**THE MONGOOSE DECEPTION
A C.J. Floyd Mystery
By Robert Greer
Book 6
*Excerpt***

**Prologue**

**OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND, MAY 1963**

There were eleven of them. Eleven men who had taken a lifetime of instruction unlike any other. They were at once the past, the present, and the future of their kind. Men who sat in the highest, most rarefied circles of power. Men who controlled the very comings and goings of the world. And like their predecessors, these men had pooled their influence and power and fortunes—their cunning and daring—their intellect and their utter ruthlessness in order to amass the unbridled influence that would be passed down from them to theirs, generation to generation.

They were the power behind governments and corporations and organized crime. The hidden face of political corruption, and the might behind the world’s military machines. Winston Churchill once called them the High Cabal. And now, after almost two centuries, they were being challenged, questioned by an upstart who would dare to deny them what was theirs. An upstart who would now have to be either eliminated or purged.

The oval table they sat around—a table with a history as stout as that of the eleven men—was three centuries old. The dimly lit utilitarian room they occupied was unseasonably cold. As the man at the head of the table, a man bred of privilege and entitlement, looked up stoically to speak, the room fell silent. His words, matter-of-fact, crisp, and clear, were the words of an anointed royal. “Are we of one mind?” he asked, looking slowly around the table.

“One,” came the response of the man to his right.
“One,” echoed the next man.
“One,” said the man next to him—and so on the answers came

until one by one all eleven men had uttered that same fateful word. After a moment of silence, the man who had first spoken rose and

brought his right hand gently to the table and said, “So it will be.”

**CHAPTER 1**

Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel, Interstate 70, Colorado Continental Divide, late August, the Present Cornelius McPherson loved talking to himself with the rumbling insistence of someone hard-of-hearing, which clearly he was not. He talked to himself in shopping malls, at sporting events, on hiking trails, and in church and once, in a booming voice that startled and unhinged a group of vacationing, camera-laden Japanese onlookers, he held a conversation with himself in the middle of the Colorado capitol rotunda, debating the pros and cons of the Persian Gulf War. More than anything, McPherson loved to talk to himself at work. Talking to himself there, inside a mountain at an elevation of over eleven thousand feet, gave him the in-control, never-alone sense of ease he craved. When you came right down to it—“netted it all out,” as McPherson was fond of saying—he didn’t really talk to himself so much as he recited, mumbled, and hummed, and not just any conven- ient piece of trendy prose, scripture, or ditty. What McPherson brought forth in all earnestness, more often than not for no ears but his own, was what he liked to think of as the poetry of life. Hymns, nursery rhymes, poems, famous sayings, quotations, and parables all fought for space, churning effortlessly and endlessly deep inside Cornelius McPherson’s head, nudging, sometimes shoving him through the day.

*Everybody’s got a song or a rhyme that haunts ’em,* McPherson loved to say, and no song, poem, rhyme, or hymn gave McPherson more comfort than the song he was currently humming, the old Negro spiritual “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

Just two days from retirement, McPherson was at work and hum- ming that song, doing the same thing he’d been doing for the past three decades and thinking that in less than forty-eight hours he’d be forever free from the cold, dank smells of life inside a tunnel through a mountain. Negotiating his way along a Colorado Department of Transportation tunnel-inspection catwalk inside I-70’s Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel, the same catwalk he’d traveled five to six days a week for pretty close to 7,500 days, McPherson found himself smiling and humming to beat the band.

The concrete catwalk, which hugged the tunnel’s north wall and stood four feet above I-70’s two lanes of westbound traffic, was used for everything from inspecting the tunnel’s aging tile walls for cracks to troubleshooting dangerous grout-line water seepage to providing a 1.6-mile-long conveyance along which the tile washers moved their high-powered water-spray equipment once a year.

It was just past 10 a.m., and traffic on the interstate was surpris- ingly light when McPherson, nodding and swaying to the beat in his head, wrapped up his rendition of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and cleared his throat in prelude to his always slightly off-key version of “Amazing Grace.”

Thirty-nine years earlier, high in the Colorado Rockies sixty miles west of Denver in the spring of 1968, all the elements of a classic duel between man and the earth had been present when McPherson and fifty other miners had gone underground to begin digging one of the largest automobile tunnels in the world, and clearly the highest. The men were on the front end of a bore into the Continental Divide that started at the eleven-thousand-foot level of Colorado’s treacherous Loveland Pass. Known back then, in a reference to the creek that ran above it, simply as the Straight Creek tunnel dig, the job entailed blasting through two miles of mountain, a geologic fault, and a nightmare of fractured and crushed rock to run a road across—or, more accurately, through, as McPherson loved to phrase it—the top of the world.

McPherson, a squat, five-foot-nine, 190-pound fireplug of a black man with a skullcap of wiry gray hair and grainy, sandpaper-textured, dark-chocolate skin, had been a 150-pound wisp of a man when he’d begun his days as a member of a Straight Creek tunnel-mucking team that would spend five years battling a mountain and the sometimes eighteen-hundred-foot-wide geologic nightmare of fractured and crushed rock known as the Loveland Fault.

During the early days of the dig, project delays, worker injuries, and an unending flow of cash to nowhere were par for the course, but McPherson had stuck it out, watching the project move from being the Straight Creek tunnel bore to a hole through the Continental Divide that would ultimately become the continent-cresting, automobile-streaking sky window known as the Eisenhower Memorial Tunnel. By the time the dig was finally done in 1973, it had claimed the lives of seven men, and as many as 1,140 people had dug and dynamited their way through a mountain. Along the way, McPherson had worked his way up from tunnel mucker to drift runner to bulk-rock-loader operator, and from there to his present job as the Colorado Department of Transportation’s chief Eisenhower Tunnel attendant and troubleshooting walking boss.

Watching the flow of traffic below, McPherson, minus two toes on his left foot that had been there when the Straight Creek dig had begun, broke into a self-congratulatory short-timer’s smile. Transitioning from humming “Amazing Grace,” McPherson, unmarried, childless, and always a loner, moved quickly into an inner-city skip- rope rhyme: *Once upon a time the goose drank wine, tried to do the shimmy with a monkey on the streetcar line. The streetcar line broke, the monkey got choked, they both went to heaven on a silly billy goat.* After a lifetime of reciting the rhyme, he never missed a word or a beat. Hard hat snugged up and power lamp in hand, he continued walking and scanning the tunnel for burned-out overhead lights, fractured tiles, ventilation problems, and the bane of his existence, eroding grout.

*Last night, night before, twenty-four robbers at my door. I got up and let ’em in, hit ’em in the head with a rolling pin.* His cadence now on automatic pilot, McPherson scanned the vast catalog of skip rhymes in his head, searching for one that was appropriate for someone just two days away from retirement. Finally he belted out, *The white boys had a rooster, they set him on a fence, the rooster crowed for the colored boys ’cause he had some sense.* He cleared his throat in preparation for a second verse when, without warning, every light in the tunnel blinked out. A fraction of a second later, the five-foot-thick, rebar- reinforced concrete catwalk he was standing on, a 1.6-mile-long vir- tual seawall, buckled and caved in. Losing his balance as he leapfrogged to a platform of stable concrete a few feet away, McPher- son fell to one knee.

“What the shit!” He scanned the darkness with the powerful lamp in his right hand, arcing the light back and forth as warning sirens sounded all around him. Twenty yards ahead of him, a tractor-trailer braked to avoid crashing into a half-dozen pieces of catwalk concrete that had tumbled down onto the roadway. The braking semi jackknifed, and its trailer kissed the tunnel’s north wall, sending a Fourth of July celebration of sparks shooting up into the darkness.

A horn blast erupted on the heels of the now steady wail of the sirens. Five seconds later there was a second horn blast, and five sec- onds later another. McPherson’s throat went dry as he recognized the blasts and sirens as the synchronized, coded alarm announcing that the Eisenhower Tunnel had been hit by an earthquake.

The tunnel’s walls and the I-70 roadway popped and cracked and buckled as McPherson grabbed a piece of the catwalk’s railing and chanted, *Apples, peaches, pumpkin pie, all not ready holler, “I!”* For three lingering additional seconds the tunnel walls and the mountain behind them hissed and snapped and groaned. Boulders and rocks the size of small cars, free from a thirty-four-year encumbrance of concrete, rebar, and tile, dribbled down onto the interstate until finally the horn blasts and sirens stopped and the sound of rushing water and the echo of a lone car horn blaring in the distance were the only things McPherson could hear.

As loudly as he dared, McPherson announced to himself, “I’m still alive!” Still hugging the catwalk’s twisted hand railing for dear life, he steadied himself on what was now an undulating platform of concrete rubble and shook his head in disbelief. Before he could screw up the courage to take a step, the backup diesel generators sparked the lights back on. The tunnel was filled with a haze of smoke and dust, but he could see the jackknifed tractor-trailer thirty yards ahead of him, and tunnel lights beyond it to the west. A midsized European SUV had slammed into the trailer, nosing its way beneath the rear-end like a rooting terrier. The trapped SUV and squatting trailer sat cockeyed across the interstate, locked together, blocking the lanes in both directions. Recognizing that both the truck driver and the SUV’s driver were at least moving, McPherson exhaled a sigh of relief.

With his view of the tunnel to the west blocked by the semi and a particle-filled cloud of smoke, McPherson turned back to see a drunken conga line of pickups, big rigs, and cars tossed hither and yon on an undulating conveyer belt of roadway that stretched a half mile back to the east portal. A dozen or so dazed-looking people who’d escaped their vehicles were moving through the haze, climbing over stalled cars and trucks and rock, making their way toward the east portal and daylight.

McPherson patted himself down, reassured that everything was still in place. Disbelief filling his voice, he said, “A fuckin’ earthquake. Who in the hell would’ve thunk it?” A cave-in was what old- time tunnel muckers and drift runners like Cornelius McPherson worried about. Oh, he’d heard people talk about the risk of a quake, and he knew that the geologists and engineers who’d designed the tunnel were aware that the Loveland Fault and plate of rock were primed for an earthquake. The tunnel design team simply never could judge for certain how powerful an earthquake to engineer for. *Now ya know, now ya know, now ya know,* McPherson chuckled aloud, aware that he’d just lived through the earthquake equivalent of a hundred-year flood.

Gripped by the uncertainty of the moment, he’d almost forgotten about the walkie-talkie clipped to his belt until a voice he recognized as that of his supervisor, Franklin Watts, crackled on a wave of static: “Corny, you all right in there?”

Breathing hard, McPherson answered, “Yeah.”

“We just had an earthquake. Golden’s already been in touch. They’re reporting a 6.7 on the Richter scale.”

Aware that the National Earthquake Information Center in Golden, Colorado, forty miles and nearly six thousand feet of elevation back down I-70 and the mountain, was linked directly to the tunnel’s command center, McPherson barked, “We got lights in here, and you, Franklin, bless your ever-lovin’, pea-pickin’ Tennessee heart, have got a bunch of hysterical people headed your way, scramblin’ like shit for the east portal. There’s a semi with a sport ute pooched up its ass blockin’ the roadway just up ahead of me.” Barely pausing to take a breath, McPherson added, “We’re ’bout four-tenths of a mile in, I’d make it. Most of the cars I can see are bumper to bumper. A few of ’em are kissin’ a tunnel wall, but I don’t see none overturned. Can’t be certain, though; there’s so much haze and smoke in here. Sure as hell can smell gasoline, though.”

“I’ve got paramedics and a disaster team headed your way. Another one’s headed in from the west. Can we get past your wreck?”

“Nope. That semi’s straddlin’ the whole damn road.”

“Shit! How many people you think you’ve still got in there with you?”

McPherson eyed the crumbled concrete that had been a catwalk, then glanced back toward the line of westbound vehicles below. Counting the vehicles off one by one in his head, he said, “I can only see as far back as maybe fifteen vehicles. Figurin’ two people to a car, and stretchin’ that out a little—not countin’ the folks that hauled ass as soon as things started movin’ and shakin’—I figure maybe twenty, twenty-five.”

“Can you walk any of ’em out?”
“If they don’t all run the hell outta here first.”

 “Then get to it.”

 “I’m on it.” McPherson had started to climb over the catwalk’s twisted guard railing when he heard, just barely but perceptibly for an old tunnel rat like him, the unmistakable sound of rushing water. He glanced back toward the tunnel’s south wall. “Hey, Franklin, I got water spittin’ at me from somewhere. Wait a minute—I see it. There’s water gushin’ outta a break in the south wall of the tunnel just up ahead of me. Didn’t see it before, but I sure as hell can see it now. I better check it out.” For the first time since the earthquake had hit, McPherson, iron-willed tunnel rat, miner, and seasoned digger, felt himself shaking. “I think we got a seam break up ahead.” Suddenly his whole body turned sweaty.

“How bad?”
“Can’t tell.”
“Damn! Scratch that victim lead-out we were just talking about,”

said Watts. McPherson could picture the other man stroking his chin thoughtfully. “I’ll send Wilkerson in to handle that. If we’ve got a crack in the mountain, we’ve bought ourselves one hell of a problem. See if you can figure out what’s goin’ on with that stream of water. And Cornelius, better make it fast.”

“Is it safe in here, Franklin?”

“The folks who engineered the place claim it is. And she just stood up to a near 7-grade Richter hit, didn’t she? I’d say you’re pretty safe there for the moment. Long as we don’t get another tremor. Take a quick look at our problem. You’re the only eyes and ears I got right now. Then haul ass outta there.”

“Okay. One quick look and I’m gone.” McPherson fumbled with his walkie-talkie, making certain the volume was set on high, clipped it to his belt, took what he hoped wouldn’t be his last look through the haze toward the queue of surprisingly orderly people who were making their way over rubble and stalled vehicles toward the east portal, and shouted, pretty certain none of the people could hear him, “Help’s on the way!” Hitching up his pants before heading toward what looked to be a gushing waterfall, he swallowed hard as for a fleeting second he brought into focus something he hadn’t seen in decades: the unmistakable belly of the mountain he had once cut his way through.

When he got close enough that his legs were being pelted by a shower of ice-cold water, silt, muck, and broken tree roots, he real- ized that what had seemed to be a massive waterfall from his earlier vantage point was, on closer inspection, simply a fire-hose-sized stream of water spewing from an automobile-sized rhomboid-shaped hole in the south tunnel wall.

Recognizing his mistake, McPherson shook his head. “Shoulda known a real gusher woulda washed my ass outta here by now. Thought you had me, but you didn’t,” he said boastfully, aiming his words directly at the stream of water and breaking into a chant: “Tried to trick me but you couldn’t. I know you did, I know you did. I know you did.” With his miner’s instincts open full bore, he mumbled, “Goddamn underground spring.” Snapping his walkie-talkie off his belt, he barked into it, “Franklin, my water gusher’s comin’ from an underground spring. I’m sure of it.” The sound of water gurgling its way out of the mountain, as if in search of a highway to freedom, had him suddenly recalling the dozens of battles he and other min- ers had had with underground springs, seepage, and erosion during the first two years on the Straight Creek tunnel dig. “A fuckin’ nightmare, and it’s back,” he mumbled.

Franklin Watts’s voice erupted from the walkie-talkie. “Figures.” Watts, also a Straight Creek tunnel veteran, hadn’t been around for the first year of the tunnel bore—the worst year on the dig, old- timers still claimed—but he’d spent the next four years underground, and the dig’s blueprint had been stamped indelibly into his psyche as well.

Confident that the rush of water was subsiding and relieved at having pinpointed the source, McPherson said, “I’m gonna check the far side of the hole I got down here.”

“Don’t press your luck, man,” said Watts. “You’ve told me what I needed to know. Get the shit outta there.”

McPherson shook off his boss’s order with a defiant nod. Uttering the words in the same cadence that he and his drift-front mining team had once used to get themselves started every day, he chanted, *Fool me once, shame on me, mishandle the mountain, shame on me, rumble-tumble, rumble-tumble, always on me, always on me, get up and go, digger man, digger man.*

The rhyme’s simple meaning, a mantra that every miner kept tucked inside the self-preservation corner of his brain—*run for day- light when you hear the unmistakable rumble-tumble of a cave-in—* wasn’t lost on Watts. “I said get the shit out of there, Cornelius! You hear me?”

McPherson smiled, knowing he’d won one more tiny battle with the mountain. “Franklin, Franklin, Franklin. Wasn’t but a couple’a minutes ago you told me this ol’ tunnel of ours was built to stand every shake, rattle, and roll the man upstairs could deliver. But I hear you talkin’. I’ll be outta here and up there with you in that warm supervisor’s bunkhouse soakin’ up the sunshine in two shakes of a tit. Just gotta check out one more thing.” Clipping his walkie-talkie to his belt, McPherson walked through what was now only a limp stream of water spitting out of the mountain. Brushing a shower of muck off his leg, he worked his way to the middle of the truncated hole in the tunnel wall. A river of tile grout, tree roots, and silt swirled around his feet as a blast of freezing air rushed out of the hole in the tunnel’s wall to greet him. Shivering and rubbing his hands together, McPherson cupped a hand above his eyes as he strained to see between two pieces of bowed rebar into the dark hole. “Thought you had me,” he shouted into the ten-foot-wide cavern. “You thought you did, you thought you did, you thought you did, rumble-tumble, rumble-tumble, digger man, digger man.”

The brief resurrection of his mining glory days quickly faded, and the thrill of his tiny new victory over the mountain was short-lived. Reasoning that now wasn’t the time to push his luck, he shook a fist at the cavernous hole, shook his head, and turned to leave. Walking off the length of the hole, he counted off the footage: “Eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. Twelve foot long, right on the money, damn!”

Eyeing a crumble of concrete at his feet, he noticed what looked like a stubby tree limb lying a few feet beyond his right foot. Deciding he’d take the limb back as a final souvenir of his nearly forty years of wrestling underground with nature, he stooped to pick it up. It wasn’t until he took a knee that he realized he wasn’t looking at a tree limb, or a broken support timber, or a fractured bearing joist, or even a misshapen piece of steel I-beam. What he found himself staring at, as his eyes expanded and his spine tingled with quixotic numbness, was a frozen, well-preserved, and amazingly intact human forearm.

A rush of curiosity and then disbelief overwhelmed him as he examined the appendage, turning it gently around in his hands, hold- ing it up to the light, rotating it back and forth. The arm, severed at the elbow, was a darker, almost ebony version of what it had been in life, and the remaining skin, patches of it having been stripped away, had the rough, uneven texture of tree bark.

As frigid air continued to rush through the hole in the tunnel wall, the gears in Cornelius McPherson’s head ground to a halt, and his whole body suddenly turned numb. It wasn’t the air streaming from the belly of an angry mountain that had unnerved him; it was something much more eerie, more unsettling and profound. There was something unmistakably recognizable about the severed arm. Continuing to hold the dark, lifeless form up to the light, he turned it around and around. There was no question about it—it was a fore- arm he recognized, an appendage stripped from somebody he’d known.

He wanted to say, *No,* wanted to scream at the top of his lungs, *It can’t be! It’s gotta be some kinda postearthquake mirage.* But there was no mistaking it. The arm bore an immutable and unmistakable sig- nature that told anyone who’d ever seen it before exactly whom the arm belonged to. As dark as it was, and as rough and reptilian as the remaining skin appeared, the red, white, and blue flames that encircled the frozen appendage and the words *breed love* just above the wrist told McPherson that the arm had belonged to one of the five men from his long-disbanded Straight Creek tunnel crew. It was the forearm of the crew’s gently spoken, well-mannered rock-hauling truck driver who, in the two years he’d worked with McPherson, had seemed sensitive, secretive, and above all lonely. Cornelius McPherson had known him during that time simply as Ducane. Sad-faced Ducane. And he remembered Ducane telling him in a breathless whisper one night, after they’d spent a weekend drinking and whoring outside the windswept mining town of Hanna, Wyoming—in a voice that had a strange, incisive edge to it—that he knew who had killed President John F. Kennedy.

McPherson knelt and laid the forearm reverently at his feet. Shaken in a way he hadn’t been for more than thirty years, he pivoted and stared into the dark cavern in the mountain, wondering whether any more of Ducane’s body parts were inside. But more than anything, he found himself wondering just how Ducane had ended up trapped behind a wall of concrete, steel, and tile. He continued asking himself that question as he scooped the arm back up and headed toward the east portal, recalling as he slipped his way over boulders and twisted metal, shattered glass and stalled cars, that the man calling himself Ducane, as far as he could remember, had not been injured even once during the Straight Creek tunnel dig. As he stumbled toward daylight, a cold shiver swept through him, and he found himself thinking about the fact that the man called Ducane, the man who’d told him that he knew who’d killed JFK, had simply turned up missing one day thirty-seven years earlier, never again to show up on the job.

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