

# WHAT THE MONKEY SAW

by Lynn Chandler

## EXCERPT

Jude Courtland stared through the passenger window of his truck, focusing without blinking on the road so hard his eyes burned. He didn't dare blink. Life could change in that split second and he wasn't going to f\*\*k this up. There was too much riding on it. Like the deal he'd brokered with the pit bull for the money they needed. Plus, his grandma's life depended on it.

His right foot rested lightly on the gas, ready to drop as soon as the van came into view. Beside him in the cab, his baby brother and cousin yakked their never-ending bull shit.

The glimmer of a front bumper edged into sight. Jude's chest tightened, clutching at his lungs, his breath trapped like miners waiting for rescue.

His cousin, Devo, leaned back in the seat as a Ford pickup passed by. "Damn. I thought that was it," Devo mumbled.

Jude's brother Crispin said something back to Devo but Jude didn't grasp it. He concentrated on the intersecting road. Every brain cell he possessed that had survived the weed zeroed in on the two-lane.

A van rounded the curve. "Showtime," Devo said. He and Crispin quickly tugged down their hunting masks. The clock in the console said 2:24.

Jude hit the gas and pulled out in front of the Belton Pharmaceuticals delivery van. The van barely missed the bumper of Jude's truck. Jude saw the driver in the rearview mirror give him the finger. He gunned the engine to pull away from the van, then slammed on the brakes while jerking the wheel to the right. Crispin and Devo were out of the truck before the delivery van had stopped fishtailing to avoid the crash.

They were on the van in record time. Devo yanked the driver's side door open before the driver had time to react. In the same second, Crispin grabbed hold of the driver with both hands and jerked him out of the cab while Devo climbed over the console into the passenger seat.

"What the hell!" the driver yelled, struggling to stay upright as Crispin tossed him aside. He was an older dude, paunchy in the middle, and no match for Crispin.

The driver didn't see it that way and lunged for Crispin. Jude's throat tightened. The stupid driver may have signed his death warrant.

Crispin body-slammed the man to the rocky ground and before the man reacted, Crispin had the barrel of a .38 pressed between the man's eyes.

"No, no, no," Jude whispered to himself. "Don't do it, Crispin." His gut muscles tightened as he silently prayed his brother would for once, just once, act like he had some goddamned sense.

The driver pissed himself, cowering and begging for his life. The dark piss spot spread across the front of his uniform khakis. Probably shit himself, too. Crispin drove his size 15 boot into the man's ribs once to **make** his point and again out of pure meanness. With the man crumpled in a heap of moans, pleading for no more, Crispin spit on him before climbing into the driver's seat.

Jude backed the truck up enough to straighten it in the road. He pulled away with Crispin and Devo behind him in the van. The old guy writhed on the side of the road, his pants loaded with piss and shit, his face covered with spit. Jude looked at the clock in the console. 2:30.

He smiled. Damn, they were getting good at this.

Jude drove to the spot they had scouted. Crispin and Devo followed in the van. He guided the truck down a dirt path, the wheels bouncing over exposed roots. The undercarriage scraped a time or two. Low hanging brush glided over the hood. "Damn it. If this shit scratches my truck," he mumbled to no one but himself.

Finally, a mile deep, the land opened up to a grown-over field. Broken fence posts stood defeated by the elements near the far tree line. Jude pulled off the path and came to a stop. The area spooked him. He didn't know anything about this part of North Carolina. His knowledge of the state centered around Boone town limits. Unlike his home in Tennessee, where he knew every back road, these roads were squiggle marks on Google Maps.

Jude killed the engine. Crispin turned the van around and backed it up so the rear doors lined up with the truck bed. They all three got out at the same time and went to work.

Jude slapped at a mosquito that had landed on his neck. He scanned the area, looking for a pond he might have missed on the satellite image. If he'd missed a body of water, what else had he missed?

Devo handed him one of the cold boxes full of insulin and Jude shoved it to the back of the truck bed. Standing on the tailgate, he waved his hands at Crispin and Devo to hurry with the others. "Come on, come on."

Crispin, the big dumb brute, carried two boxes at once to speed things up. Thirty minutes into this heist and they still had half the van to unload. Jude swore sirens passed in the distance. The unfamiliar surroundings of this area made him jumpy and kept his nerves on edge. No way to see anything through the overgrown thickets and underbrush tight as a steel wool pad. No way to see someone coming up on them.

"We gotta get outta here," Jude said, more firmness in his voice.

Devo, skinny as a broomstick but strong as a mule, put some urge to his step and copied Crispin, moving two at a time. Sweat trickled down Jude's back as he worked quickly to secure the containers in the bed.

"Whatdaya think?" Devo said, handing off the boxes. He scratched at the beard tickling his chest. "Gotta be twenty grand worth?"

"Ain't gonna be worth shit if the cops show up." Pushing forty minutes. Jude hopped down and started helping to transfer the containers himself.

They had to be in Beckley by six P.M. Thirty minutes for the deal and back on the road and home to Mountain City by nine. He didn't like leaving his grandmother alone all that time.

Two-by-two, they moved the cold boxes until the transport van was empty. Jude and Devo pulled the canvas tarp over the bed of the pick-up and secured it while Crispin wiped the van of prints. A few minutes later, with Jude and Devo waiting in the cab waiting, Crispin poked his head through the open passenger door. "We might have a problem."

Jude glared at Crispin a moment. He scrambled out of the cab, rushing to the van with Devo right behind him. His mind whirled with possibilities and none were good. Crispin led the charge to the passenger side of the drug supply van, yapping a mile a minute.

"I don't know where it came from. I swear it wasn't there when we snatched the van. Was it, Devo?" He carefully opened the door, scared something was going to jump out at him.

For a moment, Jude couldn't speak. When the words finally came, he spoke so softly he wasn't sure he'd said anything. "*What the f\*\*k?*"

A monkey wearing a diaper and a tiny striped t-shirt stood on the seat, staring them down.

"It's a f\*\*king monkey," Devo said. "One of those cappuccino things."

"Capuchin," Crispin corrected. He reached his hand into the cabin, slowly. The monkey watched with curiosity.

"What the hell are we supposed to do with it?" Devo balked.

"We can't leave him here. He'll die." Crispin didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground, but he knew his animals.

Jude backed away from the van, assessing the situation. Damn! A monkey. A f\*\*king monkey. Jesus Christ.

"What are we gonna do?" Devo said.

With his own .38 pressed against the small of his back, a quick solution came to mind. Jude jerked the Glock from his jeans and racked a round. Before he brought it up to fire, Crispin plowed into him like a linebacker, taking them both down. Every ounce of air in Jude's lungs *whooshed* out as his back slammed against the ground. The gun flew from his hand and skittered to a landing a few feet away.

"*What the f\*\*k?*" Jude pushed against Crispin's 250 pounds, trying to free himself from underneath, trying to reach the gun.

Crispin raised up but held Jude's shoulders pinned to the ground. "I ain't gonna let you kill him, Jude. Say you ain't gonna hurt him. *Say it,*" he hollered.

Rage flamed deep in Jude's belly. He spit in his brother's face, ignoring the backslash his own face absorbed. Beneath clenched teeth, he mumbled, "Get off of me, Crispin."

Crispin pressed harder on Jude's shoulders until Jude was sure they'd cracked. Every broken twig and sharp-edged rock bore into his back. "Get the hell off me, Crispin."

Crispin pushed harder. "Say you ain't gonna hurt it. Say it!"

"I ain't gonna hurt the goddamn monkey," Jude yelled.

Devo tugged at Crispin's t-shirt. "Come on, man. He said he weren't gonna hurt it."

Crispin moved slowly off his older brother. Jude staggered up, rolling his shoulders to ease the pain. He walked it off, his heart hammering in his chest. He couldn't let Crispin think he'd won.

He spun around and caught Crispin with a closed fist below his left eye. He punched him again, this time connecting with his brother's left cheek bone. Crispin's head snapped backwards. He

stumbled but didn't go down. Devo moved between them, hands on Jude's chest, pushing him toward the truck.

"Jesus Christ, you two," Devo said. "You can kill each other after we get the money."

Jude staggered to the truck. He climbed behind the wheel, clenching his teeth so hard he worried he'd chipped a molar. His back hurt, his shoulders hurt, and the skin on his knuckles was busted. Devo slid beside Jude creating a barrier between the brothers. There'd always been a barrier. Always would be.

Safely inside the cab, Devo handed Jude the .38.

Crispin climbed in with the monkey cradled in his arms like a baby. He sat it in his lap long enough to buckle up.

"Maybe we can take it to the drug company and they'll get it back to its owner," Devo said.

So angry he wanted to spit, Jude's hands shook as he gripped the steering wheel. His knuckles were already swelling. Devo's bony-ass elbow jabbed him in the ribs as his cousin pushed closer to make room for Crispin. "We can't take him back, Devo. Think they're gonna believe we found him on the side of the road?" Jude said.

He maneuvered the truck over the dirt pathway, trying to avoid the gullies and tree roots. The wheels bumped over a small mound of rocky dirt and finally grabbed hold of the asphalt. The two-lane snaked around the mountain in back-to-back S curves and emptied into the highway. Jude picked up I-81 and escaped into his own mind for the two-hour ride.

Too many thoughts ran rampant through his head. Crispin talking non-stop about the damn monkey. Arguing with Devo. The cab of the truck, stuffy as shit. Body odors, stale cigarettes, crusted sweet tea in his Gas-N-Go thermal cup. Jude punched the air conditioner as low as it would go, hoping to circulate some air.

He didn't like leaving their grandmother, Hazel, alone this long. Maybe with the next heist, he'd stay back and let Devo and Crispin make the run? Not a smart move. He couldn't trust either one of them to not f\*\*k something up. Besides, that lady from the agency would be there sometime this week to sit with Hazel. Emily something-or-nother.

Jude jacked up the volume of the radio hoping some Tyler Childers would drown out his arguing brother and cousin. They'd all squabbled since Jude could remember. Back when they were kids, Devo's mom would let Jude and Crispin spend the night on a Saturday, and haul them all to St. Paul's

Gospel Church the next morning. Even as kids, in Sunday school, the boys would find something to argue about. While Crispin and Devo fussed, Jude learned the bible stories from the Old Testament and the gospels from the New. Learned his name--Judah--meant the betrayer. Why didn't his momma name him John? The one that meant love.

At thirty-two, Jude and Devo were the same age, Crispin two years younger.

Devo married his high school sweetheart fresh out of school and had been producing kids ever since. There were four red-headed boys like stairsteps and one little blonde named Grace who had Jude wrapped around her skinny little finger. Crispin paid her no mind.

Devo's mom was a good woman. Real Christian-like. Total opposite of Jude and Crispin's mother. There wasn't a pill Tammy Courtland wouldn't swallow or a powder she wouldn't snort or shoot. Jude was fourteen when she od'd. Her death didn't really affect him much. She was hardly around, anyway. Crispin cried some and Jude grew angrier at her even in death because his little brother didn't understand. He was a pain in the ass and dumb as a sack of rocks, but he was Jude's baby brother.

"I heard monkeys throw their own shit," Devo said.

The comment rattled Jude. "They what?"

"They throw their shit at you."

Crispin coochie-cooed the creature like it was a tiny baby. "That's why you put diapers on 'em. Same with a baby."

"Babies don't fling their shit at you," Devo said.

The two continued to argue and Jude wondered if this trip was going to be worth it. Regardless, he needed the money for his grandmother Hazel. He wished the two idiots with him came with an on-off knob like a radio. Just a simple twist to allow him a moment to himself.

When they crossed into West Virginia, Crispin asked, "Can we go to the New River Gorge Bridge?"

"You gonna throw the monkey off the bridge?" Devo said.

"The gorge is thirty minutes north, Crispin. We ain't got time this trip. Maybe on the next one." Any other time, Jude would detour out of the way to take in the sight of the steel structure. The pinch in his shoulder reminded him a while earlier he'd have killed Crispin if he'd still had the gun in his hand.

Five miles outside of Beckley, Jude turned off the highway at the *Jesus Saves* sign. His gut tightened as he pulled onto the mile-long dirt driveway. This was the third deal he'd brokered with Pansy Thomas and there wasn't a damn thing *pansy* about him. Dude looked like he ate a pack of pit bulls for lunch.

"Leave the monkey in the truck when we unload." Last thing he needed was Pit Bull Pansy to see them with a monkey in a diaper.

Pansy Thomas stepped out onto the sinking porch of the ramshackle house and hooked his thumb to the back. Jude followed instructions and drove the truck as directed, parking in front of a free-standing garage about twenty yards behind the home. The grass died years ago and had never been re-sewn. Pansy came into view in the rearview mirror, all three-hundred pounds of him lumbering toward the garage. A grease-stained t-shirt with the sleeves cut out rode up on his belly.

Jude got out, followed by Crispin and Devo. They waited while Pansy unlocked the roll-top door of the building and pushed it open. "How many you got?" A toothpick bobbed between his lips when he spoke.

"Twenty-two." Jude went around to the back of the truck and lifted the tarp for the pit bull to inspect the goods.

Pansy removed the toothpick and spat, barely missing Crispin's boot. Jude held his breath and prayed his idiot brother would ignore the blatant insult. Crispin stared at the cab, too preoccupied with the monkey to notice.

The pit bull pulled a stack of bills from his pant pocket. He handed the wad of cash to Jude then turned to Devo and Crispin. "Put 'em on the left near the back."

While his cousin and brother unloaded the cold boxes, Jude counted the money. Twenty-two-thousand, like they'd agreed. He dropped the money in his pocket, satisfied for the moment.

"I've got another order for next week." Pansy said, the toothpick bobbing again. "Y'all up for it?"

"Damn straight."

Pansy offered his meaty hand and Jude shook it, hoping the lady from that agency worked out. He'd hate to leave his grandmother at home alone almost as much as he'd hate back-peddling on a deal with this redneck. Few things in life scared him. Pansy Thomas was one of them.

## Chapter 2

My name is Emily Gayle and I watch people die for a living.

At thirty-two, I ran home to Meat Camp, North Carolina, to live rent free with my disabled father when things went south at the Bureau. Pretending to help out dad eased the guilt I carried. Tripoint Transitions didn't pay near what I'd earned with the F.B.I. But this job wasn't about the money. I didn't pay my penance to the dead. Those struggling for that last breath granted my atonement. Like Hazel Courtland, my newest assignment. I was one more curve away from meeting the next person I'd watch die.

I slowed for the switchback twisting around the mountain. I spotted a sad-looking mailbox at the end of a sparsely graveled driveway and slammed on brakes. "Courtland" was painted in elementary-style script on the side. The pathway snaked from the road through a dense forest of pines. Streams of sunlight filtered through the trees in spots and lit the path in far-between sporadic waves. My headlights flickered on in reaction to the perceived darkness. The driveway emptied into a clearing, exposing an old house, and beyond that the Appalachian Mountains rising up like sentries standing watch.

The A-frame structure looked like any of the others dotting the mountain landscape. Like most of the inhabitants, the houses appeared tired. The Courtlands' was no different. Colorless weathered siding could benefit from needed paint along with new shutters to replace the half-slatted ones. The unmowed yard rolled into a forgotten garden on the other side of a free-standing carport with a lean to. Although faded, a blue pickup sat sheltered under the aluminum carport like a prized possession.

I gathered my bag and the folder containing detailed info on Mrs. Courtland. Seventy-six years old, second bought with Leukemia. Lives with her two adult grandchildren. As soon as I got out of the S.U.V., two mutts sauntered up from the side of the house, neither in a hurry to attack nor welcome me. The larger of the two stood knee-high while his cohort stood underneath him. The big dog shied when I offered my hand to sniff but the smaller one greedily accepted a scratch behind the



ear. They followed me up on the porch, in no rush, stretching out the kinks from a good night's sleep. The shy one crawled up under a cheap plastic chair like he was hiding and I couldn't see him.

Hand lifted, ready to knock, I jumped when the front door jerked open. A brutish-looking guy stared at me through the screen door. He was as broad as the door was wide. My mind flickered with images of Saturday night wrestling matches at the high school gym with headliners named Pretty Boy or Crusher. The proceeds going to the fire department's ladies' auxiliary. The purple bruise underneath his right eye, along with the busted skin on his left cheek gave credence to the wrestler image.

The big guy gave me the once over. "Who are you?" he said.

*Special Agent Emily Gayle* came to mind but that was another life ago. "I'm Emily Gayle, from Tripoint Transitions. I'm here to meet Judy Courtland."