

# The Adventures of B.J. Craft

By Michael J. Allen

## Episode Three: Catch & Release

BJ wheeled his mare to face up the path. *I've only got her word for it.*

The horse stepped side to side, pacing anxiously in response to his own tumultuous emotions. He stroked her neck, reassuring her with tones he didn't feel.

*How the hell does an imaginary entity steal and how did she get this stuff in my pockets?* He turned over the stolen goods in his hand. A cold welled up in his gut. *What if she isn't lying? I've no idea how she'd look on video hiding stolen merchandise in my pockets, but it won't be good for me.*

He scanned the clearing. He could wait, hope he could explain things—if the next people up the trail were actually pursuing him. He could gallop after her—of course, if it were law enforcement they'd only have to radio ahead to someone further along the tour.

“What do I do?”

BJ hurled the stolen goods into the foliage and galloped up the path in Pihaa's wake. *Pihaa? Where did that name come from?*

He ground to a stop almost at once, dismounted and led his mare off the path into the forest. He circled back the opposite way, keeping out of sight of path and clearing. Jungle sounds quieted at his approach. The clicks of insects and bird calls eerie in their absence. One foot sank into mud—he hoped it was just mud—releasing a rotted smell like skunk cabbage into the air. He hid his mare behind a tree and leaned around its trunk, shaking one foot to dislodge the ick. Through the thick foliage, he barely made out a group of uniformed men that cemented both his fear and Pihaa into reality.

*Her name probably means venomous viper in some language I glanced through who knows when.*

“That's not very complimentary, BJ.”

BJ started, crying out. “Where did you come from?”

She touched the burn on his arm.

He snatched his arm away. “You're not imaginary.”

“Sure I am.”

“Well, okay, but you're real too. How is that possible?”

“You're an idiot.” Pihaa folded arms over her chest. “How did you ever get on the best seller's list?”

A baritone explosion of sound filled the jungle. “Stop where you are.”

BJ stiffened. He glanced from the approaching authorities to the space Pihaa no longer occupied.

The lead man pulled an old revolver. BJ's research had delved into old guns during a writing stint of gumshoe novels. The weapon seemed familiar but pointed at him, BJ couldn't recall its model. “Don't move.”

“I’m s-sorry,” BJ’s mind raced. *You’re a story teller, tell them a story.*

“Raise your hands up slowly.”

“Can I check my fly first? I suddenly can’t remember whether or not I zipped up,” a nervous chuckle escaped BJ. “It might be the gun.”

“No.”

A second man moved around to BJ’s rear. He reached out hands patting BJ down. *I’m so glad I threw that stuff—*

The officer extracted one of the bracelets BJ *knew* he’d dumped into the jungle. “What’s this?”

“Mor-my girlfriend’s bracelet? She’s always leaving things around.”

The first officer darkened. “Always picking stuff up, too, I’ll bet.”

BJ straightened. “Look, I don’t know exactly what this’s about, but I’m pretty sure it isn’t illegal to urinate in the jungle.”

The second man turned out more stolen items from BJ’s pockets. “Petty theft is. We’re arresting you.”

“Where’s your accomplice?” the first asked.

“I don’t have one. I didn’t steal anything,” BJ said.

The third officer snorted. “Sure. You’re innocent. You’re being framed by corrupt Mexican police.”

“N-no,” BJ said. “I mean yes, I’m innocent. I didn’t take those things, but I’m not suggesting you’re corrupt.”

“Let me get this straight,” the first asked. “Some woman you don’t know, but you call your girlfriend stole all this stuff and put it in your pockets? Why would she do that?”

“My girlfriend didn’t come on this excursion. If some woman put that stuff in my pockets, I can’t imagine why,” BJ said. *Other than to get me into this predicament.*

“If you’re from a cruise ship, where’s your ID? Your passport?” The first officer asked.

BJ frowned. “In my back pocket?”

The second office shook his head. “Empty.”

*Great, how am I going to get back on—wait, no ID? Nothing to identify me?*

BJ assessed the three men. Only one was burly, but they probably knew and understood the terrain better than he ever would. He could make a break for it, try escaping. If he tried and failed, he’d be stuck with a lot worse than charges of petty theft.

*No. It won’t work. I’d need a distraction and even then—*

“Hello, boys.” Pihaa stepped out of the brush behind the officers completely naked. “You want to hurry up and finish with my boyfriend? A girl has needs.”

BJ and the other men froze, mesmerized by the perfectly shaped flesh glistening with sweat. Her mouth hardened and her eyes flicked. BJ didn’t move. She gestured ever so slightly behind him with her chin while hands drew distracting lines down her chest that tightened more than BJ’s gut.

“Oh, sweet Jesus, BJ.” Pihaa rolled her eyes. “Run already.”

She grabbed the nearest officer by his shirt and slammed a heavily ringed fist into his face. Stunned by a naked woman or not, training took over. The officers leapt at her. A knee to the groin dropped the nearest officer, and a spin kick dropped the second.

BJ bolted into the woods.

A gun barked.

*She's imaginary. She'll be fine. She's not real.* He froze. Cursing himself, BJ whipped back around. The first officer loomed over Pihaa and a smoking revolver. She crumpled against a tree. Blood welled from one perforated breast.

The officer turned his gun toward BJ.

“I said run, you dolt,” Pihaa rasped. She pointed a revolver up at the last standing officer. “I liked this body, bastard. You’d better hope that doesn’t scar.”