scattered tools and several boxes of memories.

“Well, I have several hours here, Fran, so let me help you finish sorting through more of your belongings.”

“Thank you, dear,” said Fran. Sarah gently retrieved a faded, waterlogged photo album, a gateway to childhood memories filled with laughter and adventures shared with her Aunt.

“Find anything, darlin’?” Fran’s voice, worn from exhaustion, broke the silence.

“Just a collection of mementos,” Sarah replied, flipping through the water-soaked photo album. Kneeling down at the twisted shed, Sarah also noticed a small battered wooden chest. Its lock, broken and semi-rusted, revealed an old, waterlogged leather-bound journal and a folded map.

As Sarah carefully retrieved the items, a familiar warmth pulsed against her chest. She unclasped the damp journal, its musty scent filling the air, and gingerly tried to separate the soaked pages. The ink, bleeding into an illegible mess, triggered a wave of disappointment. Yet, hope lingered – perhaps there was a way to recover the water-soaked journal entries.

Sarah unfolded the map, tracing its crinkled surface stained by time. Faded lines and curious symbols ignited a thrill within her. An emblem in the bottom left corner mirrored the intricate design of her pendant. As she studied the map, Sarah became acutely aware of a warmth emanating from the pendant against her chest. Her heart quickened, a blend of excitement and apprehension coursing through her.

Holding the map closer, Sarah felt certain there was a connection between it and her pendant. Her eyes were drawn to an inscription along the top of the map, barely legible: “Follow the Cypress sentinels, where the river remembers, and truth awaits.” As she read the words, a sudden chill ran down her spine, momentarily freezing her in place as the significance of the discovery washed over her.

“Fran...” Sarah whispered, her voice barely audible.

“What is it, dear?” Fran asked, concern lacing her voice as she peered over Sarah’s shoulder at the map.

“I... I’m not sure, Fran. Look at what I found! A very old journal and an old map. There are notations written on the map, but I can’t quite make all of them out yet. It has a symbol like my pendant in the bottom left corner, and an inscription up top says ‘Follow the Cypress sentinels, where the river remembers, and truth awaits.’ I think this might be a clue, somehow!”

“A clue to what, dear?” Fran asked, concern lacing her voice.

“I don’t know yet, Fran. But this journal and map with the inscription feel important. I’m sensing they’re somehow connected to my pendant.”

Fran’s eyes widened as she absorbed Sarah’s words. “Cypress sentinels... that sounds familiar. Didn’t your grandfather have a story about a row of cypress trees by the old river bend?”

“Yes, Dad used to tell me a story about that. Fran, where did you get this journal?”

“It was brought to me by a man I have never met before who lives up the coast north of here.” Fran paused, trying to recall the details. “It was so many years ago, and he told me your grandfather Tom asked him to bring it to me if anything were to happen to him. He didn’t stay long, and I was busy with the RV Park, put the journal in that box, stuck it in the shed, and never got back to it.”

Sarah listened intently. “Do you mind if I bring this home and see if Ev and I can restore it?”

“Not at all, dear.”

The hours passed quickly as Sarah and Fran accomplished a lot. Sarah carefully folded the map, tucking it and the journal safely into her backpack. “I think we’ve done all we can do here for now, Aunt Fran,” she said. “It’s getting late, and Everett and I will need to figure out the best way to preserve this map and journal.”

As they walked back to the cabin, a newfound sense of purpose started to replace Sarah's initial shock and grief. The storm had undoubtedly taken much, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. But in its fury, it had unearthed something else - a thrilling mystery and a potential family legacy waiting to be unraveled.

Inside the cabin, Sarah helped Fran get settled for the night, offering her a steaming cup of herbal tea retrieved from the undamaged cypress kitchen cabinet. Despite their

aching muscles and the heavy weight of cleaning up the debris, a spark of anticipation danced in Sarah's eyes. Tonight, she would return to Everett, eager to decipher the secrets hidden within the journal and map.

"Is there anything else I can help you with tonight, Aunt Fran?" Sarah asked, her voice soft.

"Well dear...I would greatly appreciate a shot of brandy in this tea...you know, for medicinal purposes. " Fran winked at Sarah as she retrieved the Courvoisier from the cabinet. "You head on back home now. Get a good night's rest, and go over those items with Everett tomorrow. I'm sure he'll have some ideas about how to dry those things out so you can read them. Keep in touch and let me know what you find out!"

Sarah nodded, her heart warmed by the familiar comfort of her aunt's voice. Leaning down, she kissed Fran's forehead, the faint scent of lavender soap filling her senses. "Okay, Fran. I'll see you soon. Call if you need anything... anything!"

With a final squeeze of her hand, Sarah turned and walked away, the weight of the journal heavy in her backpack. The thrill of discovery still coursed through her veins, a stark contrast to the devastation surrounding her. The sun was setting over Cedar Key as Sarah headed back. The long drive home was filled with the image of the inscription on the map lingering in her mind: "Follow the Cypress sentinels, where the river remembers, and truth awaits."

Ritas

2 - Unearthing Secrets

Leaving Fran behind reminded Sarah of the complexities in her family's past. While storm damage could be mended, the void left by her father's untimely departure widened with every mile Sarah put between herself and Sunset View. His accidental drowning on the Islamorada section of the Florida Circumnavigational Saltwater Paddling Trail, a dream he shared with her grandfather Tom Sr., haunted her. Tom, who mysteriously vanished near Renegade's Bayou on the west coast of Florida, north of Cedar Key, deepened the intrigue surrounding their family's past.

The clay pendant, a keepsake from her father, passed down by his father, hinted at answers Sarah couldn't yet understand. It was a constant reminder of the adventure that claimed him and the void it carved in her life.



Sarah & Everett's Homestead

The ninety-mile drive home wound through the heart of rural North Florida, revealing a landscape adorned with moss-draped oaks, cabbage palms, dusty roads, and sleepy towns. Each mile brought Sarah closer to the haven she and Everett had built together—a classic Florida Cracker house with barn board siding and a tin roof that serenaded them on many a rainy moonlit night.

Entering the driveway, Sarah spotted the warm glow from the kitchen window, a beacon of comfort in the still, chilly evening. The earthy scent of their garden greeted her—a symphony of assorted fruits, vegetables, and fragrant herbs and flowers, a shared passion that had grown into a love deeper than they both imagined.

Chesney, their exuberant “Homestead Hound,” joyously welcomed Sarah beneath the old Live Oaks draped in Spanish moss. A thought crossed Sarah’s mind – coming home was always a pleasure, and a loving smile played on her lips. Everett emerged from the

and onto the wooden screen porch, wiping his hands on a linen dish towel. His face lit up at the sight of her, though concern flickered in his eyes. Pulling her into a warm kiss, his embrace conveyed silent reassurance.

“Rough drive?” he asked softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face. Sarah leaned into him, finding solace in his familiar touch. “Not as bad as what I left behind,” she sighed. “Aunt Fran’s staying put, though. Says she’s not letting some hurricane chase her away. Stubborn as ever, that one.”

“She’ll be alright,” Everett reassured her, squeezing her hand. “She has plenty of folks looking out for her. Besides, she wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Sarah smiled, picturing her aunt’s fiery spirit. “You’re right, Ev.” Ev, Sarah, and Chesney entered the house. Chesney intrigued by the scents coming from the backpack Sarah had put on the table.

“Did you grab something to eat?” Everett asked, knowing Sarah had had a long day. She shook her head. “No, not hungry... but there’s something else.” Her eyes darted to the backpack that held the weather-beaten journal and map.

“Something...interesting?” Everett raised an eyebrow, intrigued.



Tom River’s Journal

“I found these at Sunset View, under the damage and debris of Fran’s storage shed.” She pulled out the journal and unfolded the faded map, the edges crinkled with age and still

damp from the storm's rains. "Remember Tom's stories about his canoeing trips, searching for hidden artifacts and forgotten paths?"

Everett's eyes widened. "Sure, we always thought they were just tall tales."

"Well, maybe they weren't," Sarah said, the pendant warming against her skin. Everett listened intently, his expression shifting between concern for Fran and a growing curiosity as Sarah described the journal and map. When she reached the inscription, "Follow the Cypress sentinels, where the river remembers, and truth awaits," his eyes widened.

"Wow," he breathed, leaning forward. "That's... incredible. It sounds like you stumbled onto something quite interesting!"



Drying the waterlogged manuscripts

A surge of relief washed over her. Everett's enthusiasm mirrored her own, and his unwavering support was a comforting presence.

"I know, right?" Sarah exclaimed, a genuine smile returning to her face. "I can't believe what we might uncover here. And the map... there's a symbol on it that looks exactly like my pendant!"

Everett's eyes gleamed with excitement. He was a man who thrived on riddles and puzzles, and the prospect of deciphering the map's secrets ignited his adventurous spirit.

"That's fascinating," he said, reaching for the map Sarah had placed on the table. "It seems like everything is somehow connected. The inscription, the symbol, your pendant... it's almost like the map is calling to you."

He scanned the map, his brow furrowed in concentration. "This is... incredible! We've got to dry these out and see if we can fully make out what the journal entries say as well as the writing on this map."

Sarah, her silver hair framing kind and knowing eyes, felt excited but also aware of the challenges ahead. The damp journal and map, still whispering secrets of the past, wouldn't be ready for proper examination until they had been properly dried.

"Looks like we can't crack the code tonight," she said with a gentle smile, turning to Everett. His weathered hands, strong and capable, rested on the table beside her, a comforting presence.

Everett smiled. "True, but we can certainly enjoy a well-deserved margarita while these precious artifacts dry out." He winked, his eyes sparkling with a familiar mischievous glint. Sarah's heart, like the soil she nurtured in her beloved herb garden, held a secret side-dream: to become a mixologist, crafting magic in some local hangout. But for now, she contentedly conjured her own concoctions at home, each sip a testament to a life as rich and layered as the earth itself.

Sarah couldn't help but smile back. Their shared love for a good margarita, made with secret ingredients from their herb garden, was a cherished tradition. It was a reminder of the day their paths first crossed, years ago, amidst the fragrant herbs of Ev's herb nursery that fueled Sarah's passion for healing.

Sarah was known as "Moonflower" by those closest to her. She carried the quiet strength of the rivers she'd navigated with troubled youth for years. Now, at 65, her silver hair, like the flowing currents she loved, framed a face etched with wisdom and kindness. Her

hands, weathered by time and the elements, spoke of resilience and a deep connection to the earth.

She glanced across the table at Everett, “Captain Compass” to his friends. His sun-kissed skin, etched with the stories of countless adventures, mirrored the weathered wisdom of his 70 years. Despite his quiet, calm exterior, a mischievous glint in his eyes hinted at a shared thirst for adventure with Sarah. He documented every stroke of their adventures on the many Florida waterways, a walking encyclopedia of nature’s secrets. The flora, the fauna, the miles they paddled were recorded into Ev's well worn paddle journal. One day, he knew, these 'paddle notes' would be a helpful guide for others following in his wake.

“Intriguing,” he spoke after several slow sips of his margarita. “Seems like destiny has dropped an unexpected adventure on our doorstep, Moonflower.”

Sarah’s heart fluttered at the mention of her nickname. Their bond, nurtured amidst the fragrant herbs of his old nursery where her passion for healing plants had lead her to Everett, was as deep-rooted as the ancient Live Oaks that shaded their shared homestead.

“Remember our first connections, Ev?” she asked, her voice laced with a hint of nostalgia. “Classes at The Herb Garden and visits to your booth at the farmer’s market... though I will say you weren’t quite the talkative one!”

Ev took another sip, leaned back and simply smiled. He enjoyed when Sarah would retell the story of how they met...it was a local legend in their small rural town and she told it so well...though he had his own take on the story.

They had been drawn together by their mutual passion for the natural world and their shared connection to the world of healing herbs and their love for exploring Florida waterways.

Shared laughter over well-crafted margaritas and evenings spent singing along to Sarah’s dulcimer melodies had woven their bond tightly. Their love story, like the rivers they explored, flowed steadily, each bend offering a new chapter in their journey.

It was getting late, and cooler. As Everett and Sarah finished the last batch of margaritas, they were ready for bed. Sarah had had a long day and was ready for some sound sleep.

“Honey, you go on ahead and get ready for bed. I’ll get a fire going in the wood stove, we’ll leave some windows cracked for a draft. I’ll get the map and journal on the table, spread out and hopefully in the morning they will be a lot drier,” Ev said as he placed some oak logs into the wood stove.

“Sounds like a good plan, Ev. Don’t stay up too late!” Sarah gave him a kiss and retreated upstairs.



Everett collects more Firewood

It was definitely a cool night as Everett and Chesney went out back to stock up on logs for the stove. He loaded the wagon and called out, “C’mon Ches’, let’s go in the house.” They both headed in, but not before Everett took time to look up in the sky and be amazed at the intensity of the stars. Living in rural Florida, 40 miles from the nearest

small town provided many nights of excellent stargazing, unfettered by ambient light from any towns.

Once inside, Everett finished filling the wood stove and started a robust fire. He closed the damper and washed up. Chesney knew his routine and after three circles, laid down in his bed in front of the warm stove. Everett patted him goodnight and, with hopes of a dry journal and map in the morning, went upstairs to join Sarah.

Ritas

3 - Secrets of the Map

A crisp breeze whispered through the open windows of the cabin, carrying the scent of wood smoke. Sarah and Everett woke to a shared yearning to delve into the secrets hidden within the map and journal.

They both put on their robes and warm slippers and headed downstairs to the kitchen. The air was chilly, and Sarah, sensing Everett's focus, brewed a pot of warming Chamomile tea. The scent mingled with the wood smoke, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere.

'Would you like a cup, Ev?' Sarah called out, approaching the table with two steaming mugs.

'Sounds perfect, Sarah,' Everett replied, his gaze still fixed on the map. He paused, adding, 'Thank you.'

'I'll feed the critters before I sit down,' offered Sarah.

The 'Critters' consisted of Chesney, who was still curled up on the rug in front of the stove, and right next to him were his feline buddies, Gillis, Nell, and Luna. All four got along well, but Gillis and Chesney were tight. Everett called them his boys, and they were always ready for some affectionate petting. The sound of their food hitting their bowls had them eagerly waiting for Sarah to dish out their morning meal.

With a few deft pokes at the fire, Everett coaxed the flames into a higher dance, banishing the chill from the air. ‘Nice job, Ev!’ Sarah exclaimed as she joined him at the table. Taking a sip of her tea, she glanced at Everett with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. ‘Ready to take a look at the map?’

Everett met her gaze, a resolute glint in his eyes. ‘Let’s do it,’ he said, his voice filled with determination.



Sarah and Everett check out the map

The wood stove, stoked the night before, had done its job. The journal pages, once damp and fragile, lay relatively dry on the table. However, it would be several more hours before they could confidently declare it ready for a thorough examination. They treated it with the utmost care, meticulously turning each page and blotting any remaining moisture with soft linen towels.

The map, on the other hand, was ready to reveal its secrets. Spread open on the table, its once vibrant colors dulled by water damage, lay like a silent puzzle waiting to be solved. With careful fingers, they traced the faded lines, pressing down the delicate creases.

Over the next couple of hours and several cups of tea, Sarah and Everett scrutinized every inch of the map. Everett, momentarily transported back to his days as a topographic surveyor in the army, meticulously studied the details, his brow furrowed in

concentration. He traced the river with his finger, muttering to himself as he examined the faded markings.

At one point, he pointed to a particular spot on the map along the river. Despite the map being dry, the writing was still a bit blurred. 'Sarah,' he finally spoke, his voice laced with a hint of excitement, 'do we still have that illuminated magnifying glass?'

Sarah's head snapped up, her eyes mirroring Everett's enthusiasm. 'Yes, of course! It's in the hall pie safe.' She disappeared into the hallway, returning moments later with the magnifying glass in hand.

Everett switched on the small light on the magnifying glass and carefully held it over the map. His pen danced across a notepad, diligently transcribing the information revealed in the light.

'Sarah,' he exclaimed, his voice filled with a thrill, 'this is the Sentinel Cypress River! And... there, Whitey's Fish Camp!'

Recognition dawned on Sarah's face. 'Whitey 'Alligator' Yates! He came to your nursery a few years back, didn't he? The one who lost his homestead to the highway?'



Mother Earth News 1970

"He introduced himself and told me what he was doing and we instantly connected, as I had done something quite similar" Sarah sensed the excitement in Ev's recollections.

"He was interested in Medicinal Herbs, which I grew a lot of, and over the next couple of years, we became good friends. I drove out to his homestead and it was amazing. This guy did it right, using permaculture and organic gardening techniques he learned from Mother Earth News. He bartered excess eggs and vegetables with his neighbors for fresh milk and mullet dip and achieved the self-security many only dream of."

A look of melancholy shown on Ev's face, "Then the shit hit the fan! Whitey had heard talk when in town about a new expressway coming to the area near his property. He attended several town meetings with neighbors and other folks to try to keep the planned route of the highway away from his land. To no avail, a certified letter arrived in the mail. Whitey's property was ground zero for the project, and the state would be purchasing the five acres by Eminent Domain.

His heart was torn out of his chest! All that work, down the drain...a dream turned into a nightmare! The state gave him a generous payout for his property and he disappeared for a while. He managed to rebuild his life on the Sentinel Cypress River, near Osceola Spring. He now lives off the grid, but his fish camp is a welcome haven and resupply stop for the few who paddle the river.'

Renewed focus returned to his face as Ev continued scrutinizing the map. 'Sarah,' he said, 'this is the route Tom was using when he disappeared! Buttonbush Creek, leading to the Sentinel Cypress River, and then... Renegade Bayou.'

"An uneasy silence descended upon them. Renegade Bayou—the name was synonymous with danger and mystery, a place few dared to venture into, and even fewer returned from.

Sarah and Everett exchanged a look, their excitement tempered with a newfound concern. The map clearly showed the path Tom had taken, but whether it would lead them to answers or heartbreak remained to be seen.

'It's crucial to connect what the journal reveals with the information on this map,' Everett finally said, his voice firm with resolve. He closed the notepad and reached for the drying journal, their shared journey truly beginning as they turned the first page.

4 - Whispers from the Past

The afternoon sun cast warm rays on the kitchen table, and Sarah and Everett hovered over the dried journal. The air crackled with anticipation as they finally declared it safe to examine. After a lite lunch, two shots of tequila now replaced the Chamomile tea. Sarah and Everett were ready. They toasted, smiled at each other and carefully opened page one of the journal.



Dried and Ready to Explore

The first few entries documented Tom's initial preparations for his journey, his excitement about exploring the Sentinel Cypress River, and his eagerness to learn more about his family's history with the Timucua tribe. As they delved deeper, however, the mood shifted.

A feeling of concern came over Sarah as she read about Tom's encounter with poachers, their ruthless disregard for the land and its inhabitants echoing in her mind. Her gaze drifted to the map, where Everett's hands, weathered like the bark of ancient trees, meticulously traced the lines and symbols. He pointed to a specific entry in the journal...

'Look, Sarah,' he said, his voice tinged with urgency. 'This entry mentions a hollow cypress tree near Renegade Bayou. Tom describes finding ancient Timucua artifacts – pottery, tools, ceremonial objects.'

A gasp escaped Sarah's lips. The warmth spreading through her pendant intensified, a tingling sensation that sent a jolt through her. Could there be a connection between the artifacts, the Timucua tribe, and the reason Sarah's family had entrusted her with the pendant?

Everett continued reading, immersed in concentration. 'Tom mentions frustration,' he said, 'about the poachers constantly disrupting his research and threatening the artifacts. He talks about leaving something behind, hidden for anyone who might follow his path.'

The weight of this revelation settled upon them. Tom was clearly passionate about protecting his Timucua legacy. His disappearance at Renegade Bayou felt even more ominous in light of these entries.

Sarah glanced at Everett, her eyes filled with a mixture of determination and apprehension. 'We can't leave this unfinished, can we?' she whispered. 'We need to follow Tom's route, find those artifacts, and make sure his efforts weren't in vain.'



Sarah and Everett Confirmation

A flicker of resolve ignited in Everett's eyes. He placed a weathered hand over hers, his touch grounding her. 'We do this together,' he said firmly. 'But we can't do this alone.'

We need to contact the Posse, Remy, Maggie, and Riley. They're not just friends, they're family. We'll need their help, their expertise, and their support.'

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows across the room. Sarah and Everett knew their lives were about to change. This wasn't just about following a map anymore; it was about honoring a legacy, protecting the past, and unraveling the secrets that whispered from the pages of Tom's journal.

Ritas

5 - Embers of a New Quest

The warm glow of a crackling fire cast a welcoming light across Sarah and Everett's homestead. Cicadas chirped a soothing symphony as they sat around their fire pit, savoring the warmth on this chilly October evening. Tonight, they would gather with their closest friends and fellow adventurers to share the secrets whispered from Tom's weathered journal.

"They should be arriving soon," Everett said, just as the headlights of Remy's van cast a bright white light, momentarily eclipsing the warm glow of the fire.

Remy, a twinkle in his eye, ambled up the path. The sixty-five-year-old ex-cop, known by his self-proclaimed nickname "Toker," boomed a laugh that promised an evening of lively conversation and tales from his recent Florida Keys adventure. Not far behind him walked Maggie "Salty" Thomas, sun-bleached hair, a weathered face that exuded a salty spirit and a thirst for thrilling tales. The retired postal worker and fellow kayaking enthusiast greeted them with a warm smile.

Riley "Cap" Cypress, her youthful energy contrasting with Remy and Maggie's seasoned presence, closed her truck door and strode over to the fire pit. The younger captain, known for her artistic flair and river expertise, held a deep knowledge of the Timucua tribe.

The aftermath of Hurricane Maya had brought them together, sharing stories of damage and resilience. Today, however, Sarah and Everett had a different story to tell.

As Everett prepared to share the discovery of the water-damaged journal and the cryptic map, Sarah interrupted with a warm smile. “I’ve just made a fresh pitcher of margaritas. Anyone care for one? This is going to be an interesting evening!”

“I’ll take one, Sarah,” Remy said, his voice laced with amusement. “And hey, mind if I take?”



Sarah fetching the Margaritas

Sarah chuckled. “You know better than that, Rem,” she said, handing him a glass. “Of course, go ahead. Is it still that Purple Kush you have the medical card for?”

“Yep,” Remy replied, taking a sip of his margarita. “One of the best strains Cannabis for pain relief.”

Maggie chimed in, “Just bring the whole pitcher over, Sarah. It’s been a long day.” Everyone laughed, the sound echoing through the cool night air.

“Thanks, but I’m good. I’ve got a sixer of Bud Light,” Cap said, offering a friendly smile. Sarah served the margaritas and then took over, her eyes sparkling as she described her trip to Cedar Key to help Aunt Fran. “It was like a war zone,” she said sadly.

“Is Fran okay?” Maggie inquired, her voice filled with concern.

“She lost a lot,” Sarah replied. “Sunset View will take a long time to recover, but Fran is tough and a survivor. We’re here for her if she needs anything.”

Sarah then revealed the story of finding the journal and map in the debris, bringing them home, and spending days carefully drying them. She pulled out the map and elaborated on its inscriptions, their alignment with Tom’s route, and the strange connection she felt to the area. She spoke of the warming of her pendant, a sign she couldn’t ignore, and the growing need to follow in Tom’s footsteps to find answers.

Remy raised an eyebrow. “This sounds serious, Sarah. You sure you want to jump into something like this?”

Everett, sensing Sarah’s apprehension, spoke up. “We understand the risks, Remy. But Sarah has a strong connection to this, and we can’t just ignore it.”

Maggie placed a hand on Sarah’s shoulder. “Whatever you decide, Sarah, we’re here for you.”

Cap, the group’s resident history buff, leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with curiosity. “Mention of the Timucua tribe? That piques my interest. Tell me more about this map and its connection to them.” Cap was the curator of the local university's exhibit on the Timucua tribe and ready to help any way she could.

Unfurling the map, Everett spoke, the firelight dancing on its faded lines. He meticulously outlined Tom’s suspected route, weaving together the information gleaned from the map and the journal.

“We believe Tom was headed towards Renegade Bayou, an area steeped in Timucua history, possibly searching for something or recovering something,” Sarah explained, mentioning specific details from the journal entries about poachers, artifacts, and the bayou. “Our plan is to retrace this route on the map and see where it leads us.”

A flicker of concern crossed some faces amidst the enthusiasm. “Navigating those rarely traveled rivers alone is out of the question,” Everett said, his voice firm. “We need you guys, and we need to be prepared.”

Remy’s eyebrows shot up, Maggie whistled in astonishment, and Cap traced the map lines with a thoughtful finger.

“So, you’re telling me that your grandfather left you a treasure map, hidden Timucua artifacts, and an adventure?” Remy exclaimed.

Sarah chuckled. “Not exactly a treasure map, Remy. More like clues hinting at something bigger.”

She continued the story, her voice painting vivid pictures of Tom’s cryptic messages, the pendant’s warmth, and the yearning she felt to connect with her now realized Timucua heritage. A ripple of concern crossed some faces. Remy, usually the life of the party, whistled, his usual grin replaced by a thoughtful frown.

“Sounds intense, Ev,” he said, a touch of seriousness lacing his voice. “What’s next on the itinerary?”

“A glimmer of hope, my friend,” Everett replied. “Forty miles downriver, an old spring run leads to Osceola Spring. There, amongst the cypress trees, sits the fish camp of Whitey ‘Alligator’ Yates. Remember the name, folks. Whitey might be our only point of resupply, a chance to catch our breath before delving deeper into the bayou’s secrets.”

They knew this wouldn’t be a leisurely paddle down a calm stream. The wilderness held its own challenges, demanding respect and preparation. Sarah, sensing the shift in

mood, stepped forward, her voice infused with passion. Her eyes, like pools reflecting the setting sun, met each of theirs in turn.

“But think of what awaits us!” she exclaimed. “The whispers of my past are guiding me here, to a secret held among the Sentinel Cypress and the heart of Renegade Bayou. This isn’t just an adventure, folks. It’s something deeper, something personal. It’s a chance for me to connect with my history, to finally understand the quiet whispers I’ve been feeling ever since my father gave me this pendant. Imagine - uncovering secrets held by my ancestors, unraveling the mysteries that shape who I am today.”

Sarah’s words were a spark, igniting a renewed fire in their eyes. Cap leaned forward, her voice eager. “So, what are the dangers? What detours should we expect?”

Maggie, her weathered face etched with determination, nodded along, already envisioning the challenges and triumphs. Remy, his usual humor laced with a hint of seriousness, raised concerns about supplies and the physical demands of the journey.

Silence fell for a moment, then Remy let out a booming laugh that echoed around the fire. “You gotta be kiddin’, Moonflower,” he said, slapping his knee. “Where do I sign up?”



A Toast to Friendship

One by one, the others chimed in, their voices filled with eagerness and a touch of healthy apprehension. Maggie raised her glass, her eyes twinkling. “To whispers that

become roars, secrets waiting to be unearthed, and adventures with the best crew a gal could ask for!”

They clinked their glasses, the sound resonating with the promise of an extraordinary journey. The whispers of the past had found their voices, and Sarah knew, with this team by her side, they were ready to follow them wherever they led.

Everett, seeing their resolve, outlined his plan. He returned to the map, his voice steady and authoritative as he traced their route.

“We’ll follow a fifteen-mile stretch on Buttonbush Creek with a slight current to the Sentinel Cypress River,” he explained, meeting each of their gazes. “The Sentinel Cypress River leads us eighty miles into Renegade Bayou.”

A collective murmur rose, the magnitude of their journey becoming evident.

“We aim for fifteen miles a day,” Ev continued, the rhythmic tap of his finger mimicking the steady cadence of paddling. “But remember, the wilderness keeps its own counsel. Nature throws curveballs, so flexibility is our mantra.”

His gaze swept across the faces, searching for understanding, for the spark of determination that mirrored his own.

Everett continued, “While fifteen miles a day may seem manageable with the current, remember, we need time for setting up camp, cooking meals, and unforeseen obstacles. So, realistically, it’ll be a six to seven-day journey to reach the bayou.”

“Our first leg starts with Buttonbush Creek,” he began, his finger pointing to the route. “It’s a familiar stretch, remember that paddle we did back in August of '21? Though it was only three years ago, we need to be prepared for changes. Around mile six, things get tricky. The creek narrows, shallows appear, and fallen trees might force us to portage. Teamwork will be key.”

“The next couple of days are crucial,” Everett announced. “We need to research everything we can about the area, especially the Timucua tribe. Cap, your knowledge will be invaluable.”

Cap, a determined glint in her eyes, nodded eagerly. “Consider it done. I have a collection of historical documents and artifacts that might offer some insights.”

Energized by Sarah and Everett’s words, cheers erupted as a launch date was set for their expedition. Everyone agreed to check their calendars and make sure they had a clear week or more with no commitments.

As the night deepened, the excitement of planning gave way to the practicalities of the late hour. One by one, the friends began to say their goodbyes, their faces flushed with anticipation and a touch of trepidation. Remy was the last to leave, giving Sarah and Everett each a warm hug before disappearing into the darkness.

In the sudden quiet, Sarah and Everett found themselves alone by the crackling fire. They exchanged a knowing smile, the weight of their upcoming journey settling comfortably between them.

As if on silent cue, Sarah retrieved two glasses and a bottle of 1800 Reposado, the amber liquid shimmering in the firelight. They poured themselves each a generous measure, the warmth spreading through them like a comforting embrace. In the quiet companionship, they sipped their drinks, their eyes reflecting the dancing flames.

This wasn’t just about the adventure; it was about the shared journey, the unwavering support, and the deep bond forged in the crucible of friendship. As the embers died down, they knew that tomorrow’s dawn would bring not just research and preparation, but the first step into a shared destiny, a quest into the heart of the unknown.

Ritas

6 - Preparations for the Unknown

Outside the history department of the local university, Sarah and her friends waited in anticipation and excitement. Riley’s invitation, as the Timucua exhibit curator, granted them access to the extensive archives on the region and its people. “Welcome to the Timucua Exhibition!” Riley exclaimed.

Riley, affectionately known as “Cap” by her friends, guided them through a detailed display of artifacts and archives. Her expertise in river navigation and local history made her an invaluable asset to their mission. “These archives hold more than historical files and forgotten records,” she explained in hushed tones. “They may contain the answers to Sarah’s whispers, waiting to be heard by those who seek them.”



The Archives Room

In the well lit archive room, bookshelves overflowed with leather-bound volumes and maps. Cap directed them to a section dedicated to the Timucua people, her fingers tracing the worn spines of ancient texts. The air itself seemed charged with history, echoes of long-forgotten voices whispering through the ages. Sarah felt a familiar pull, a sense of belonging that transcended time and space, her pendant warming against her skin. Surrounded by the silent whispers of history, they sought answers in the archives, exploring clues about the Timucua artifacts, herbal healing, and the connection to the Silent Sentinels.

Maggie scanned a thick tome titled “Everyday Life of the Timucua.”

“Listen to this,” she announced, excitement tingeing her hushed voice. “It talks about ‘sacred objects’ made from shells, bones, and even feathers. They believed these artifacts

held powerful spirits and used them for healing, ceremonies, and communicating with their ancestors.”

Sarah was excited. Could these “sacred objects” be the same artifacts mentioned in Tom’s journal? Did their connection to healing tie into the warmth she felt from the pendant?

Cap chimed in, her eyes gleaming with the thrill of discovery. “Another book mentions a shamanistic practice of using plants for medicinal purposes. They had extensive knowledge of herbs and their properties, treating everything from wounds to illnesses.”

Remy leaned forward, his face serious. “So, you’re saying these cypress trees might hold some secret knowledge, passed down through generations?”

The pieces started to click into place for Sarah. The pendant’s warmth, the inscription mentioning the river remembering, the whispers she felt for so many years – they all seemed to point towards a hidden legacy, a connection to her ancestors’ knowledge of healing and sacred objects.



Herbal Healing Ritual

Fueled by their newfound understanding, they delved deeper into the archives. They unearthed descriptions of intricate carvings depicting figures holding strange objects and symbols. They learned about ancient rituals performed under the cypresses, believed to harness the healing power of nature.

As the late afternoon sun painted the archive windows in shades of orange and gold, Sarah closed the worn leather cover of the final book. Many possibilities hung in the air, woven from fragments of ancient knowledge. Each discovery had fueled their excitement, propelling them closer to the secrets hidden within the Sentinel Cypress.

Everett, meticulous as always, filled several notebooks with observations and transcriptions. His methodical nature complemented Sarah's impulsive drive, ensuring their quest wouldn't be guided by mere passion alone. Exiting the building, Sarah met his gaze, a silent understanding passing between them. They had their pieces; now, it was time to assemble the final puzzle.

"Alright everyone," Sarah announced, her voice carrying across the bustling university courtyard. "It's been an intense day, full of fascinating discoveries. But this isn't the end; it's just the beginning."

"Hear, hear!" Remy boomed, clapping his hands with gusto.

"I couldn't agree more," Cap added, a determined glint in her eyes. "But for now, let's give Everett some time to work his magic."

Sarah smiled. "Exactly. Everett will thoroughly blend the knowledge we gleaned here with entries from Tom's journal and the map. In a couple of days, we'll reconvene back at the Cove. Then, with a clear plan and the right supplies, we'll embark on the real adventure."

A chorus of agreement rippled through the group. Anticipation danced in their eyes, tinged with a healthy dose of nervous excitement. They were a crew bound by friendship and a shared thirst for the unknown, ready to follow Sarah's whispers of her past into the heart of Renegade Bayou. As they bid farewell and parted ways, Sarah knew this was just the first chapter in their extraordinary journey. The secrets of the Sentinel Cypress awaited, and they were determined to unearth them.

The following days buzzed with anticipation. Sarah and Everett retreated to The Cove. Maps and notes sprawled across the wooden kitchen table, competing for space with Sarah's well-worn copy of Tom's journal. Sunlight streamed through the windows,

casting a warm glow on their focused faces as they quietly pieced together the final plan. Instead of the usual mugs of coffee, a pitcher of Sarah’s famous margaritas sat on the table, condensation clinging to the glasses. Each discovery, each shared truth they unearthed, was celebrated with a clink of ice and a sip of their tangy cocktail.

The planning phase was complete, replaced by the tangible buzz of preparation. Gone were the lists and reminders; now, action reigned supreme.

Sarah, ensured their supplies were in tip-top shape. First-aid kits were restocked, lightweight tents were aired out, and her canoe, dubbed “Whispering Wind,” was prepped for action. Sarah ran a loving hand over the sleek lines of her vessel, a silent promise for the adventure ahead.



Everett's Preparations

Everett transitioned seamlessly into logistics mode. He double-checked weather forecasts, consulted river condition reports, and meticulously reviewed campsite locations and portage points. His evenings were still spent hunched over maps and critical supplies, making sure to pack his flask of 1800 Reposado strategically placed “for emergencies” only, of course.

Cap transformed into a whirlwind of efficiency. Sturdy backpacks were unearthed, water purification tablets tested, and machetes gleamed with freshly sharpened edges. Her infectious enthusiasm filled the air as she organized their supplies, ensuring she had

everything from a fishing rod to fire starters, all with a confident glint in her eye that promised she wouldn't let unexpected challenges dampen their spirits.

She packed a twelve-pack of Bud Light, unfettered about keeping them cool; ice would just be extra weight anyway.

Maggie, a seasoned paddler, calmly prepped her "River Dancer" with practiced ease. Worn straps were replaced, navigation equipment checked, and dry bags filled with essentials like survival blankets and energy bars. Her quiet demeanor belied a steely glint in her eyes, a testament to years navigating both water and life's challenges.

Maggie, a lover of the finer things, brought two bottles of red wine and tucked a well-worn copy of "Where is Joe Merchant?" by Jimmy Buffett into her dry bag, a small indulgence for the evenings by the campfire.

Remy, the free spirit, approached his preparations with characteristic laid-back charm. He stocked up on his favorite trail mix, packed several spliffs of his favorite Kush, and his vape pipe, ready for storytelling around the campfire.



Trucks with Canoes

Trucks laden with canoes and overflowing with supplies pulled up to The Cove. The plan was to all get a good night's sleep, wake up to a good breakfast, and head over to the launch at Buttonbush Creek to start their adventure.

7 - Buttonbush Creek



Breakfast Awaits

The aroma of sizzling sausage, bacon, and rich coffee filled the kitchen at The Cove, and mingled with the scent of freshly baked biscuits. Outside, Sandhill cranes flew by, their calls serving as a natural alarm clock for the day's adventure.

It was still dark, with just a hint of light in the eastern sky. Everett and Sarah, the first ones up, were busy cooking a hearty Southern breakfast. The cast iron pan on the stove cradled a symphony of sizzles as sausage links and bacon strips gradually crisped up. Eggs lightly danced in another pan, while a pot of grits silently bubbled on the back burner. The scent wafted through the air, a tempting invitation to the day ahead. Remy, drawn by the irresistible aroma, was the first to stumble into the kitchen. His grin widened as he swiped a sausage link from the pan. Laughter bubbled from Everett and Sarah, who exchanged amused glances.

"Remy, you're up early," Everett chuckled.

The sly twinkle in Remy's eyes spoke volumes. "Couldn't resist the smell of a good ol' Southern breakfast."

“There’s plenty more where that came from,” Sarah added, checking on the biscuits in the oven.

As the trio bantered, Maggie and Riley joined the scene. Their eyes lit up at the sight and smell of the breakfast spread.

“Looks like we’re just in time,” Maggie remarked, her quiet demeanor betraying a twinkle of excitement.

Riley peered over Everett’s shoulder at the sizzling pans. “Smells delicious. What’s on the menu?”

“Sausage, bacon, eggs, grits, biscuits, and a selection of jams – Fig, Roselle, and Datil Pepper,” Sarah listed, gesturing toward the spread. “Oh, and don’t forget OJ and coffee.”

“Perfect,” Maggie replied, pulling out a chair. “I could use a good meal before we embark on this adventure. And by the way, you guys make the best jellies and jams I’ve ever eaten...all fresh from your garden to boot!”

Riley nodded, her eyes scanning the table. “Count me in. Let’s fuel up for the day...an ditto about the jams and jellies. Simply top shelf in my book!”

Everett and Sarah smiled in appreciation and gave a thumbs up to the compliments. As the group settled around the table another group of Sandhill cranes’ calls echoed overhead while the homestead rooster Rafael sounded the official wake-up call, a natural symphony accompanying the new light of day.

As the group enjoyed a hearty breakfast and some light joking around, Everett went over the day’s plan one final time.

“This is it, gang!” he said with a strong sense of excitement. “Sarah and I want to thank all of you, not only for your willingness and commitment to join us on this unique adventure but also for all the hard prep work. We feel truly blessed to have such good friends!”

“Having your support and company makes this whole trip that much more meaningful for me!” Sarah chimed in.

“We wouldn’t miss this opportunity for the world!” they affirmed.

As the remnants of breakfast were gradually cleared away, a harmonious rhythm of cleaning and cooperation emerged in the kitchen. The group, in an impromptu display of camaraderie, insisted on helping Everett and Sarah with the cleanup. What would have been a time-consuming task turned into a team effort, and the kitchen was soon restored to its pristine state.

Once the last dish was dried and put away, the group stepped outside into the crisp morning air. The vehicles were patiently waiting, adorned with canoes securely fastened and supplies neatly organized. Everett and Sarah took a moment to check tie-downs, inspect equipment, and ensure everything was in order. Sarah left instructions for the neighbor who would be coming over to feed the critters twice a day and keep an eye on the homestead.

The vehicles, a convoy of readiness, hummed to life as the engines roared in unison. Buttonbush Creek was only 6 miles away, and in single file, they arrived in no time at all.

Morning light, breaking through the fog, painted the scene with soft hues of gold on this chilly October morning. The creek, surrounded by tall grasses, numerous Buttonbush plants, and a mixture of Bay and Tupelo, beckoned with an air of mystery. The fog clung to the water’s surface, creating an ethereal atmosphere.

Everett, the navigator and record keeper, opened his GPS map app on the iPhone and pushed begin to start tracing the route they would take for the next 6 or 7 days. The group, a band of adventurers ready to face the unknown, stood at the water’s edge. Canoes were gently lowered into the creek, their bows cutting through the fog as they touched the water. They loaded their canoes with precision. Everett and Sarah would take the lead, Remy and Maggie in the next canoe, and Riley would paddle solo, carrying some extra supplies.

“Let’s do this!” Everett called out, his voice a blend of excitement and determination. They all high-fived, boarded their canoes, and pushed off into the foggy Buttonbush Creek. The journey into Renegade Bayou awaited, and with the chill of the October morning air on their faces, they set forth into the misty waters. The first strokes of their paddles marked the beginning of an extraordinary adventure.



Ready to Go!

The crystal-clear water, fed by an underground spring, greeted the paddlers. As the canoes glided down Buttonbush Creek, the crew found themselves immersed in the waterway’s intimate embrace. The creek, averaging 45 feet wide near the Sentinel Cypress River but starting at a modest 25 feet, promised an up-close experience with the surrounding wilderness.

Starting at a depth of about 5 feet, the creek provided glimpses into the submerged world beneath their canoes. Normally, the clarity of the water would allow them to observe the intricate dance of aquatic life, with fish darting beneath the surface. However, the recent passage of Hurricane Maya had left its mark. The water level was about 10 inches higher than usual, and the clear waters of Buttonbush Creek were tinged with brackish tannins, a result of the mingling of freshwater with the storm’s remnants.

As the canoes smoothly glided through the meandering turns of Buttonbush Creek, the first rays of sunlight began to pierce the lingering morning fog. With the first mile of their journey behind them, the crew felt the gentle warmth of the sun on their faces. The

transition from the cool mist to the embracing sunlight marked the beginning of a day that promised ideal paddling conditions.

The weather forecast had aligned with their expectations, predicting a sunny day with temperatures reaching the mid 60s. It was the kind of weather every paddler cherished – not too hot, not too cold, and the morning sun casting a golden hue on the water's surface. The natural surroundings seemed to awaken with the sunlight, and the crew found themselves paddling through a picturesque landscape painted in the soft, early-morning glow.

The crew, immersed in the tranquil rhythm of paddling, exchanged glances filled with the shared appreciation of the perfect paddling weather. The occasional call of a distant sandhill crane added a melodic touch to the already harmonious journey.

The rhythmic sounds of paddles cutting through the water accompanied Remy's casual offer to the group. "Anyone up for a bit of Kush?" he grinned, pulling out his vape pipe with a twinkle in his eye. "It'll take the edge off, guys."

Maggie, always up for an adventure and a bit of relaxation, tapped Remy on the shoulder without hesitation. "Pass it back here Toker" she instructed with a smile. As the sweet aroma of Purple Kush filled the air, they shared a few tokes, the calming effects washing over them like the gentle ripples beneath their canoes.

Rejoining the rest of the group, Remy and Maggie wore matching contented smiles, the shared experience fostering a sense of team spirit among the paddlers. The soothing effects of Kush blended seamlessly with the tranquility of the sunlit creek, creating an atmosphere of shared enjoyment and relaxation.

Once the group was united, Remy felt the urge to share another of his captivating stories, this time recounting a close call with a charter boat near Bahia Honda during his recent Florida Keys adventure.

"You guys ever been down to Bahia Honda in the Keys?" Remy began, glancing around at his friends. "Man, it's a paradise. But let me tell you about this one time, I had a close call that nearly ended my latest trip there."

The others perked up, intrigued by the change in Remy’s usual laid-back tone. “It was a perfect day for fishing,” Remy continued. “Crystal-clear waters, a gentle breeze – the kind of day that makes you feel alive. I had chartered a small boat to take me out to some of the best fishing spots near Bahia Honda. The captain was this grizzled old salt named Captain Jake. He knew those waters like the back of his hand.



A CloseCall!

We’d been out there for a few hours, catching some nice fish, and just enjoying the sun. I was high on life, and yeah, probably a bit of the good stuff too,” he chuckled, taking a puff from his vape. “Anyway, we decided to head back to shore because the clouds were starting to gather on the horizon. You know how it is down there – weather can change in a heartbeat.

As we’re making our way back, out of nowhere, this massive sport fishing boat comes barreling towards us. It was like a scene out of a movie – this big, flashy boat with all the bells and whistles, and it was heading straight for us. Captain Jake tried to steer clear, but the thing was coming at us way too fast. We were dead in its path.

I was at the bow, gripping the rail, and I could see the whites of the other captain's eyes. He looked panicked, like he had lost control. I shouted to Jake, 'We gotta move!' Jake cranked the wheel hard, and our little boat lurched to the side. The sport fishing boat missed us by inches – I mean, I could've reached out and touched it. The wake from that thing rocked us so hard, I almost went overboard. But somehow, we managed to stay upright.

We circled back, hearts pounding, and saw that the other boat had finally come to a stop. Their engine had died or something. The guys on board were shouting and gesturing, clearly in distress. Captain Jake and I decided to help them out. We threw them a tow line and slowly guided their boat back to shore.

When we finally made it back, the other captain, a young guy who looked like he'd never faced a real crisis in his life, came over and thanked us profusely. He offered us a bunch of fresh-caught mahi-mahi as a thank you.

So there we were, shaking hands, exchanging fish, and laughing about the close call. But man, that was one hell of an adrenaline rush. Just goes to show you – no matter how prepared you think you are, the ocean's always got a way of keeping you on your toes."

Remy grinned, looking around at his friends. "And that's why I always pack a little something extra to keep me relaxed. You never know when you're gonna need it." The group laughed, the tension of Remy's tale dissolving into the calm rhythm of their paddling. The adventure ahead seemed even more exciting with Remy's story fresh in their minds.

Maggie silently knew all too well, how being on the water can always throw you a curveball!.

Everett and Sarah, with one ear attuned to Remy's story, split their attention between the captivating narrative and the natural symphony of the creek.

As the sun illuminated the diverse flora along the water, Sarah couldn't resist capturing the beauty with her camera. Everett joined her in documenting the journey. Their shared love for photography and plants added an artistic layer to the expedition. Amidst

the paddling, storytelling, and appreciation for the surrounding environment, the group forged bonds that transcended the mere pursuit of hidden treasures. It was about the joy of shared moments and the unique blend of interests that made their adventures truly unforgettable.

The crew navigated through the narrow confines of the creek, with overhanging branches and buttonbush clumps creating a serene canopy above them. The air was filled with the subtle fragrance of the wetlands, and the sound of paddles slicing through the water merged with the rustling of leaves.



Downfall on Buttonbush Creek

As they progressed, the creek gradually widened, and the water deepened. Around the 6-mile mark, Sarah, at the forefront of the lead canoe, spotted an obstacle ahead – a downed tree spanning the width of the creek. Alerting the others, the group assessed the scenario, realizing that a large water oak had recently fallen, its canopy still adorned with lush leaves, most likely a victim of Hurricane Maya.

Familiar with these situations, Remy immediately took charge. He directed the canoes to the right side of the creek, instructing everyone to tie onto the surrounding brush. With a paddle in hand, he ventured closer to the fallen tree for a thorough assessment. The trunk, partially submerged, formed a natural dam, redirecting the flow through the canopy of branches and creating a swift current. It was evident that these obstacles needed to be addressed before continuing.

Remy declared the need to cut through the fallen canopy branches. Riley promptly offered her utility saw, a tool she always carried for such situations. Seizing control, Remy took the saw, his paddle, and maneuvered his canoe parallel to the trunk. The flow of the creek would hold the canoe steady against the trunk. Maggie secured the canoe to the fallen tree, and Remy, exited the canoe and using the half-submerged trunk as a makeshift walkway, reached the canopy. Silently expressing gratitude for Riley's well-maintained saw, Remy skillfully cut through the thick branches. Each severed branch was carried downstream by the swift current, gradually creating a navigable path.

With Remy positioned on the trunk, ready to assist, the canoes made their way through the gap. Everett and Sarah led the way, the current propelling them over the remaining branches. Riley followed suit, effortlessly navigating the opened passage. Remy then climbed off the trunk and into his canoe with Maggie. They untied from the trunk and paddled through, each stroke pushing them forward with the swift current. The challenging episode with the fallen tree unfolded into a successful collaboration, highlighting the crew's adaptability and teamwork.

By now, the sun hung directly overhead, casting a warm glow over the creek. The group, enjoying the midday warmth, reached for their lunches, a combination of biscuits and sausage, bacon, fruit, and jams left over from breakfast, savoring every bite while continuing to paddle. Despite the delay caused by the downed tree, their spirits remained high, propelled by the anticipation of reaching the Sentinel Cypress River and the promise of setting up their first campsite of the trip.

The final two hours of the journey down Buttonbush Creek proved to be both uneventful and delightful. With temperatures settling in the upper-sixties, the cool, spring-fed waters of Buttonbush Creek provided a serene pathway for the three canoes.

The landscape transformed gradually as the banks of the creek rose higher, and the familiar buttonbush plants and swamp dogwoods gave way to a taller canopy of trees. As the canoes glided effortlessly downstream, young Bald Cypress mingled with Carolina Ash, Black Tupelo and Red Bay. Clumps of assorted Sword Ferns adorned the banks. The surroundings painted a vibrant picture, with Tillandsia, commonly known as

Bartram's airplants, adorning the branches like Christmas ornaments. William Bartram's observations from the 1700s came to life as the crew marveled at the intricate flora named in his honor.

In a seamless transition, Everett checked his GPS app and announced, "We're here!" Before them stretched the expansive Sentinel Cypress River, its steady current flowing downstream to their left. Just before the river's embrace, a small sandy bank on the left side of the Buttonbush Creek led to a grassy meadow. It was a clear indication of a camping spot well-used by those who had ventured here before. Everett, with a confident proclamation, declared it the night's campsite.

The crew paddled over to the sandy bank, stepping onto solid ground as they secured their canoes to the numerous cypress knees that were becoming increasingly prevalent. The meadow welcomed them with the promise of a peaceful night under the towering cypress trees, and the campsite's history whispered tales of adventurers who had sought refuge in this very spot.

The sun, now casting longer shadows, signaled the end of the day's journey and the beginning of an evening filled with the fellowship of kindred spirits bound by the shared love of exploration.

Setting up camp was a well-practiced routine for the crew. The tents, a temporary haven beneath the towering cypresses, were quickly assembled. Everett and Sarah shared one, while Remy, Riley, and Maggie each claimed their own. As the low profile dome tents were dwarfed by the tall Bald Cypress, responsibilities naturally fell into place.

Remy grinned and swiftly volunteered for cooking duties. "Alright, folks! Get ready for a feast," he declared, setting up his makeshift outdoor kitchen with an air of confidence. Meanwhile, Riley and Maggie ventured into the surroundings to scout for firewood. The aftermath of Hurricane Maya provided an abundance of fallen branches, making their task relatively easy. The crackling sound of breaking twigs and the soft shuffle of leaves echoed their progress.

Back at camp, Sarah took charge of preparing fixings for their dinner. Riley, returning with a fishing pole in hand, announced her plan to try her luck at catching something for

the evening. With a few skillful casts, she managed to catch several panfish, which she expertly cleaned and prepared, adding a fresh, delectable offering to the evening's meal.

The mouth-watering aroma of fresh fried fish, burgers, hot dogs, and Sarah's infamous black bean hot dogs filled the air. With each member of the crew contributing their unique skills and personalities to the evening, a contentment enveloped the campsite, providing a comforting and warm atmosphere as the day came to a close.

Post-dinner, around a crackling campfire, Remy produced his vape pipe, offering it to all. Maggie joined in, while Riley kicked back with a Bud Light, still chilled, thanks to her ingenious method of keeping them cool in the spring water. Everett, in the remaining light, pulled out his 'Emergency Flask' and took a long awaited pull on 1800 Reposado. "I don't like to see my man drink alone...pass it on over Ev" she lovingly instructed. They both smiled and happy to be together on this adventure. Everett then looked over the map, engaging the crew in a discussion about the next leg of their journey.

"We've got 80 miles left on the Sentinel Cypress River," Everett shared. "The next 15 should be smooth sailing, but the Indian Bend Shoals in the fourth leg will pose a challenge. We'll need to keep a close eye on the conditions as we approach the shoals." As the evening settled in, the crew found their respective corners of relaxation.

Remy, sitting by the campfire, delved into more tales from his recent Keys adventure to anyone listening. Riley savored her Bud Light listening intently to Remy, while Maggie immersed herself in Jimmy Buffett's world with her red wine and her copy of Where's Joe Merchant. With one ear open to one of Remy's tall tales, she couldn't decide which story was more intriguing, Joe Merchant's or Remy's.

The haunting calls of the river owls and the rhythmic chorus of cicadas provided a natural soundtrack, enhancing the serenity of their camp along the Sentinel Cypress River.

"Good night guys, sleep well," they all seemed to say in unison. Sarah kissed Everett goodnight and as she snuggled in her sleeping bag, her pendant began to warm as faint whispers called to her in the darkness... she fell asleep.

8 - Revelations on the River

The crew awoke to the smell of hot coffee and an active campfire. It was another chilly, misty morning, and Sarah and Everett were up early, preparing for the day ahead. Remy, once again, returned to the camp kitchen, volunteering to fix the day's breakfast. While Remy prepared the eggs and bacon, Sarah mixed together her biscuit dough and worked her magic. "We still have plenty of jams and jelly, so be sure to help yourselves!"

The crew, now fully awake, decided to tear down most of the encampment while Remy and Sarah cooked breakfast. As predictable as the sunrise, Everett checked his GPS, glanced over Tom's map, and checked the weather on his Marine radio. "Looks to be another great paddle day, folks. Clear, lower 70s, and smooth sailing," he announced.

While Everett ensured everything was set for the day's journey, Maggie and Riley started packing up their tents and sleeping bags, folding and rolling them with practiced ease. The campsite, which had been a bustling hub of activity the night before, gradually transformed back into its natural state, with only the remnants of the campfire and the smell of breakfast in the air.

As the bacon sizzled and the biscuits browned to perfection, the crew fell into a comfortable rhythm. Maggie gathered up the cooking utensils from the previous night and began washing them in Buttonbush Creek, while Riley sorted through their supplies, ensuring everything was stowed away properly.

By the time breakfast was ready, the camp was nearly packed up. They all gathered around the fire, plates in hand, and enjoyed the hearty meal, discussing their plans and sharing a few laughs. The morning mist began to lift, revealing the serene beauty of their surroundings.

The Sentinel Cypress River stretched out before them, wide and inviting, its current noticeably stronger than Buttonbush Creek. Sunlight dappled the water with a mosaic of

light and shadow. Tall cypress trees, draped in Spanish moss, lined the banks, their gnarled roots gripping the riverbed like ancient guardians.

With breakfast finished and the last of their gear packed, they extinguished the fire, making sure to leave no trace of their campsite. They loaded the canoes with their supplies, ensuring everything was secure for the journey ahead.

Everett took a final look at the GPS and Tom's map, giving a nod of approval. "Alright, let's hit the water. We'll shoot for another 15 miles today," he said, leading the way to the edge of the Sentinel Cypress River. The crew followed, their excitement palpable as they pushed off from the shore, ready for the day's adventure.

As they paddled along, a comfortable silence settled between them, broken only by the rhythmic splash of paddles and the occasional call of wildlife. About two miles into their journey, Remy noticed a pensive expression on Sarah's face.

"Hey, Moonflower," he said softly, using the nickname she had given herself. "You seem lost in thought. Everything okay?"

Sarah glanced at him, a flicker of sadness in her eyes. "It's just... I've been thinking a lot about my dad lately," she admitted.

Remy dipped his paddle, slowing his pace to match hers. "Would you be open to talking about him?" he asked gently. "We've been friends for a while now, but I never really knew much about your family."

Sarah hesitated for a moment, surprised by his empathy. The dam holding back her emotions seemed to crack. Perhaps sharing her burden and grief would further strengthen the bond they were forging. Taking a deep breath, she met his gaze. "I'd be happy to," she replied softly.

As they paddled down the river, Sarah began to share her story. She spoke of her father, Thomas Jr., an adventurous soul with a boundless passion for exploration and a fascination with hidden corners of Florida. She recounted the captivating tales he told, especially about Renegade Bayou—a place shrouded in mystery where her grandfather, Tom Rivers, had vanished years ago. Sarah's father had devoted his life to uncovering

the secrets of that bayou and the disappearance of his father, but his quest remained unfinished when he passed away. The pendant nestled against her chest thrummed with a faint warmth, a silent affirmation of the connection she felt to her father and grandfather, and their unfulfilled quests.

The group listened intently, their faces reflecting a mix of empathy and fascination. When she finished, a thoughtful silence descended upon them.

“Thank you for sharing that, Sarah,” Maggie said finally, her voice filled with warmth. “That was incredibly honest.”

“Yeah,” Riley chimed in, “we never knew any of that. It definitely makes this trip even more meaningful.”

Remy nodded, his eyes reflecting a new understanding. “It’s clear how much your family’s story means to you. It gives this adventure a whole new layer.”

The acknowledgment of her personal history seemed to deepen their bond, intertwining their own journey with the legacy Sarah carried. As they continued down the river, the weight of their shared stories and the significance of their quest settled around them, adding a profound sense of purpose to their adventure.

Sarah smiled, a wave of relief washing over her. Sharing her story had been cathartic, a weight lifted from her shoulders. The journey down the Sentinel Cypress was no longer just about reaching Renegade Bayou; it was about forging deeper connections and sharing their burdens with each other.

Everett, ever the navigator, scanned the river ahead. “Hey everyone,” he announced, a grin spreading across his face. “Looks like we’re nearing the end of our 15-mile journey for today. Up ahead, nestled amongst the trees, I see a rustic camp platform that’s marked here on the map. Perfect spot to rest our weary bones and share some stories around a crackling fire.”



Wilderness Camping Platform

As they paddled towards the platform, a collective sigh of relief escaped their lips. “And a functioning porta-potty!” Riley exclaimed, her voice filled with mock theatrics. “Civilization at last!” They’d all silently harbored similar desperate longings for the past few hours, and Riley’s outburst brought forth a chorus of laughter.

The platform, set 6 feet above the water with wide wooden steps leading down to the river, offered a welcome change from their previous campsite. They secured their canoes to the cleats along the platform’s edge. Remy and Everett were first up the platform, instructing the rest to hand up the gear they would need for the night. With that done, they all stepped up onto the platform for an assessment. It was quite accommodating, measuring 25’ x 40’. On one end was a picnic table with a covered roof, and at the south end of the platform was the port-a-potty, maintained by the forestry department and surprisingly clean.

“Ladies first!” Riley declared as she dashed toward the door, clearly in need.

“Looks like we can use the camp grill over there, and there’s a firewood box,” Remy observed. Lifting the lid to the box, he found ample firewood for the evening’s meal. Meanwhile, everyone took their turn in the port-a-potty, with Remy joking, “I’ll gladly be last... you don’t want to come in after me!”

“Thanks for the warning, Remy. You’re so thoughtful,” Maggie said, laughing and shaking her head.

Dinner was simple but satisfying: spaghetti, garlic bread, and a salad. They needed to use up the greens before they spoiled and planned to resupply at Whitey’s in the next two days.

As night fell, the sky was a canvas of stars, and the quiet beauty of the platform in the middle of nowhere was striking. After dinner and a thorough clean-up, each person retired to their own space to relax. Sarah and Everett, sitting together on the edge of the platform, admired the star-filled sky and each other. Everett reached into his back pocket, retrieving the Emergency 1800, and they shared a few shots, holding hands and savoring the moment...happy to be together.

Ritas

9 - Healing Currents

The morning sun bathed the campsite in a warm glow as the crew bid farewell to the rustic camping platform, grateful for the luxury of a functioning port-a-potty. Breakfast today consisted of hot coffee, juice, granola bars, and some fresh fruit—simple and quick with minimal cleanup. With canoes secured and gear loaded, they set forth into the steady current of the Sentinel Cypress River, continuing their 100-mile journey toward the elusive Renegade Bayou.



Wood Storks Fly Overhead

As the canoes glided downstream, they marveled at the ever-changing panorama of nature. Pink Spoonbills, Ibis, and Wood Storks painted the sky with their vibrant plumage, while herons gracefully perched on fallen trees, taking flight and moving further downstream with each approach of the paddlers. The rhythm of the river was occasionally interrupted by the distinctive calls of red-shouldered hawks, adding a melodic touch to the journey.

Florida River Cooters sunbathed on logs, slipping into the water as the canoes approached, while Ibis found refuge in the towering trees above. The air was alive with the symphony of the swamp—a harmonious blend of the autumn wind rustling leaves, birdsong, and the occasional splash as turtles and gators slid into the river.

In this idyllic setting, Sarah prompted Remy to share his personal story. “So Remy, how about you? What went down in Costa Rica last year? Do you mind sharing?”

Remy, with an apprehensive grin and a hint of vulnerability in his eyes, agreed and began to unfold the tale of his wife’s departure, leaving him for a young surfer. The group listened with a mixture of empathy and disbelief, the river bearing witness to the ebb and flow of his life’s currents.

Remy’s voice carried a subtle tremor as he began his narrative. “It was in Costa Rica, a place Trudy and I often visited for our shared love of kayaking...or so I thought! The lush landscapes and rushing waters had once been our passion...or so I thought! But as time went on, I sensed the relentless pursuit of new and exotic destinations began to wear on her.”

“Trudy had grown weary of our constant travel. The nomadic lifestyle that once thrilled us became a burden to her. I was too engrossed in the thrill of adventure to see the toll it was taking on her. The hints of her discontent were there, but I failed to recognize them.”



A Bad Memory

“Last year, while we were in Costa Rica, she met a young surfer. I had to run into the nearby town for errands, she headed down to the beach. She watched this man skillfully glide with the waves and when he eventually came ashore, he introduced himself.

“Hello I'm Trevor, he held out his hand. They talked and became friends. His carefree lifestyle and love for the simple pleasures of beach life appealed to her in a way I couldn't. One day, while we were gearing up for yet another thrilling run, she said to me, ‘Remy, I can't keep chasing after these rapids. I need a different pace.’”

“The news hit me hard. She wasn't just leaving our adventures; she was leaving me. Her departure was quiet, like a paddle slicing through calm waters, but the echo of her words reverberated through my heart.”

“Trevor became her escape, a symbol of the simplicity she craved. As she left with him, I was left up the creek without a paddle, watching her disappear into the distance. I realized that while she needed change, I wasn't going to change. Sometimes, love can be as unpredictable as the wildest rapids we ever faced together.”

Remy concluded his story with a heavy sigh, the weight of his memories palpable. The river, an ever-present companion, flowed alongside them, carrying the fragments of his heartache downstream.

Maggie, breaking the silence, offered words of understanding. “Mate, that’s a heavy load to bear,” she spoke with sincere empathy. “Life’s currents can be harsh, but sharing the weight makes the journey a bit easier.”

Riley, paddling quietly beside them, nodded in agreement. “Remy, it takes strength to lay bare the pain. We’re here for you, through the rapids and the calmer waters alike.” Everett, his steady gaze fixed on the river ahead, added, “Remy, life’s a series of unpredictable bends. Your story reminds us that even the most adventurous souls encounter unexpected twists. We’ll paddle through them together.”

Sarah, the Moonflower with the pendant warming against her chest, offered Remy a gentle smile. “Thank you for sharing, Remy. Your vulnerability strengthens the bonds of our crew. We’re not just navigating rivers; we’re navigating life, and we’ve got each other’s backs.”

As the crew absorbed the gravity of the stories shared, Maggie’s voice, tinged with a mix of solemnity and vulnerability, broke the contemplative atmosphere. “I reckon it’s time you know,” Maggie began, her gaze fixed on the riverbanks. “I lost my partner, Jake, out at sea a few years back. We were sailing off the coast, chasing the horizon and the promise of a sunset only the open ocean can paint.”

The sunlight danced on the water, mirroring the warmth in Maggie’s recollection. “A storm rolled in unexpectedly. We tried to secure everything, but the sea has a way of making you feel insignificant. One moment, we were riding the waves, and the next, a rogue wave tossed us like a mere speck.”

Her gaze met Remy’s, and in that exchange, an unspoken understanding passed between them. “I held on, but Jake... he was gone. Vanished into the deep blue. Some losses leave you adrift in a sea of memories.”

As Maggie shared the fragments of her maritime tragedy, the river’s current carried her words downstream. The revelation hung in the air, catching the crew by surprise. The rhythmic paddling ceased, and each face mirrored a mix of shock and empathy.

Riley, usually lively and quick-witted, was momentarily silenced. She exchanged a solemn glance with Remy, recognizing the shared weight of grief that bridged the space between them.

Remy, having just unraveled his own heartache, nodded with somber understanding. His gaze met Maggie's, a silent acknowledgment of the pain beneath their adventures. Everett, the steady captain, exhaled a sigh of compassion. The river, attuned to the emotional currents, carried the weight of Maggie's words along its course.

Sarah, with her pendant's warmth, offered Maggie a gentle smile. The river's untamed beauty seemed to echo Maggie's resilience in the face of tragedy.

The canoes, now vessels of shared stories and unspoken bonds, resumed their journey. The paddle strokes, once marked by unspoken sorrows, now propelled them toward a shared horizon. Despite the weight of their experiences, the Paddle Posse found solace in their adventures together.

As they paddled, laughter once tempered by personal tragedies rang out freely. The stars overhead bore witness to a group that chose to embrace their connections rather than be defined by their losses. Each member of the Paddle Posse—Remy's humor, Riley's optimism, Sarah's strength, Maggie's resilience, and Everett's guidance—blended into a harmonious symphony.

Their journey through Florida's mystical landscapes became more than a quest for hidden treasures. Each twist of the river mirrored the unpredictable yet beautiful nature of their own narratives. The paddle strokes, once laden with grief, now carried them forward with a shared determination.



Time for a Toke

“Alright, folks, after all that soul-baring, I’m ready for a toke!” Remy declared, transitioning to a lighter mood. He took a puff and passed the spliff back to Maggie, settled behind him in the canoe. This time, Everett and Sarah paddled close, and one by one, they indulged in a bit of pain relief. Everett once again reached for Emergency 1800, sharing a shot with Sarah.

As the calming effects settled in, a collective agreement resonated: “It’s time to lighten up.” With the river as their guide and their shared purpose as their compass, the Paddle Posse embraced the moment, ready for whatever the next leg of their journey had in store.

Ritas

10 - Indian Bend Shoals

The sun dipped low on the horizon, casting long shadows from the cypress upon the Sentinel Cypress River. Riley, showcasing her fishing prowess, skillfully reeled in two hefty 8-pound striped bass. The savory aroma of the evening meal, cooked by the ever-capable Remy, mingled with the crackling campfire and the natural scent of pine, creating a cozy atmosphere that wrapped around the tired Paddle Posse.

As the crew savored the last bites of their dinner, the rhythmic rumble of Indian Bend Shoals echoed in the distance. Everett, a topographer well-versed in the ways of the river, gathered everyone around the fire.

“Tomorrow poses a challenge,” he began, his eyes reflecting the dancing flames, “we’re approaching Indian Bend Shoals, just 2 miles downriver. It’s exposed, fast, and potentially dangerous. We’ll need to navigate the shoals with utmost care.”

Anticipation hung heavy in the evening air as Everett outlined the plan. In the morning, he and Sarah would take the lead, walking the riverbank to assess the shoals’ conditions.

The crew, listening intently, could hear the distant rush of water, a constant reminder of the impending trial that awaited them at first light.



Around the Fire

With the campfire casting a gentle glow, Remy indulged in the tranquility of a toke, Maggie savored sips of wine, and Sarah and Everett took a shot of courage from the Emergency 1800 flask. The distant murmur of Indian Bend Shoals provided a lullaby, serenading them into a night of anticipation. Under the star-studded sky, Remy took another drag, Maggie immersed herself in several more chapters of *Where's Joe Merchant*. While engrossed in her book, she occasionally glanced towards the distant sounds of rushing water, with a mix of curiosity and anticipation painting her features.

The rhythmic sounds of the shoals became the backdrop to their peaceful slumber. Sarah and Everett shared a quiet moment by the fire. Their eyes spoke volumes—a blend of determination, shared vulnerability, and a love for one another. Everett's hand found Sarah's, a reassuring squeeze that conveyed more than words ever could. They were partners, lovers, and each other's anchors in the face of the unknown.

As dawn edged over the horizon, brushing the sky with hues of pink and gold, the crew stirred from their sleeping bags. The promise of a new day brought with it a mix of anticipation and determination. A quick breakfast ensued, punctuated by the comforting aroma of hot coffee that mingled with the crisp October air.

“Okay, everyone, we’ll clean up, attend to nature’s call, and get securing the gear in the canoes,” Everett announced, the first rays of sunlight catching the subtle resolve in his eyes. The crew, accustomed to the routine, moved with a synchronized rhythm, each member contributing to the collective effort.

As the crew gathered for their morning preparations, the atmosphere was a blend of playful banter. Remy couldn’t resist injecting some humor into the routine.

“Time to show these riverbanks who’s boss,” Remy exclaimed, a theatrical flourish accompanying his words.

Maggie, engrossed in her book but not one to miss out on the banter, quipped, “If only Joe Merchant could navigate a canoe, he might have had a better adventure!”

Riley, double-checking her riggings, chimed in, “Joe should’ve invested in SealLine bags; might’ve saved him a lot of trouble!” A shared laugh rippled through the crew as they acknowledged the practicality of Riley’s statement. Even Sarah, usually the serene presence, couldn’t resist a smile. “Maybe we’ll find Joe Merchant downstream, paddling in circles,” she teased, adding a playful twist to the conversation.

As they worked together to load and secure their gear, the crew’s banter became a lively soundtrack to their morning routine, a light-hearted counterpoint to the challenges that awaited them downstream. In those moments, the Paddle Posse found joy in each other’s company, their laughter a testament to the bonds forged on the journey to Renegade Bayou.

“Make sure your valuables are tucked well into your waterproof SealLine bags,” Everett informed them. Using his iPhone as the GPS and route recorder, he made sure the waterproof case was on tight.

Remy called out, “OK Posse, let’s get this show on the road, well, in this case, the water.” With smiles exchanged and a shared determination, they embarked in their canoes, allowing a fast, steady current to guide them towards Indian Bend Shoals. The anticipation of the challenge ahead hung in the air, heightened by the distant roar of

whitewater, a reminder of the formidable trial awaiting them just two miles downstream.

Those two miles to the shoals vanished in a heartbeat. Everett and Sarah led, motioning urgently towards the shore where a fallen cypress diverted the river's flow. The roar of whitewater grew, drowning out everything else. The three canoes were securely tied to the downed cypress and away from the fast-moving current. Everett's plan echoed over the tumult, the crew now poised for action.

Remy's wide grin couldn't conceal his eagerness. "Indian Bend Shoals, our kind of party! Ready to ride those rapids, Everett!" he exclaimed, excitement gleaming in his eyes. Riley gave a nod of acknowledgment. "Alright, Everett, we trust your river wisdom. Just point us in the right direction, and we'll navigate those shoals like pros," she declared, adjusting her hat with a determined air.

Sarah, her eyes reflecting a mix of nerves and determination, nodded in agreement. "We've faced challenges before, and we'll face this one together. Indian Bend Shoals, here we come," she affirmed, a quiet resolve in her voice.



Approaching the Shoals

Everett, pleased with the crew's response, offered a reassuring smile. "Good to know we're all on the same page. Remember, caution and precision." Ev left the group to scout the shoals

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With a determined gaze, he watched the river from the bank, analyzing the formidable Indian Bend Shoals. The river, 225 feet wide and usually ten feet deep, revealed its exposed, fast, and treacherous nature at the shoals. Returning to the crew with valuable insights, Everett addressed them with a sense of gravity.

"The left side seems the safest," he advised, his eyes reflecting the weight of responsibility. "We need to be cautious and precise. The shoals are formidable, but with careful navigation, we'll make it through."

The crew, though apprehensive, trusted Everett's expertise. Each member diligently prepared for the challenge ahead. Belongings were secured, SealLine bags safeguarded valuables, and the canoes lined the staging area, ready to face Indian Bend Shoals.

Despite the crew all being seasoned paddlers, Everett stressed the importance of reading the downstream V in the current, the key to navigating through the rapids. Remy and Maggie, well-versed in river navigation, would lead, followed by Riley, also a seasoned captain on the waterways, and then Everett and Sarah.



Indian Bend Shoals

As the canoes left the staging area and glided into the mainstream of the river, the crew felt the rush of adrenaline. Remy and Maggie entered the shoals first. “YeaHa,” shouted Remy as he and Maggie were swept away. The transition from calm waters to the tumultuous shoals was immediate!

Riley, who had her share of maneuvering river shoals, waited for Remy and Maggie to be about a third of the way through and then launched herself into the current. She never shied away from forming a thrilling jolt of excitement. The mood shifted as the rhythmic flow of the river transitioned into the turbulent chaos of Indian Bend Shoals.

Riley navigated the treacherous rapids, where the surging water slammed against her canoe, spraying violently as it collided with the jagged rocks. The turbulent waves splashed up, momentarily blinding her vision as she sped through, relying on instinct to guide her to safety. It jolted her and dislodged her waterproof duffle, but her swift recovery showcased her resilience. When her canoe collided with the submerged rock, her heart raced, and for a moment, the world seemed to freeze. The duffle floated away, a tangible reminder of the unpredictable nature of the river. Yet, Riley’s swift recovery showcased not just her resilience but a triumphant smile that spoke of conquering a split-second fear.

Everett and Sarah held their breath as the bag floated away. Unperturbed, Riley swiftly recovered, ensuring her safety and the undamaged canoe. The bag, however, remained adrift.



Taking on the Rapids

As Everett and Sarah entered the shoals, the adrenaline-fueled ride began. The quarter-mile journey through the fast-paced, frothy waters felt both eternal and fleeting.

Remy, his infectious enthusiasm undiminished, exclaimed, “Well, that was a wake-up call! Rapids for breakfast, anyone?” His laughter echoed over the river, breaking the tension that had built up before the shoals. Being the first to emerge from the shoals, Remy and Maggie spotted Riley’s bag across the river. Without hesitation, they navigated their canoe skillfully, rescuing the crucial gear.

Riley, now through the shoals, paddled towards her recovered belongings, offering a relieved smile. Maggie couldn’t help but join in the celebration. “A thrilling way to start the day, indeed. Beats my usual morning routine,” she quipped, a playful smile gracing her lips.

Sarah, in front, shouted commands back to Ev. “V to the left!, to the left!,” and Ev guided the canoe through the frothy rush of water. They were both soaked from the river current crashing against the large rocks, but both held their ground and emerged from the exhilarating ride. The crew felt a shared sense of accomplishment. The challenges of Indian Bend Shoals, though formidable, had been conquered.

Remy’s “Let’s do that again” echoed the sentiment of triumph. The shared glances between them revealed an unspoken connection, a bond forged not just by successful navigation but by facing the unexpected head-on.

Everett, watching the crew, felt a surge of pride. The responsibility of leading them through the challenging shoals lifted from his shoulders, replaced by the satisfaction of a united and victorious Paddle Posse.

Sarah’s eyes met Everett’s, and in that silent exchange, gratitude and love flowed between them. They had faced the shoals together, and the mutual understanding that passed between them was a testament to the strength of their partnership.

As they continued down the river, the adrenaline of the shoals descent slowly gave way to a shared sense of achievement. Each stroke of the paddle became a celebration of their triumph, and the river, though unpredictable, had become a witness to the resilience of the Paddle Posse.

Renegade Bayou, with its secrets and challenges, lay ahead, and the Paddle Posse was ready for whatever lay around the next bend. As the exhilaration from conquering Indian Bend Shoals lingered in the air, everyone refocused on the task at hand – navigating the remaining 13 miles and finding a campsite.

The sun hung high in the sky, creating dancing diamonds over the winding river. The relentless current, now a familiar companion, effortlessly propelled them forward with each paddle stroke.

Remy couldn't resist a playful remark, "Alright, mates! Rapids for breakfast, and now we're on a scenic cruise for lunch. Let's keep the momentum going!" His cheerful demeanor resonated with the crew, infusing a lighthearted spirit into the journey. He pulled out a spliff. "Anyone care for a victory toke?"

Maggie, like clockwork, seated behind Remy, reached out and enjoyed a long pull. Riley, steering her canoe with purpose, chimed in, "Adventure indeed. But let's not forget, we've got miles to cover before we rest our weary arms. Captain Compass, any hints on what surprises the river might throw at us next?"

Everett, his eyes scanning the meandering river ahead, replied, "Let's enjoy the journey for now. We've earned it, and tomorrow is resupply day at Whitey's Fish Camp!"

Riley thought to herself, "Great, I was running out of brew." And with that thought, she reached into the net in the water holding her Bud Light and popped a top! "Now that's what I'm talking about."

The crew paddled in unison, alternating paddling with simply drifting with the ever moving current. Everett took a snort from his trusty flask and offered Sarah a pull. "Here, Moonflower, we did good today, time for a reward." Sarah reached back, grabbed the flask, and enjoyed a lengthy "sip."



“Thanks, Ev,” she smiled and winked as she handed back the flask. The scenic beauty of the Sentinel Cypress River continued to unfold around them, with cypress trees standing tall among a mixture of Carolina Ash, TiTi, and Black Tupelo.

As the day wore on, they covered the 13 miles with a mix of steady strokes and moments of leisurely drifting. With the sun descending in the west, Everett called for a break. “Alright, gang, let’s find a suitable spot to set up camp for the day. We’ve earned a rest,” Everett declared. He looked at his map and had a spot already picked out from earlier planning at The Cove. “About a quarter-mile on river right, we should see our platform,” he replied.

The wooden camp platform, nestled above the swift current of the river, provided a perfect vantage point for the crew to unwind and celebrate their victorious descent through Indian Bend Shoals.

Remy set up his makeshift kitchen on the platform, ready to turn Riley’s potential catch into a delicious feast. “Hey Cap, fancy bringing in some river delicacies for our evening meal?” Remy chuckled, casting an appreciative look at Riley’s fishing rod.

Riley replied, “Consider it done, Chef. Tonight’s dinner will be a banquet fit for river royalty.” She strolled to the edge of the platform, casting her line into the river. Meanwhile, Everett and Sarah, still buzzing from the excitement of navigating the shoals, assisted in securing the canoes and organizing the campsite. Sarah, taking in the

scenery, remarked, “This platform feels like a haven in the midst of the river. What a perfect spot to celebrate our triumph over the shoals.”

Everett, sharing in her sentiment, nodded. “Indeed, Sarah. The river has a way of offering both challenge and serenity. Let’s make the most of this evening and toast to the journey so far.”

As the fire bowl flickered to life, lanterns adorned the wooden platform, creating a warm ambiance. The crew gathered around, the sounds of the river providing a soothing backdrop to their shared stories and laughter. Riley, successful in her fishing venture, proudly displayed her catch. “Tonight, we feast like true river adventurers!” she declared, showcasing the bounty that would soon sizzle over Remy’s makeshift grill. Remy, infusing his culinary expertise, added, “And let’s not forget to toast to Captain Compass for leading us safely through those shoals.” The crew raised their improvised cups in a salute to their intrepid leader.

Under the starlit sky, the wooden camp platform became a stage for celebration. The crew, bonded by the challenges faced and victories achieved, reveled in the camaraderie that defined their journey on the Sentinel Cypress River. Sweet fumes of Purple Kush filled the air. The murmur of the river, the flickering campfire, and the shared stories created a panorama of memories that would linger long after the night faded. As the feast commenced, with Riley’s catch taking center stage, they embraced the magic of the river and the resilience that brought them to this spot.

In their tent, Sarah kissed Everett, expressing her gratitude for his unwavering support and expert leadership through the challenging shoals. Everett, pulling Sarah close, reciprocated the sentiment. “You’re welcome. It’s my pleasure to be your partner in crime and a loyal supporting partner. I love you too.”

Tomorrow’s adventure awaited, and the excitement of reaching Whitey’s Fish Camp for resupply added a spark to their dreams. The wooden platform, now a stage for the river’s serenade, marked not only a celebration of the day’s triumphs but also a prelude to the conveniences and camaraderie that awaited them at the renowned fish camp.

11 - Whitey's Fish Camp

After a restful night on the wooden platform, the crew awoke to the gentle murmur of the river and the inviting aroma of breakfast prepared by Remy. Supplies were running low, so the remaining oatmeal and granola bars were served.

“We’re eatin’ light this morning, but we’ll have fresh supplies in a couple of hours,” Remy informed them.

The crew gathered around the makeshift dining area, exchanging thoughts about the journey ahead. Everett unfolded the map to discuss the day’s plan.



Approaching Whitey's Fish Camp

“Today, we’ve got a 7-mile paddle to reach Whitey’s Fish Camp. The current is definitely in our favor, so we should make it in just under two hours. Once there, we can catch up on supplies, check out the manatees in Osceola Springs, and enjoy a good meal,” Everett announced.

For Everett, Whitey was more than just a fish camp owner; he was a longtime friend from the days of Whitey establishing his homestead on Sweetwater Creek. As a river guide, Riley also got to know Whitey over the years from her many stops for supplies during her tours on the river.

The Fish Camp, nestled on Osceola Spring, remained hidden from the river's view. A discreet wooden sign nailed to a tree pointed up the narrow spring run, a quarter mile off the Sentinel Cypress River. The run, 30 feet wide and surrounded by lush ferns and cypress knees, led to Osceola Spring—a second magnitude spring with an oval pool measuring 230 by 135 feet and a depth of 18 feet.

As the crew approached Whitey's, the merging of clear spring water with the darker tannin water of the Sentinel Cypress River signaled the entrance to Osceola Spring. They guided their canoes to a designated docking area, where Whitey 'Alligator' Yates stood—a wiry figure with a long white ponytail, a full beard, and a weathered face. A straw river hat perched atop his head completed the ensemble.



Whitey 'Alligator' Yates

“Welcome, my river friends!” Whitey exclaimed, extending a firm handshake to Everett.

“It’s been a long time, Ev. You doing well?”

“No complaints, Whitey...you remember Sarah,” Everett said, motioning to her.

“Could never forget this lovely lady. In fact, I still have the remnants of several medicinal tinctures she fixed me up with before my journey out here,” Whitey said, sharing a fond hug with Sarah.

Whitey, recognizing Riley, extended a warm handshake. “‘Cap,’ you bringing these folks way out here on another of your deep wilderness tours?”

Riley smiled as she shook Whitey’s hand. “Not quite this time. We’re here on a special mission and we’ll tell you all about it.”

After further introductions, Whitey asked, “How was navigating Indian Bend Shoals? Quite the feat! Now, what can I do for y’all today?”

Everett replied, “The shoals were a piece of cake. A great shot of adrenaline, to be sure! We’re in need of supplies, a bit of catching up, and definitely a good meal.”

“Let me get you guys some lunch and we’ll talk. I’m quite interested in what brings y’all out this way,” Whitey offered.

The fish camp was a rustic place, with barnboard siding and a rusting tin roof, adorned with weathered signs advertising fresh bait and cold sodas. There was no electricity. Whitey was proficient in living off the grid, using natural gas and solar panels as his means of power. A tall, makeshift windmill helped pump water from the spring in his backyard.

A clearing behind the fish camp, alongside the spring, was Whitey’s garden. As was the case with his original property on Sweetwater Creek, Whitey implemented the principles of permaculture to achieve a well-integrated and sustainable environment for growing food, raising chickens, and producing his own energy, outside of the natural gas.

The crew wandered the property, admiring Whitey’s resourcefulness and ingenuity, then made their way over to the spring. Peering down, they saw a pod of three manatees in the clear turquoise water and white sandy bottom. A massive male, a smaller female, and a playful calf nudged its mother.

“Impressive,” Maggie remarked.

Everett chuckled. “Indeed. That little one is always a delight.”

The aroma of sizzling fish and frying onions wafted through the air. Their brief moment of admiration was interrupted by a loud clang from the kitchen. Whitey emerged, grinning.

“Alright, slackers! Food’s ready. Let’s eat!”

The crew moved to a large picnic table under a well-worn canopy providing shade. Whitey brought over plates of freshly fried catfish, onion rings, hush puppies, and crisp coleslaw.

“There’s plenty, so help yourself,” he smiled as he served up the hefty plates of food. “Caught those catfish just this morning!”

“Everything is just great, Whitey...awesome!” said Everett as he popped another hush puppy in his mouth. There was mostly silence as everyone focused on the delicious meal. Whitey broke the silence.

“So what brings y’all out here in the middle of nowhere? I am assuming it isn’t just a casual paddle.”

Everett looked over at Sarah and nodded, offering her the opportunity to share her story. Whitey listened intently as Sarah described finding the journal and map at her Aunt Fran’s after Hurricane Maya blew through and their determination to uncover answers to questions surrounding her grandfather’s disappearance in Renegade Bayou many years ago.

Whitey exclaimed, “Wow, that’s fascinating. I’ve been out here for quite a while and off and on word comes about, in pieces, about your grandfather’s disappearance, but nothing really tangible.”

“You guys have your work cut out for you!” he said, then added, “Two dudes stopped by for some supplies just two days ago and left me with the weirdest feeling. I asked them what they were doing out here, and their answers sounded fishier than my catfish stew.”

Everett exchanged glances with the crew. Riley leaned in. “What did they want?”

Whitey shook his head. “Claimed they worked for the museum and were exploring the river for old Timucua mounds to document, but they didn’t look official at all. Even their Jon boat had no markings on it, and it raised an eyebrow of suspicion.”

Riley listened intently. Something about this information lit a spark in her mind to be further investigated.

“That was some good fixins,” Maggie told Whitey as she took a last sip of her sweet tea.

“Dittos here,” Remy agreed.

They all thanked Whitey for such a fulfilling meal and proceeded to get to the task of resupply.

Inside the camp store, shelves lined with provisions awaited them. The crew divided tasks—Riley and Maggie took charge of resupplying food and essentials, Remy explored the cooking supplies, and Everett and Sarah gathered information on weather updates.

“Looks like we’ve got some rain heading our way,” Whitey remarked. “You’re gonna want to make sure your gear is well-covered. I’ve got extra visqueen for y’all.” Whitey then turned on the VHF Radio for weather updates. Everett and Sarah listened in.

“It doesn’t sound good,” Everett said as Whitey asked, “Do y’all want to stay here ’til it passes?”

“Thanks, Whitey, but we’ll press on...we’ve been in worse and need to get to the next campsite before dark.”

With provisions loaded and secured, the crew thanked Whitey for his hospitality and began loading into their canoes. Everett shook Whitey’s hand firmly and said, “You take care, my friend. It was great seeing you again!”

Whitey returned a smile. “Safe travels, Ev!”

With that, the Paddle Posse resumed their journey with full bellies, needing to cover eight more miles to their next campsite.



A mile down the river, a light rain began to fall. The crew put on their parkas. A low rumble echoed in the distance, and white puffs of clouds gathered into a menacing gray mass. A flash of lightning illuminated the darkening sky, followed by a menacing crash of thunder.

“Eight miles to go...batten down the hatches, it doesn’t look good,” Everett warned.

Ritas

12 - The Storm’s Embrace

Leaving the warmth and comfort of Whitey’s Fish Camp, the Paddle Posse braced themselves for the challenges that lay ahead. The wind, now driven by the front, blew straight up the river, slowing their progress. Despite the river’s persistent current, the wind battled against their every stroke. Their gear, safeguarded by the visqueen Whitey provided, held the promise of dry essentials in the impending downpour. As they embarked on the final stretch of this leg, a sense of determination filled the air.



Storm on the River

Two miles downstream, the heavens unleashed their fury. Lightning forked through the clouds followed by deafening crashes of thunder in a non-stop progression of the storm's fury. Rain descended in sheets, obscuring their surroundings. Frog Tog ponchos and wind jackets provided some defense, but the cold October rain seeped through, chilling them to the bone.

The rhythmic drumming of rain on the canoes and the howling wind became a clamor of nature's raw power. Lightning flashed, thunder crashed, and the crew pressed on, knowing any pause would mean losing precious ground.

With water infiltrating the canoes, Everett steered towards the right side of the river, seeking shelter. Thick overhangs offered a temporary haven. Tying their canoes together and securing them to cypress knees, they became a determined unit against the tempest. Water squirters were turned into makeshift bailers as they battled to keep the canoes afloat. The storm, intense and unforgiving, seemed an eternal onslaught. The squall line overhead marked its persistence.

"Keep it up, everyone! We need to bail faster!" Everett commanded. The rain filled the canoes as fast as they could bail. Riley, with most of the supplies in her canoe, reached under the visqueen and produced several cooking pots, handing them to the others.

“Good thinking, Riley,” shouted Everett above the crash of thunder. They continued to bail in earnest.

After 45 harrowing minutes, the rain slowly began to let up. The worst was over, but the crew, wet, cold, and shivering, clung to the security of the riverbank. They finished bailing the remaining water from their canoes, and with the current as their ally and the wind now easing, they continued downstream while shedding rain gear and donning warmer jackets that were protected by the visqueen. The river led them towards their sanctuary for the night.

Everett consulted the map and identified a campsite on the left bank. A small, damp makeshift shelter awaited, a beacon of hope in the aftermath of the storm. The shelter, though modest, had a wood platform bottom with a roof. Remy and Riley, seasoned fire-wranglers, conjured flames from the dry wood in the fire pit.

“Thank goodness for this firewood,” Riley exclaimed as they all gathered around for warmth. The crew, relieved their gear remained dry, set up tents, opting for dry rations and warm beverages.

Remy pulled out some Kush and said, “If there ever was a time I need this, it is now!” Maggie laughed. “Sorry Rem, it’s always the right time for you; give me a hit.” Remy laughed and handed the spliff to Maggie, who, by now, had poured herself a cup of red wine and moved closer to the fire. Riley, happy to have been restocked with Bud Light, popped a top and relaxed by the fire.

Everett looked over at Sarah, who was drinking her warm tea; he winked, and they smiled at each other, knowing what was next. He reached into his inner jacket pocket, pulled out his trusty flask, and took a long sip of the sweet 1800 Reposado. “For emergencies only!” He handed the flask to Sarah, who poured a bit into her warm tea.

“That’s the ticket, thanks, Ev.”

By the crackling fire, they recounted the day’s trials, finding comfort in each other’s company. As the chill of the night enveloped them, the shared warmth of the fire

became a symbol of resilience, forging bonds that weathered storms, both in the sky and within.

The distant rumble of thunder faded, replaced by the crackling flames that danced in the shelter, casting shadows on the faces of the weary yet triumphant crew. Now warm, dry, and exhausted, their bodies tested by the storm, the fire dimmed. One by one, they retreated to their tents for a well-needed sound sleep.

Ritas

13 - Poachers

With dawn's arrival, a renewed energy filled the air. The crew awoke to a transformed world – crisp air, a clear sky, and a landscape refreshed by the storm's cleansing rain. After resupplying at Whitey's, Remy was in his element. The aroma of sizzling bacon and freshly brewed coffee mingled with the earthy scents of the river. The crew, their tired muscles finding rejuvenation in the new day, gathered around the fire pit.

Breakfast was more than a meal; it was a celebration of survival. Sarah, feeling much fresher, brewed her favorite herb tea, its calming fragrance filling the air. Everett, as was his morning ritual, unfolded his map and meticulously planned the day's paddle.

“Alright, folks,” he called out, “Today's another crucial leg. We'll be heading towards the entrance of Renegade Bayou.”

Their goal was a towering cypress, one of the many silent sentinels guarding the riverbanks. Everett continued, “We need to look out for this sentinel on river left. It marks our exit from the Cypress Sentinel River into the bayou's winding waterways. It should have a weathered signpost.”

Maggie, taking a hearty bite of bacon, replied, “You get us close, Everett, and we'll keep a sharp eye. No sentinel can hide from us!”

In between bites of bacon, hot biscuits, eggs, and sips of coffee, the crew exchanged morning banter, their spirits lifted by the hearty meal. The tents came down, gear was

packed efficiently, and laughter echoed as they shared tales of the storm-drenched previous day.

The Sentinel Cypress River unfurled before the Posse like a lush, green ribbon, its current carrying them steadily towards Renegade Bayou. Unbeknownst to them, the river's tranquility concealed a hidden threat.



Poachers

As the Posse navigated a secluded stretch of the river, Riley's keen eyes spotted a Jon boat with two men emerging from the shadows. The men, pretending innocence, motored towards them with forced smiles and casual greetings. The bayou's serenity was disrupted by an undercurrent of tension.

Riley, the astute curator of the Timucua Exhibit, recognized one of the men from a dubious museum encounter. A shiver of concern ran down her spine as they approached, their intentions masked by feigned curiosity.

The poachers, Hank and Judd, intercepted the Posse. Hank, a weathered man with a shady grin, greeted them. "Well, howdy there, folks! Beautiful day on the river, ain't it?" Riley narrowed her eyes. "What brings you out here? This isn't exactly a popular spot for casual boaters."

Judd, the silent partner, added, "Oh, we heard about this stunning river from a friend. Said there might be some rare bird sightings."

Maggie, skeptical, crossed her arms. “Rare birds, huh? This isn’t exactly a tourist hotspot. What are you really doing out here?”

Hank chuckled nervously. “Oh, just enjoying nature, you know? Nothing to worry about.”

Riley’s recognition was sharp. She looked over at Everett and whispered, “I’ve seen that guy before. He tried selling Timucua artifacts to the museum. These folks are up to no good.”

Everett, feeling the tension, whispered to the crew, “Stay alert. Something’s off about these folks.” He echoed Riley’s concern.

Unease settled over the encounter, a silent clash between the Posse’s genuine quest and the poachers’ sinister intentions. As they continued down the river, the Posse let some distance accrue between them and the Jon boat.

Everett checked his map and announced, “We’re approaching a side branch on river left. It might be a good spot for a break and discussion away from prying eyes.”

The crew agreed, steering their canoes towards the branch. The riverbank was adorned with Virginia Willow and Saw Palmetto, providing natural cover. Unbeknownst to them, the poachers had silently followed, entering the same cove.

Once in the secluded area, Everett gathered the team for a hushed discussion. “We need to address the poachers before entering Renegade Bayou. They can’t compromise our mission.”

Then, once again the poachers confronted the crew. “So what brings y’all way out here?” Riley, with authority, spoke up. “I know who you are and what you’re after.”

“We don’t want trouble Ma'am, but if you get in our way, you’ll find out just how serious we can be.” Hank’s hand rested on a partially concealed weapon.

Riley pointed to Hank, “We’ve met before, and I’m sure you remember the circumstances.” Her heart raced as the threat of violence lingered in the air.

The men, caught off guard, exchanged uneasy glances. Riley continued, “Here’s how this is going to go. You turn around, or continue on downriver, and forget you ever saw us. If we see you again, I’ll call the Florida Wildlife Commission. Commissioner Farrior won’t take kindly to poachers disrupting ancient tribal sites.”



Poachers Head Away

The threat of legal consequences weighed heavily. Reluctantly, the men agreed to abandon their pursuit. The Posse watched as they motored away, leaving the cove and boating down river.

With the immediate threat averted, the crew felt a shared sense of accomplishment. The mysteries of Renegade Bayou still loomed, but they were now more vigilant and determined to navigate the challenges ahead.

Ritas

14 - Tom’s Timucua Connection



Tom Rivers Sr.

The heavy, damp air of Renegade Bayou clung to Tom Rivers' skin as he ventured deeper into the swamp's labyrinth. Each paddle stroke he took was a journey back in time, guided by the echoes of his ancestors, their voices carried on the breeze that rustled the thick canopy above. Tom wasn't just a man navigating the murky waters—he was a bridge between past and present, a vessel for the stories that had been passed down through his bloodline.

Tom's lineage was steeped in Timucua history, a history that whispered to him in the stillness of the bayou. His great-grandmother Elowah, a proud Timucua woman, had married into the Rivers family, bringing with her a legacy rich with ancient wisdom and spiritual guidance. From her, Tom had inherited more than just blood—he had inherited a sacred duty to protect the secrets of the bayou, secrets that had been hidden away for so many years, waiting for the right moment to reveal themselves.

As he paddled his small boat through the winding waterways, Tom couldn't help but feel the weight of his ancestors watching over him, their presence as tangible as the humid air that surrounded him. Every sound, every shift in the water's surface, seemed to pulse with the energy of those who had come before him.

It was on one of these journeys, deep in the heart of the bayou, that Tom stumbled upon a secluded clearing bathed in a golden light that filtered through the thick cypress trees. The clearing, untouched by time, held an otherworldly stillness. The swamp's usual symphony of croaking frogs and buzzing insects seemed to hush as if acknowledging the sanctity of the place. At the center of the clearing, beneath the sprawling roots of a towering cypress, Tom found what he had been searching for—a Timucua ceremonial site, its sacred energy still potent after all these years.

Time seemed to slow as Tom knelt amongst the remnants of the site. The air around him thickened, charged with a spiritual energy that made his heart race. It was as if the bayou itself was alive, breathing with the spirits of the Timucua, urging him to uncover what had been buried in its depths.

As Tom stood in the clearing, the light filtering through the cypress trees seemed to draw his attention to a particular spot near the base of the largest tree. The air around him grew heavier, charged with an almost tangible energy, and he felt a subtle but insistent pull in his chest, as if the earth itself was calling out to him.

His great-grandmother's teachings echoed in his mind—trust the signs, trust the land.

He noticed how the roots of the cypress twisted and curled, creating a natural cradle in the earth. The ground there seemed softer, disturbed in a way that suggested it had once been a place of importance. Guided by a deep instinct, Tom knelt down and, with reverence, began to dig.

As Tom's hands sifted through the earth, he could feel a subtle vibration beneath his fingertips, a resonance that grew stronger the deeper he dug. The soil here was different—softer, almost as if it had been disturbed not long ago, yet there was an ancientness to it that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.



The Sacred Staff

The whispers of his ancestors grew louder, their voices blending with the rustle of the leaves above, urging him on. He dug with purpose, driven by a certainty that whatever lay beneath was not meant to stay hidden.

Then, his fingers brushed against something solid, cool to the touch. The earth gave way, revealing the smooth surface of a staff, its wood intricately carved with symbols that seemed to pulse with a life of their own. As he lifted it from the ground, Tom could feel the power thrumming beneath his fingertips. This was no ordinary staff—it was a conduit, a key to the mysteries that lay hidden within the bayou.

As he held the staff, another presence made itself known—a faint glow emanating from a spot beside the roots. Tom's heart quickened as he uncovered a pendant, its surface etched with symbols that mirrored those on the staff. The pendant seemed to hum with the same energy, a link to the past that had somehow found its way into his hands.



The pendant had been passed down through the generations, a tangible reminder of the Timucua heritage that Tom had vowed to protect. As he held it, he could almost hear the soft voice of his great-grandmother, urging him to guard it with his life. He knew that this was no mere artifact—it was a piece of history, a testament to the resilience and wisdom of his ancestors.

But the bayou was not a place of peace. Tom had sensed the danger long before he saw it—the distant sounds of poachers, their greedy eyes always searching for something they could take. The thought of them finding the staff and pendant filled him with dread. His ancestors' warnings echoed in his mind, reminding him of the ruthlessness of those who sought to exploit the bayou's secrets

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Faced with the responsibility of protecting the artifacts, Tom knew he had to act quickly. The staff was too conspicuous to keep on his person. It was a beacon that could attract unwanted attention. After a moment's hesitation, he made his decision. He hid the staff in the hollow trunk of a fallen cypress, concealing it in a place where only those with the knowledge could find it again. The pendant, however, was different. Its warmth against his skin felt like a comforting presence, a guide that would lead the rightful seekers to the staff when the time was right.

Tom knew his time in the bayou was running out. The poachers were getting closer, their greed a palpable force that seemed to taint the very air. He had one final task before he could leave—he had to ensure the pendant would remain safe, its secrets hidden until the time was right.

Before he left, Tom stood at the edge of the bayou, looking out over the waters that had been his home and his sanctuary. He felt the pull of the swamp, the call of the ancestors, but he also felt the weight of the danger that lurked within its shadows. He knew that he might never return, that his journey into the heart of the bayou could be his last. But he also knew that the artifacts were safe, hidden away from those who would misuse them.

The mystery of Tom's disappearance would echo through the bayou, a tale whispered by the wind through the ancient trees. The poachers, driven by greed, would never find him. Whether he had outwitted them or fallen victim to the swamp's many dangers, no one would ever know. But the legacy of the Timucua would endure, carried forward by those who understood its significance.

As the Posse paddled toward the heart of Renegade Bayou, they carried with them the weight of Tom's encounter, the responsibility to uncover the mysteries he had left behind, and the hope that they would be worthy of the legacy he had entrusted to them.

Ritas

15 - Whispers of Revelation

Mosquitoes hummed a relentless tune as the Florida sun dipped below the horizon, casting long shadows over Renegade Bayou. The Posse was miles from Sarah and Everett's homestead, guided by Tom's cryptic journal towards a hidden clearing marked by a tall, hollowed Bald Cypress tree, known to Tom in his journal as "The Sentinel Cypress." Sleeping wasn't easy. They were not only fueled by the promise of discovery but also by the growing sense that they were nearing the heart of a mystery.

The day dawned not with the expected glow of a golden sunrise but with a deep fog blanketing the campsite at the opening to Renegade Bayou. It was another chilly October morning as the Posse prepared for this important day of their quest.

Remy leaned against a tree, his eyes sparkling with mischief. He winked at Sarah, a plume of Purple Kush smoke curling from his vape pen.

“Alright, posse,” he announced theatrically, “Prepare to be amazed! Time to unearth some buried secrets.”

Maggie scoffed, her face etched with a healthy dose of skepticism. “Easy there, Captain Hook. We’re not after buried pirate treasure, remember? Just answers.”

Cap bounced on the balls of her feet. “Let’s do this, Sarah! What’s the first step?”

Sarah took a deep breath, clutching the worn journal tightly. Her heart pounded with anticipation. This was the culmination of weeks of research, late nights deciphering Tom’s clues, and a growing unease about the truth they might uncover.

They finished a light breakfast in the foggy morning, all anticipating what might unfold in the bayou today. They packed up, got in their canoes, and paddled slowly through the thick fog into the heart of Renegade Bayou.

Following the map’s intricate markings, Everett led them to a thicket of young cypress trees, cabbage palms, and palmettos. They secured the canoes and exited onto soft, uneasy moist ground and followed Sarah, guided by the heat from her pendant.

The fog thickened as they ventured deeper into the thicket. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and vegetation. Sarah paused occasionally, consulting the map and feeling the warmth of her pendant intensify.

“Are we close?” Remy asked, his eyes scanning the dense foliage around them.

“Close, but not quite there yet,” Sarah replied, her voice tinged with determination.

Maggie wiped sweat from her brow. “This better be worth it. I didn’t sign up for a swamp trek without some kind of payoff.”

Cap grinned, her enthusiasm undimmed. “Adventure is the payoff, Maggie! Just think about what we might find.”

“You know I was kidding when I said that, at least I hope you do,” Maggie answered back.

As they trudged through the thick underbrush, the sounds of wildlife echoed around them. Birds called out from the treetops, and the occasional splash hinted at unseen creatures in the water nearby.

Sarah suddenly stopped, holding up a hand. “Wait. I think we’re getting closer. The pendant is getting warmer.”

Everett stepped forward, his eyes narrowing as he peered through the foliage. “Over there,” he pointed. “That looks like a clearing.”

They pushed forward, breaking through the thick palmettos. The dense foliage gave way to an open thicket. Sarah’s pendant was now almost hot to the touch.

“Over here, guys! I’m feeling something,” Sarah called out, her excitement noticeable. They walked to the open thicket, their steps quickening with anticipation. Guided by an inexplicable force, Sarah found herself standing before a fallen, hollowed cypress tree trunk, its decaying roots intertwining with the earth. The trunk, easily 35 feet in circumference, was massive.



Sacred Staff Tree Trunk

The pendant around Sarah’s neck began to warm more intensely, resonating with the energy emanating from the remains of the tree. Instinctively, she reached out to touch

the rough bark, and as her fingers traced the grooves, whispers of the past flooded her senses. The timeworn stump seemed to tell tales of Sarah's past ancestry.

A soft light emanated from within the hollow trunk, beckoning the crew to uncover its secrets. As they carefully cleared the hollowed recess, a collective gasp escaped their lips. "Look at this," Sarah whispered, her voice trembling with awe.

Resting within the sacred space, covered in humus, from years of natural decay inside the trunk, Sarah removed a staff, brushed it off to reveal numerous plant etchings along the shaft and markings that matched those on her pendant.

"This has to be the staff Tom mentioned in his journal," Everett said thoughtfully. "A link to your heritage, Sarah."

Carefully, they removed the staff from its hollow home. Sarah cradled it gently, feeling a surge of energy course through her veins. The staff, about four feet tall, was an exquisite piece of craftsmanship. Carved from aged cypress wood, it had a smooth, polished surface glowing with a warm, honeyed hue. Intricate carvings of native flora wound their way up, depicting the interconnectedness of nature.



The Sacred Staff

“Right here, the same etchings as on my pendant!” Sarah exclaimed, tracing the carvings with her fingers.

Near the top, an opening revealed a hollow interior, designed to house a collection of Timucua healing herbs. The handle was wrapped in supple leather, worn but still retaining its natural beauty. Along with the herbs was a delicate yet resilient fabric, woven from plant fibers native to the Timucua region. They carefully unfurled it, revealing a compact, detailed tapestry designed to fit snugly within the secret compartment near the top of the staff.



Timucua Herbal Tapestry

The intricate patterns on the fabric didn't convey information through conventional writing. Instead, they used visual representation and symbolic weaving to communicate

each herb's attributes. The patterns' specific colors, shapes, and arrangements represented different aspects of the herbs, such as their appearance, properties, and traditional uses.

Attuned to the subtle energies and whispers of her heritage, Sarah began to experience a deep connection with the herbal fabric. As she gazed upon it, the patterns came alive, going beyond mere visual comprehension. It was as if the tapestry's knowledge spoke to her intuitively, resonating with her ancestral whispers and the warmth of her pendant. She connected with the medicinal properties and significance of the depicted herbs, the woven material acting as a living guide to the tribe's herbal healing practices.

In that moment of connection, Sarah's whispers transformed into a resounding voice, revealing the staff's purpose. It wasn't merely an artifact; it held the essence of herbal knowledge and healing practices passed down through generations. The etchings, similar to those on the herbal fabric, unlocked the secrets of the tribe's medicinal wisdom.

A radiant sun broke through the thick fog, witnessing this sacred moment. The crew, mesmerized by the revelation, understood the magnitude of their discovery. The staff was a bridge between Sarah's heritage and the ancient wisdom of her ancestors.

Ritas

16 - Ritas Landing

The journey was still not over. A feeling, an intuition, pulled Sarah toward the worn map that Everett had.

“Everett, let's take a look at the map again.” Sarah's voice was steady as she traced the faint markings on the worn parchment. Her fingertip was drawn to a small, seemingly insignificant dot near the coast. The writing around it was faded, almost illegible, but a memory stirred within both Sarah and Everett—Tom's last journal entry had mentioned Rita's Landing. A jolt of recognition shot through her, and she looked up at Everett with a sense of urgency in her eyes. “Rita's Landing,” she breathed, her voice filled with a newfound understanding. Tom had known this place well, and now, its significance seemed more important than ever.

The crew gathered closer, realizing that they needed to find Rita's Landing to uncover the reason Tom had emphasized it in his journal. The full meaning of this place was still a mystery, but they felt a growing urgency to reach it and understand its importance.

They now discussed how to safely transport the sacred staff. They knew the staff was too powerful and too important to be left unprotected or easily visible. Concealing it was essential, not just to protect it from prying eyes, but to ensure it could be safely transported without drawing attention.

Riley sensed the gravity of the situation. "We need something that won't look suspicious, something that can blend in with our gear," she said, glancing around at their supplies. After a moment of thought, she reached into her gear and unstrapped a long, narrow tube from the side of her canoe. It had served as the protective case for her fishing rod, but now it could serve a far more important purpose.

"This should do the trick," Riley continued, handing the tube to Everett. "It's s

The crew, appreciating Riley's resourcefulness, examined the tube. Its length and durability made it an ideal candidate for concealing the staff. With some additional padding and strategic placement within one of the canoes, they ingeniously repurposed Riley's fishing rod tube into a perfect disguise for the sacred artifact. The hidden compartment seamlessly blended with their equipment, ensuring the staff's safety as they continued to their destination.



Riley Reaches for the Rod Tube

Guided by instinct and Tom’s weathered map, they paddled onto their final stretch through Renegade Bayou. The cool October weather had given way to temperatures in the low 80s. The sun beat down mercilessly, and mosquitoes buzzed a relentless tune. Despite the fatigue and heat, their spirits remained high, fueled by the success of finding the staff. Their unwavering determination kept them going, eager to tackle the last leg of this journey.

As they navigated the tangled mangroves and oyster beds, the sound of paddles dipping into the water and the warm air was almost hypnotic. Progressing forward, they recounted the different aspects of their journey and speculated on what might lie ahead.



Ritas Landing

After what felt like a long, winding journey, they emerged into a hidden cove. Sunlight glittered like diamonds on the shallow water, revealing a rustic fish camp jutting out over the water, surrounded by the marsh scrub of mangroves, palmettos, and bay trees. A wooden sign up top, with faded lettering, read “Rita’s Landing.” They were approaching their final destination. Relief and interest filled the crew as they paddled closer.

Surprise crossed the leathered face of an older man with eyes as blue as the sky. Standing on the sun-bleached deck, he took in the sight of unfamiliar faces approaching.

“Welcome, strangers,” he called out. As they drew nearer, Wally’s tone turned curious, “What brings you out to these parts?”

The crew secured their canoes to a makeshift landing and climbed up onto the outside deck, taking in the rustic charm of the place.

“First thing on our agenda is an ice-cold beer,” a determined Riley spoke up. Everyone nodding their heads in agreement.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” answered Wally, beckoning them inside.



Inside Ritas

Inside the rustic central room of Rita’s Landing, was the kind of place where the floorboards creaked a welcome and the air hung thick with the aroma of fried fish and conch fritters.

There were just a handful of wooden tables and chairs. Each table had a faded red gingham tablecloth, salt and pepper shakers, a bottle of Da’Til’s Datil Pepper Sauce, and a small single-page laminated menu. Inside, a handful of locals sat eating and talking

about the morning's catch, their faces etched with the lines of lives lived close to the water.

Up front was a long wooden bar lined with empty barstools, except for a man who looked like sun-bleached driftwood, sitting at one end with a cold beer, smoking a cigar. Overhead, several ceiling fans stirred the semi-cool air, swirling the smell of sweet cigar smoke.

Everett, Sarah, Remy, Maggie, and Riley all pulled themselves up onto the barstools just as Wally asked, "What can I get you?" As if in unison, the heat-fatigued crew answered, "A cold beer... give us your house favorite."

"You got it." Wally then proceeded to fill five frosted pints with **Bayou Breeze Pale Ale**, a hazy orange brew, a full-bodied, crisp beer, pleasant to the mouth and refreshing. "Whoa, now that's what I'm talkin' about!" Everett exclaimed. The sentiment echoed among them as they all agreed, raising their glasses in a toast to their mission, their friendship, and to Tom Rivers. With each swallow of Bayou Breeze, they quenched their thirsts and celebrated this moment.



Bayou Breeze Pale Ale

Sarah briefly shared their mission, the quest for Tom’s legacy they sought in Renegade Bayou. Wally listened intently, his face reflecting a mix of curiosity and recognition. Finally, after hearing their story, Wally’s eyes lit up with understanding.

“Do much business out here in the boondocks?” Remy inquired, looking around at the almost empty room.

“This place is long past paid off, and the locals living throughout the bayou keep me in business. A mixture of oystermen, fishermen, a few ex-drug runners... a motley crew!”

Riley, already eyeing the mounted fish trophies with the air of a connoisseur, began telling tales of the “ones that got away.”

When the conversation died down for a moment, Wally’s gaze shifted back to the paddlers, and he spoke to Sarah.



“About that journal you mentioned a moment ago,” he said empathetically.

“I knew Tom Rivers; he was a good man,” Wally continued, his eyes distant as he reminisced. Sarah’s eyes opened wide with intrigue.

"Wary of the imminent danger from artifact poachers in the bayou, he entrusted me with these," pointing to the journal and map Sarah had placed on the bar.

"He said, if anything happened to him, to make sure to get them to Fran Rivers down at Sunset View RV Park in Cedar Key."

Sarah couldn't hold her amazement. "That's my Aunt Fran! I was just down there three weeks ago helping her recover from Hurricane Maya, and that's where I came across them."

"Fran mentioned a man giving her the journal and map and that she hadn't had time to go over them," added Sarah.

The mention of poachers cast a shadow over the moment, a reminder of the perils Tom faced in protecting the sacred staff. Wally continued, "Tom was more than just a visitor here. He believed in healing, not just the body but the community. In the midst of tragedy, he sought solace in this hidden haven.

"

Wally continued to share stories of how Tom, with his knowledge of natural remedies, healed not just physical ailments but also the hearts of the local community.

Everett chimed in, "Wally, this is amazing. How about another Breeze for everyone while we're listening?"

"I've got something better than that," Wally said, winking at the crew.

Wally went into his office and returned with a plaque from the wall, his eyes meeting Sarah's. Inside, nestled amidst dried herbs, lay a small, worn scroll. He handed it to Sarah.

"Go ahead, open it," he said with a smile. Unfurling it with trembling fingers, Sarah recognized her grandfather's handwriting. She continued, slowly reading the faint lettering, "A recipe?" She looked up at Wally.

“Yes, ma’am, but not just any recipe. It was the recipe for his most cherished remedy, a concoction known to hold the power of laughter, healing, and community – The Rita.”

Wally continued, “He named it after a calico cat that used to hang out here. We renamed the place Rita’s Landing in honor of Tom.



Wally pours the 'Ritas'

As Wally prepared a pitcher of The Rita, sharing its history and symbolism, a wave of understanding washed over Sarah. Rita’s Landing was a testament to Tom’s resilience, his belief in the healing power of community and shared joy.

The Rita, with its bittersweet tang and refreshing chill, made from 100% Blue Agave, became a symbol of their newfound purpose – to honor Tom’s legacy by carrying his light forward, spreading laughter and healing wherever they went.

As the crew moved out to the weathered porch of Rita’s Landing, sipping the healing concoction Tom had left behind, Wally’s eyes twinkled with curiosity.

“Folks, you’ve traveled a long way to this hidden haven. But how do you plan to get back from the middle of nowhere?”



Renegades Air Charter

Everett grinned and leaned back in his chair. “Wally, my friend, we’ve got it covered. There’s an outfitter in Cedar Key, not too far from here. They specialize in transporting paddlers and their gear back to civilization. No need to worry about battling the current for a hundred miles.”

Wally’s eyes widened with understanding. “Ah, planning ahead, I see. Smart move. If you need anything else, just let me know. Rita’s Landing might be secluded, but we take care of our own.”

As they continued to enjoy the Ritas and the amazing story of Tom Rivers, Everett using his VHF radio, discreetly made arrangements with the outfitter in Cedar Key. The logistical challenge of the return journey faded away, allowing the crew to focus on their amazing discoveries.

As the drinks flowed and the sun began dipping below the horizon, Sarah raised her glass in a toast. “To our amazing crew, who faced the challenges of Renegade Bayou together. Your support and solidarity have made this journey unforgettable.”

Everett chimed in, lifting his glass. “And to Wally, the guardian of Tom’s legacy. Thanks for protecting his journal and map, and for getting it safely to Fran. You’re an honorary member of the Paddle Posse.”

As the crew savored their drinks, Sarah’s thoughts drifted to the pendant nestled against her chest. It warmed her heart, solidifying her conviction to heal others. She reflected on the journey, the obstacles they overcame, and the bond they forged in the heart of Renegade Bayou.

The mention of poachers cast a shadow over the moment, a reminder of the perils Tom faced in protecting the sacred staff. Wally’s stories about Tom’s efforts to heal both body and community resonated deeply. Sarah vowed to continue his legacy, protecting the artifacts and sharing their wisdom.

Everett shared their plans for safeguarding the staff. “We need to ensure the staff and its knowledge are protected from poachers. We’ll work with local authorities and historians to secure its future.”

Riley, the curator of the local museum’s Timucua exhibit, nodded thoughtfully. “I can coordinate with the museum and other historians to ensure the staff is properly preserved and protected. We can also create educational programs to share its significance with the community.”

Wally nodded in agreement. “Tom would have wanted that. His work was always about healing and protecting.”

As the sun finally set, the crew raised their glasses one last time. “To Tom Rivers, whose legacy brought us together and will guide us forward,” Sarah said, her voice filled with emotion.

The crew echoed her sentiment, toasting to the journey, their friendship, and the enduring legacy of Tom Rivers. As they finished their drinks, they knew their adventure was only just beginning, with a shared mission to honor and protect the wisdom of the past.

It was now dark and beneath the thousands of stars above, the Paddle Posse felt a sense of completion and purpose. They had found the staff and uncovered the secrets of Renegade Bayou, but more importantly, they had strengthened their bonds of friendship and commitment to preserving Tom’s legacy.

As they prepared to leave Rita’s Landing the next morning, Wally handed Sarah a small parcel wrapped in weathered cloth. “Take this with you,” he said. “It’s a piece of Tom’s legacy that belongs with you now.”



The Bracelet

Unwrapping the cloth, Sarah found a small, intricately carved wooden box. Inside, nestled on a bed of soft moss, was a delicate piece of Timucua jewelry—a bracelet adorned with symbols that matched those on the staff and her pendant.

Tears welled in Sarah’s eyes as she carefully placed the bracelet on her wrist. “Thank you, Wally. This means more than words can express.”

Wally smiled warmly. “Keep it safe, and let it remind you of the connection between past and present. Tom’s spirit will always be with you.”

Their mission was clear: to honor Tom Rivers by protecting the Timucua artifacts, sharing their stories, and continuing the legacy of healing and community. The Paddle Posse, united by their journey, knew that together, they could navigate any waters and face any storm.

Their adventure in Renegade Bayou had come to an end, but the journey of preserving and honoring Tom’s legacy was just beginning. And with each sunrise, they are reminded of the power of friendship, the importance of heritage, and the enduring strength of the human spirit.

Ritas

About the Author

***James** is a multifaceted creator with a background in surveying, photography, horticulture, culinary arts, and military service. Living in rural North Central Florida, he draws inspiration from nature, expressing his creativity through writing, photography, music, and graphic arts. A lifelong learner and the creator of **Florida Paddle Notes**, James blends his diverse experiences into his work, inviting readers to explore the beauty and mystery of the world around them.*