**RESURRECTING LANGSTON HUGHES
A C.J. Floyd Mystery
By Robert Greer
Book 4
*Excerpt***

The man walked with a hesitant, changing-gears kind of limp that mirrored more than twenty years of painful osteoarthritis. Flipping up his collar to ward off the wind and chilling 38-degree West Virginia coal-country mist, he slowly paced the final half mile of the more than two-mile trek to his cabin. It would be warm there, and safe, and above all familiar. His bed with the sagging thirty-year-old mattress. The pot-bellied stove. The well-worn Navajo rugs—even the creaky heart-pine floors and the smoky, dull gray, coal-dust-laden windows. The cabin had been his safety net for thirty-four years, tucked invisibly into the side of a West Virginia mountain, yards away from a petered-out coal mine.

He had walked the path that snaked its way up to his cabin more times than he cared to count. Over the years he had jogged, run, trotted, and even skipped his way home, until now, after half a lifetime, he knew the outline of every blackberry and gooseberry bush, every tree and rock, every hump in the earth that lined the narrow trail. It was almost as if they were well-placed stage props, there to add stability to his life.

Slowing his pace, he scooped a handful of gooseberries from a convenient bush, popped several of them into his mouth, and crunched down, marveling at their eye-watering tartness. He noticed a fresh half-dollar-sized impression in the dirt at the trail’s edge and dropped the remaining berries onto the trail as he knelt to examine it. Chalking the imprint up to the partial hoofprint of a deer, he rose and continued walking, rolling the bitter skin of the gooseberries around in his mouth. When he spotted a second small imprint in the dirt, he stopped abruptly, realizing with sudden urgency that the two perfectly curved notches in the soil were far too close together to be the tracks of a deer and too deeply stamped into the moist loam to be the imprint left by a darting animal.

Painfully taking a knee again, he studied the second imprint, examining it closely for more than a minute before realizing that a third and then a fourth imprint dropped off the trail, disappearing into the thick grass at the margin. Rising slowly, the man forced back a cough as he methodically eyed the surrounding terrain. His cabin was fifty yards uphill and a slight dogleg to the west. Behind the cabin, Rosebush Mountain jutted up four thousand feet into the foggy, cloud-covered West Virginia sky. Attentive now to the familiar sounds of the backwoods, he froze and listened to the rustling of sycamores in the brisk north-westerly wind, the intermittent cawing of the pesky birds he knew as camp robbers, and the rush of Willow Buck Creek gaining speed as it charged downhill through a rocky mountain corridor in the distance. All seemed perfectly normal. Even so, there was something unusual about the sounds enveloping him—something strange and unnerving. Something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. A sound—no, perhaps it was a smell, or a tiny mutation in the sunlight as it faded for the day. There was something! For a moment he had the uneasy feeling that finally, after thirty-four years of self-imposed isolation, he might actually be going stir-crazy. Maybe the two-week-long high-country rains had finally thrown everything in his head completely out of kilter.

Perhaps he’d been thinking too much about the letter he had received the day the rains began. It had come in an oversized business envelope with a barely legible Denver postmark and return address and a two-inch-wide masking-tape seal. Now, three weeks shy of his fifty-eighth birthday, he was sensing and seeing things that shouldn’t be in his woods. Maybe it was time for a meltdown. Maybe the letter stuffed securely in his shirt pocket was meant to keep him confused.

From the depths of the woodsy quietness he heard a chirp, then another and another, and finally the muted rustle of something in the dead wet leaves fifty yards ahead. The sounds were both disturbing and familiar, the trademark warning chirps of squirrels and chipmunks as they scurried from danger for holes in the dirt and hollows in the trees. Perhaps they were attempt- ing to avoid a fox or a badger on the prowl. It didn’t much matter—something ahead had the army of animals that served as his warning beacon clearly agitated.

Now, as intent on avoiding danger as he’d been during his days as a platoon leader during the Vietnam War, Langston Blue decided to circle his cabin’s perimeter. He had no reason to suspect anything was seriously wrong, but after years of hiding he’d learned to play it smart as well as safe. His thoughts returned to the letter in his shirt pocket as he started working his way around the cabin. He had stepped close to twenty yards away from the trail when he heard what sounded like a snapping twig and then a lengthy, vacuum-like *whoosh*. Seconds later his cabin imploded before erupting into a ball of flames.

During his two tours in Vietnam he’d watched jungle shacks, thatched huts, and even substantial buildings go up the same way, the air sucked out of them by a well-placed incendiary device before fire exploded inside their bellies. But this time things were different; now he was the outsider looking in, like the ghost of a Vietnamese peasant watching his life erode before his eyes.

As the flames danced up to lick the sky, he dropped and hugged the ground spread-eagle, trying to breathe. Shivering as the musty smell of the damp West Virginia soil crept up his nostrils, he listened to the crackling of the fire.

Fifteen minutes later, still kissing the earth, breathing cautiously, and hoping that whoever had torched his cabin was gone, Langston Blue crawled back to the spot where he’d first spotted the strange imprints in the soil. Patting the ground, he fingered the edges of one shallow depression and cursed himself for missing a telltale clue. In hindsight, he recognized the notch for what it was: the imprint of the rubber tip guard of a cane. “Cortez,” he mouthed in a whisper. “Son of a bitch.” The words came out in a stream of spittle.

Rising to a crouch, he painfully duck-walked his way back into the woods before finally slumping against a fallen branch. The aromatic smell of burning oak and cherry wood permeated the woods, punctuating the fact that after so many years of dodg- ing it, the truth had finally caught up with him. Sighing and leaning back against the fallen limb, he slipped the letter he’d been carrying around out of his shirt pocket and began reread- ing it for what he suspected was the hundredth time. He fum- bled with the dog-eared sheet of paper, inhaling the pungent charcoal smell of what was now left of his life as his eyes slowly adjusted to the letter’s bold black handwriting.

The paper suddenly felt moist and heavy in his hands. He understood how Cortez had finally been able to find him. After all, tracking, searching, and destroying the enemy had once been Cortez’s principal job. But he couldn’t fathom how the letter writer had also been able to track him down. Reading slowly, he followed each perfectly aligned sentence to the bot- tom of the page until his finger came to a painful arthritic halt just below a boldly scripted closing: *Love, Your Daughter, Car- men Nguyen*.

**CHAPTER 2**

There was no way out of the blind Denver alley, CJ Floyd told himself as he choked in an effort to block the smell from the mounds of garbage filling the dumpster that shielded him from the calculating approach of Newab Sha. Sha, a bond-skipping Haitian and a wife and child beater whom CJ had been chasing for over a week, caught a whiff of the garbage, smiled, clucked his tongue, and continued slowly closing in on the four- foot-high dumpster.

CJ gulped a quick breath of air, wondering as he strained to remain still how he’d ever been stupid enough to leave Mavis Sundee’s house barefoot, without his gun, in hot pursuit of a masochistic Haitian with four diamond-studded, gold-jacketed front teeth and a head the size of a watermelon. Maybe his uncharacteristically juvenile response had been a protective offering to Mavis, the one sweet drop of feminine softness in his otherwise hard-edged life, served up to let her know that at forty-nine he still harbored an inner toughness.

Twenty minutes earlier, Sha had riddled Mavis’s house with a barrage from a semiautomatic just as CJ and Flora Jean Benson, CJ’s street-smart bail-bonding partner, had arrived at the front door for dinner. Sha had then sent a Molotov cocktail crashing onto Mavis’s porch, catching CJ, as Flora Jean liked to say, with his drawers on the floor.

After beating back flames with a couple of cushions from a lounge chair and kicking off the thongs he’d been wearing in preparation for washing Mavis’s car, CJ had taken off after Sha. He had chased Sha for more than three blocks through the alleys of Mavis’s Curtis Park neighborhood without seeing a soul. The chase had then wound through the very heart of Denver’s once jazz-rich, predominantly black Five Points community without so much as causing a head to turn. Most of the people were gone, hostages to the Fourth of July holiday, scores of free baseball tickets, and the promise of free food and postgame fireworks at Denver’s Coors Field.

Now, as he crouched barefoot and winded, hugging the back side of the foul-smelling dumpster and looking for an escape, CJ could only kick himself for taking Sha’s now very obvious bait.

“Bail bondmon, I gonna cut your nuts. Feed ’em to the dogs! Ha!” Sha’s words reverberated off the dumpster’s shell. “Den gon’ go back and hump that girl a yours—squeeze her tits till she scream to da sky. Gon’ split her wide open from hip to hip. But what da you care, bail bondmon? You gon’ be dead.”

CJ swallowed hard and clenched his teeth, aware that Sha’s singsong mockery was meant to tease him out of hiding. Scanning the alley, he searched in vain for a rock, a broken bottle, a stick—anything to serve as a weapon.

“Come on out, bail bondmon. Got somethin’ for ya, my friend. Gon’ skin ya like a rabbit. Gon’ tan your hide. Whoop, whoop, whoop.”

CJ glanced behind him toward the crumbling three-story-high brick wall of a former creamery that blocked his escape. He nervously eyed the two body lengths of space between the wall and the dumpster as he ran his hand along the dumpster’s rusted frame, feeling for a protective fragment of loose metal to use as a knife. Nothing. The only possible weapon was a porous, baseball-sized rock that felt like a lump of Silly Putty in his right hand.

“Gon’ skin ya and leave ya for the dogs! Ha! Den gon’ kill your woman, ha!” Sha sucked a loud stream of air between his front teeth, so close now that CJ could hear his labored breath- ing. Clutching the rock tightly as he peered around the back corner of the dumpster and telling himself his aim had better be major-league perfect, CJ rose from his crouch to find that Sha was now less than five feet away.

“I know where you at, bail bondmon. Gon’ skin ya, den toss you in da dumpster wit’ da rest of da trash. Ha!”

CJ duck-walked his way along the back of the dumpster, inching toward the creamery wall.

“You gotta come outta one side a dat dumpster, bail bondmon. De left or de right. Gotta pop out one way or da other, like a baby or a turd. Ha!”

Homing in on the sound of Sha’s voice, CJ rose until he could see over the lip of the dumpster. He eyed the side of Sha’s half-turned head, prepared to throw a temple-crushing strike.

“Ha!” screamed Sha, hearing the rustle of clothing as CJ’s

arm shot forward. Grinning, he peppered the dumpster with bullets as the rock careened off his neck, then screamed, “Gon’ kill ya now, gon’ snip off your nuts!” as he raced toward CJ.

CJ suddenly thought about his days as a nineteen-year-old machine gunner on a navy riverboat during the final turbulent days of the Vietnam War. As he dove toward Sha, one arm draped protectively over his head, the unmistakable sound of a 30.06 rang out, and a hollow-point bullet dropped Sha like a 250-pound sack of sand just as CJ slammed into him. Anticipating more shots as he rose from Sha’s lifeless body in confusion, CJ raced for cover behind the dumpster. Within sec- onds, Flora Jean Benson ran into view. CJ let out a relieved sigh, stepped from behind the dumpster, and walked back to Sha’s body. Glancing down at the pool of blood that cushioned the dead man’s head and then up at Flora Jean, he said, “That was one hell of a shot.”

“What?” Flora Jean looked dismayed.

“Dropping Sha like that.” CJ quizzically eyed his six-foot- one-inch, Las Vegas showgirl-sized partner, looking for her vin- tage Winchester before realizing that she wasn’t carrying a rifle.

Flora Jean shrugged and patted the 9-mm in her pocket. “Wasn’t me.”

The startled look on CJ’s face caused Flora Jean to pull her gun, drop to one knee, and nervously scan the alley before repeating, this time in a near whisper, “Wasn’t me.”

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Blocking any exit from the alley, two police cars, their roof- mounted lights flashing in unison, blared police-band static into the hazy dusk. Newab Sha’s body remained where it had fallen. A man sporting a coroner’s ID and a red-white-and-blue- striped tie with a crescent of stars just below the knot knelt over the body with a plainclothes Denver detective by his side.

A few feet away a large, rumpled man in a cheap, ill-fitting khaki suit stood quietly asking CJ questions. “Seems like you’re forever dodging bullets or the law, Floyd. Now it’s Molotov cocktails. And on my beat, no less. Guess I’m just blessed.”

CJ shrugged, glanced down at his bare feet, and curled up his toes.

The man followed CJ’s eyes. “Times so hard you can’t afford shoes?” His tone was mocking.

“It’s a long story, Lieutenant.” The word *lieutenant* lingered as CJ forced himself to say it. “But I’m guessing a big-time African American law enforcement officer like you probably doesn’t have time for it.”

“Surprise yourself and try me.” Wendall Newburn tugged at the sleeves of his wrinkled suit coat and adjusted his stance. “Don’t mind being quoted, do you?” he asked, slipping a small spiral-bound notebook from the coat’s inside pocket.

“Nope. Not as long as it’s what I actually said.”

Newburn smiled. “Don’t flatter yourself, Floyd. No need to edit the likes of you. Go ahead, sing your song.”

CJ stole a quick glance toward Flora Jean, who was standing just beyond the draped remains of Newab Sha, knowing that he had one supportive witness. Catching CJ’s gaze, Flora Jean, a for- mer intelligence sergeant who’d done a tour with the Fifth Marine Division during Desert Storm, nodded at Newburn, eyeing him as if he were a target to be taken out, then reached into her pocket, popped a stick of Juicy Fruit into her mouth, and smiled as if to say, *I’m listening to this conversation too, asshole*.

“You lie and sweetie girl here swears to it,” said Newburn, spotting the communication.

“Don’t push me, Newburn. I’m not feelin’ as giving as CJ today, and unlike him, I didn’t go to grade school with you. We got no ties that bind, my friend.”

Aware that Flora Jean hated being called either sweetie or a liar, CJ nudged her away from Newburn, who’d dropped a hand onto the butt of his service revolver. Staring defiantly at Newburn and smacking her gum, Flora Jean took the hint and walked away as CJ began recounting what had occurred, from the time he’d arrived at Mavis’s house for dinner until Newab Sha crashed face first into the blacktop. Fifteen minutes later, his notebook crammed with notes, Newburn stood shaking his head. “Hell of a story, Floyd. Good enough for the silver screen. Maybe you should get yourself a Hollywood agent.” Newburn glanced casu- ally in Flora Jean’s direction. His glance was met with a cold, hard stare.

CJ eyed the ground and gritted his teeth, aware that he’d just fired the opening salvo in a new conflict with Newburn. Their battles spanned twenty-five years, stretching back to the days when he’d first taken over his uncle’s bail-bonding business and Newburn had been a wet-behind-the-ears patrolman. Dur- ing that time they had clashed on the streets, outside court- rooms, at athletic events, and even in the sanctity of Denver’s largest black church, and although the bad blood between them appeared at first blush to be linked to the natural friction between a bail bondsman and a cop, the real reason for their animosity boiled down to Mavis Sundee, who had long ago chosen CJ over Newburn.

CJ looked up as a pixieish crime-scene technician walked up to Newburn. “Coroner needs to see you, Lieutenant.”

“Can’t you see I’m in the middle of something?”

The technician took a dutiful step back. “He says it’s important.”

Newburn shook his head. “You’d think a deputy coroner could do his job without somebody holding his hand.” Giving the technician a dismissive nod, he said, “I’ll be there in a second,” before turning his attention back to CJ. “This whole thing smells, Floyd. Like a sack of dripping sewer shit.” He looked down at CJ’s bare feet again before locking eyes with Flora Jean. “A suspicious person might even say that the whole thing smells like a hit.”

Flora Jean spat out her gum and watched it dribble across the asphalt before wedging into a crack inches from Newburn’s right foot.

CJ mouthed, *Cool it.*

Newburn eyed the gum wad and smiled. “Everybody knows you’re an ex-marine, sweetie. Hear tell you’ve even got a few intelligence connections. But try taking a hint from your boss. This is my jurisdiction, not the Iraqi desert. Homicide’s the operative word here, not Desert Storm. Don’t push your luck.”

“Are we free to go?” asked CJ, locking an arm in Flora Jean’s and giving her a half turn before she could respond.

“Yeah.”
CJ quickly began walking Flora Jean down the alley.
“Take the hint, Ms. Benson,” Newburn shouted. “And Floyd,

keep your ass close to home. I’ll come calling.”
CJ didn’t answer. He was too busy nudging Flora Jean toward

the black SUV that had been idling fifteen yards beyond the police cruisers, air conditioner blasting, at the mouth of the blind alley for the last five minutes. The right front and rear doors of the vehicle swung open in unison as CJ and Flora Jean approached. “Hell, I thought you and Newburn was gonna stand there and spar forever,” said the man behind the wheel, shaking his head as CJ slipped into the front seat.

“I was beginning to wonder too,” Mavis called out from the back as Flora Jean, in full huff, slid in next to her.

Roosevelt Weeks, CJ’s best friend since kindergarten, snapped on his seatbelt and adjusted both hands on the steering wheel as CJ stared back to where Newburn and the deputy coroner knelt over Newab Sha’s partially uncovered body. “Wonder what that coroner found that’s so interesting?”

“Think about it later,” Rosie barked. “Air conditioning costs money, my man. Shut your door.”

CJ pulled the door shut and adjusted his rear in the seat before turning toward Mavis and Flora Jean. “Either I’ve got a vig- ilante guardian angel out there or Sha took a bullet for me,” he said, sounding puzzled. Mavis leaned forward and hugged him tightly around the neck. “I’m betting Sha’s bullet was meant for me.” A haunted look spread across CJ’s face. It was a familiar look that still frightened Mavis after more than thirty years, a look that CJ had worn night and day for close to two years after coming home from Vietnam. “Like my old patrol boat captain used to say after we docked up safe from a mission, ‘They missed us this time, boys, but there’s always more ammu- nition.’”

Mavis relaxed her grip, and tears welled up in her eyes as CJ turned his head to kiss her on the cheek. “It’s okay,” he said, stroking her cheek reassuringly as the big black SUV picked up speed and he began to think about just who might want to see him dead.

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