

OUR KINFOLKS

A person in a red shirt and blue jeans is walking a white dog on a leash up a grassy hill. The background shows rolling hills and a blue sky with white clouds.

A N O V E L

ED KRAUSE

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BY

Ed Krause



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OUR KINFOLKS

Rick Queen-editor of Guardian newspaper
Mary Ross-wife of Rick Queen
Abe Queen-son of Rick Queen and Mary Ross
Scott Revis-senior editor of Mirror newspaper
Ben Jackson-employee of Mirror newspaper
Mark Zone-NYPD Police Officer
Capt. Steve Seigel-NYPD Police Officer
Barney Clark-NYPD Police Officer
Buddy Garfield-Corn Still resident
Becky McCoy Garfield-wife of Buddy Garfield
Junior Garfield-son of Buddy & Becky Garfield
Sue Ann Garfield-daughter of Buddy & Becky Garfield
Georgia Garfield-sister of Buddy Garfield
Allison Garfield-sister of Buddy Garfield
Henrietta Garfield-sister of Buddy Garfield
Peggy Ellen Garfield-sister of Buddy Garfield
Randy -son of Peggy Ellen Garfield
Fannie Mae -daughter of Peggy Ellen Garfield
Oscar McCoy-brother of Becky Garfield
Millicent McCoy-sister of Becky Garfield
Grover Ashebrook-friend of Buddy Garfield
Steve Fields-realtor
Martha Moore-secretary to Steve Fields
Mrs. Filburn-Mulberry Elementary School principal
Tammy-secretary to Mrs. Filburn
Julie – third grader at Mulberry Elementary School
Larry Butts-employee of Guardian

Arthur Waddsworth-Mulberry Attorney
Marlene-secretary to Attorney Waddsworth
Mr. Bartlett-Riverport attorney
Howard Winde-county attorney, brother of Henry Winde
Henry Winde-town Attorney, Brother of Howard Winde
Tommy Snickle-County Supervisor Chairman
Felcie Smith-County Supervisor
Hoss-town drunk
James Quick-former Guardian editor
Dr. Sammie C. Porter-retired minister
Ms. Sammie D. Porter-friend of Rick and Mary
Joe J. Pickins-Judge
Frank Jacobs-property owner
Molly-employee of Guardian
Joe-Junior's dog
Angus-Junior's dog

“To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die.

A time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted

A time to kill and a time to heal

A time to break down, and a time to build up

A time to weep, and time to laugh

A time to mourn, and a time to dance”

Ecclesiastes 3:1-4
King James Version

P R E F A C E

For over a century, the land remained the same. The fertile bottomland produced an abundant harvest of corn, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, and other crops. On its gentle slopes, fruit ripened on apple trees, grass turned into hay and cattle grazed on lush pastures. On its steeper reaches, rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, bear and deer shared the land with large stands of pine, oak, hemlock and locust. There was an orderly balance of nature, for each season had its own purpose.

In the late summer's shortening days and cool nights, a subtle change occurred. The bees buzzed faster among the late blooming flowers, the squirrels stored nuts, black snakes found refuge in barns, and bears gathered the remaining berries on the upper ridges of the land for their hibernation. Soon there would be dramatic changes, some to be expected, others not at all. The leaves would ripen into radiant colors lasting only a blink of time. The peaceful trickle of the creek dissecting the small valley would turn into a torrent of water moving roads, rocks, earth and structures with it. Violent winds coupled with pounding rain would topple the tallest and sturdiest of trees. Lightning bolts would set fires and create random destruction. Living things would die for no apparent reason. No one knew exactly what would happen or how it was all connected.

CHAPTER 1

The cold rain and wind chilled him to the bone as he walked down the city street. But it was the loneliness and the turmoil that reporter Rick Queen was about to face at the Courthouse that gnawed at his soul. He did not have to appear as a defendant, but his investigation had led to the prosecution of four policemen before the Court. Cops on trial! Not a pretty sight. His boss, Scott Revis, had offered him a chance to move far away to a different place. Would this be only a temporary reprieve?

In the Courthouse snack bar, Rick yanked off his raincoat and knocked a pitcher of cream all over the other two men at his table.

"You clumsy ox! You need to look what you're doing!" Ben Jackson, his co worker, grabbed paper napkins and threw them on his lap. His husky body shook the metal chair as he wiped his pants.

Turning to Jackson, Revis commanded, "Take it easy on Rick. He's been under a lot of stress from this trial." Jackson glanced down at his crotch and then stared at Rick. Their boss broke the silence. "It'll come out, Ben."

Rick leaned over and thinking back to the move, he whispered to his superior, "Well, where's Stark County anyway?"

"It's somewhere in the sticks, in the Southern Appalachians," said Revis in the same tone.

Finding a salt shaker, Rick fondled its ridged sides. "If the jury convicts any of them, I will need to get out of town. It doesn't really matter where. As long as it's far from New York." Through his reporting over the last year, he had uncovered a scheme whereby cash seized at drug raids found its way into the hands of a few greedy officers.

"Don't expect us to visit you!" Almost hitting police at the next table, Revis shoved his chair two feet back from the table.

"I won't." Jackson snapped, using the last napkin out of a metal dispenser to clean off the surface in front of him.

"That's okay. It's not a federal witness protection, but at least they'll have a hard time finding me."

"The cops would be like fish out of water there," Revis said.

"All rotten." Rick gazed around the crowded foyer filled with uniformed officers. An elderly waitress approached the table, but stood three feet away. Her wrinkled skin rivaled the stone walls of the Manhattan Courthouse built a hundred years ago.

"It's about time." Jackson's bull-dog face glared at her. "Hell, everyone else is served."

"You're lucky you get anything here, buster. I should ask those cops over there to kick your ass outta here." She stared at Rick. "But if I don't serve you, you'll do a nasty article about this place. What do ya want?"

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Rick focused his eyes up at the dingy ceiling, and said nothing. Ben ordered first. "Gimmie a ham and cheese, hold the mayo, only some mustard."

"Just coffee, make it black, please." Rick replied without looking at the woman and turned to Revis. "Couldn't sleep at all last night. Got some of those calls."

Jackson interrupted. "Coffee for me. I'll probably have to stay all afternoon for this damn thing."

The waitress glanced in a mechanical manner at Revis. "Only some tea," he said.

As soon as the waitress left, six police officers at the next table rose like a church choir ready to sing a hymn. They approached Rick in single file, each of them with his handcuffs extended tapping on the back of his metal chair. Rick's heartbeat increased with each clang, but he couldn't move a muscle. Where could he go? Not to the police. They were closing in like vultures in the desert and he the carcass. The officers left, but four young Hispanic men at the table replaced them just spitting distance away. Each had identical diamond clasps pinned on purple silk ties.

Jackson watched the cops blend in the crowd and looked at Rick. "Well, how long do you think I have to be here? I got plenty to do back at the office."

Rick knew that his fellow reporter was not pleased to be in attendance. He tried to give Jackson an explanation. "I think it'll take a while. It's been a complicated trial with testimony from a strange assortment of bedfellows."

"Well, who took the stand?" the senior editor asked. "I've been out of town."

"Where have you been for the last two months?" Jackson asked.

"Taking some sick-leave. I had to use it by the end of the year. Thinking about throwing in the towel. I need to stay up in Vermont more." Revis adjusted his hearing aid. "Don't hear so good."

"We have some friends up in Vermont." Rick's voice rose. "My wife likes the mountains."

"Well, who testified? I've been out of it." It was apparent to Rick that his boss wanted to distract him from the threats. Revis had nurtured him along in his ten year career at the Mirror where he started in 1975, covering car wrecks, fires and a host of other bizarre accidents that could happen only in a place where millions of people live in a confined area. After a few years, he was dissatisfied with strictly reporting the facts. These events were soon lost forever to the public's short attention span. Rick wanted to get back to his ideals of doing something that left a permanent impression on people. He had not only achieved this goal, but now had to face the repercussions.

After five years at the paper, he had graduated of sorts to reporting the police beat. He soon found no shortage of crimes amid the muscle of drugs in the city. Rick always had suspected the misuse and imbalance of power in the criminal justice system with its huge arsenal of city cops, state police, FBI and district attorneys. Even though he knew that crime had to be held in check, it did not take long for Rick to see abuse of the overwhelming power that law enforcement held over the lives of ordinary citizens. His job opened a window of opportunity to protect the constitutional rights of law-abiding private citizens and even those accused of crimes.

"Strangely enough, even drug dealers testified for the prosecution." Still Rick's hand shook. The men at the next table turned and looked at him. He realized he had said the wrong thing, and maneuvered his chair so Jackson's large torso partially hid them from his view.

"How long has the jury been out?" Revis asked.

"Three days. They'll make a decision today," Rick said with some confidence, raising his head and looking directly at his boss. "Thanks for coming down here."

"No problem. That's the least we can do." With a frail hand, Revis stroked his sparse white hair. "I asked Ben here to come for moral support." Jackson, silent, still had a frown on his unshaved face.

"You came to see me get iced if they get convicted," Rick said, trying to be funny. No one laughed.

"If that happens I'll do a good story on it. Don't worry." Jackson glanced around the tables scattered haphazardly in the granite foyer.

The senior editor ignored the crowd in the room. "You've done an excellent job here. The boys upstairs told me that circulation has been up ten percent since this started a few months ago. Didn't even read the paper when I was up in the boonies. It's good to get away for awhile."

Rick nodded. "I want to see this through. That's why I came back from the office."

"You're commended for doing a great job on this. You didn't have to come. We could've handled this today, but I knew you would be here."

Jackson whined. "Courts usually hurry up and wait. I'd like an office job."

Without comment or eye contact, the same waitress served their drinks. No one spoke until she left.

"Isn't the money from the drug raids supposed to go to the schools?" asked Revis. "Under the fines and forfeiture statute?"

"Correct. Whenever cash is seized and the defendants are found guilty, it must be put in education." Rick gulped some of the lukewarm coffee. "The cops diverted it for themselves." His pudgy hand shook as he placed his coffee down on the small table, almost spilling some liquid on his boss.

Jackson took a sip from his cup and faced Rick. "You must be under a lot of stress. I bet you're ready to do something else. Like get out of the newspaper business?"

Rick disregarded Jackson again, but only rambled. "It's been bad! First, my wife and I started to get anonymous phone calls at home. Then we felt like we were being followed. Since the trial started a few months ago, the cops and dealers have been getting in each others way to harass me."

"In what way?" Revis fumbled with the same salt shaker that Rick had, although the elderly man could not fully grasp it with his hand. It fell to the floor, but no one bothered to pick it up.

"Stuff like parking tickets, stalking, threatening notes on my car and slashing my tires. It's been difficult the last week to travel anywhere in the City. At least the cops are smart enough not to cross state lines, but the druggies don't care." To accommodate his boss, Rick talked louder. "They're practically at my doorstep. Strange cars running around at all hours of the night. Honking horns."

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A bailiff came down the marble stairs and announced the jury was returning in ten minutes. "I haven't got my sandwich yet." Jackson stood up and towered over the other two men as he was forced to follow Revis. All the patrons in the café moved in one direction, up the curved stairway leading to the second floor courtroom.

The public surged into the courtroom like a tidal wave onto a deserted beach. The District Attorney strolled from a side door and took his place at a six-foot table on the right hand side facing the empty judge's bench. Four police officers in civilian clothes, along with their attorneys, marched down the center aisle as if they were attending a funeral and squeezed behind a similar table on the other side. Rick sat on the front row in the press section directly behind the defendant's table. Revis and Jackson flanked him, but Rick felt naked to the officers in front of him and their families behind.

He was sure the jury would convict at least two of the four who all now turned their heads towards him. The evidence against Deputy John Jones, the youngest of the group just out of recruit school, was weak because he only had knowledge of the illegal operation and did not benefit from the cash. Jones covered it up to protect his friends and had been uncooperative with the many prosecutors on the case. Captain Seigel, a veteran of thirty years, was not directly involved at first. His only crime was that he did not adequately supervise the people under him and greed eventually took over. The others, Mark Zone and Barney Clark, were the masterminds of the scheme. Both started on the force as partners and became best friends. They vacationed together in Atlantic City and accumulated substantial gambling debts.

Rick knew more about this case and the associated police operation than anyone else including the DA, State's witnesses and jury. As a result, the District Attorney's office wanted him to take the stand. However, since he could not reveal sources, he refused. Fortunately the prosecution did not want to confront a reporter with a subpoena. Nevertheless, Rick kept the public abreast of the progress of the investigation and now, the trial, through his lengthy and detailed daily news articles. Rick was relieved that this would be his last story on this sad chapter in the city's history.

The Judge entered and assumed a bench towering over everyone else in the room. He opened court with a bang of the gavel, and the jury panel filed into their box. Everyone in the courtroom, including Rick, stared in complete silence at the jury foreman as he handed a single white piece of paper to a bailiff. All eyes followed the sheet to the Judge, who then read the guilty verdicts for all four officers. Several gasps and sobs erupted from the audience behind him.

After a short sentencing hearing, the Judge, a former prosecutor, gave relatively light sentences. Any active punishment for a police officer was harsh. Incarcerated law enforcement officers don't mix in the prison population too well, requiring constant protection from the rest of the penitentiary inmates, who have easy and convenient chance for revenge. Seigel was given five years, Jones one year and the two others, three years. The Judge's pronouncement especially affected Zone. He turned around and faced Rick. The convicted cop yelled in open court, "Queenie, you son of a bitch! I'll never forget this!" Rick's

pulse raced, and he felt as if his body rose up six inches from the bench although he never left the earth. He knew that Zone's friends and for that matter, most of the city police would be after him. The other defendants, Seigel, Clark and Jones seemed resigned to their fate, saying nothing as they left. Rick wanted to get out of the building, the city, the state, the country and the planet; however, he could not move from the hard bench.

Rick's previous coverage of another high profile case had also exposed flagrant police disregard for the law. That situation involved some of the same people here, the team of Zone and Clark. Two years ago, the two officers were on a stakeout on the street outside a Puerto Rican drug dealer's Harlem apartment. They saw a potential buyer go in, who turned out to be the dealer's attorney. The cops followed and broke into the dealer's dwelling without a warrant or any evidence of apparent illegal activity. They found a black book containing the list of suppliers and contacts hidden behind a bedroom dresser. Zone gave the treasure trove to his supervisor and the police began rounding up the suspects based on that find. At their trials, defense counsels made a motion to suppress based on the fruits of an illegal search and seizure. The judge was forced to grant each of the motions. The cops had egg all over their faces at not being able to convict anyone because of their negligence and disregard of the law. Like this trial with Seigel and his underlings, Rick covered and reported on each of these cases. The police were not pleased with the publicity. After these earlier trials, Rick was known in police circles and in the drug culture as the 'Queenie.'

The beleaguered reporter had developed a small following among the more elitist element in New York City having been invited to speak at several meetings of the ACLU, attended several dinner parties on the Upper East side and had made an appearance on public television. Where were these people now?

Rick's thoughts returned to reality. Where could he go to escape this torment? After the bailiff told them to leave, the three reporters marched out of the empty courtroom and down the staircase to the dark foyer, where a lone janitor mopped the now deserted café. When the trio opened the metal exterior doors, they were greeted by icy stares from an assemblage of police officers standing in a rainy mist on the top stair landing. Three officers followed one pace behind in a line so each newsman had a person to his rear as they went down the slippery steps. Despite the noise of the street, Rick overheard one of them say, "We need to escort 'Queenie' out of town for good." He emphasized Rick's nickname so everyone could hear.

Another said, "Let's start fillin up the East River."

"Give him a royal send-off!" the first officer shouted.

Rick focused on a Lincoln continental double parked on the street right in front of the cops. The Hispanics from the snack bar slid in the back seat and sped away. He looked over a colorless landscape of buildings, sidewalks and roads. No indication of the season of the year. Rick needed to escape the endless pushing, shoving and waiting in lines. He was tired of an almost futile effort to maneuver in the correct lane on the George Washington Bridge, to find a parking spot, to take an elevator to his office on the twenty fifth floor, to order a simple sandwich at the deli next to his building and even to cross the street

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before the traffic light turned red. The hostile environment strangled him. The cops followed their prey to the street. He knew that the pushers lurked in the urban jungle, ready at any moment to pounce without warning.

"Rick, you've been a good reporter for over ten years here," Revis said while he stood at the bottom of the steps, ready to leave. "Why don't you take the rest of the week off and relax? I'll have Jackson here write the story. It'll still be under your byline." Jackson nodded in agreement, less than thrilled at this suggestion, but unable to object.

Rick thought about this offer a few moments, "How about the rest of the century?"

CHAPTER 2

Buddy Garfield and his son hiked side by side up a dirt road with a grass center. They trailed their big ole coon-dog, Joe, by a few paces. The pair took in the familiar smell of cow manure carried by a gentle breeze. As they climbed farther up the cove, the grade gradually increased and the pastures and creek were left far below. Now they saw maples and poplars checkered with brilliant red, orange and yellow leaves on the right side. Five rows of apple trees stood in a sea of well-manicured fields on the left. Buddy pointed to the fruit trees. "Next weekend we gotta come up here. Pick em."

"Paw, can I drive the tractor some?" Junior Garfield halted just at the lower end of the apple trees to catch his breath.

"Yeah. Part way."

"Ma can make apple pies all winter." The boy licked his upper lip.

"Right, son, I like those pies. Don't mind fetchin em way up yonder." Buddy leaned on his shotgun in the middle of the road. Joe stood at attention three strides ahead, his nose pointed up the valley. Buddy surveyed the orchard, "Your Great Granpaw planted those apples far back. One of the first things he did up here. Said you gotta plan for the future. That's what he told my Paw. Course they're not the same trees. We're always replacin em."

"Why did he set em out way up yonder?" The fourteen-year-old collapsed on a granite rock the size of a bale of hay on the edge of the road. The stone was unique not only in that it was the largest in the orchard area, but it had a smooth curved depression in the center, excellent for resting. Buddy's great grandfather probably sat in it over a century ago as did native Indians before that. The rock also marked a Garfield property corner. Junior continued to admire the perfect rows of trees. "I'd plant em down by the pond, easier to get to."

"Can't set em down there. Air ain't right." Buddy faced down the valley, gazing at his land and home place. "In spring, an early frost would kill the blossoms down yonder. The wind up here stirs the cold air, mixes with the warmer stuff. Not too much wind down there. The cold just hangs round down by the pond." He turned and began to stride up the road. Joe followed suit and maintained the lead.

"Why's that?" Junior rose, ready to continue.

"The cold air's heavier."

The sun sank low in the sky, about to disappear behind rock ledges and pine scrub atop the west ridge of Corn Still valley. The pair walked fifty paces to the upper end of the orchard. A faded "No Trespassing" sign dangled from a post on the left bank of the road. The post connected several different barbed wire fences; the most prominent stretched across the upper boundary of the last row of apples and then the fence blended into the forest in the distance to the west. Buddy yanked the rusted sign down and threw it across the road into the woods. It made a clanging sound hitting an abandoned car entangled with brush.

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"Why'd you do that, Paw?"

"Cause I'm tired of those Jacobs people tellin me what to do." Buddy stomped on the ground and kicked some loose dirt. Unknown to his son and family, he had received a registered letter last year informing him that he could no longer go onto this upper land. Junior kept on moving without saying another word.

Like burrowing through a narrow dark tunnel in the fading light, both sides of the road were now shaded by a thick forest of oaks. About the distance of four mobile homes lined up length wise, the land leveled and the road disappeared into an overgrown area with an old cabin on the left and a weed-infested garden space on the other side. Junior stopped to look around. "Paw, I learn a lot more here from you than my teachers learn me."

"School's important. Don't like you bein off even on a day like this." Buddy followed Joe wherever the dog wanted to go. "By the way son, what do them teachers do on a work day?"

"Don't know for sure, reckon they go to lot a meetins." Junior grabbed a four foot locust stick off the ground and swatted the knee-high grass. The dog led them around the cabin to a familiar footpath that started behind it.

"I like time off too." Buddy reached down and picked up a golf ball size stone. He threw it at a side of the cabin and it bounced off the wood.

"How come you didn't have to go to work today?" Junior strolled past within ten feet of the empty structure, turning his head for a chance to peer inside. The windows were partially boarded up and the front door had a padlock strapped near a rusted door knob. Morning glory vines climbed the outside walls; some of the vegetation even gripped a portion of the roof near the chimney. Moss and lichen dominated the other end of the cabin, giving it a dull green color on the north side.

"I'm between highway projects. The boss man gave me a day off." Now past the building, Buddy quickened his pace on a footpath leading northeast up a hollar to a ridge.

"Wish I got some more time off from school." Junior turned his neck to get one last look at the backside of the cabin. A fallen-down shed was attached at one end.

"You just had the summer off." Buddy chuckled. "My fancy is that I was back in school. Have a lot of time for huntin, fishin and farmin, that kind of stuff. Enjoy it while you can. It's tough makin a livin round these parts."

"How far are we goin?" Junior lagged behind as the grade of the path increased. "Reckin up to the ridge. Let's just follow Joe. He knows where he's a-goin." The pair heard the sound of a car engine straining to climb up the road. Both turned to look behind them. Because of the dense foliage, neither could see the cabin, level area or any vehicle. Buddy muttered, "Not those Jacobs people again."

"Thought they just came up on Labor Day. Once a year."

"Yeah. Some of that bunch came up last month." Buddy paused. "Wonder what they're doin now?"

"Should we get off their land?"

Buddy glared and raised his voice. "Don't say that, son."

"Sorry, Paw."

Buddy cooled down. "It's not your fault. They told me not to cut wood. Been doin that forever. Let's go on." Abundant firewood was available on Buddy's lower acreage, but it was inaccessible in most places on his land. On the Jacobs' upper tract he could merely roll it onto the road and load it on the tractor. He even hauled logs down on the path they traveled.

"Reckin it's okay?"

"Don't worry bout it." Buddy did not mean it and did not tell the entire truth for the letter was specific not to enter the lands for any purpose. The foreign sound of an automobile in the woods opened up a raw nerve. There was nothing he could do, so he continued on their journey. They double-timed for fifty feet to catch up to the dog, who never stopped. After five minutes on the path, Joe froze, his tail straight, then darted off to the left towards the summit of the mountain, the highest point of Corn Still.

"Looks like he's got a scent!" shouted Buddy.

"It's up there, near the top, Paw!"

This trek served as a safety valve for Buddy, because it let much steam out of his system. "Come on!" He led and they quickened their pace up the steep slope. Off the path, brush and rocky ground slowed them. Numerous times, they crawled on their hands and knees. On one occasion a briar tore Junior's red wool jacket and low rhododendron branches knocked off his John Deere cap several times. It was easy to hear the dog's shrill barking, although they could not actually see Joe. After following him the length of a football field, they saw Joe at the base of a large dead tree. Buddy stopped to catch his breath. At the very top of the tree was a full-grown raccoon clinging to a bare branch.

"Can you get a clear shot?" Junior shouted as they got twenty feet from the base of the tree.

"Yep!"

Buddy wanted to aim at one of the Jacobs clan, but his sights now were on a full grown raccoon. A second later, Buddy's shotgun went off, and the coon dropped to the ground near the foot of the rotting tree. They heard a soft thump on the forest floor.

"Wow, this tail will look great in my room." The boy pointed to the bloodied animal on the thick blanket of leaves. Joe stopped barking and guarded his conquest. Junior collected coon tails and strung them over his bed, along with other trophies from the outdoors, such as snake skins, assorted bones and turtle shells. Most of the time there was nothing alive, but once the boy brought in a wasp nest that still had some live inhabitants. He also kept a fresh assortment of worms, frogs, and spiders together in an old aquarium tank on his dresser.

Buddy carefully used a hunting knife to gather all the remains of the coon into a plastic bag, Junior examined it. "Ma'll like this for dinner."

"She's always been a tellin us we need to live off the land." Buddy put the bag in his knapsack.

They struggled down through a laurel thicket with the goal of reaching the holler and the path home. It was getting dark and Junior tripped on a metal object covered in leaves. "What's this thing?"

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His father sneered at a spiral copper tube the size of a five-gallon pail and lifted it waist high. "It's part of the old moonshine still." This, like the sound of the car engine, brought back unpleasant memories.

"Can I keep it for my room?"

"Sure, just don't use it!" Buddy warned and thought it would do no harm for his son to retain it. Fortunately he had a downward slope to drag it through this section of brush. After scrambling on all fours in places, they finally reached the relatively clear holler and the path. Buddy examined the artifact more closely by feeling the entire object, although he could not see too well in the twilight. His fingers went inside the tube and he even considered tasting the residue inside. He thought better of it and put the metal on the ground for his arms were tired carrying both the shotgun and tubing. "This belonged to my Granpaw. It's used for heatin the liquor up."

"Special recipe?"

"Don't think we'll find this in your Ma's cook book." Buddy handed it to his son.

"This weighs a ton." Junior held it with two hands close to his lean body.

In the 1920's, Buddy's grandfather had secretly operated a liquor still on this upper land near the cabin. He used the log structure to hide some of the corn, other ingredients, and the still's products. The still itself was in an old shed attached to the rear of the building, out of sight to any casual observer coming up the road. A nearby spring just below the garden spot served as a reliable water source for the operation. During prohibition, a fundamentalist Baptist preacher named Frank Jacobs tipped off the enterprise to the law enforcement authorities. The sheriff at that time, wanting to make a name for himself, seized both the still and the upper part of the land. Jacobs then bought this section of land for a minimal price, way below market value, at a public auction on the Courthouse steps. This caused an instant feud between the Garfields and the Jacobs that has not ended even today. Jacobs himself rarely went up to his land, only on Christmas and Easter when he conducted some sort of religious ceremony. He figured old man Garfield would not shoot him on these holy days. When preacher Jacobs died in the 1950's, his four sons inherited the land, but they too seldom used it. The Jacobs' boys were scattered over the country and did not want to battle with the Garfields. For many years, the elder Jacobs son who lived up North paid the taxes, made some renovations to the cabin and used it only as a vacation get-away around Labor Day. However, this annual event was always a reminder to Buddy that he had lost a part of his inheritance.

As long as the Garfields could hunt on the lands most of the year, there was peace on the surface in Corn Still. Now, all of the Jacobs children were either dead or in nursing homes. A grandchild living in Mulberry, the county seat of Stark, paid the taxes and rarely set foot on the land. Despite the fact that Buddy had basically full control of the upper land and no one was around most of the time to enforce the letter, he knew that this arrangement could not last forever. As Buddy went down the footpath, he thought that it might end today. Would any of the Jacobs confront him at the cabin? In the presence of his son?

When they reached the clearing, the boy's arms gave out. Junior handed his

father the tubing to carry the rest of the way. Buddy saw with relief that there was no car or any sign of Jacobs near the cabin. It was now dark, but the pair had little trouble finding their way home, as they had done this many times in the past even on moonless nights. An outline of trees and landscape against an immense backdrop of bright stars and planets provided direction for the pair as they traveled down the valley. Soon the overhead light on the barn illuminated the road next to the kitchen porch of the Garfield home place.

"Look, what we brought for supper, Ma." Junior held the plastic bag high in the air as he entered the kitchen. Joe stood erect, proud of his accomplishment.

"Ugh, I just lost my appetite." She turned away.

"We can also make some liquid refreshments." With both hands, Buddy raised the copper tubing to his shoulders.

"That's okay, not tonight. We can save it for New Year's Eve," Becky Garfield said. "You both need to get cleaned up! Don't bring that varmint into my kitchen!" She raised her voice and pointed the way with her index finger extended. "Get it out of the house. Right now!"

Junior scurried out with his father to the barn directly across the dirt road. The faded gray building sat between the Garfield road and the creek. The main floor of the barn opened up to the road by two large sliding wooden doors. The basement had access both to the creek and to the pasture on the other end by a single door just wide enough for a tractor; the three remaining sides were made of old stone that came from the upper reaches of the property. He put the plastic bag in an upright freezer in the barn cellar.

Buddy was never surprised about what Junior carried into the house, and rarely went into his son's bedroom. As long as the boy remained happy and healthy, he did not care too much what his space looked like or what it contained.

"I don't want any part of that thing in your room either." Becky glared at Junior as he entered the kitchen again, this time with the copper pipe.

"Which thing, the tubing or the coon?" Junior asked.

"Just keep it all out."

He obediently left the kitchen and met his father outside near a metal spigot attached to the side of the barn. "This still thing will make a good addition to the tails. Ma won't let me have it." Junior paused a few moments, "for a while anyway."

The valve squeaked as water rushed downward. "You better hide that thing. Put it in the loft." Buddy reached for the soap on a shelf. "No one ever goes there."

"You'll need to help me carry the thing up yonder."

The senior Garfield lathered his hands under the faucet. "Reckin we'll do it tomorrow. I'm beat. Just put it in the stall for now."

"What about the tail?" Junior asked.

"Gotta dress the animal sometime. After that you can put it in your room."

"Yeah, sneak it in when Ma ain't lookin'."

"What she don't know won't hurt her." Buddy dried his hands on a towel hanging on a nail.

ED KRAUSE

"Gotta get it past Sis too." Junior's only sibling, Sue Ann, was down the road at one of her aunts trying on some clothes.

Buddy had four sisters: Allison, Henrietta, Peggy Ellen and Georgia. They all lived in separate trailers on the extreme lower part of the family property. He also had three younger brothers scattered in other rural parts of the county. Allison's home, the closest to the State highway, served more or less as the unofficial gatehouse. All of the units were arranged in a row, their ends facing the Garfield private road. The sisters were either divorced or separated and returned to the homeland for various reasons after their relationships ended. In Stark County, it was said that one could determine the number of unattached daughters of a family by counting the trailers next to the home place.

Except for his sisters' occasional boyfriends, Buddy was the only adult male living on Corn Still and the unelected defacto mayor. He not only set all the rules for the use of the land, but provided their basic needs: drinking water, road maintenance, firewood, meat and vegetables. For the most part the Garfield family interacted well with each other, but Allison, the only one living alone and without children, was a busy body and a gossip with too much time on her hands. Buddy and Becky were always on the lookout for a nice man to hook up with her so their immediate family could have some peace and quiet.

After Buddy gave a blessing at the kitchen table, Allison and her niece came through the back porch door without knocking. "Found Sue Ann over at Georgia's trailer watching trash on TV. I'm aware that you have rules about this. Wanted to let you know."

"Thanks," Becky said.

Buddy nodded, not too concerned about what his eldest sister told the family and then stared at the screen door hoping she would leave.

Allison shifted her eyes and mouth to the table heaped with food. "Reckin this spread looks mighty good. Ain't ate a lick all day!"

CHAPTER 3

The clock in Rick's new 1984 Volvo read 2:16 as the car hit light rain coming out of the parking garage onto Chambers Street. He turned west toward the Hudson River and his home in Jersey. As he passed the Courthouse one block away, police officers lingered on the sidewalk and gave him a middle finger in unison as a send off. The car maintained a safe speed, for he did not want any excuse to be stopped. Out of their immediate sight, he adjusted his rearview mirror. So far so good. No escort. But the police and druggies knew where he was going. They didn't have to follow.

Rick felt better crossing the George Washington Bridge out of the jurisdiction of the NYPD. The classical violin music rhythm on NPR soothed his soul, but it acted only as a Band-Aid until he turned left on Hollywood Avenue from New Jersey Route 17; a black Lincoln limousine stood guard across from his ranch home on the suburban street. The houses and landscape looked all the same to him, even the dull yellow leaves of fall. Except that car.

The Volvo claimed the garage spot normally reserved for his wife's Audi. Rick stepped on a footstool and pulled the rolling garage door down to the ground. He dragged himself into the house intending to pounce on wine stored in the den's refrigerator. He was thwarted by the sight of his fourteen-year-old son in the kitchen pouring juice at the counter. "Thought you had swimming practice today."

"Have to do a chore today."

Rick raised his eyebrows. "What chore? You're supposed to be at the Y."

"D-Dad. I h-h-have to c-clean up." Abe Queen stuttered and lowered his head.

From past experience Rick knew it had to do with his son's hobby downstairs. He took two steps to the cellar door and sniffed. Pronouncing each word slowly, he asked, "What is that smell?"

"I was going to clean it up before you and Mom came home. What are you doing home so early?"

"Never mind. What's the smell?" Rick opened the door and a putrid smell of dead meat jumped from the basement. He slammed the door shut and confronted his son. "What have you done?"

"L-Last week, I must of blew a fuse down there." Abe's round face turned red as a tomato. "Had a problem with the control panel."

"Yeah and it's on the same circuit as the freezer?"

The boy nodded.

"We have to clean it up. Right now." Rick pointed downstairs. "I'll help. Maybe we can do it before your mother comes home."

"Thanks, Dad." He smiled.

"We may need the vacuum after we get all the stuff out."

ED KRAUSE

"D-Dad. I broke it." Abe looked to the floor and avoided eye contact.

"What? What happened now?"

"Spilled some of that plaster of Paris in the hall yesterday." Abe turned his head up. "Tried to vacuum it up and got clogged."

"Just like the last time in the living room. That white powder?"

"Sorry, Dad." The boy came over and hugged him.

Rick felt it was genuine and returned the gesture of concern. "Where's the vacuum?"

"W-Well it's downstairs. I tried to take it apart."

"I need to change clothes. I'll meet you around back. Open the windows and patio door down there. Air it out."

"I already have a trash can down there."

"Good. We may need the other one. There's a lot of stuff in the freezer." Rick was used to, and for the most part tolerated his son's interest in model railroading and its effects on the household. At least with this hobby, his parents knew the boy's whereabouts after school.

Instead of drinking wine in his den, the reporter spent the afternoon helping clean the freezer. They removed the spoiled food into the garbage can and then lugged it up to the side of the garage. Fortunately the suburban town of Ho-Ho-Kus picked up trash the next day. Although the smell was sickening, the job proved a good diversion for Rick, keeping his mind off the events in New York earlier in the day.

Several times they were forced to retreat outdoors for air. Rick found freshener and sprayed it throughout the house to mask the smell. He put a dab of Old Spice on his face. They opened all the kitchen windows despite the chilly rain outside.

Finishing scrubbing the freezer with Lysol, Rick asked his son. "Are the kids still teasing you?"

"A little. Say that I shouldn't be playing with trains. They think it's like dolls or something."

Rick lifted his round head out of the freezer and came close to the boy. "Son, people call me names too."

"Really?"

"Do you think it'll be better at another school?" Rick bent down and scrubbed a stubborn brown spot on the metal bottom.

Abe put down his towel and looked at his father. "Why do you ask?"

Both heard a car pull up in the front of the house. Rick dropped his brush. "It's your mother. Need to close all the windows upstairs." After doing this, Abe retreated back to the basement to work on his trains, and Rick rushed to the living room.

A car door shut, and Mary Ross came in with an overflowing shopping bag in each arm, covering most of her slender face and thin upper body. "Why did you take my space? I couldn't go through the garage."

"Tell you later. Here, I'll grab this for you." Rick took the groceries from her, and the couple went to the kitchen.

"Is Abe back from the Y yet?" Mary opened the refrigerator to put a jug of

milk away.

"He's downstairs."

She took her coat off, revealing an attractive figure for a forty year old woman. "It's cold in here."

"We need to talk, let's sit down."

"Is it that bad?" Mary shelved a box of cereal and proceeded to the living room.

He did not respond to her question. "Need to check on Abe." Rick went to the cellar door, opened it half way and closed it immediately. The smell persisted. He found his wife in her favorite reading chair next to the front picture window. The Lincoln had not moved an inch. "Let's go in the den."

"It must be real bad. Cops chase you out of town?"

He led the way into the adjoining room and closed the door behind them. Rick made a beeline to an apartment sized refrigerator and opened a fresh bottle of white zinfandel, the only liquor in the house.

"That's for our anniversary next week." Mary frowned as she sat down.

"I need it now." He poured two glasses and sat next to her on a comfortable sofa. "Scott Revis told me the Mirror bought a small weekly paper down South." He took several gulps of wine. "Near where Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee all come together."

"That's where Jed Clampet of the 'Beverly Hillbillies' came from." Mary frowned and shook her head.

"Don't be funny. I had a rough day." Rick chugged down the last of the wine in his glass and got up to capture the bottle.

"Does this mean we're moving?" Mary's voice rose to a shrill and she slammed the glass on the table. "Moving?"

Rick sat down on the sofa to explain. "He wants me to be in charge of the operation down there." Another glass of wine was poured. "I can get away from all the harassment." He did not need to tell her the details of the trial, as he informed her of its progress on a daily basis. "They'll give me a raise. That paper has been losing money for some time."

"A real loser?"

Rick could not fool his wife and tried to think. "Have to start out fresh somewhere. You know I like a challenge. More money."

"I don't care about the money. I've moved around enough."

"Not with me you haven't. Maybe with your ex."

Married once before to an older evangelistic minister, she traveled the world attempting to save it. Mary abandoned a college degree in English literature for the reverend. It turned out that he only wanted a trophy wife to show off to his flock.

"Sorry, dear. I shouldn't have said that. It's been a hard day at school. Those monsters are getting to me." Mary paused. "I'll think about it."

"Then you're not opposing me?" Rick put the glass of wine to his lips.

"I admit the noise from Route 17 is getting to me. You know what, maybe Abe can be outdoors more." Mary sipped her wine in small doses. "But those people are backwards."

ED KRAUSE

"You don't know that." He placed the glass on a crystal coaster and faced her. "How'd you know that?"

Shrugging her shoulders, she asked, "Specifically, where is this place?" Before there was time to answer, the telephone rang and Mary stared at it. "Not one of those calls again. Right around dinner."

"Let it ring."

The phone stopped ringing, but the answering machine recorded a message. "Queen. You're dead meat now," said a raspy female voice and then the line was dead.

Rick thought of the sight in the freezer and slumped further into the sofa. He continued to stare at the black box by the phone for several minutes. "That's strange."

"Why? We've been getting these calls for about a month."

"First time by a woman. The cops and druggies always use my nickname."

Mary got up to check on Abe, now in the kitchen nibbling on crackers. In her absence, he guzzled a shot of wine and poured another. She returned in a minute. "Well, where's this place in the sticks anyway?"

"Okay, it's Stark County," Rick finished that glass, "Only has a population of 10,000."

"I never heard of it."

"Near Riverport."

"Don't know where that is." Mary put down her half-empty glass. "Look, I spent a year in the wilds of Africa in the sticks. Hated it."

"This is not Africa, I'll show you on a map. Let me finish this wine."

"That's your third glass. Watch it."

"Are you keeping track?"

"Look. Let's go on vacation somewhere. Maybe things will settle down." Mary grabbed his wine glass away from him. "We could stay with Lisa and Autumn up in Vermont."

"They know we go up there." Rick struggled up from the sofa and fumbled through some books on a wall bookcase. As he yanked out a legal size paper booklet, half the hard cover books and folders on the shelf tumbled to the floor. Paying no attention to the mess, he flipped through an atlas and tried to focus on the small print. "Can't find it now."

"You're in no condition to find anything." Mary's voice rose. "You'd better sit down."

Dropping the map on the floor, he held on to a chair arm, and made his way back to the sofa. He searched the room for his glass.

"I hid it. Anyway, the problem with moving is that Abe'll have to change schools in the middle of the year. I bet they just have a one-room school for the entire county."

"Revis told me that they just built a new high school." Rick stood up on his own two feet and scoured the den.

"He'll also have to take his trains down." Mary rose and stared into his face.

"That would be a big problem. The mountains weigh a ton. But you know the kids are teasing him."

Mary picked up the newspaper from a table and walked back over to the sofa. "I'm getting a little concerned about him too. Instead of going to dances, football games, Abe builds plastic models."

"Yeah. Yeah." Rick found his glass in a magazine rack and poured himself more wine.

"Yes, sometimes when I get him up in the morning, he wakes up with a headache all glassy-eyed. It's like a hangover because of that styrene glue." Mary put the paper down. "You know what, you're going to have one too."

Glass shattered in the living room. Rick yelled. "Stay here." He staggered to his feet but tripped on the end table as he rounded the corner of the sofa. Mary's right arm caught him. "I'll be all right. Be back in a minute."

Abe came flying into the den and put his arms around his mother, his face frightened. Mary held the boy tight.

Rick hastened to the living room. Through the broken picture window, he watched the black car speed away down the wet street. He returned to his wife and son with a round object the size and weight of a baseball covered with a piece of paper held together with thick rubber bands. "This was in your reading chair."

"Shouldn't we call the police?"

"This is from the police." Rick glanced at the note for a second and threw it in the general direction of the trash can. "Just like the stuff on my windshield in the City. They're not too smart. Use the same type paper." The situation troubled him. "I need to put something in the window now." He left for the garage and stapled plastic sheeting over the shattered opening in the living room. It should have taken a few minutes, but in his half-drunk condition it took longer. Rick picked up the note on the floor on his return and unraveled the paper again. "This is different. You check the spelling."

"I'm surprised you can read anything." Mary took the note. "One of my second graders can spell better than this."

"Maybe it's not from the cops."

"What difference does it make? What are we going to do?" Mary hugged Abe tight in her arms.

Rick put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Abe. Please go back in your room. It's safe now. They just want to try to scare us."

"They have!" She grabbed the wine glass and escorted the boy back to his room.

Slumped in the sofa, Rick closed his eyes and thought "I have to get out of here." He went to the liquor cabinet and procured another glass, emptying the wine bottle. Rick consumed another drink and concealed the glass in a trash can.

Mary came back to the sofa. "We can't stay here." Her voice rose. "He's too upset. I'm scared."

Rick slid over to his wife. "I guess I could drive to my parents' place. We might be able to stay there tonight."

"You're not driving anywhere. I'll take my car. Look, I'll go and at least look at this place down South." Her stomach growled. "You know what, maybe it will be better, a simpler lifestyle."

ED KRAUSE

"Like the TV show, Mayberry. Believe it or not, that was one of my favorites. Remember Otis the town drunk?" Rick staggered up from the couch once more and attempted to pour from the empty wine bottle.

"No. But you're like him now." Mary's stomach growled a second time. "I need to get dinner started. Something simple. We need to leave before dark."

"You're right, we can't stay here tonight."

"Could you go down to the freezer and get those pot pies?" Mary headed to the kitchen.

Rick blocked her path. "Let's go out to dinner."

CHAPTER 4

The alarm awoke Becky weekday mornings at 5:30, but she lounged in bed listening to the sounds of the new day. Her husband had forty-five minutes to eat breakfast, get dressed and leave for work with the State Highway Commission. Before departing, his routine included tending the animals in the barn and waking both children, so that they would have time to catch the school bus. She heard him knock once on Junior's door. The boy responded with an unintelligible grunt. Buddy said, "Tonight I'll help you with that coon, Son."

Joe barked inside the boy's bedroom. "Great. Need to get that tail mounted," Junior's voice clear now. "It's been awhile."

"You're not supposed to have that dog in there."

"Sorry, Paw."

Buddy tiptoed downstairs to his bedroom, retrieving his keys from the dresser. He fumbled for them in the dark and headed for the door to the hallway. Becky rolled over in bed and whispered. "Ain't you forgettin somethin?"

"Yeah. I'll fetch you some coffee before I leave."

"That would be nice. How about a little smooch?"

"Forgot." Buddy bent over and pecked his wife on the cheek. "I'll be back with the coffee." After the delivery of a dose of caffeine, her husband was gone. Becky, sipping her drink, could hear the rumble of the pick-up rolling down the road and then dry leaves rustling in gusts of wind outside. Soon the house creaked upstairs with children stirring about and pipes rattling with flowing water. Her thoughts turned to her husband; he had been distant in the last few weeks. Of course when she asked, he said everything was all right. This troubled her. She laid the cup down, and drifted back to sleep.

"Ma, I need money for the dance this weekend," Sue Ann said through the paper thin door.

"Okay," Becky yawned, "I'll be up in a sec."

Becky's morning schedule included fixing the children's breakfast and making sure they boarded the bus. All the school-aged Garfield children in Corn Still caught the bus down near Allison's trailer at the intersection of the gravel road and the State Highway. After they left, she was alone in the house wondering about her husband as she prepared to make the trip to her job at Mulberry Elementary school.

With Buddy still on her mind, she greeted the principal with a faint smile, "Mornin."

"Good morning, I need you to file some student records in the back room," Mrs. Filburn said, her voice pleasant but firm.

This brought her back to reality, but Becky found a way to delay this assignment by lingering at the front counter to help a mother locate a lost jacket and escort her to the cafeteria down the hallway. The parents loved Becky and made it a point to seek her out, no matter where she was in the school.

Becky and Tammy shared the responsibility of the backroom and the counter. Today Becky let the younger woman stay out front almost all morning, and took over for her at the dinner break. When Tammy returned, Becky took her bag lunch next door to the public library to eat with her sister, Millicent McCoy.

Becky relished the opportunity to spend time at the library with Millie at the curved checkout desk. Since many people came in the library, Millie was another source of information in Becky's news network. The librarian, childless and unmarried, spent most of her waking hours at work, reading, or writing a book on the history of Stark County. Millie knew every part of the county. She had operated a bookmobile, a converted school bus purchased with a grant from Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, for twenty years. However, the service was discontinued when the Federal funds ran out, and the county could not afford to repair or maintain the vehicle. Some residents thought it cold and unmerciful when President Reagan failed to renew it.

The sisters talked about the upcoming Thanksgiving dinner at their mother's home, a tradition in the McCoy family, as with most other Stark County families. However, their parents were getting feeble, so Millie was planning to assume the job this year at her house next door to their parent's residence in the Balds.

After several patrons, including several teachers on their dinner break, checked out books, a stocky middle-aged man came to the front and asked Millie, "Do you have a form book for a power of attorney and deeds?"

"Yes, but you'll need a lawyer," the librarian answered.

The man hesitated and argued, "No, this is simple. All I want to do is buy out my damn relatives. Some family land."

Munching an apple, Becky glanced up. Millie retrieved the book for him from a small shelf dedicated to reference material and brought it back to the counter. "Could I please have your library card?" She stamped the inside jacket with the due date.

"Don't have one. Why? Thought anyone could use this place."

"Well, I need to see your driver's license then." The man complied without comment and took it out of his wallet. "You're Frank Mathew Jacobs III. Is that correct?" Millie made a cursory inspection, but Becky's ears perked up.

"That's what it says."

"You live in Reno, Nevada?"

"No. No. That's an old address."

"Well. Where do you live?" Millie's voice rose, attracting the people in line behind Jacobs. They too were impatient with the man. "I need a local address for reference material."

"Why?"

"In case someone else needs it."

"I live here in Mulberry in an apartment above the funeral home up on East Prong. Hell, is that good enough?" The librarian pointed to a sign on the counter about profanity. The man offered, "Sorry."

"I remember the Jacobs family. That'll be okay." Millie handed the book across the counter. "Please have it back in two days, Mr. Jacobs."

"Why so da... short?"

"Mr. Jacobs, it's reference."

This incident remained with Becky the rest of the afternoon. "What was Frank Jacobs planning to do with the land above their home? Was this just some family business or was the land to be sold to someone unrelated to the preacher's clan? Was this the reason Buddy remained distant?"



The town of Mulberry was nestled in a flat valley north of the confluence of two creeks known to the locals as the East and West Prongs. At this point, they formed the larger Dutch Curve River that flows to the south through a mountain gorge. About twenty miles downstream from the town, but thirty miles by road, was the small city of Riverport. The Richmond and Northern Railroad hugged the western side of the Dutch Curve from Riverport going north to Mulberry, although at one point the railroad traversed a sharp bend in the river by two bridges and a tunnel. This curve was known as the Dead Bear Rapids. From the town, the railroad followed the East Prong valley to the northeast.

U S Highway 10, a two-lane paved road from Riverport, generally followed the western side of the River, although it veered away from the river at Pump Gap. The road then crossed the West Prong just above the confluence into the town. From Mulberry, the geographic center of Stark County, several roads crossed both Prongs leading to different parts of the County. The eastern and western sections of Stark County were more remote, especially the eastern, where the county line straddled Mt. Clifton at an elevation of 4000 feet. On the western side of the county, several grassy-top mountains, known as the Balds, rose almost as high. To the north of town, the land consisted of fertile bottom-land all the way to the county line. Beyond there, more mountains formed another barrier to the outside world.

In Mulberry, Rick and his wife climbed old wooden stairs to the second floor above an empty drug store. They had an appointment with Steve Fields, a local realtor, to look for property for their new home. As they reached the top of the stairs, a slender girl not more than eighteen years old greeted them. "Howdy, are you Mr. and Mrs. Queen?"

"Yes, my name's Rick Queen and my wife here is Mary Ross."

"That's right, my name is Mary Ross."

"Sorry, not many gals keep their names around these parts."

"I'd like to be called that if you don't mind," Mary asserted with a serious face.

"Well, Mr. Fields' runnin a tad late. Had to fetch some cows that strayed off his place. His neighbors called here to complain."

"A lot of people criticize me at my office too," Rick said.

"Honey, I'll move some of these boxes off the couch so you can sit down," the young girl said apologetically to Mary. "Hi, my name is Martha."

It appeared that no one ever threw out anything in the office. Magazines, old brochures and newspapers dated back to the early 1970's. No one cleaned

either. Trash overflowed from an old paint bucket used for a wastebasket and coffee stains dotted a dirty rug. Smiling faces of children on torn calendars tout-ing funeral homes haunted them from the flaking plaster walls.

"Some of this must be valuable," Rick surveyed the junk.

"Don't take anything. We have enough stuff to move," Mary said in a whisper and stared at the young girl. "This whole office needs a good cleaning out."

"Where you folks from?" Martha asked.

"We're from Jersey," Rick replied in a low voice as if there were cops in the adjoining room.

"Why would you ever want to live in these parts? You're not old enough to stop workin yet."

Both looked at each other strangely. Rick wondered why a realtor's secretary would ask that question. After a minute of silence, Mary asked the young girl, "Is retirement the only reason to move here?"

"Honey, not many jobs here. You gotta be rich. I like your fancy clothes." It was true Rick and Mary were over-dressed. She wore designer Calvin Klein pants and a pure white blouse partially covered by a wool jacket; he, had on suit pants, a stiff shirt with a tie, and shiny dress shoes. The young girl focused on their clothing. "I can't wait to leave this place. Everyone knows my business here, can't get away with anything. Got to get away from my mother. Need a real job. Say, what do you do for a livin, Mr. Queen? Mrs. Queen?"

They were saved from answering these questions when a middle-aged man dressed casually in scuffed cowboy boots, worn dungarees and a frayed plaid shirt came rushing in from the stairs, his ponytail wagging behind. After catching his breath, he addressed them, "Hi, I'm Steve Fields. Sorry I'm late. You must be the Queens."

Mary nodded. The young girl disappeared into a back office without further comment. Fields moved a box from another chair and sat down in the waiting area. He looked at Rick. "How can I help you folks?"

"We need a quiet place far out in the country," Mary said first.

Rick blurted, "Someplace hard to find." He realized he had said too much. "From my mother." He smiled unconvincingly.

The realtor did not pursue this statement. "Well, you could get that almost anywhere in the county. There's a place just about a mile out of town, towards Dog Run on the West Prong."

"What's Dog Run?" Mary asked.

"It got its name from a straight section of road where dogs would chase speed-ing cars. This county needs a dog ordinance real bad. Overpopulation. It's getting out of hand. I read in the paper last week there was a real bad wreck up there because of that. Probably the only straight section of road in Stark County."

"What about the house?" Mary asked.

"I have a listing for a small house there. The folks had to go to a nursing home in Riverport. They didn't have any children to take care of them. Sort of a strange pair who didn't mix too well with the locals. They used to breed llamas. Could-n't stand all the dogs chasing their llamas. Didn't mix too well. Both animals and humans, you could say."

Rick interrupted, "How about something further out than that?"

"We need a view," Mary said forcefully.

"Got some of em way up in the Balds on Panther Creek. You can get a good view of some roosters fightin up there. Some people pay good money to see that stuff, although that's not my cup of tea, as the Brits say. What do you say to that, chaps?"

Both Rick and Mary shook their heads and remained silent.

"Well, I just got a listing from a Mr. Jacobs. He's got some property in Corn Still, real far out."

"What happened there?" Mary asked with a touch of sarcasm.

Rick intervened, "We don't really want to know that either."

"Does it have a good view?" Mary paused, "Of the mountains?"

Fields nodded. "Real secluded."

"We may be interested in that." Rick did not care if the property had a view. He only wanted her to be satisfied. Living here would be an adjustment for Mary, but he could live almost anywhere at this point, so long as it was far from New York.

Fields interrupted his thoughts. "It'll take all afternoon to see the property because it's at the other end of the county. Not that far as the crow flies, but you've got to go up Chicken Creek, over Egg Gap, down Possum Trot, make a right turn at Fox Den and up almost to the head of Rooster Trace."

"You know what, maybe we can see some animals along the way." Mary got up from the frayed chair ready to leave.

The realtor yelled to Martha, still out of sight. "Can I borrow your car? Mine won't make it up to Egg Gap. Overheats a little, needs a new radiator. Next time I get a sale, I'll have it fixed."

"You borrow everything else." She came into the room and sat in a squeaky chair to get her pocketbook from a desk drawer. "Just bring it back in one piece."

"Why, do you have a hot date tonight?" He leaped up to claim the keys.

The secretary did not respond, merely handed over a large key chain with a rabbit's foot dangling among several keys. Fields went in another room, and they could hear him make a phone call.

Martha whispered in Rick's ear, "He forgets his watches, pens, bank deposits, umbrellas, and coats. I gotta fetch em all over town." Fields returned, and they went down the stairs to Martha's red two-door Chevy coupe parked facing against traffic outside the abandoned drug store.

"In the City you would get a ticket for parking that way," Rick said.

"I've never heard of anyone getting a parking ticket in Mulberry. I don't think they even have any to give." Fields paused. "Hold on a minute. It's Friday and the paper just came out. I'll go to the Guardian and get one."

The couple stood on the sidewalk, staring at the cluttered car. It was a typical Stark County teenager's car: dice hanging from the rear view mirror, a large stuffed tiger in the rear window shelf, an old dirty hairbrush on the dash and a confederate flag decal on the passenger side window. Within a minute, Fields came back scanning the front page of this week's edition. Rick and Mary pretended not to care about the paper.

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Fields blurted out, "Another car crash. That's the only thing this paper covers. I wish someone would come in here and do something different. The editor, Mr. Quick, is gettin too old. If I had some money, I'd do it myself."

The couple looked at each other. When Rick opened the passenger door, Mary crawled into the back seat after moving a big pile of clothes, enough laundry for several people. She had to bend in a fetal position, and hold her nose, all at the same time. "That's the only time since we've been married you've opened the door for me." Her voice sounded as if coming from underwater.

"This time I was forced to." Rick rolled down the car window.

"That didn't hurt you too much." Her breathing returned to normal but the arms of the stuffed tiger dangled down onto her shoulders. She removed the furry animal from the shelf and put it on her lap. A trail of white stuffing followed the beast.

"Don't get too close to that tiger," Fields pointed out.

"Why, will he bite?" Mary glanced at the creature.

"The innards may come out and get all over your clothes."

"Thanks for warning me," she said, still all crunched up like a Chinese acrobat in a barrel.

Her husband turned back and gawked at her, "You don't look like you're having a good time."

"I'm not. Hope I don't meet anyone from my League of Women Voters back home. I'm going to try to duck down to make sure no one can see me in this thing."

"Yes, they would ban you for life."



In the mid-afternoon, Allison Garfield watched "As the World Turns" at her trailer on Corn Still. A vehicle turning off Rooster Trace highway onto the road past her trailer aroused her suspicions. No one was due home for another hour, and the school bus was not expected for about half an hour. Like a watchdog without a bark, she turned from the TV, got up and peered out the kitchen window. All she could see was a small red car racing up the Garfield's private road, narrowly missing a stack of lumber piled by the left side near the pond. Shadows of a big oak tree across the road prevented her identifying the occupants. As the car went farther up to the home place, she could see large dice hanging from the rear view mirror.

"That's Martha Moore's car. What's she doin up here? I better call Becky. See if she knows something about this." After getting her sister-in-law on the line at work, she blurted, "Guess who I saw goin up our road just now?"

"Who now?"

"Martha Moore and a man. Couldn't tell who he was."

"That's probably Earl," Becky said.

"Yeah, I know him. A real loser and probably up to no good. Last year he got a girl from Riverport pregnant and then dumped her. She didn't even finish high school. I better tell Martha's momma. Earl's probably gonna get her knocked up."

"It's probably too late; they're up to the old cabin by now, Allison. I've heard Earl's a fast worker. Next time Beatrice Moore checks out some books at the library, I'll have Millie tell her about it. She usually comes in at the first of the month to get a supply of those trashy romance paperbacks."

Allison wanted to get right in her car and go up the road to spy, far more interesting than this episode on the soaps. However, she expected the school bus in a few minutes, and had to wait for the Garfield children. By the next station break, she could not control herself and called her sister Georgia, the last trailer up the road. Maybe she got a better look. Georgia was not home, so she decided to call Martha's mother, after all.

Two commercials later, she heard Joe's greeting bark and the brakes of the school bus squeal on Rooster Trace. Six children got off, leaving it empty since this was the last stop on its route. Buddy, Peggy Ellen and Georgia each had two children that rode the bus. Peggy Ellen had two older children, a boy who worked at the coal quarry below Mulberry and a daughter employed at a nursing home in Riverport. Georgia's youngest child, not old enough for school, spent the day with a relative in Fox Den. Henrietta's two children lived primarily with their father in Riverport and came to visit on the weekends.

Although Allison did not have any offspring, she took charge in the afternoon when the parents were at work. At least one of the children stopped at her house for doctoring, encouragement or punishment, and for a delicious, although not necessarily nutritious snack. She made sure that they did their chores and refereed the minor squabbles that developed between the children. Basically they were good kids, but needed some adult supervision, as all youngsters do.

Junior came in, taking short steps. "Feel a bit tired. Can I rest some?" Joe trotted behind.

"Sure, go to my guest bed." Allison pointed to a room in the rear of the trailer. This was a normal request for one of Georgia's boys, but the first for Junior.

"Got a little whipped pickin apples with Paw the other day."

"Did you do any huntin up there?"

"Nope. Ain't done any huntin since I got the still thing." He stroked the back of the dog's neck which came up to the boy's boney hip. "Paw don't talk bout huntin too much."

"Yeah, I heard about your adventure. You collected some good stuff."

"Goin to clean the still up and see if it works." Joe licked his hand.

Allison knew that Junior was a free spirit, and his parents did not know how to deal with it at times. He often did things that were beyond his age and experience. She thought about the time he turned eleven and his parents forced him to enroll in a Boy Scout troop. On his very first camping trip, the boy left on his own into the woods following some deer tracks. Although he was never lost, the scoutmaster spent the remainder of the outing trying to locate Junior. After that episode, he never returned to the group. Allison chuckled to herself.

Peggy Ellen's boys came in her kitchen and demanded lemonade. Just then, she heard a car coming down the road, but it was nearly gone before she could get to the living room window facing Rooster Trace. All Allison could see was a red blur going down the highway towards Fox Den. "Darn it, I missed them."

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Shortly after that, Buddy's pick-up turned into the gravel road and parked in front of Allison's trailer. She went out on to her wooden deck to greet him. "Did you see that red car?"

Her brother got out of the truck and walked towards the trailer. "Yeah, what about it?"

"That was Martha Moore with one of her boyfriends goin up to the cabin."

"Didn't see who was in the car. Just met it before your place. Drivin a tad fast."

"Well, she drove up and stayed about an hour there. Probably shacked up with Earl. She works for Steven Fields, you know, the realtor. I'll call him bout this later. She should be workin at this time of day, not messin around with that trash. I gotta go, can't miss my TV. A steamy program starts in ten minutes."

"I've got to go way up yonder to the upper barn. Chop some wood, I reckon."

"I thought you went up to the cabin with the tractor to do that."

"Can't do that no more." Her brother's lanky face tightened up even further. "Where's Junior?"

"Lyin down. Said he's tired." Allison pointed to her trailer.

Just then, the boy came out on the deck.

"I'm okay, Paw, let's go. I'll help with that wood."

"Let's lick this thing." Buddy started back to his pick-up. Junior hopped in the cab and Joe jumped in the bed of the truck.

Allison looked at her brother. "Why don't you go up to the cabin. Check it out?"

Buddy stopped walking, glanced back and asked, somewhat puzzled. "Why do that?"

"May find some evidence of some hanky panky."



"You folks didn't say too much. How'd you like the property?" Fields asked his clients as he turned left off the Garfield gravel road onto Rooster Trace.

"Fine," Rick said. "Thought I'd never make it up there."

"Guess you don't have mountains in New Jersey. That flat grassy clearing on the ridge up there above the cabin would make a nice house site." Fields turned around to the back seat towards Mary.

After a long pause she said, "You know what, I admit it's got a good view." In truth Mary, ecstatic about the vista, could barely contain herself; she did not want to appear anxious to purchase the property in the presence of Fields.

"You folks better act quickly. It won't stay on the market long. The owners need to sell it, part of a big family. One of them lives in town. He's sort of in charge. Got some gambling debts to pay. Don't tell anybody I said so."

"My lips are sealed." Mary placed her right index finger on her mouth.

"There's a long history to that place. It will take some time, but I'll tell it to you. It started during the Civil War."

"I'd rather listen to the radio."

"What do you wanna hear, Mrs. Queen? Martha's probably got the station on some teeny bop stuff."

"Anything will be fine," Rick answered.

The radio blared on a top forty station in Riverport. After a commercial for John Deere tractors, they listened to 'What's Love Got to Do With it' by Tina Turner. There was a report on hog prices and then a short political commercial for Walter Mondale. From behind, Mary saw that Field's ears perked up during the spot for the presidential candidate. He started to talk politics, "Mondale will never hear the gunfire. Those liberal Democrats in Washington are wastin their money doin that stuff. All they do is spend and tax people to death. When my Daddy died, he couldn't afford to pay the estate tax. Had to sell the farm to pay the damn tax. That's a shame, he worked all his life, government took it away. Before real estate, I was in the used car business, then sellin aluminum siding in Riverport. The taxes were terrible, couldn't make a livin out of it. Now, Ronald Reagan's been a good president cuttin those taxes. He'll win around here next month, probably get re-elected. It'll be a blow out!"

When the song 'Ghostbusters' came on, Rick turned the volume up even more, and the couple started singing along. Fields could not compete. They just smiled at each other between the words. However, after the song was finished, Fields started in again, "I saw that movie. It was filmed in New York City, wasn't it? You're from there?"

"Yes, it was."

"Mrs. Queen, you're a librarian of sorts. That's what your man here said. Didn't they film that in the New York Public Library on 42nd Street?"

"Yes, they did." Mary had to admit, amazed at the realtor's knowledge of such a far away place, a different world.

"Have you been there?"

"Yes, I have."

"I hitchhiked up there once. Had to stand by an exit on the New Jersey Turnpike around Newark for about three hours. It was terrible. Wished I had brought a gas mask. Right by one of those chemical plants. Had a sweet odor to it, but I got a headache. Two exits before that, waited by a petroleum plant. That was bad because....."

Before he could finish the sentence, Rick asked, "Can I change the station? Do they get NPR down here?"

"Is that the Nicaraguan Public Radio? That's the communist bunch down in Central America stirrin up all the farmers against the government. That NPR is another one of those liberal groups up in Washington. My tax dollar's supportin it."

"Sorry I asked," Rick said.

Finally Fields got the message and remained quiet until they got to Mulberry. As the car crossed the bridge over East Prong and the double train tracks, the realtor pointed proudly, "That's the old station, hasn't been used in years by the railroad. I've been involved in renovating it for the town. Like to save old buildings. I have ten thousand invested in that."

"Maybe our son could help you. He likes anything to do with railroads," Mary volunteered.

Fields did not pay much attention to that comment and continued his monologue, "We have only one traffic light here in Mulberry. Matter fact, only one in

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the whole county. Half the time it doesn't work, especially when it rains or snows, so watch out. I guess you've got a few more up there where you're from?"

"A couple more," Mary said still curled up in the back seat. "You know what, they work all the time, even when it rains."

"Now, up in front, is the Courthouse. That's where my Daddy was the judge for a long time. He sentenced many a man there. Some got the death penalty, did the hangins right here in that little grassy area in front of the Courthouse. They set up a big wooden scaffold, took em at least a week to get everything ready. Always had a crowd for it. Usually did em on Saturday afternoons so everyone could come. My Daddy got up on the balcony there and pronounced the sentence right before people were hanged. He died just last year. Had a heart attack right on the bench. They had to carry him down from the courtroom on the second floor. Those liberals at the State Capital in Richmond stopped the hangins about thirty years ago. Never been the same, crime has gotten outta hand now."

Mary looked around the town as best as she could in her position. "There's a lot of jaywalking here in town."

"Where can we get something to eat?" Rick asked.

"The best, well it's the only place, is the Chuck Wagon next to the Courthouse. It's a grill where you can get about anything. Can't miss it. See it? They got the big corny wheels on each side. Curved roof. It even looks like a chuck wagon."

Rick turned back to his wife and pointed in that general direction. "I'll probably spend a lot of time in there."

"Where? The Courthouse or the grill?" Mary asked.

"Ma'am, we call it the Wagon; that's where I eat a lot. Tonight they're havin country style steak. That's their best grub."

Besides the natural beauty, the town of Mulberry was dominated by the yellow Courthouse with a statute of Lady Liberty, perched atop a massive four-sided center turret. Two smaller turrets topped with flagpoles flanked it on each end, all on a red tile roof. The Courthouse front had four white columns stretching from a porch landing to a triangular roof overhang. Broken concrete steps led down from the portico to a walkway on the street level. Half way up on the columns, a balcony opened from the second story, where the large courtroom was located. On the porch level metal benches hid behind the base of each column and double doors served as the only access to the first floor lobby. The stone structure was almost out of place, like something you would find in the French Chateau country; most of the other buildings in town were drab two-story dilapidated brick structures.

Outside the Courthouse, grass grew on well-manicured lawns on both sides of the center walkway. A bronze statue of Robert E. Lee on his horse guarded one side, and more metal benches faced the street on the other. Next to the Courthouse on the right poised the Wagon ready to roll down Main Street. Several churches were scattered among the brick buildings containing law offices, insurance agencies, county offices, and stores. Many of the store fronts stood vacant. Some of the masonry buildings had faded signs on the sides, such as

'Feed & Seed,' reflecting a more thriving agricultural past. On the outskirts of town, a mix of rundown frame houses, trailers, gas stations and car lots were scattered on both of the two Prongs and down Highway 10 towards Riverport. The town seemed not to have changed for at least fifty years. The only remaining prosperous residential section sat behind the High School on a gentle slope known as Bright Knob.

Fields parked the car in front of his real estate office, this time in the direction of traffic. When the realtor and his clients reached the stair landing to his office, Martha yelled. "Steven M. Fields! That's the last time I'm goin to let you borrow my car. My reputation's been ruined!"

Fields, puzzled, looked at her strangely. "Why? Did I drive too fast? Got your car back in one piece, didn't I?"

She glanced out the window to make sure. "No, stupid, everyone thinks I went up to that cabin to mess round with Earl. I ain't seen that jerk in months."

"Why would they think that?"

"My mother called me and gave me a lecture on men. I'm quitting this job right now. I've had enough of you and your stupid chores. Anyway, I never hardly get no pay round here."

"That's not true. You get paid when I get a commission."

"That ain't enough. Got a car payment, rent, bills to pay. Wouldn't say this is exactly a boomin real estate market here!" The feisty girl shook both fists at Fields, who retreated two steps back almost stumbling over some boxes.

Mary wanted to leave as soon as possible before sparks started to fly. She waved to Fields. "We have to go back to Riverport tonight. We'll call you tomorrow." The couple never looked back as they went down the stairs and out the building. They bee-lined for their car a block away and wasted no time climbing in. Mary extended her arms as far as she could in the front seat. "You know what, none of my league members talk as much as he does."

"At least they say something of value, some of the time." Rick grabbed a map and unfolded it.

"Dear, I really liked that place on Corn Still. That's a good house site with a beautiful view above the cabin." She closed her eyes and replayed the scene on the ridge in her mind.

"I like the cabin."

"It's pretty small."

"The kitchen at least has a stove and refrigerator." Rick glanced for any traffic on Main Street. He had to wait for an old man staggering across the street to the Courthouse.

"That's great. I'll not have to cook over a fire or put milk in the creek."

"Or even go outside to go to the bathroom. It has one inside the house."

"Of sorts." Mary stretched her legs. "Let's get something to eat."

"Okay, but first, I need to drive by the Guardian. See where I'll be working. It's just down the street. Maybe Mr. Quick is still there."

"I noticed you never mentioned your job to Steve."

Rick turned the car around, making a U-turn on Main Street, and drove past the Courthouse again. The drunk that he had seen earlier darted out

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in front of him. The Volvo missed him by inches. "This is almost bad as the City." The Guardian was on the other side of town away from the railroad station. The clock in the car showed ten past five and the office was dark inside. They parked, got out and looked for Fields. The front page of the current week's paper glared at them on the window. The headline read 'Man hangs Dog,' and underneath a giant picture took up the rest of the page. No story accompanied the photo of a small dog dangling on a rope from a tree and two husky men standing proudly by.

"Rick, what kind of a place is this?" Mary looked up close to the glass. "I thought they just did that to the criminals."

"Let's get something to eat."

"I don't need food. Just a stiff drink."

"Don't think we can get that here." Rick glanced down both sides of the street.

"Well let's go back to the motel in Riverport. I lost my appetite." Mary sighed. "Anyway, if we eat at the grill, we may run into Fields."

"Don't want to do that."

"Yeah, you know what, he may tell us the history of Corn Still."

"I've got to meet the editor here tomorrow. Need to face what punishment Scott Revis has dished out for me."

"You asked for it, didn't you?" Mary pointed out.

"At least you don't see any cops or drug dealers."

CHAPTER 5

There was a smell of wood smoke in the crisp morning air and a blanket of fog covered the valley floor. After a big breakfast, Junior rested on an old tire dangling from one of two towering oaks on the front lawn of the Garfield home place. These trees planted by his great grandfather provided much needed shade in the summer months, and kept the inside relatively cool even in the hottest of weather. Now they were stripped of all leaves. This afternoon Junior had to rake the fallen leaves and pick up small branches that had accumulated over the fall.

This one and a half story home with a front porch wrapping half way around was typical in Stark County. The main floor included a bedroom for Junior's parents, dining room, kitchen, living room and a bath. Under the eaves upstairs, Junior and Sue Ann each had a bedroom with a bathroom and stairway in between. The home place had been built at the turn of the century by Junior's great grandfather of the liquor still fame. The first Garfield to arrive in America, his great-great-great grandfather, first settled in Riverport in the early 1800's. He and others from Scotland were independent people seeking governmental and religious freedom in the new land. Today, they still did not want to be told what to do, especially by non-native people. An outsider would say, "How long do you have to live in Stark County before you're a native?" The answer depended on what the 'outsider' would be doing in the county and what that person wanted from the locals. People working on farms and in agriculture seemed to blend in easier than people who had a profession or owned a business. It was almost impossible for an outsider to be successful in a small business such as a funeral home or restaurant or even in the practice of law. People indigenous to the area wanted things done a certain way and any deviation met with resistance. A few years ago, a couple from Chicago had opened a bagel shop in Mulberry that lasted only six months.

"Let's ask Ma if we can go up yonder. Look for more of that still stuff we found awhile back." Joe barked in agreement. "Be back in a sec." Junior returned with his red coat, John Deere cap and a burlap bag in case he needed to carry something home. "Let's go, Joe, got to be back by dinner. Grover's comin later on. Reckin we'll have plenty of time to explore up there."

Grover Ashebrook worked with Buddy as a surveyor and often appeared at the Garfield household, especially at mealtime. Junior always liked to hear his accounts of his hunting trips out West.

The dog knew exactly where they were going and led the boy a few paces ahead up the dirt road. Ten minutes later, Junior and the dog saw the old log cabin in the small clearing ahead. It looked different since Junior had come up with his father in the early fall. There were many ruts made by tires on the yard in front of the cabin; piles of old furniture were stacked on the porch; and the door stood half open, creaking in a breeze. After poking his head inside, Junior

hiked up the footpath toward the ridge and upper part of Corn Still.

Another ten minutes and Junior could see over a one hundred eighty degree view of the surrounding mountains. The morning fog had lifted, and although some trees blocked the view of his house, he could see Allison's trailer, pond, oak tree and the school bus stop on the State highway. A white snow band wrapped around the top of Mt. Clifton, not unusual for late fall. After taking in this vista, Junior turned north to look at forested government property bordering the Jacobs' tract. This land dropped off steeply with rock outcroppings and trees. Below was the Bear Lick community with its tiny Indian reservation, although smaller mountains and ridges hid all of the barns and other buildings. One hundred yards down the north side, the boy made out something foreign to this landscape, a dull metal object. Only when the leaves were off the trees and only from this vantage point, was it visible, for it was wedged in between a couple of large rocks, each the size of a full grown cow.

"Let's go down to investigate, Joe. This is goin to be a little rough. You follow me."

Joe barked his eagerness to proceed. With no path down the almost vertical slope, Junior had to criss-cross on the descent, hanging onto roots of pines and brush. Joe had difficulty finding places for at least three of his four legs at one time. On several occasions boy and dog slid a few feet on a bed of moss. One time the boy had to hold his dog. They were exhausted by the time they reached their destination.

What he found was a piece of tail rudder off a small private plane. Faded numbers and letters on the torn airplane component were visible. Junior stood on a rock and gazed around the area for other parts, but could find none. It was getting close to dinnertime and his mother expected him, but Junior wanted this treasure trove. It would be difficult to haul the piece up the slope alone and be back by dinner. Junior photographed the markings in his mind.

"Let's go, Joe. It's gettin late. Ma'll start worryin about us."

Junior chose a steeper, more direct route, which took him over tractor size rocks, slippery with moss and fallen wet leaves. Although he could not see much above, the boy knew the ridgeline and the grassy area lay ahead. About two thirds of the way up, he popped his head above a three foot ledge and a small cave appeared. Junior's waist was now even with the top of the ledge. He could see a little level area in front of the door-sized opening in the rock fissure. The boy caught his breath for a few seconds and stared at the dark inside. Without warning, a bear three times his size jumped from a nearby rock. All Junior saw and felt was ominous black fur on his face. The bear lashed out with its front paw. Junior pulled back, almost losing his footing, but the bear's sharp nails caught his right hand. With his other hand, he grabbed a root to prevent a backward fall and certain death. He yelled, "Help! Joe!"

The dog growled and attacked the much larger animal. It was no match. The bear turned from Junior towards Joe, coming up from the boy's left side. The bear's paw hit Joe squarely in his little face, knocking him against some sharp rocks near the cave entrance. Junior heard a snap followed by a yelp of pain from Joe. The bear's three cubs peered out of the dark opening of the cave at the life-

less body of the dog, then the bear strolled back into the cave. Junior, torn between helping his friend and descending to safety, soon realized nothing could be done for his beloved companion. Joe was dead. He stood motionless on the rock ledge and cried, then retreated down the slope almost as far as the airplane debris. He did not notice his bleeding hand until he wiped the tears from his eyes. The boy had no choice but to retrace his path up the slope he had descended earlier. It took much longer for the ascent, as Junior had only one hand and a heavy heart. Finally, he reached the top of the ridge and the familiar sights of his property. The sun's position over the Balds told him it was late afternoon, way past the time he had told his mother he would be back.

Junior had never experienced death close up like this with a creature that he knew intimately. This was different from hunting and killing indifferent prey. His loss devastated him. He was alone, his one true friend gone, a companion for as long as he could remember.

When Junior finally reached his home, his parents tried to console him. "Son, we can get another dog, just like Joe." Becky wrapped a bandage on his hand.

"There ain't goin be another dog like Joe." Junior looked at his father through bloodshot eyes.

"Junior, you need to count your blessings. You could've died up yonder." His father inspected the boy's hand.

"I couldn't even bury Joe."

Becky hugged the sobbing child. "Why don't you nap until Grover comes?"

"I'll do the yard work." Buddy volunteered.

"Thanks, Paw." The thought of Grover lifted Junior's spirits. "Okay, I'm whipped."

Later, a red pick-up that parked beside the barn awaked the boy in his bedroom. He flew down the stairs, forgetting for a moment his loss earlier in the day. Grover Ashbrook and the Garfields gathered around the dining table for supper. After the meal they retired to the living room and Grover plopped into an easy chair, the only one reserved for guests. "Ouch!" He leaped out, holding his buttocks, and looked at the cushion on the seat of the chair. A metal spring stuck out.

"Sorry. I should have warned you about that," Buddy grinned.

"I'm fine. Don't worry about it."

"There's a rip in your dungarees," Becky said. "You go put some of Buddy's clothes on. I'll sew it up lickety-split." She left for the bedroom and returned with a pair of shorts that had never been worn. "Here, go in there and change."

Grover obeyed, returning with the shorts on and with the torn pants in his hands. Near a dim lamp on an end table, Becky sat down and began to sew. From a large envelope Grover removed Alaska souvenirs to show to Junior and his father.

Junior gawked at Grover's hairy legs, then resumed looking at the hunting material. When Junior saw a picture of Grover's dog, so similar to Joe, he sobbed and left for his room.

Buddy said, "Let him go, he'll be okay." The guest was given an explanation of the day's tragic events.

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"How can you afford all these trips?" Becky asked.

"From the survey work I do on the side. Forgot to tell you that was a great spread. That's one thing bad about those trips, I hate to cook."

"Say, I know a good woman who can cook for you, she lives just down the road." Becky continued to mend the pants. "She'll probably be up here soon for some pie. She sews real good too."

"Becky, I wouldn't do that to our enemies, especially not to our friends," Buddy said in an authoritative voice.

"I think I better leave now." Grover glanced at the door. "I need to go home and feed the dogs. Haven't seen em all day."

"Do you want your pants before you leave?"

CHAPTER 6

Mary and her husband had an appointment at the law office of Arthur Waddsworth, just across from the Courthouse in Mulberry. For her, this came none too soon; the harassing phone calls in New Jersey had increased and disrupted her life. She longed for peace and quiet. Today they would finalize the purchase of their property on Corn Still.

Like his father, Arthur was a respected pillar of the community. The elder Waddsworth practiced medicine, making house calls to almost everyone in the county, many times without monetary payment. His compensation included all of the fruits of the harvest of Stark County.

As with Steve Fields' office, hordes of files and trash cluttered the attorney's office leaving little space to work. However, there was an air of professionalism lacking in the real estate office. Diplomas and landscape paintings hung on the wood-paneled walls; matching black leather furniture sat in the reception area where the couple flipped through out-of-date Guardian editions.

Mary said, "You know what, that hanging dog didn't even happen here. Some hunters from Mulberry went out West. They got mad at their dog and strung it up."

"Must have been a slow week," Rick quipped.

A thick layer of cigarette smoke floated throughout the office at eye level. A slender thirty-something woman bounced out in bare feet and greeted them. "Are y'all Rick and Mary Queen? I'm Marlene."

"Yes." Annoyed at the greeting, Mary wanted to liberate all these young women, when she moved down, but knew that was impossible.

"You'll have to wait a little bit." Marlene puffed twice on a cigarette. "Haven't finished the closin statement yet. Have a seat." The prune-faced secretary blew smoke in the direction of a waist-high house plant, disturbing a layer of ash on its wide leaves.

Just then, Steve Fields walked in with a plump man about his age. "This is Mr. Jacobs. He's the owner of the place and these folks are the buyers of your property, the Queens. I forgot something at the office. I'll be right back." He was out the door in no time.

Rick extended his hand. "Hello, how nice to finally meet you. Steve talked a lot about you and the property."

"Bet he did. Glad I'm finally sellin the damn place, so I don't have to listen to him anymore." Jacobs wiped the sweat off his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. "Roundin up all the heirs in my damn family and gettin them to sign off was a pain in the butt." He took a stack of documents out from under his dirty white shirt. The man and the papers had a strong body odor about them. "I need to show these damn things to Waddsworth."

"Before we go in, can I ask you about the cabin? Do you know when it was built?" Rick asked.

"Hell, no, I don't."

"Well, do you know what kind of apple trees are up there?"

"Hell, no. Never even knew what was up there hardly. Think my uncle planted one up there a long time ago."

"The reason I ask is that we all love apples. Sorry I bothered you," Rick said.

"You'll have to ask Fields that stuff." Jacobs shrugged his shoulders and started to walk toward the secretary's desk.

"No, don't bother." Mary followed Jacobs into the attorney's private office without knocking, obviously not his first visit. Rick plodded one step behind.

"Arthur, here's all these deeds and power of attorneys from the rest of my family." Jacobs waved the stack as he entered the dark wood-paneled office.

Sitting behind a desk that matched the walls, Arthur Waddsworth responded in a hoarse voice, "Good, I'll have Marlene check them right away." A unique unkempt mustache tilted to the right and made his entire body seem to lean in that direction. He glanced at Rick while placing a copy of the latest Guardian over an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, some of them still smoldering.

Mary worried that the paper would ignite at any moment. A cigarette hanging precariously from his mouth supported a perfect cylinder of ash at the tip. She anticipated that it would fall on her deed or other papers strewn on the desk. Smoke trails drifted up from several cracked saucers, and cigarette butts were scattered on the desk, making it look like a miniature war zone.

"Marlene, I need you here right away," Waddsworth shouted and then coughed a little. The bare-footed woman popped her head in the office and he asked, "Could you check these legal descriptions for me?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Waddsworth." The secretary skipped three steps to his desk, carrying the papers to her office near the waiting area.

"I'm Rick Queen, the buyer of the property."

"Arthur Waddsworth here. Glad to meet you." He rose and shook Rick's hand without disturbing the cigarette ash in his other hand.

Rick sank into a large black leather chair similar to the furniture in the waiting room. Mary remained standing and said boldly, "There may be a problem with the road into the property. Can you tell me if there's legal access?"

Surprised by her question, Waddsworth looked in the direction of Marlene's office. "Well, let's see. Jacobs here told me that he and his family used the road for over sixty years without asking anybody. That's a non-permissive use, as we lawyers say, and that would be a prescriptive easement. I believe the statute says you only need twenty years."

"What's that?" Mary asked. "I'm not a lawyer."

The attorney rose from his desk, his ash intact, cigarette in his mouth again, and went to his shelf of law books. He removed a green book, dusted it off, and turned to the middle section. He took the cigarette out of his mouth, and the ash floated to the carpet. The lawyer focused on the definition of an easement by prescription. "The use has to be open, non permissive, hostile and continuous for at least twenty years." He put the book back in its place on the dusty book-case. "You won't have any trouble up there. I know the Garfields. If you have any problems, come back to me, and I'll talk to them about the road."

"Yes, but what does the deed say about the road?" Mary insisted.

"Marlene, could you bring that stack of stuff back?" The phone rang, and Waddsworth yelled again, "I'll get it, Marlene, your time's more valuable than mine. You need to finish that closing statement." Before the attorney picked up the phone, he coughed again. Waddsworth listened to the caller awhile before saying, "I can't talk about that problem you're having with your neighbor's dog. Don't do those cases anyway. Try Mr. Fern down the street."

After the phone call, Fields slipped back into the office. "Forgot the deposit check, had to go back to the office to get it."

Marlene returned to the office with the deeds and the attorney looked over them. As he read over the documents, Waddsworth said to the secretary, "You have to change the closing statement. There's more powers of attorney that need to be recorded. We gotta collect more recording fees." As she left, the attorney finished examining the deeds and said in a deliberate voice. "This description is taken from an old Sheriff's deed back in the 20's. It does mention an old road in the third call. Although it does not expressly contain a specific grant of a right of way, you probably could prove a prescriptive easement. At least from the deed itself, there's evidence that a road was there in the Depression, and I'm sure the road did not change."

Mary felt a little more assured, but not completely satisfied. "Well, what does the description say? When we bought our property in New Jersey, we had a land survey done."

The attorney looked at the deed. "The calls in the description start at the top of the mountain near a fifteen inch chestnut...."

She asked, "That's a short tree. How could anyone find that?" and waited.

Waddsworth gazed at her. "Fifteen inch in diameter, not tall." The attorney returned to the deed. "Goes down a ridge with a new fence in a southeast direction to a planted rock in a field."

"Do they plant rocks here?" Mary interrupted.

"No, but sometimes old-time surveyors will make that reference. They place rocks to mark a corner. Okay, going to the deed now. Then the property line goes with a new line in a southwesterly direction past a large chestnut crossing a small branch to a sitting stone on the side of a road." Waddsworth paused, waiting for someone to ask what that meant. No one spoke. "Then up the road ten poles, then leaving the road and thence with an old fence in a westerly direction parallel with the northern margin of the apple trees to a . . ."

Mary interrupted again. "So the apples are not on the land?"

"Well, the apples are on some land but not on the Jacobs.' Okay, going back to the deed. It goes up a holler."

"What's a holler? Somebody shouting?"

"No, it's like going up the middle of a bowl. Can I finish now?" asked the attorney, a little irritated. "Thence with the holler to a pine at the top of the ridge at a rock cliff, thence, a northeast direction a piece with the ridge along with the top of a rock cliff and with a wire fence to the beginning containing fifteen acres, more or less. It also says it's a northern portion of a deed in 1875 to Sylvester Garfield."

"Shouldn't I have this surveyed? Sounds kinda vague."

"No, ridges and hollers don't move. A survey would be a waste of money."

"Yes, but what about the line with Garfield?" she asked.

"You could have the survey, but it would delay the closing. Anyway there are fences up there. There's a little jog on your boundary with the Garfields. That call of ten poles on the road. It's about two hundred feet."

"Are any of the apples on the property?" Mary asked again. "Fields told us they went with the property."

"They own the apple trees."

Mary's pleasant look disappeared. At this point Steve Fields was getting a little nervous, his commission being in jeopardy. "I'll talk to Jacobs and see if he'll reduce the price."

"Tell him I'll split the cost of a survey if he goes down ten thousand on the price," Mary added.

Fields left the room and went out the front door to the sidewalk with Jacobs. Meanwhile, the secretary came back to the attorney's office, this time with the new closing statement. The attorney spoke. "Sorry, Marlene, I forgot to tell you there's a four percent commission instead of six. Could you do this over again? Here's the deposit check. Put that in trust."

After thirty minutes Jacobs and the realtor came back from outside, and Fields reported that the purchase price would be reduced five thousand.

"That should do it," Rick said. "If he'll pay all of the survey." Mary looked at her husband strangely.

"Marlene, could you come back, got another change," Waddsworth yelled again and the barefoot woman came back into his office.

"I changed the commission," Marlene said.

"Thanks, but the price is changed. This needs to be done over again." Marlene left again, without saying anything, but with a frown on her face.

Concerned about the situation, Mary pointed the way out. "Rick, I need to talk to you." This time the couple went out in the street. When they came back ten minutes later, she said to the group, "That's not enough. I'm still worried about the property line. We want it reduced eight thousand and we'll pay one half of the survey."

"That's too much." The preacher's grandson was surprised not only at the high demand, but also at dealing with a woman.

"You could put part of the purchase price in escrow until you can get the property surveyed." Waddsworth lit up another cigarette. "How bout splittin the difference? Drop it to sixty five hundred and put some money in escrow, let's say five thousand. That should protect you. I'll keep it in my trust account."

"So Fields can't get it?" she blurted out.

"Yes."

"What about if there are any problems?" Mary asked.

"If everything is okay on the survey, I'll release the funds to Jacobs. If not, the money goes back to you as your compensation."

"That'll be okay for Jacobs," Fields said without even asking or looking at his client. It was obvious that the realtor had a side deal with Jacobs.

Rick turned to the attorney. "I would rather have the survey first, but I'll go along with this only if we get a new deed based on the survey. If the survey's okay, and we get a new deed, I'll sign off on the money."

"Does this mean I have to get all new deeds from all my family after the survey?" Jacobs asked in a somewhat worried tone. Fields now looked dejected.

The attorney reassured the group. "No, I would only suggest you sign a quit-claim deed based on the new survey." Mary looked perplexed but waited for the attorney to continue. "That's a deed with no warranties; it only conveys title that the Jacobs may have." The lawyer looked over the documents again, adding after clearing his throat, "Is this escrow agreement acceptable to everyone? So I'll hold five thousand."

Everyone in the room nodded with the exception of Fields saying, "Okay" several times as if to drown out voices of dissent.

"All right then, I'll have to draw up an escrow agreement. It'll be a few minutes; you folks sit in the waiting room. You can talk about surveyors."

Mary saw that Fields was relieved that the parties had finally come to some sort of agreement, but before anyone left the attorney's office, he asked, "When do I get my commission out of the seller's money?"

Mary spoke up, "I want that also held in escrow until this is cleared up."

Fields was not pleased, but consented to this by his silence and then looked to the attorney who spoke. "Okay, everyone, I need to make some changes in the closing statement to reflect the escrow. Marlene, could you come in here again?" the attorney shouted to her, followed by another cough, this time more pronounced and prolonged. Ash on his cigarette gently fell on his desk on an old closing statement.

In the reception area where they all waited, Fields said, "I know a real cheap surveyor. He works for the State. If you go to Riverport, you'll pay triple the price."

"Okay, let's get it done," Mary said.

After a few minutes, the group returned to Waddsworth's office. The attorney wrote the escrow agreement on a yellow legal pad. "Everyone please read and sign it."

"Shouldn't this be typed up?" Mary asked.

"No, it's okay. Marlene can't do it; she's changing the closing statement," the attorney said as the secretary brought the statement into the office and left without saying a word.

"What about these attorney's fees to do the new deed? I shouldn't have to pay for that." Mary added. "We're going to have to pay some for a survey."

Fields said, "I'll pay the attorney's fees, take it out of my commission. How much will it be, Mr. Waddsworth?"

"Probably two hundred will cover my time and extra recording fees. We're going to record all these deeds now with the old description and the property will be yours, Mr. Queen. You'll get warranty deeds now from all these people. The property will be officially transferred once Marlene goes down to the Deed Office. She'll do it today. When we get the new survey, I'll prepare a new quit claim deed based on that survey. Come to think about it, I need to collect that

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two hundred dollars. Gotta subtract it from the commission. I had better tell Marlene to show that on the closing statement. Marlene, please come in, I have another change."

Mary whispered to her husband, "You know what, I'm glad she doesn't have shoes on."

"Why's that?" Rick quietly asked.

"Because she would wear the carpet out running back and forth changing the closing statement," Mary said in a normal voice to her husband and added, "I wonder if she'll put on her shoes to go to the Courthouse to record our deed."

CHAPTER 7

Up until 1980, Stark County had six separate schools, all serving kindergarten through high school. One such building was located in the town of Mulberry while the other five were scattered throughout the rural sections of the county: the Balds, East Prong, West Prong, Turkey Neck and Pump Gap. Because of all these separate facilities, the children, parents and communities remained isolated from one another. A few years ago, the County finally built a consolidated high school just outside of Mulberry in the Bright Knob area. Even then, friction and distrust among the communities remained, especially between the Balds and the town. All of the older schools continued operation as K-8 schools after the High School opened its doors. Two years later, the small ones at Pump Gap and Turkey Neck had to be closed due to declining enrollment. The few children from those communities were sent to Mulberry. Now, due to a little growth in the prosperous Bright Knob section and overcrowding at the elementary school in town, talk centered on building a consolidated middle school next to the high school.

In the Depression of the 20's and 30's, the population of Stark County swelled to almost double that of the turn of the century. Many people moved back to the land from the cities to farm because of a plentiful supply of food and wood. Neighbor helped neighbor in need. They may not have had paying jobs, but no one went hungry or suffered cold. At the outbreak of the Second World War, most of the young men left to fight in the military. Some families moved to Michigan and northern Ohio to work in the war effort, building tanks, jeeps, airplanes and weapons. This out migration continued in the post-war boom in America. Instead of armaments, there were washing machines, TV's and a host of new consumer products to be manufactured up North. Even after the war, few families returned, for there was no paying work to be had in Stark County. They were reluctant to give up the comforts they had acquired up North or the jobs that supported this affluent lifestyle.

In the early 1970's, some Americans grew dissatisfied with suburban life and wanted a complete change in lifestyle. Others returned because of roots or connections in Stark County, and the population inched up. A few counselors, doctors, social workers, and do-gooders came, attracted by President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty in the rural areas of the country. There followed a large infusion of Federal dollars for disadvantaged people, but some of these programs had a negative effect on the community, such as the school breakfast program. The truth was that almost every child in the County ate a good breakfast before school. County supervisors had no choice but to comply, and allocate additional time each morning for a meal that almost no one needed or wanted. This created a mess to be cleaned and wasted food. Washington even planned the menu, which offended the locals. The County did some good ole horse-trading with other parts of the Commonwealth to rectify this problem, but there was

much paperwork to deal with. For example, all parts of the state received both oatmeal and grits. By agreement, the northern part of the state got all the oatmeal while Stark County got all the grits.

Stark High School was much smaller than the one Abe Queen attended in New Jersey. For the first week, the freshman kept to himself, minded his own business and spoke to hardly anyone. On Monday of his second week in the new school and during the breakfast period, he saw a tall, lean boy sitting alone at a table hanging his head over a full plate of food. Carrying his tray, Abe went over to the boy's table and sat down next to him. Although he heard no audible evidence of crying, tears steamed from the boy's eyes partially covered by a John Deere cap. Abe whispered, "What's the matter?"

"My dog got killed by a bear." He paused to wipe his eyes with a napkin. "Can't remember life without him."

"I lost a little dog back in Jersey two years ago. A car ran over her right in front of my house. I saw the whole thing and it was terrible."

"Yeah, I seen it too, but mine's different. Me and Joe hunted, fished, did chores and slept together."

"Didn't do all that with my dog, but I missed her." Abe's eyes also watered. "She liked to lay at the foot of my bed at night. She was supposed to sleep in the garage, but I sneaked her in sometimes."

The boy nodded. "Just like mine."

"Well, after she got killed, I got involved in other things."

"What things?"

Abe could tell that this boy was curious about him, but felt out of place, wearing a long-sleeved shirt and clear plastic eyeglasses. "Model trains. I love to build things. Had a great layout in Jersey modeled after the main line Erie railroad that ran right by my house. It had four tracks side by side." He held four fingers in the air. "The line later merged with the Lackawanna. After that, the company went downhill. It was known as the 'Weary Erie.' Lost a lot of money."

"Yeah, I like to build things too."

"What stuff?"

"Gun racks, deer stands. You know, stuff like that. Helpin my Paw."

"Never heard of a deer stand. Is it for the deer to stand in the woods?" Abe asked with a straight face.

"No, no, my Paw and me go up in trees and watch for deer." Junior cracked a smile for the first time. "Don't really want to hunt for a while. Anyway, some people from the North came in last month and bought the place where my Paw and me hunted. He's upset about it, but I don't really care. All, all, all I wants is my dog back." Junior started crying, and this time several of the students sitting at the next table looked in the direction of the pair.

To mask the boy's expressions of grief, Abe talked louder. "Do you want me to show you how I build my models?" He bit into a plain biscuit with grape jam oozing out. Little packages of jelly one would get at a restaurant lay on his book bag, for the school cafeteria did not supply any jelly. Like the oatmeal, it too went up North. In return, Stark County received a little more country ham.

"Maybe." Junior fought back the tears.

"They're real fun to build. Some of them I buy in kits. Others are scratch built. Those are harder to build. Made from all sorts of stuff."

"Like what?" Junior became curious.

"Balsa wood, plastic sheeting, sandpaper, cardboard and metal cans for oil tanks. One time, I opened up all the spinach cans in my Mom's kitchen. Put the spinach in a big ole bowl and then hid it in the back of her pantry. Forgot about it." Abe stirred his grits, unsure what to do with it. He continued, "That's until after a few weeks later when things started to grow in it. I meant to tell her about it when she got home that day, but it slipped my mind altogether. Had too much fun that day making an oil tank farm." The boy looked confused and Abe clarified his previous statement. "It's a place they grow tanks." Both boys laughed together.

"Reckin she was mad?"

"Sure was. Punished me by serving me spinach every day for two months. I'll never eat the stuff again."

"Don't eat a lick of that."

Abe began to realize that he had something in common with him. "Another time I borrowed my Mom's favorite comb to make ridges in Plaster of Paris to look like crop land."

"What's the plaster stuff? Comes from Paris?"

"No. No. You mix it up. It's like you start with a liquid, like this stuff I'm eating."

"Really."

"Then it hardens up"

"Just like my Aunt Henrietta's grits."

"Yes, but only trouble is that I couldn't get the plaster out of the teeth after it hardened."

"What'd she do to you then?"

"Not telling," Abe said with a grin.

"So what do you model?"

"All kinds of buildings, bridges, cars, trucks, freight cars and passenger ones. The steam engines are the most complicated because they have a lot of moving parts." Abe placed half a spoonful of the grits in his mouth. "Most of my stuff's still in Jersey, but I have a few here. My next project is the railroad station in town."

"The Mulberry station?" Junior had an astonished look.

"Yes."

"It's closed now. No trains stop there no more."

"Yes, I know. The last passenger train was in 1955." Abe took a swallow of grits.

"How'd you know that? You're not from these here parts!"

"How can you tell?" Abe asked.

"For one thing, you don't lay no gravy to your biscuits." Junior dove into his food for the first time.

"I don't want to ruin a perfectly good breakfast by putting gravy on it. Gravy's for pot roast or something like that," Abe argued mildly.

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"Say, what kind a dog did you have?" Junior took his cap off.

"A Westie. It's short for West Highland Scottish Terrier. They're not too good for hunting, the stuff you like."

"Huntin's tirin me a bit." Junior munched while talking. "Gotta climb too much."

"Well, they like to chase little animals, mice, squirrels, chipmunks and stuff like that. In Scotland they helped herd sheep, and that's where they're from. Westies are friendly, smart too." Abe burped and several students at the next table turned. "I don't like German Shepherds. Got bitten by one right on the leg, tore my pants." Abe stood up and pulled up his right trouser leg to the knee. "I still have a scar. Couldn't deliver eggs for about a month."

"Deliverin eggs?" Junior continued to be flabbergasted.

"I had an egg route up there. Pushed around an old grocery cart to the neighbors."

"I'd like to see you to push a cart up Rooster Trace, so would my cousin Randy. He would tease you for the rest of your life."

"Don't tell anyone, but the kids called me 'Eggert the egg man'. Didn't like it at all. Anyway, that's how I got money to buy trains."

"Don't wanna be mean, but you've done some weird stuff in your life, but I'll never tell. But do those Westie's get in trouble?"

"One time, I left a crate of eggs in the garage in Jersey by mistake. You know, for my route. My dog Tippy got locked up there over night by my Dad. By accident. Next morning, what a mess!"

"Reckin you and your Paw got egg all over your faces."

Abe nodded.

"I'd better protect my chickens." Junior wiped his forehead with a napkin. "You know, Joe got into trouble. Last year he pushed over my box of spiders. Couldn't find em after that, except for the time Sis was washin her hair in the tub. Never heard someone scream so loud."

"Don't worry, a Westie wouldn't act like that. Maybe would chase the spiders if they ever got out. Why do you ask?"

"Thinkin of gettin a dog. My Paw's goin to let me have another one. Small dog would be better. Somethin that wouldn't tangle with bears. Grover gave me Joe when I was just a little youngin." Junior wiped his eyes with a napkin. "You know, my kinfolks way back, they all came from northern Scotland. That's what my Aunt Millie said. I'd like to see those models. Reckin I might try my hand at it." Junior smiled. "Say, where do you live anyways?"

"Place called Corn Still. No one's ever heard of it."

CHAPTER 8

On a Sunday morning in early December, Becky woke up while it was still dark. She fed the wood stove in the living room before the coffee started to perk. Her real mission was to wrap Christmas gifts in the living room before anyone else stirred. She had bought a new shotgun for her husband, a sleeping bag for Junior, music records for Sue Ann, a high power game rifle for Grover and various things for her sisters-in-law. This was just the start of big preparations for the holidays. When she finished the packages for her daughter, rays of sunlight burst through the picture window. Buddy came in from the first floor bedroom. "Good mornin honey, do I get somethin this year? I've been a good boy."

She threw a quilt over the presents before he could see what was on the couch. "Yes dear, I've made some coffee. Let's talk." Becky directed him to the kitchen.

Buddy staggered, still half asleep. "What did you get me for Christmas?"

"I reckon you'll get somethin." She reached for porcelain cups in a wooden cabinet and placed them on the counter.

"I need a new deer stand. The one me and Junior put together's startin to break." Buddy poured coffee and sat down at the breakfast table.

"Gainin a little weight, my dear?"

"Gotta answer that?" He turned away, not making eye contact.

"Buddy, I've been noticin that Junior's gettin tired a lot. Ain't sure what's wrong."

"Yeah. He's been draggin some."

"Seems like he doesn't go to the bathroom a lot at night. I used to hear him." She poured a cup for herself and sat down.

"This old house creaks at night."

"Startin to leak, too." Becky pointed to a discolored spot the size of a dinner plate.

"I don't hear him up upstairs that much, only Sue Ann. She practically lives in there. Have you asked him about it?"

"No, not really, Buddy."

"Maybe he's still feelin bad over Joe."

"I think he's over that." She looked at Junior's empty place at the table. "He's not eatin right. I gotta throw half his food out at supper. Allison says he ain't havin snacks after school."

"He eats a good breakfast."

"Yeah. But later in the day he gets tired and don't eat." Becky stared at the steam rising from her cup. "Let's take him to the clinic in Mulberry."

"I reckon. After the holidays."

Becky sipped her drink. "All right, anyway too much goin on this time of the year. I gotta stay some over at my folks over Christmas. Junior likes to stay up yonder at the Balds too."

"Gets away from Randy." Buddy reached for the refrigerator door and grabbed a pitcher inside. "Junior don't like him too much."

"How does Junior get along with the boy up yonder at the Jacobs' place?" To cool her coffee, Becky poured some milk into the cup.

"As far as I know they don't have too much in common." Buddy put his mug down for a refill. "They've been livin' up there for about a month. Ain't seen the youngin' round that much, but haven't paid too much attention to it."

"Yeah, I think his Paw takes him to school in the morning, and his Ma takes him home. When I go to the library to visit with Millie at closin' time, he's there a lot. She says that he's a quiet boy. Keeps to himself. Always readin' magazines with pictures of trains, doin' drawins of some sort."

"How about the Ma?" He looked up from his fresh cup of coffee.

"That's a different story. Millie says that she has an opinion on everything. She really hasn't had a chance to talk to her much, but the woman's tellin' Millie how the library needs to be run." Becky put her drink down. "The new woman up yonder has even come to our school bossin' Mrs. Filburn around. Talkin' about a fundraiser to start a new library for our school. I don't think Filburn knows what she's in for."

"I hear the youngins' upstairs." Buddy pointed upward. "Better get goin' with the breakfast. We gotta go to church a bit early to pass out bulletins."

"Okay, I'll get started after I hide the presents."

"I'll do that."

"No, you won't. You get goin' for church."

All of the Garfield clan attended church at the crossroad community of Fox Den at the intersection of Rooster Trace and Possum Trot. At present, there were only about twenty operating churches left in Stark County. Before the popularity of automobiles in the 1930's, there were three times as many; everyone walked or rode by horseback, so the buildings had to be close to where people lived. Many of these old wood frame buildings still dotted the landscape, but most were in disrepair and abandoned.

Soon Junior came down foraging for breakfast, while Sue Ann was upstairs taking a bath. They knew that Sunday morning brought a feast. There would be another big spread after church for the whole clan.

"Good mornin'! How's Junior this mornin'?" Becky said.

"Great, Ma." Junior replied in a cheery voice as he entered the kitchen. "How's that new calf doin', Paw?"

"Fine. Before I turned in last night, went out to the barn and checked on it. It stays close to its mother still. Need to look at it again."

"Mind if I take a gander?" Junior grabbed a strip of bacon from a platter and his red coat off a nail beside the kitchen door.

"Sure, I was goin' out there in a minute. You can do it for me." Buddy replied as his son went outside and across the road to the nearby barn.

Becky reached up to a shelf on the cupboard and slid a bag of flour out. A trail of white dust followed. "Buddy, I need to talk to you about your sister Henrietta. Allison says, um, she's startin' to drink again. Georgia also says that she stops at 'Cow Girls' to get the stuff."

"She needs somethin more to do," Buddy said.

"Well, um, I think her kids are botherin her." Becky stood by the counter and measured the flour into a glass bowl. "What about a job for her?"

"They're hard to come by."

"What about at the Wagon?" She lit a match on the stove and slid a griddle the size of a basketball over the flame.

"They only hire pretty young things at that place. Of course, I never look at anything except food." Buddy was quick to defend himself, although not all that convincing.

Becky added two cups of milk to the bowl. "Yeah, that's why all the men go there." She stirred the mix of ingredients into a soupy consistency.

"I admit it's pretty crowded. Just don't have her work with Georgia at 'Cow Girls' beer joint."

"That would be hard with all that liquor there." As Becky poured batter on the hot griddle, it made a crackling sound. "What about where you work? Peggy Ellen works there."

"Not hirin. Anyway, I'd have to ask one of the Winde boys to get her a job there."

"What's wrong with that? Your Paw talked to old man Winde bout gettin you a job on the roads."

"I hate to ask those people."

Henry and Howard Winde were prominent attorneys in Stark County. Both twin brothers had well-trimmed, short black beards like the Smith brothers on a cough drop box. Their father had operated one of the last commercially productive dairy farms in the county. Yet, his real notoriety was, that as the political boss of the local Democratic Party, he had controlled everything in the county for years. Even though he was never elected to any public office, the senior Winde had doled out jobs, awarded construction contracts and decided what roads were paved. He had pushed all his children to go to law school and tried to pass on his dynasty with mixed success. His only daughter went away to college and never returned to Stark County, for she did not want to be embroiled in politics and its cronyisms. She rarely visited the County; the only time in recent memory was for the funeral of her father several years ago.

From the kitchen, they heard car tires crunching on gravel above the house. Becky moved to the window and saw an Audi approaching the barn at a high rate of speed. Junior was in the wide door walking towards the kitchen porch, and the car missed him by two feet.

The boy jumped back. "Slow down!"

Sue Ann flew down the stairs to the kitchen. Buddy leaped from the table and ran outside. The car never slowed as it whizzed past Peggy Ellen's trailer. It finally reduced speed at Allison's and turned left toward town. Although not hit, Junior was shaken a bit. "Paw, those people need to slow down on the road. They almost hit me." Buddy ushered him back in the house.

After checking him over, Becky returned to the stove. Black smoke rose from the pancakes. She threw them away and poured fresh batter on the griddle. "Buddy, you need to talk to those people right away."

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"Don't like to go up there no more, but I'll do it after church."

The phone rang, but before picking it up, Becky said to her husband, "That's Allison reporting on the car." Becky answered it and without listening to the caller, said, "Good Mornin, Allison. Yes, I heard the car go fast. Buddy will talk to them about it. Don't worry about it. We'll take care of it."

"How did you know that it was me on the phone? I guess, well, don't answer that. Look, sorry to bother you. Bye."

Becky hung up the phone and said to her husband. "We gotta get her hitched up with a man!"

Buddy looked over to the stove. "Another set of pancakes is toast."

"Oh no!" She shook her head at the griddle in frustration.

"Maybe those people up there know someone. When I talk to them, I'll ask. I don't care if Allison gets hooked up with a Yankee again."

"Millie says they have some pretty weird friends." Becky scooped the last of the batter out of the bowl to try again. "One even writes plays for a livin. Said that the woman up yonder checked out a book on crystals."

"Maybe they're mining the stuff up there," Sue Ann said.

"Something we should know about." Buddy turned to his wife. "Better send Junior up there to check it out."

"Don't you have to tell them about payin some for the gravel?"

"Oh yeah, I need to do that too. There's a game on right after church. The Bengals are in the playoffs. Gotta watch that."

"I don't think you'll make it all the way through." Her eyes were glued to the pancakes as they developed bubbles on the top. "Usually after Sunday dinner you lie on that couch to watch the game on TV. You're asleep by halftime." Becky flipped them over.

"Today, I'll make it to the end of the third quarter."

CHAPTER 9

"That's the place where Joe got killed." Junior pointed down the mountain towards Bear Lick. He and Abe stood on the ridge on the property Abe's parents had purchased a few months ago.

It was exciting for Abe because he finally had a person his own age to hang out with. "Is the bear still down there?" Abe backed off a step, a little frightened.

"Yeah, but he's in hibernation by now. Reckin I just scared him when I got up to his little house. Bears is protective of their cubs."

"Like the people around here?" Sweat streamed down Abe's forehead.

"Yeah, you're a smart kid, didn't know they had em up North."

"Everyone's basically the same. You got some smart, some show offs and some that are bullies."

"Say, Abe, you remember back yonder when you saw me cryin?" Junior gazed down on the Forest Service property, not making eye contact with Abe.

"Yes," Abe replied, confused about what his new friend was getting at or wanting.

"Do me a favor. Don't tell anyone, especially Randy."

"Who's he?"

"My cousin. Reckin he'll tease me. Lives down at one of the trailers."

"Sure, Junior, my lips are sealed."

"Great! You're a good friend." Junior looked in his eyes.

"Hope I'm a little better than Joe."

"Just a tad." Junior chuckled. "I gotta show you somethin." He pointed northwest to the top of the mountain.

"Don't know if I can make it. We've climbed a lot already." Abe sighed and wiped the remaining perspiration off his brow.

"It's not far."

The boys walked up following the ridge on the old Jacobs' side along an ancient wire fence. There was less brush than in the summer, only an occasional briar to deal with. When the boys reached the top, Abe panted some. "I need to sit down and rest. We don't have any mountains like these in Jersey."

"See those wooden boards up yonder in that big tree?" Junior looked up.

"Yes, there's a rope hanging from it," Abe observed after a few seconds of straining his neck upward. "Can barely see it."

"Let's go up." Junior jumped onto a rock the size of a beach ball near the large oak tree. He loosened a rope tied to one of its lower limbs. The rope dangled freely from the boards in the top of the tree all the way down to the ground. Junior started climbing the thick rope with his hands and feet. In no time, he stood on the wooden boards almost thirty feet above the ground and looked down at his friend through a trap door. "Now it's your turn."

"Don't think I can do this." Abe surveyed the situation.

"Sure you can!" Junior shouted from above.

Abe tried it several times, but he did not have the strength in his arms to pull his heavier torso up the rope. "Can't do it."

"Abe, you need to put your feet together and lock em up. Use em like a little platform. Then pull up with your hands on the rope. Ain't that hard."

"Don't think I can do all that at one time, but I'll try again." Abe made several attempts at it. But he did not have either the coordination to put his feet together while hanging on the rope with his hands, or the strength to pull with his arms. His stocky body would not go anywhere but down each time he tried.

"That's okay, I couldn't do it the first time." Junior closed the trap door.

Pleased that Junior did not make fun of him, Abe smiled. "What are you doing up there?" His friend remained hidden; Abe saw only the underside of the platform.

Junior popped his head around some broken boards. "Just lookin for smoke. It's fire season this time of the year. All of the leaves are off the trees now, a lot of dead stuff around. All of it will burn pretty easy until the rain and snow comes. That'll be pretty soon. Things don't change much around here, same things happen each season." Junior disappeared again.

"See any fires?" Abe yelled.

The trap door opened. "Just a small one over near the high school in Mulberry."

"Is somebody burning it down?" Abe asked with a ray of hope in his voice.

"I wish. It's only somebody burnin brush."

"Can you really see that far?" Abe tried to squint through the brush and trees.

"I've got a pair of binoculars up here. Keep em in this ammo can. I can even see where my Ma's folks live, the Balds. Be down in a minute." A metallic banging sound was heard, and then Junior slid down the rope in thirty seconds.

"That looks fun," Abe said as Junior's feet softly hit the leaf-covered ground.

"I love it up there. Go up there to watch for deer, bear and stuff like that. Get a good gander of the hawks on the rock ledges."

"How did you build it way up there?"

"With a skyhook," Junior said in a matter of fact manner.

"What's that?" Abe responded with a puzzled expression. "Do you get that at the hardware store?"

"Nope, I'm pullin your leg a bit."

"You're not touching me."

"Just kiddin a tad."

"Okay, I understand." Abe joined in the humor. "People don't talk like that where I'm from."

"It'll take awhile for you to learn the talk round these parts." Junior tied the rope back to the tree limb. He stood on the rock and started to make a mark on the tree with his hunting knife.

"Do they offer the course at school?" Abe asked, knowing the answer as both boys smiled at each other. "Well, how'd you build it?"

"Tell you the truth, my Paw did most of it. I just watched him from here. He's got this gadget thing to go up trees. Now, I'm not kiddin this time. Show you

sometime." Junior put the knife back in the sheaf on his waist. "The way we made it was, I first tied boards together on the ground here. He hauled em up by rope."

"Do you go up with your Dad now?"

"Climb some with him." Junior paused. "Well, come to think about it. He ain't climbin none no more. Puttin on a few pounds. First it was real scary up there; I'm used to it now. There's some other things I need to show you."

"Hope it doesn't involve climbing," Abe said.

"Nope, it don't. All down hill from here."

The boys retraced their steps along the fence line down the ridge to the clearing. As they reached the grassy spot, Abe said, out of breath. "Can we rest a little? This is a good place to sit down and look at the view."

"Sure, I love it here too, except for the bears."

"My parents are thinking about putting a new house here." Looking around, not trusting Junior completely, Abe pointed to some red stakes spread out in the grass.

"Sure wish it would just stay the same." Junior hung his head down.

Abe could see that this upset him, probably torn between pleasing his father and wanting to be a friend. "I'm sure you can still climb up there. I'll make certain of that with my parents."

Junior's face lit up. "Good, I would like that."

"Anyway, they won't be building for awhile. Don't worry about it."

"Let's go down now. I'll show you some salamanders in the creek. On the way down, look for some metal stuff. It's part of an old liquor still. My Paw and me found a piece just before you moved up here."

"Is that how Corn Still got its name?"

"Yeah, my Great-granpaw planted a lot of corn. He ate some of it and drank some. Built a still out of an old Model T car. Used the water in the little spring down there below your cabin."

"Really? Maybe we can make a model of it."

"The car or the still?" Junior asked. "Probably agin the law to build the still. The Sheriff would come up here again."

The boys crossed the upper clearing and meandered down the holler, deviating from the path to look for parts of the liquor operation. At the cabin, the pair followed the road about halfway down to Junior's house just below the apple trees. There was a little open area to the left of the road as they walked down the valley. The boys climbed down some rounded rocks to the creek with only a trickle running this time of the year.

Junior put his hands in the water. "Have you seen salamanders before, Abe?"

"Yes, they have them in Jersey also. They live under small rocks at the edge of small brooks." Abe turned over some stones in the water.

"We call em creeks round these parts. This is a great place for them. They make good bait for fish, but my Paw says to leave em alone."

"Why's that?"

"They're getting rare now, on the threatened list of animals. Used to be a lot more of em. Sensitive to bad stuff in the water. My Paw likes em because they

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eat a lot of insects." Junior lifted a wallet-sized rock out of the water and a two inch reptile slithered away. "Keeps the balance of nature in check." He grabbed it in his right hand before it escaped under another rock. Junior opened two fingers and showed the black amphibian to his friend. "I know this place hasn't changed in a long while. I guess I take it for granted. Haven't been anywhere else."

"Have you been to Riverport?" Abe asked, surprised at his friend's response.

"Only once a year around Easter." He put his hand on the surface of the creek and released the slimy creature. It disappeared underneath a rock.

"Really, you need to go to New York City up North. There's a lot of neat things." Abe turned over several rocks.

"Like what?"

"They have underground trains." A salamander wiggled in Abe's hand, but it escaped. "Statue of Liberty right in the water."

"I saw some pictures of it in my history book." Junior caught another creature but let it go within seconds. "The French give that to us after the War Between the States?"

"Yes, you know a lot about history."

"That's my favorite in school. But I really need to know, can you visit the Statue of Liberty?"

"You can go up in her head." Abe said. "I've been up there with my Grandparents."

"Really, I wish I could go up into my sister's head."

"Why?" Abe said, this time in a puzzled tone.

"Try to find out if there's somethin up there."

CHAPTER 10

"Sorry, I'm late, Mrs. Filburn. There's some snow on Egg Gap this morning." Becky rushed into the school office. A group of young mothers milled about in front of the counter.

The principal appeared from her workplace. "At least Tammy gets here on time. We've had a lot of calls due to the weather. Becky, could you file these records." The elderly lady disappeared back to her private office.

"Okay, I suppose," Grumbling to herself, Becky took off her coat and lugged some folders stuffed in a cardboard box to the back room. She preferred to talk to Tammy, whom she had not seen since before Christmas. News had to be gleaned from her co-worker, and the parents and teachers especially after school being closed for the holidays. There was not too much to do in Stark County in mid-winter: football ended, NASCAR not started, too early to till the ground and plant. However, there were domestic disputes and steamy love affairs over the holidays to be analyzed. After classes were underway and the parents left, Mrs. Filburn asked both Tammy and Becky to come to her private office. The two secretaries followed their principal into her inner office and she closed the door. Becky thought, "Oh no, what have we done?"

However, she was relieved to hear Mrs. Filburn inform her employees, "A new volunteer has joined us. She's going to supervise a new library for our children. Over the break, the janitors fixed up the old science lab room from when we had the high school in here. I want both of you to help her. We're getting some of the books from the county library next door."

Tammy said, "That'll be better. The youngins won't have to go out of the building to get books. That library next door should be condemned. You can still smell the oil from the repair shop."

Mrs. Filburn focused on Becky. "Both of you need to carry books from there, shelve and catalogue."

With a frown Becky insisted, "I thought we had to do the popcorn today."

"You're correct. The library work will be later this week." Becky relaxed and the principal continued. "There's a Ms. Ross coming to be in charge of our new library. She has some experience in children's work."

Slouching in her chair, Becky scowled. "That's my neighbor who just bought above us. She's from up North. Drives too fast. We don't have too much in common."

"Well, now you will," Mrs. Filburn said with a sense of authority.

"I reckon." Becky wanted to protest but limited herself to another frown, this time sustained.

"Is that all right, Tammy?"

"That's great, Mrs. Filburn."

"You know this is going to be a lot more work for me. I gotta look through all the books myself to determine if they're age appropriate. I've got my orders from the superintendent. All right then, if you both could go to the back room and compile all the prizes on the popcorn sales. We need to get it out to the kids; they've earned it. Our school had the best sales in the county. We even beat the Balds." With a proud smile, the principal started for her door. "I'll be at the front desk for a while, and then I need to go check on Ms. Ross. See if she needs anything."

Becky walked to the back room as if she was going to death row. The two secretaries spread out at least two hundred order forms on a table the size of a twin bed. They sat down in wooden chairs designed for high school students fifty years ago. The two women had to compute the dollar amount sold by each child to determine their eligibility for a certain prize, make a list of the type of prizes and figure the number of each type of popcorn sold by each child. It was not much fun, but at least they were able to gossip. After about an hour of tedious work, Tammy went on the front desk to replace Mrs. Filburn, leaving Becky alone with the popcorn work. In a few minutes Tammy returned to the back room. "You've got a phone call, Becky, sounds important. Caller ain't Allison."

Becky jumped up and took long strides to pick up the telephone on the counter. "Hello, this is Becky Garfield."

"Is this the mother of Sylvester Garfield, Jr.?" a female caller asked in an impersonal way.

"Yeah, I am, who's this?"

"This is the Stark Clinic and we have the blood tests back on your child."

"Yeah, what do they say?" Becky sat down in the chair with an elevated heart-beat. The results were not due for another week, and she was not ready for this. During the holiday she had tried to put this out of her mind, but it always nagged her.

"Hold on, I'll get Dr. Zirbroski on." It was a few seconds of delay, but it seemed like hours to her.

"Mrs. Garfield, your son has a very high urea level."

"How come?" Her heart raced as Becky slumped over the counter.

"This is a strong indication of a possible kidney problem. It's called 'Chronic Kidney Failure' to be specific."

"What's that?"

"The kidneys are supposed to filter out the body's wastes in the blood and when the kidneys fail, there's a buildup of these harmful substances. It can be dangerous if not corrected. This has been happening over a period of time in your son. It can't be treated or controlled by medication. Only by dialysis or a transplant."

"Oh, my dear! Oh my dear!" Both prospects seemed to be terrible for the active boy. Both his life, hers and all the kinfolks would be completely different. How would they cope?

"There's no immediate danger, just yet, but you and your family need to make an appointment with a specialist at the hospital in Riverport to discuss the options. Your boy will have to change his diet, and they'll go over all that."

"We'll get right on that, doctor." After she hung up the phone, it immediately rang. Becky picked it up, "Hello, Mulberry Elementary School."

"Becky, this is Allison, I've got some wonderful news."

"Good, I need some now. Glad you called." For once it was a joy to talk to Allison, as a diversion to this catastrophe.

"Georgia had her baby. Everything's fine. But she can't work at 'Cow Girls' no more." Allison said in a cheerful tone. "We need to get over to Riverport to see her. Can you go? There's not too much goin on with the soaps tomorrow."

"How would you know that?"

"Cause I looked at the TV guide. Also I can tell if somethin important's gonna happen."

"If you know that, why look at em?" Normally, Becky would not give a hoot and be asking this, but Allison's soaps were her temporary therapy.

"Need to get the steamy details."

"Anyway, can't tomorrow, have some bad news about Junior. Just got the tests back." Becky said.

"Yeah, I've noticed he has been draggin some, especially in the afternoons. What's the problem?" Allison asked.

"His kidneys is messed up. I've got to bring him to Riverport to check it out."

"You could take Junior and see Georgia with her new kid all at the same time."

"Reckin I could." Becky wasn't thrilled at the idea.

"You could kill two birds with one stone." When Allison said this, Becky started to cry. Allison realized she said the wrong thing. "Sorry bout that. I'm excited about Georgia."

"I know you don't mean that. It's strange that I'd be goin to the hospital for both good and bad purposes."

"Life's like that. On the TV soaps, it happens everyday." Allison paused and added, "Usually by the third commercial of each show."

"Are you still hooked on that stuff?"

"Yeah. Tried to get off of em last year. Then I gained weight, started smokin, played the lottery, took sleepin pills."

"Why don't you just stick to the soaps."

CHAPTER 11

As Rick entered the Guardian's office, Larry Butts asked his new boss, "How was your Christmas?"

"Fine. Thanks for working the paper up last week."

"Glad to do it, nothin much happens round the holidays." Larry, a man in his mid- twenties, had been working at the Guardian from the time he flunked out of college four years ago.

"Where's Molly?" Surprised to see her empty desk because Rick had thought that the high school senior planned to work all day through her winter break.

"She'll be back shortly. Had to go to the bank. It's pretty slow today, anyway."

"It seems like nothing happens any time of the year." Rick observed. "I hope you made a lot of money to go to the bank."

"I think it's a personal errand there." Larry went around Molly's desk to a small table leaning against a wall. The clutter on its top included a coffee pot, jars of condiments with some of the contents spilled out, a stack of napkins and cups scattered around. "Did you go up North for the holidays?"

"Yes. We're still getting harassing phone calls there."

"Same kind you told me about when you first came?"

Rick nodded. "Now a black van stalked us for awhile up there. At least the cops think we still live in Jersey."

"Did you stay in your old house?"

"It still hasn't sold, so we slept there. Many of the neighbors still think we live there. Abe was able to get more of his trains."

"What kind of trains?" Larry poured coffee in two styrene cups and handed one to his boss.

"Model ones. Not the real ones. He doesn't have them set up here yet. After we build this summer, he'll have a place for a layout. Say, I need to find a good contractor for the new house. Mary's been nagging me about that. Do you know of any?"

"There's a good one in Riverport. He built several nice homes around Pump Gap, overlooking the river. You'll have to call him at night."

"Good. The site has some great views up on the ridge. Mary hikes up there all the time. We'll have large windows in the front facing south. Going to have three bedrooms, but our son's will be in the basement. That's where he wants it, right next to his trains. We're planning it just for him."

"What good parents!"

"If it were up to him, he'd like the kitchen down there." Rick carried his coffee into the composing room with this week's paper spread out on the large table. The advertisements were placed among the news articles in a way to get the maximum attention. Many times an insignificant news article had to be deleted to make way for an advertisement, as that generated precious income. Sometimes when there was a short supply of ads, a 'filler' news article replaced

them. He always had a stack of those to choose from. To a news editor, no matter what size the paper, space always remained a problem.

"How has your son adjusted here?"

"A little bored. No one to hang around with."

"Teasin him?"

"I don't think they're doing that, but he hasn't found anyone he likes. All the kids his age around here care about are cars, hunting and fishing. He's still happy with his train projects, so I'm not worried about him too much. Even though he doesn't have a layout, he still builds models."

"I have that trouble about fitting in," Larry said, "Only came from Riverport. To some people in Stark County that's on the other side of the moon. Anyway, what's your son building?"

"He can build about anything. I know he's making a model of the station here in Mulberry."

"How'd he do that?"

"I helped him measure it when we first moved here."

"Hope nobody saw you."

"We did it at night." A smile covered Rick's face.

"That should please Steve Fields," Larry chuckled. "You need to hook your kid up with him."

"No thanks, he'll be just fine without Fields." Rick examined the set-up of the paper more closely. He moved several ads so a large picture of a car wreck could fit in on page five.

"Almost forgot to tell you, there's a big county supervisor's meeting next week. The coal quarry wants to expand, and the neighbors are protesting. Most of them are back-to-the-earth outsider types. They shouldn't have bought their property there in the first place."

"So you already have your mind made up?" Rick asked.

"Well there's a lot of people who earn their living workin at the quarry. It's about the largest private employer in the county. The schools are the only thing with more workers now. Every family has somebody workin at a government job. The mill used to be even larger than the schools, but the plant closed down last year. Even some outsiders from Riverport worked at the mill. Some negroes."

"I thought I was the only outsider here," Rick observed.

"No, there's a few just south of town here towards Riverport near Pump Gap, mostly retired people who bought places overlooking the river and the rapids. Some on Bright Knob. You're the only tree hugger in Corn Still." Larry had a faint smirk on his face.

"Yes, I know." Rick admitted to the charge by raising his voice a notch. Larry went into the reception area to answer the phone, and when he was finished, a woman in her 40's dressed in a coat, white shirt and bow tie, tiptoed in the front area. As soon as she entered, Larry went to the restroom, and the woman waltzed back to where Rick was studying this week's paper. He was trying to fit several ads around a picture of the winner of a pie contest.

"Hello. I'm Doctor Sammie C. Porter. Are you the new editor?" She said in a prissy voice and laid her feathery hat over one of the ads on the table.

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Her rich red hair blinded Rick. "Yes, I am, Ms. Porter."

"I'm a doctor, and I attended the Allied Institute. Please communicate with me as, 'Doctor', in the future." She emphasized the word 'doctor' and gratuitously added, "I did my thesis on Senator Thaddeus Calhoon, the first Republican Senator elected in this Commonwealth since Reconstruction."

"Never heard of him."

"Well have you heard of the Allied Institute? I have a Divinity Doctorate from that learned school."

"Is it a truck driving school for a moving company?" Rick asked in innocence, but in the back of his mind, he knew that this woman had an ego that had to be dealt with one way or another.

"No, no, it's a distinguished school of ministry," she said defending herself. "Well, I want you to publish my article about the Honorable Calhoon that I composed for your readers." Porter waved her hand backward and forward several times, almost touching Rick. "I also have a list of my degrees to be inserted at the end of the piece."

"So you went to other truck driving schools?" Rick asked, this time meaning to be sarcastic. "Did you flunk out at Allied?"

"Certainly not. I graduated ninth in my class at Allied."

He wanted to ask her how many were in the graduating class, but didn't want to push the woman too much. She was much taller and even plumper than Rick. In a fight he would get hurt. Larry returned and grabbed the piece of paper that Porter still had in her hand. "Thanks, Sammie, we'll see if we can use it this week."

"Well Mr. Butts, this is very, very, important," Dr. Porter pointed out in a slow voice.

"Rick, I need to see you right away in your office," Larry said with some urgency.

"Nice meeting you, Ms. Porter. Or I mean. Dr. Porter." Rick emphasized the word 'doctor' to please her, hoping she would leave.

When Rick and Larry escaped to the back office, Larry explained, "Sorry, Rick, I should've warned you about Dr. Porter. She can be a pest."

"Yeah, I can see that." Rick nodded his head in agreement. "Does she have a real job?"

"Not really, she sometimes works as a night manager in a seedy motel in Riverport, may do other things there."

"How would you know that, Larry? Bring all your girlfriends there?" Rick asked in a half-serious way. The ringing phone saved Larry.

Molly, who had just come in the office from the bank, yelled from the front, "Rick, it's for you, the Sheriff."

"Mr. Sheriff, glad to speak with you," Rick said as he answered the phone.

"We're about to make a drug bust around Turkey Neck and wanted to give you a heads up. You can join us if you want."

"Thanks, Sheriff, I can't go. Mind if I send Larry?"

"That's okay."

After he hung up, he turned to his employee and asked, "Larry, can you go with the Sheriff to a drug arrest? I have to write this week's editorial. After that,

I better go to the library and Courthouse to do some research on this coal thing before the meeting."

Larry agreed and said, "The Sheriff wants some good publicity because he's up for re-election this year. He needs a good picture of himself standing on a pile of some confiscated pot."

"Not smoking the stuff, I presume."

"The Sheriff's pretty straight, a lot better than the last one. That one was drunk half the time, chewed raisins and mints all the time to mask the smell. This one just likes to get his picture in the paper."

"Now, I know why he called me."

As Larry left with his notebook and camera, Steve Fields came in with some papers, ignored Molly, and went back to Rick's office. No one was there. Rick was in the restroom, so Fields went back and talked to the young girl in front. "I need to get this ad in this week's paper."

"How are you going to pay for it, Steve?" Molly inquired.

"I'll give you a check dated next week when I get a commission."

Overhearing this conversation, Rick came out to the front informing Fields that the paper required cash or a current dated check.

"Quickly allowed me to do this," the realtor protested.

"Well, there's been a change of policy." After Rick told him this, Fields stormed out of the office, slamming the front door behind him. The editor knew that he would be back with proper funds, for no other paper existed to put his listings in. There was at least one advantage to having a monopoly.

CHAPTER 12

"Thanks for coverin for me, Tammy." After removing a wool hat, Becky combed her hair. "Had to take Junior to the doctor in Riverport early this mornin."

"No problem, Becky. I had lunch in the back room."

"Told Mrs. Filburn yesterday I'd be late, but it was longer than we expected."

"How did the first dialysis go for him?" Tammy stood at the counter writing a supply order for textbooks. After she stuck the sheet of paper in the principal's cubby box, both women sat down at the desk in the front office to fill out timesheets.

"It really doesn't hurt, but it's hard for him to sit still for three hours. To pass the time for him I took some stuff Grover brought back from Montana."

"When does he have to go back?"

"Next week, gotta go every Thursday from now on. Need to get him some Vitamin D to help his bones someday; it's complicated." Pressing too hard on her pencil, Becky broke the lead. "Also got to limit his phosphate in his foods. That's in meat, chicken, dairy products, vegetables and breads."

"Well, what can the youngin have?"

"Spinach and egg whites for sure."

"I bet Junior'll like that."

"Well, he can have some stuff in moderation." Becky went to the pencil sharpener on the wall beside the coat rack. "The doctor told me after a while if everything goes okay, the dialysis thing can be done at home with a portable unit." The turning of the handle made a grinding sound. "That'll cost a lot; can't afford it now."

"Maybe the church can help." Tammy scratched her head. "This would be a good project for our Sunday school class. I'll ask Mrs. Filburn if we can put a donation jar in the school office, right here on top of the counter. Tell the parents if they want their children back, they have to contribute."

"Now, that's dangerous. We would be left with a lot of youngins," Becky said with a smile, the first one today. "Thank you, Tammy, you're so kind." She returned to the desk and worked on her timesheet.

Tammy glanced at the clock that connected the buzzer system for the school. "Have you had lunch? It's almost one o'clock." She put her record in a wire box on an old table.

"No, I won't go to dinner today. Been gone enough. It's going to be busy and school gets out early. Some sort of teacher's meetin and parents'll be startin to come for their youngins." Becky looked at the telephone on the desk. "Need to call Allison and remind her that they'll be comin home early. I dropped Junior off at the high school just now. Also, need to call Millie at the library and tell her that I won't be over for dinner. I imagine she'll survive without me. She has probably given up on me by now anyway."

The principal came in the front door to the office and acknowledged both of her employees, but looked at Becky. "How's your boy?"

"Fine, Mrs. Filburn, do you mind if I make a few calls? Won't take long. I'll explain it all later."

"Sure, go ahead, but I need both of you to go down after awhile to meet our new volunteer at the old science lab. She's making a nice little library for our students out of that mess we had last year."

Both secretaries nodded. Tammy's face lit up, but Becky was not enthusiastic about the new person in her territory. The principal let it ride, not wanting to push the issue, especially in light of the serious problems with Junior. After Mrs. Filburn went to her private office and closed the door, Becky said to her co-worker. "Tammy, why don't you go down there? We need someone up here on the desk anyway. I'll go meet her tomorrow. Got to make these calls."

"That's okay, Becky. Be back in a few minutes."

Becky called her sister at the library, her sister-in-law on Corn Still and Buddy at work. After these calls an abrasive man stormed in demanding to talk to the principal. She responded in a pleasant voice, "I'm sorry, she's on the phone right now. Please have a seat. I'll let her know you're here. What's your name?"

The man did not give a responsive answer. "Well, I can't wait long, got to pick up my son at the high school. It's getting out early. I hate this. You people have too much time off, and this disrupts my schedule."

"Can I give a message to her?" Becky did her best to please him.

"Yeah, you can. Tell her that my son should've received valedictorian. It was last year at school graduation. She'll know what this is about. He had more points than that girl who gave the address." The man pointed to a picture of an eighth grade girl on the office wall. "I went back and figured it out and your school messed up. I want a plaque showing he got it last year." Several young mothers came in the office and waited behind him, but this did not impede the man in the least. "I called the company up that makes them. They told me that they can't sell me a plaque without a letter from the principal here. I want to see her now. This is upsetting my son. It's going to ruin his career as a doctor. I'll sue you if he doesn't get into medical school. It's all your stupid mistake." The parents in line stared at him.

"Sir, let me take your phone number and I'll have Mrs. Filburn call you about this. I'm sure there's some logical explanation." Becky tried to console him, but she wondered why this man had nothing better to do than be worried about this trivial situation. He must not have a real job, having time to pick his child up from school in the middle of the day and to spend time on such a matter.

"Don't want to listen to you hicks down here." The dismissal bell did not deter the man. "I told my wife we should've never moved here from Florida. She wanted to get away from the heat, but I hate it here. No one can even count right. My boy should've gotten that award!" Another group of parents formed outside in the hall and listened to his tirade.

"Look, I'll have Mrs. Filburn call you." Becky realized that she could not reason with the man so she had to be firm. "Why don't you go pick your child up

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from school. Something like this can wait." She nodded to the group of young women in the office, who then left.

The man finally headed toward the open door to the hall. "I guess it'll have to, but I'll be back!"

After the man finally left, Mrs. Filburn called Becky into her office. When she sat down in front of the principal's desk, Becky said, "Just had a mad parent from last year complainin about his youngin not gettin somethin."

"Yes, I know. I could hear most of it. I should've warned you about him. I'll write him a nice little letter," Mrs. Filburn said.

"I feel sorry for the youngin."

"Could you start pulling his records together this afternoon?" the principal asked. "Becky, the real reason I asked you back here is that we've got a problem with bills not getting paid for the school. The phone company's threatening to turn service off. I know your brother works in county finance; can't he do something about it? I hate to impose. But we need the phone around here."

"I agree we need the phone," Becky responded.

"You need to keep up with Allison," the principal chuckled. "Seriously, could you do something about it? I hate to impose. Could you talk to Oscar?"

"I don't get too involved in his work. He doesn't with me. It's tough having a brother in that position. He basically pays me."

"You need to be nice to him then," Mrs. Filburn grinned.

"Try to, I'm proud of my brother. He's the first from our family to go to college, then come back here to work. My other brothers ain't amounted to much. One's in jail somewhere."

"It's hard to get a good job here," the principal said.

"Yeah, young people are startin to move away after schoolin."

"Aren't you all from the Balds?"

"Proud of it. Can you keep something in confidence, Mrs. Filburn?"

"Sure."

"Oscar ain't happy in his job there in finance. He writes all those grants there, that's how the railroad station got fixed. The county manager takes all the credit and half the grants that he writes don't get sent in; for some reason the money doesn't show up on the books."

"That's interesting. I appreciate that tidbit of news. I'll keep it close to my chest. I hope it gets worked out."

"I'll talk to him about the phone bill. I don't think my sister-in-law could survive without callin me at least once a day."

"Or you call her."

"Can't get away with too much around here, can I?" Becky asked, knowing the response. "By the way, I need to call Allison again to see if Junior got off the bus, you know with the early dismissal?"

"Sure."

After leaving the principal's office, she called Allison again, this time to inquire about her son.

"Yeah, I can see him now. He's runnin up the road with that new boy. Didn't even stop here. Hiding somethin under his coat. Looks like they're up to no good."

"Great." Her thoughts about his medical condition were erased for the moment.

"What's so great about gettin in trouble?" Allison hesitated for a few seconds. "Do you want me to find out what's goin on?"

"No, let em alone. Glad he's doin something with the new boy."

"First time I saw those two together. The youngin's parents usually take him to school and back. Shelter him too much. I guess they couldn't do it today because of the early dismissal."

"Look, I've got to work late at the school. We've got a little problem. Could you start supper for me?" Becky asked.

"What kind of problem?" Allison asked curiously.

"Don't have time to explain. Can you start supper?"

"Yeah, did you see the paper today?" Allison asked her sister-in-law.

"No, I've been too busy takin Junior to the doctor."

"Well, our editor neighbor's agin the coal expansion. Peggy Ellen's oldest boy works there. If they can't get a permit, he'll be out of a job. I wish that editor would just stick to the facts instead of tellin us what's good for us!" Allison was defiant .

"Allison, I can't talk about this now. I'll explain later, I've got a parent in front of me now." The same irate father appeared, but this time his boy accompanied him. Becky wanted to ask the man, "Is this the future medical doctor with you?"

CHAPTER 13

Abe slammed his metal locker with a bang. "That was mean of Randy to put spicy stuff in your sandwich." Before the homeroom bell, the halls of the high school were crowded and the noise level was at its highest.

"Don't care. Wasn't very hungry yesterday."

"Yes, but he shouldn't have done that."

"Reckin ain't supposed to have that spicy stuff."

"How'd he do it?" Abe whispered.

"Must have done it on the bus when my pail was on the floor." Junior hung his red plaid coat in his locker.

"Seems to be a real jerk." Abe said.

"Yeah, he is. Teases my sister all the time. Calls her 'snorkel' cause of her high pitch voice. But I've got to admit, Sis deserves it sometimes. Reckin he overdoes it some."

"We need to teach him a lesson," Abe thought aloud and then said to his new friend in a pensive voice, "I'll try to think of something."

"Hey, Abe. Found a Westie. Folks in Riverport has to go into one of those nursin things. Had to get rid of it."

"Great, I can't wait. What's its name?" This would further brighten Abe's life in this new environment.

"They call him 'Angus'. We're goin this weekend to fetch em."

"You'll love him. My Mom still keeps the dog's little winter coat. You could have it. It'll keep your pet warm this winter."

"Reckin he needs to be dressed right?" Junior questioned.

"They don't like the cold. Westies have sensitive skin. Have a lot of problems if you're not careful."

"Better get that coat for Angus." Junior brushed a briar off his jacket hung in his locker.

"Say, I've got an idea, talking about clothes. I'm going to PE this morning. Randy's in the class with me."

"So?"

"When we're all in the gym playing basketball, I could ask to go to the dressing room to get a drink of water. Then I could put Randy's clothes somewhere where they couldn't be found for a while."

"Yeah, he would have to wear his gym shorts to class all day."

Abe looked down the hall. "Also we'll need to get his coat and stuff from his locker."

"I'll get that next period. I know where it is, even the combination." Junior gathered his books from the top shelf.

"You could put his stuff in your sister's locker."

"That's a great idea."

"He'll never look there." Abe said.

"He won't have a stitch on him except those torn shorts."

"Even on the bus home." Abe leaned on his locker, wondering how the school would react to the stunt. "We better not get too close to him."

"Say, I don't go to gym no more, got a doctor's note. He wouldn't suspect me at all for doin that. If I was anywhere round, he'd jump all over me."

"I don't think he even knows we hang out together."

"Just as well. If he gets wind of our buildin models, it'll be all over school. Probably call us pot heads for usin the glue." Junior shut the flimsy door. "Where are you goin to put his clothes?"

"I'll think of something." Abe said.

The bell rang for homeroom so the boys went their separate ways. At the start of second period, both Randy and Abe went to the men's dressing room next to the gymnasium. After the students put their shorts and tee shirts on for the basketball practice, they mustered in the gym for the required drills. Randy took his shirt off since he was on the 'skins' team. Fifteen minutes later Abe asked to be excused for a drink of water. On his way to the dressing room, he picked up Randy's tee shirt off the bench when no one was looking. Earlier when he dressed for PE, Abe had noted where Randy put his clothes. Now all alone, Abe went to Randy's locker and emptied out all of his clothes including his boots. A laundry cart for the dirty towels was nearby. Abe placed all the belongings at the bottom and covered them with a pile of dirty towels so they were completely hidden. He returned to the gym floor as though nothing had happened and resumed basketball. After practice, Randy scouted everywhere, opening all the lockers looking for his clothes. He even went over to the girls' side after they had left. Randy did not think to look in the laundry cart, which stood right in front of his locker. Finally, he left with just his shorts.

Everyone looked at the half-naked boy as he came in the classroom late. Although Randy and Abe were in different grades, they had the same math class.

"I like your legs," one of the girls teased.

"Someone stole my pants!" Randy slid down at his desk and tried to hide his legs.

"I smell something, somebody's BO," another girl said who sat next to the boy.

"Be quiet," the teacher shouted, but the rest of the class laughed anyway.

The students finally settled down and a girl, who felt sorry for Randy lent him her pink jacket with white lace on the sleeves. He did not hesitate to put it on his bare shoulders because none of the boys allowed him to borrow anything. All period Abe tried not to look at Randy, but it was hard not to watch him squirm. After the bell rang, Randy went to the office to call his mother at her job with the Highway Commission, but she was out on an errand. A busy signal beeped at Allison's home.

At lunch, Junior finally hooked up with his buddy in a corner in the lunchroom. Abe said, "I'm sure sick of ham every other day." The school lunch never varied much, so Junior brought his dinner from home even before his new dietary requirements. Although still new to this setting, Abe too was weary of the food.

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"It's leftover from breakfast." Junior sat down. "They try to disguise it. Watch out for the big ole round bone."

"Why?"

"Cause I found one while back. Chipped a tooth." Junior threw his John Deere cap on an empty chair. "Why don't you bring your lunch to school?"

Abe swallowed some milk. "Seems like everything's rushed in the mornings, my Dad has to leave early and takes me to school."

"My Ma makes my lunch for me." Junior opened his lunch pail to examine what his mother packed.

"What I really miss is a Big Mac."

"What's that?" Junior bit into a home grown apple.

"Haven't you heard of McDonalds?"

"Yeah, I think they have one in Riverport. Never been to one, though. I only get there once a year."

"Don't know how you made it this far in life." Abe forced the last bite of the ham down. "I guess that's why I'm a little fatter than you. Every time we go to Riverport I get one of them."

"I go down to my Aunt Allison's for somethin good to eat. Almost every day after school." Junior unwrapped a cooked egg white and leafy spinach sandwich.

"Here he comes." Abe pointed Randy out with a pink top and bare legs.

By this time, the entire school had heard about the incident and the lunch-room erupted into laughter and cheering. There were several whistles and cat-calls. Even the teachers smiled, knowing that Randy finally got some of his own medicine.

"Abe, you should give him his stuff back now," Junior said.

"No, he'll find it tomorrow."

"Yeah, then he would ride the bus home without it today." Junior nibbled on his food. "Maybe he'll leave Sis alone for awhile."

"I'd love to go on the bus this afternoon," Abe noted. "That would be fun. Bet your Aunt Allison would like to see him."

"Why don't you ride home with me? Could start on the bank building."

"I'll call my Mom from the office. She expects me at the library to work on the history project."

"Good." Junior finished the last of his sandwich.

"If I don't finish the history thing I'm going to get in trouble too, just like Randy," Abe said.

"Hey, Abe, what's your project goin to be about? We gotta write somethin about the War Between the States."

"I'm doing a paper on the role of the railroads in the Civil War. My Mom found a book at the library that's interesting. I'll get some maps of the system on both sides. What are you doing, Junior?"

"My Aunt Millie's helpin me with mine. She's makin a book about the history of this county. Knows about all the family history too. I talk to her some at the family dinners and gatherins. Reckin she knows more about my Paw's family than he does, even though she ain't kin to him. She's related to my Ma, not my Paw. I'm doin a history of our kinfolks during the War Between the States."

My Paw's great-granpaw got wounded at Sharpsburg; the Yankees called it Antietam. Got a hunk of lead in his arm. Anyway, my kin had to come back to Riverport after gettin hurt; a little hospital was there."

"Where did he live before the War?"

"Was livin at Fox Den, and people in Mulberry forced him to fight in the Confederate Army. Some of his kin didn't go, took to the hills, places like where we live."

"Corn Still?" Abe asked.

"Yeah. My Paw told me that some of em lived up where the cabin is now. They got plenty of water, good huntin, a little place to garden, and no one could find em up there. They probably climbed the same tree on the top of the mountain that the platform's at. Had a good view of the River and the old turnpike. The Union folks around Fox Den, some of my kin, helped em some. Wasn't much at Mulberry either, just a few tradin places, post office, small cabins, churches, and a lot of farms."

"Are there any old relics left up there near the cabin?" Abe asked.

"No, not really. When it was built, the old stuff was taken away. I found a few Indian head pennies up yonder with my Paw. Spotted some arrowheads in the garden."

"When was the cabin built?" Abe continued to be interested in where his family now lived and the history associated with it.

"About 1915 Paw tells me."

"Wow, I'm living in a place seventy years old. My Mom thinks it's two hundred years old. She is always complaining about the plumbing. When somebody's washing dishes, no one can take a shower. Well, how long have the Garfields owned Corn Still?"

"Property's been in the Garfield family since the end of the war. Paw's great-granpaw served in the Home Guard while gettin better in Riverport. That's after he got hurt. He tried to round up the draft dodgers and watch out for the spies."

"Really, what did they do?"

"They had to go into Riverport every now and then, steal supplies. Needed salt real bad. They used the river from Mulberry. Built rafts out of logs to get down there. Stole horses to get back with the stuff on the turnpike. There was an old toll road where the railroad is now."

"Did they pay the toll?" Abe chuckled.

Junior did not have to answer that question. "Anyway, one time the Guard chased em all the way up to Fox Den and killed a bunch of them. There's a marker right on the road by my church. Tells about it. It was a real mess then. Everybody fightin. It never stopped even though the war ended."

"So your relative in the Home Guard fought some of his own people."

"Yeah, they made him do it."

"Well, why did he buy the place on Corn Still? Way out here with all that trouble?" Abe asked somewhat surprised.

"He wanted to farm. Get away from town; but the people in Fox Den hated him too. Some still do even today; they take it out on my Paw. It's still a big mess. After the war, the place was deserted and most of the people livin up yonder

went North. Reckin it was too much trouble for the dodgers to stay. Paw says that he got the place for next to nothin. Dirt cheap. Some folks livin round Fox Den and most of the Balds still stayed. They never really got along with the rest of the people. That's why there's so much trouble between the youngins from the Balds and town. The first year the high school opened up, the Balds refused to go. The Sheriff tried to make em go. Had to call the National Guard way up yonder in Bryon County to come. When they finally got here to school, it was nothin but trouble. That's what Peggy Ellen's oldest boy told me. He drives fast in his hot rod. So watch out when you push your egg cart round." Junior smiled. "Anyways, he graduated from this here place the first year the school opened. Told me that they had to cancel the ceremony because of all the fightin. Now he works at that coal place down by the river."

At the next table, the boys heard a faint gagging sound. Within seconds a heavy-set student leaped out of his chair, grasping his neck with two hands and bent over as if throwing up. He fell backwards to the tile floor, choking violently. A friend at his table dropped to his knees and turned him over on his stomach. Several students pounded on the back of his shoulders to attempt to dislodge the object. A crowd gathered around the disabled boy.

Abe jumped up from his chair and yelled, "Stop that!" Abe dove to the boy's head pushing away two students. "Help me get him up." With another student's help, they yanked him to his feet by the arm pits. Abe stood and maneuvered behind the boy. With Abe's right fist, thumb side up, he placed it below the boy's massive rib cage in front. Abe reached around the boy's body, stretching with his left hand, and grabbed the fist. Abe now had his stomach molded to the boy's buttocks in a tight grip. Without touching the boy's rib cage, Abe gave a quick inward and upward thrust. This was repeated several times. On the fifth try, a round bone the size of a quarter popped out between the boy's blue lips. Within seconds natural color returned to the boy's face. A teacher arrived and asked if the boy was all right. He pointed to Abe and whispered. "He saved my life."

Abe did not know what to say. The crowd of students clapped.

The teacher asked, "How'd you know what to do?"

"My Dad and I took First Aid in Jersey. He made me go."

"Well, you're both heroes then." The teacher sized him up. "You're new here. Don't know your name."

"Abe Queen."

"I'm goin to call your father up right now. Thank him too. What's his number?"

"Please don't. This wasn't anything."

"Sure?"

"Let me get back to my lunch. Haven't had dessert."

"Just sit down and I'll see what I can get. Can't promise too much around here."

"Some cookies would do fine."

"All right. I'll get some for Junior too." The teacher brought back some dessert for them. The boy that Abe saved thanked him and left to call his parents.

The two boys returned to their seats in front of their trays.

Abe said, "Think I'll bring lunch tomorrow."

CHAPTER 14

In their cabin, Rick and his wife shared both the sofa and the Sunday New York Times. The paper was exactly one week late, but it was heaven to him to learn of the current world events, national issues and the happenings in their old stomping ground. Mary borrowed it from the library next door from the school. They were probably the only ones in Stark County to read any edition of the Times from front to back.

"I really miss Ed Koch," Rick lamented as he read an editorial about the mayor's proposal to curtail subway service to Coney Island.

"You know what, I do too. Compared to these good ole boys down here, he's a saint." Mary put down the book review section on the wood floor among the masses of paper scattered about. "I never thought I would hear you say that about Koch."

"When I worked in the City, I didn't realize what a good job he did," Rick observed.

"I thought you just saw all the garbage building up."

"I should've overlooked all of the trash. That is, besides the cops," Rick said. "It's tough being a politician, but these people here can't think for themselves." The telephone rang. He struggled up from the sofa and grabbed their only phone, a few steps away next to the refrigerator.

"This is Grover Ashebrook, gotta survey ready for you. I'm just down the road at Garfields' a piece and could bring it up to you now. The race I was watchin just got over on TV."

"What race?"

"Darlington 500, what else?"

Rick realized that he should not have said this, for Grover sounded surprised that there were people living on Corn Still who did know what he was talking about. But he was anxious to have the survey. "Sure, come up." After putting down the phone, he turned to his wife still sitting on the sofa with the paper laid out. "The survey's finally done."

"It's only been about six months. I'm surprised Fields hasn't been pushing more. He can't get his commission until this is done."

"Mr. Ashebrook's coming in a few minutes."

"Who's he?" questioned Mary.

"He's the surveyor that Steve Fields got," answered Rick.

"What was the race you were talking about with him?" Mary asked

"One of those little stock cars. I gotta put some of that in the paper every week. Don't pay too much attention to it. Matter of fact, Molly handles it."

"Those things are stupid. Waste of gas. Imagine just sitting in front of the tube watching a bunch of cars running around in a circle."

In fifteen minutes, there was a gentle knock on the door. "Have a survey for you," Grover Ashebrook said in a business-like manner as he entered the living

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area of the cabin. This was no personal visit.

"Any problems?" Rick asked.

"No, not really, I could find most of the boundaries."

"How about the part with Garfield?" Rick asked as he detected a slight odor of beer on the surveyor's breath. He also knew that Ashebrook would not volunteer much information.

"It's mostly old fences. Some places it's down. Reckin that shouldn't make any difference."

"Why's that?" Rick was confused, but again, he should not have asked the question.

"Cause you don't tend no cattle." Ashebrook unraveled a large paper roll and spread it out on the table.

Rick bent over the map for several minutes while Ashebrook paced around. "I thought I had 15 acres. This shows 19.65."

"Well, with mountain property it's hard to estimate acres. Some of the old timers put less on their deeds to avoid payin a lot of taxes."

"Okay, how much do I owe you?" Rick asked.

"Around a hundred That's your half. Also I need ten dollars to record the survey at the Courthouse. Almost forgot that."

"Seems pretty reasonable. I priced it in Riverport, and they wanted a thousand dollars. Hold on while I get my checkbook." Rick seemed pleased and walked in the direction of his bedroom.

"Mr. Queen, could you please pay me in cash?"

Rick saw that Grover's begging attitude was far different from when he first entered the cabin. "Don't have that around."

"That's okay. Why don't you leave it with Buddy sometime."

"I'd rather not do that. We've got some trouble over this road." Rick paused, wanting to take this statement back.

Ashebrook was silent for a few seconds. "Your wife works some at the school, don't she? That's what Becky says."

"Yes."

"Can't she give that to her?" the surveyor asked.

"I suppose so."

The surveyor nodded and left without further comment. After examining the plat, Rick recognized the top of the mountain and the two ridges sketched in with solid lines with numbers by them. It appeared acceptable to him; there was more land than he thought. "I'll call Arthur Waddsworth and tell him to prepare a new deed and release the rest of the money. This looks okay. However, I'm curious about people underestimating their property, trying to cheat the county. It has nothing to do with this deal, and I think I'll look into this after Easter."

"Are you really that busy?" Mary asked.

"Yes, the primary election's coming up for Supervisor. Those stupid ads to work on. Some old guy, eighty years old, I think a retired principal, is running for supervisor. He put in the paper his grades that he got all the way back in high school." Rick fumbled through a stack of papers on the bottom shelf of an end table and gave her a copy of the Guardian. "It's on page thirty two, next to the last page."

"You know what, that's crazy, I don't believe it." Mary flipped through the paper. "You're right. Who cares what somebody did in high school sixty-five years ago."

"Maybe trying to impress his grandchildren." Rick left the table with the survey still laid out and went to the kitchen. All the appliances, an undersized cabinet for dishes and small sink were lined up against one wall, all open to the living room.

"How do you think the election will turn out?" Mary asked as she followed her husband to the kitchen.

He lit a match over a burner on the stove. "Depends on the activity in the cemeteries around here."

"I didn't know that." Mary put a glass pot of leftover coffee on the burner.

"Hope Felcie Smith gets re-elected. He's the only one on the Board who is independent. Only one who even let the environmentalists talk at the coal meeting. The county attorney tried to muzzle all of them. Of course he also represents the owners who want to expand their operation."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

"People around here don't care."

"Maybe you need to change that."

"I'll try," Rick quipped. "Felcie cares but he doesn't seem to fit in here. I know the Windes don't like him. The county manager can't stand him. Felcie makes him work a little."

"You know what, I get that impression, too, Rick. Mrs. Filburn at the school says that the two attorneys have a lot of political connections in Richmond." Mary reached above the stove for some coffee cups hanging on nails. "They're involved in fund raising, big parties for politicians at their home in Bright Knob."

"I need to research that also. I have enough work here to work beyond retirement at the paper."

"Speaking of retirement, didn't you say that Scott Revis is going to retire at the end of this year?" Mary poured coffee into cups on a counter just large enough for two of them.

"Yes, he did when I talked to him last week."

"Who would replace him?"

"Don't know. It would be nice to write editorials in New York and influence many people. I wouldn't even have to go out of the office. Matter of fact, I could do a lot of it at home. Spend more time with Abe."

"Can't you influence people here?" Mary asked as they sat down on the couch together with their drinks.

"Some, although most people around here are set in their ways. Remember that editorial just after that big car crash involving alcohol?" Rick slouched in the sofa and yawned. "These kids were coming back from drinking in Riverport. Most of them go to 'Cow Girls' just over the State line. I suggested that beer be sold in the county. I'd rather see them get the stuff here and not have to drive as much, especially over that bad road over Pump Gap. You know those kids are going to get it one way or another. The Baptist people practically ran me out of town for that comment. Some of them cancelled their subscription. One of them cussed me out."

"Really?" Mary picked up some papers off the floor and made a neat stack on the couch between them.

"Next week I'll call Revis and see who is in line to replace him. Also ask him if the police are calmed down." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "What do you think about this?"

"The cops wouldn't give you a welcoming party. You know what, I could live here or up North. Each has its own advantages. I love the peace and quiet. I feel challenged here at the school. There's one kid in third grade who I really like and would miss." Mary hung her head and paused for a few seconds. "She lives with her grandmother on East Prong, lost her parents in a car crash over the summer. Mrs. Filburn told me when she first came to school this year she would just cry, suck her thumb, and sit in the corner facing the wall. You know what, her teacher didn't know how to deal with it." She looked at her husband. "Since I started reading to her, at least she has stopped crying."

"Have you talked to the grandmother about the problem?"

"You know what, I can't really, she's hard of hearing. Has some other problems, arthritis, bad heart. She can't even give the child a bath. The neighbors have been helping some."

"What's going to happen when she can no longer take care of the kid?" Rick asked with more interest.

"The County Welfare Agency will come and put the child in a foster home, she'll be shuffled around. If that happens, it'll destroy little Julie."

"Is the girl a discipline problem?"

"Oh, no, she's a polite, quiet child. If her thumb sucking persists, that's going to be a problem. The teacher really doesn't know how to handle it." Mary picked up the papers and laid them on the sofa again. "She tries to get her distracted whenever she puts her hand in her mouth. Even does it on the playground. Matter fact, the little girl has weak muscle tone, doesn't get much exercise. Her grandmother babies her. Means well, but at that age, she can't do much."

"I bet that little girl needs some male influence in her life." Rick selected the arts section of the paper and resumed reading.

"Yes, why don't you take over?"

"We've got enough problems. Abe's not too happy here. Misses his trains." Rick yawned again, this time he covered his mouth.

"Yes, but when we build up on the ridge, you know what, we can have a basement. Did you call that contractor Larry was talking about?"

"Forgot to." Rick threw the section of the paper on the floor.

Mary's eyes followed it. "Well let's go forward with it. You know what, we need to put in a road up to the site first. We need to get this thing started. Abe may like it here once we build a new house. I'll like it a lot better. I love the mountains up there." She glanced at the open bathroom door with the com-mode in full view.

Rick picked the paper off the floor and put it on the stack. "Okay."

"We can put Abe's room down in the basement with his trains."

"That should make him happy."

"You know what? More glue sniffing."

CHAPTER 15

The deputy sheriff shouted, "Yes, oh yes, this Honorable Court is now in session, the Honorable Joseph J. Pickins, Judge presiding. God save this Honorable Court and this Commonwealth. Please be seated."

The crowd in the courtroom took their seats as the black robed man took the bench. He was one of the few declared Republicans in Stark County, coming from a strong politically active family. However, Pickins respected the entrenched Democratic establishment, including the Winde brothers, because he needed to be elected in a county where his political party was in the distinct minority. When Judge Fields died in office a few years ago, the first Republican Governor since Reconstruction appointed Pickins as judge for the county.

Buddy arrived promptly at nine-thirty in the morning for the start of court but had to take a seat and wait. Today's court involved traffic violations and minor misdemeanors. The courtroom was packed with people standing in the rear and stairwell area. He had received a speeding ticket and a past-due inspection violation, but he needed to contest the moving charge because that would affect his insurance.

Rick attended to cover an animal abuse case for the Guardian. A young hippie-type couple was charged with keeping ten goats in their house. Their neighbors complained about the animals coming over to their property during the day to eat flowers, bushes, and garbage.

It was nine-fifty when things got underway as Judge Pickins started to read the full names off the docket. The lawyers answered the call of the calendar on behalf of their clients. About midway through the calendar call, a well-dressed man entered the courtroom through a side door and sat down at the attorney's table. The Judge noticed, raising his voice. "Mr. Bartlett, you're late for court. We've been waitin."

Everyone looked at the lawyer now standing and facing the bench. "Sorry, your Honor. I had to attend a short hearing at nine in Riverport. Yesterday my secretary called the clerk to let the Court know I'd be late."

"Counselor, if you out-of-state attorneys are goin to practice here in this county, I want you here at the start of calendar call. We start court promptly here at nine thirty." Pickins shook his finger at him. "Do you understand?"

The attorney blushed. "Yes sir."

"Be seated then." The Judge resumed the call of the calendar, which lasted until about ten forty five. It was long and boring. He explained all the charges to the people who did not have attorneys. Many begged for continuances for a variety of reasons, some of them quite innovative. One lady from Bright Knob didn't have anyone to watch her cats the entire day. At the end of the roll of defendants, Pickins directed, "Madam Clerk, I need to appoint attorneys for indigents." He called several people before the bench, asking questions about

their income and expenses. The first was a women charged with shoplifting a hamster from Snickle's grocery store, the next a man who wrote a bad check to an escort service in Riverport. Rick guessed the third person to be in his fifties, but appearing a lot older because of his withered and wrinkled face. A dirty tee shirt and dingy dungarees barely covered his big belly. This man was familiar to Rick as being the man he almost hit on Main Street on his first visit to Mulberry.

"What's your name?" The Judge did not raise his head buried in the court docket sheet.

"Hoss."

"Do you have a last name?"

"Nope."

"Would it be Higgins?" Pickins lifted his head, barely visible on the bench.

"Don't go by that. Everyone knows me as Hoss, like the one on the TV show Bonanza." He cleared his throat, but some of the saliva dribbled out, ending on the floor boards. Rick, sitting in the first row, smelled alcohol and moved to the rear of the courtroom. The town drunk continued. "Do you watch that show, your Honor?" Hoss bent down, swished his mess with a finger and wiped it on his shirt.

The Judge followed all his movements. "No I don't watch it. Mister Higgins, you've been here many times before on vagrancy and drunken behavior. I've given you jail time."

"Yep, many times," Hoss admitted. "It's a nice warm place to go. I like it there, cept the grub. Could cut down on the salt some. Mashed potatoes little lumpy. Too much . . ."

Pickins, not at all interested in a critique of the culinary aspects of the county jail, interrupted. "You've filled out one of these affidavits of income and expense forms before?"

"Yep, last year."

"Well, I have to ask you some questions again."

"Yep. Know what they say."

"Your street address the same?" the Judge asked mechanically.

"Yep. Still under the highway bridge outside of town. Don't know the street address." Hoss picked his nose "That's when I'm not in jail. Don't know that either."

There was a little chuckle in the courtroom, and now the audience listened attentively to this exchange. "Quiet!" barked the Judge.

"Have your expenses changed since last court date?"

"Yep, your Honor."

"Well, what has changed?" The audience listened carefully.

"The price of liquor's gone up."

The entire Courtroom erupted into laughter, and Judge Pickins was beside himself trying to restore order. His face and bald head turned red. He pounded the oak gavel that he rarely used. Still not quiet. Pickins hit harder, raising it higher above the bench each time. The shaft splintered in half and the head portion bounced off the bench. It flew across the room, whizzing past Hoss within two feet of his right shoulder and landed in the front row where Rick had sat before. The drunk ducked and lost his footing, tumbling to the floor. The deputy

ran to his aid, but Hoss was on his feet before he arrived.

When things were settled down, the Judge said, "I'll appoint Henry Winde to represent you."

"Your Honor, I don't like Howard, I mean Henry. He represented one of my ex-wives, can't remember which one. "

The Judge lost patience with him. "You come back next month. Get out of my Court!" Hoss lost no time in leaving the jam-packed room. Pickens continued, "Madam Clerk, where's Henry this morning?"

"I think he had a highway meeting in the capital yesterday. Supposed to be back later today."

"Well, when he gets back, tell him I appointed him to Mister Higgins. Are those all the appointments I need to do?"

The Clerk nodded as Mr. Bartlett whispered something to a fellow attorney seated at the counsel table. The Judge, who had his eyes focused on the young attorney, said, "Mr. Bartlett, you need to be quiet. I will allow no talkin in my Court. You can leave if this happens again. Let's recess for ten minutes. This will give time for the attorneys to talk to the solicitor." The Judge's short frame was almost invisible behind the bench.

Everyone stood up and milled around. After waiting in line to talk to the solicitor about his traffic ticket, Buddy presented him with a document showing that his truck was inspected. "Got my pick-up looked at yesterday. Sorry about the speedin, could you do something bout that? I work for the Commonwealth. Need my license real bad."

"Okay, just slow it down next time. Pay the fine and court costs to the Clerk downstairs. I'll dismiss the inspection charges and let you plead to going over ten miles the limit. You can go and won't lose your license," the solicitor assured him.

Buddy went back up the crowded aisle and passed Rick, still sitting on the back row writing on his reporter's pad. The two exchanged glances. The editor broke the silence and the tense situation for the moment. "Glad to see you, Sylvester. How's your son doing?"

"What about payin for the road?"

"I gave you something last week."

"Ain't enough." Buddy left and walked out of the back of the courtroom. He went downstairs to the cashier and stood in another line. On the first floor, he saw most of his ex-brothers-in-law waiting. They were there for simple assault, hunting violations, past-due child support, driving while under the influence and a bad check. Each of Peggy Ellen's and Henrietta's ex-husbands was there in addition to all three of Georgia's former spouses. Buddy ignored them all.

Upstairs in the courtroom during the rest of the break, Rick watched the Sheriff mingle in the audience. It was a good time for him to do some politicking with the attorneys and some of the people who were charged with minor offenses. The Sheriff liked to make deals with the Solicitor to help these people, hoping they would remember it on election day. About half an hour later, Judge Pickins strolled back on the bench. Everyone took their seats, and silence returned to the courtroom.

The Solicitor stood up and announced. "Your Honor, I need a continuance on the animal abuse case. Our office couldn't get a hold of one of the witnesses."

Mr. Bartlett, the attorney from Riverport, rose, "Your Honor, I represent the defendants and we've been waiting all morning. I object to this continuance. The Solicitor should've subpoenaed the witnesses and arranged for them to be here."

"Let's put this on next month's session. Everyone in that case be back." The Judge totally ignored the young attorney. Mr. Bartlett filed out with his clients, all with disgusted faces. Rick and the defense attorney were also frustrated because they had waited all morning for nothing. Yesterday the Solicitor had told Rick this case would be tried.

The next case involved a pair of young kids from Riverport who were charged with stealing ten highway signs. "How do you plead to these charges?" The Judge used a harsh voice looking directly at them and ignoring their attorney.

"Guilty," the two young defendants replied together.

"Mr. Solicitor, did the Commonwealth get the signs back?" Judge Pickins asked respectfully unlike the tone he used with the defendants and the out of state attorney.

"Yes, your Honor."

"Were they damaged?"

"No, Your Honor, the signs were not damaged."

The Judge stared at the defendants for a few seconds. "Do you have anything to say?"

"No," both replied again in unison.

"Well, why did you do this, steal these signs? Don't you know that the public depends on these signs? They're important."

The slightly better dressed boy said, "Your Honor, we were lost."

Rick felt that he had enough local humor for the morning, but not much hard news. He decided to leave and thought, "A little different from New York court." Since Rick did not have to write a long in-depth story about the animal abuse case, he decided to spend some time at the Register of Deeds office downstairs in the Courthouse to do some research into the tax valuation problem that Grover had mentioned. Before he did this, he walked outside for some fresh air after being in the stuffy courtroom all morning. All he smelled was Hoss and his dog on the bench. A crowd gathered, mostly complaining about their lawyers and having to wait so long. He was tempted to go to the Wagon next door for a bite to eat. Since a line strung out the door, he decided to do his deed work first. Just as he was about to re-enter the Courthouse, he saw a Cadillac pull up in the reserved parking space just in front on Main Street. Henry Winde slid out of the car and trotted up the concrete walkway from the street as if he owned the place.

Before the bearded man ascended the steps, Rick turned and headed into the building to the deed office. He did not want to confront the attorney just yet. The Guardian's editorials about the coal meeting, alcohol sales and grants all criticized what the supervisors had done along with noting the many conflicts of the brothers.

The woman at the Registry was helpful in locating the original deed to the Garfields in 1875, the 1920's Jacobs deed from the sheriff, and finally his first

deed from Jacobs delivered at Waddsworth's office. After comparing the new survey that Ashebrook did with both the old Jacobs deed and his deed at the closing, he discovered it did not match at all. His plat showed a straight line from ridge to ridge as the boundary with the Garfields. Rick's new quitclaim deed was based on that survey, which now took in their apple trees. Apparently the surveyor merely connected points on both ridges in a straight line. The map did not follow the call on the old Jacobs deed and his first deed 'with the road 10 poles.' Rick remembered the description of this little jog from Waddsworth's office. No wonder Grover came up with more acreage, because he did not take into account that deviation. The survey line took in more property than it should have and that extra land belonged to the Garfields, specifically his apple trees on the left side of the road. It was either an obvious mistake or plain laziness on the part of Ashebrook. Rick really did not want to claim this area. He desired no part of the Garfields' apples and certainly no trouble with them over the trees. Before leaving the Deed Office, he asked the elderly woman behind the counter. "How would I straighten out a title based on an incorrect survey?"

"You may have to get a brand new map and deed. Reckin I would go to the surveyor first who done your work." The woman had a puzzled look. "Let's see that map please." Rick showed it to her, and she said after examining it, "There's no seal on this. A licensed surveyor must put their seal on it, and Mr. Ashebrook is not licensed. This is not the first time this has happened. Probably not the last."

"Can't something be done? Only qualified people should be able to do surveys."

"You could write to the Commonwealth office of land surveyors about it."

"Or I could do an editorial about it," Rick suggested aloud. "The people around here should be aware of this rip off."

The registrar nodded.

Rick could tell that she agreed with him but didn't want to say it out loud. Even though Rick felt cheated, he was pleased that someone in a position of authority felt the same way he did. "Before I leave, could I make some copies of these deeds?" Rick gathered up some of the heavy books on the table.

"We've got a problem with our copier. The county manager's daughter spilled some cola on it. Every copy has a big blotch on it."

"I'll wait until it's repaired," Rick said.

"That may be a while. Nothin gets fixed round here," was the desperate response from the lady.

"Why don't you call county maintenance?"

"What's that?" the deed lady laughed. "There ain't no county maintenance, except what you're lookin at."

CHAPTER 16

Ever since the boys talked at school about the Westie, Abe savored the time when his neighbor was to return from Riverport with the new addition. Saturday morning, he helped his dad clear brush, so he could be free the entire afternoon with his friend and the terrier. After an early lunch, he raced down the road and saw the Garfield's pick-up parked next to the barn. They were home with the dog! Abe knocked on the kitchen door and went in when he heard Junior's voice. A white ball of energy the size of a basketball jumped up, licking Abe's hands. Abe responded by bending down and petting its matted fur.

"This is Angus," Junior said.

"He's so cute." Abe admired the large pink ears, bushy tail, and stringy beard on both sides of the dog's jaw. "Just like the one I had in Jersey."

"Got him this morning. Cried a little bit in the truck comin' home. He's fine now," Junior assured his friend. The Westie ran in circles and his tail wagged like windshield wipers. It was obvious that he was happy to see another human, especially one closer to his size. Angus became the center of attention in the Garfield home. "Let's take him for a walk."

"Do you have a leash for him?"

"Reckin we need one?" Junior asked.

"I would. Until he gets used to the place. They like to dart off and chase things. Go right in the road. That's how mine got killed."

"Ain't much traffic here."

"You're right, but I would still leash him awhile," Abe suggested. "He needs to get used to the place."

Angus now settled down and spread out like a pancake right in the center of the kitchen floor with his little hind legs stretched out behind his larger white body. His two large brown eyes peered up at the visitor.

"Okay, let's go. The leash is still in the truck outside." When Junior mentioned this, the dog jumped up, lunged to the door and started barking.

"He wants out; he heard the word, 'outside.' Mine did the exact same thing," Abe said.

"Stay here, Angus. Stay with Abe, I'll get the leash." Junior said as the dog lay back down on the floor.

"Do you have any treats?" Abe asked, while the dog lifted both ears up like automatic car antennas. "That'll keep him close."

"Yeah, I'll get those too. Some are in the pick-up. His favorite."

"I guess he knows that word. Need to be careful what we say in front of him."

While Junior was outside, Abe stooped down on the kitchen floor, picked up Angus and started stroking the white coat on his back. The dog responded by licking the boy's face. The screen door swung open and squeaked, Abe turned. "I'm going to have to ask my Dad for one also. There's nothing better than two

Westies playing together."

The dog darted to Junior, who knelt down to secure the animal. It was apparent that the terrier liked to be leashed and knew what was to follow.

"Let's go, Angus," Junior followed him outside. The dog tugged ahead of him to the door. "Sometime today, I gotta clean up the prunins of the apple trees. It's up near your property just off the road. Promised Paw."

"How long will that take?" Abe asked almost whining.

"If we both work on it, reckon about half an hour." Junior sighed as the boys started down the road.

"You don't sound too happy."

Angus stopped to sniff under a rusted bed spring lying on Aunt Georgia's front yard. Junior had to tug on the leash to move him along. "Can't drive the tractor."

"Why does it have to be done now?"

"Paw pruned em last weekend." Junior turned and pointed up the valley with his free hand. "Has to be done before it turns warm. Don't want the blossom to come out. Gotta get the brush cleaned up."

"I went to an orchard in Jersey. It's beautiful in the spring with all those white and pink colors."

"You know none of it ain't possible without the honey bees." As they passed Peggy Ellen's trailer, her eldest son popped his head from under the hood of his 1980 Ford Mustang and nodded to his cousin.

"Why's that?" Abe asked.

"Cause the bees pollinate the blossoms of the trees. The little creatures spread pollen with their furry bodies so the flower can germinate. The bees need the sweet stuff in the flowers to make honey. They eat the honey."

"So the bees are dependant on the apple trees and the apples on the bees." Abe put his hands in his pockets, facing a brisk wind up the valley.

"Somethin like that. There's a lot of other stuff on this place that's connected in some way or another. I just don't know all of it. It's hard to understand." Junior shrugged his shoulders several times.

"Only God knows how it's all connected." Abe took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed them. "Like the earth, moon, sun and stars. Our planet's turning around once a day like a top, the top is traveling in a big circle around the sun, and the moon's going around the earth. The whole thing is moving around in the Milky Way galaxy. You know that band of white fluff you see spread out in the sky on a clear sky."

"Thought it was a candy bar." Junior turned to his friend walking by his side.

"No, no. It's millions of stars going around each other. Our sun is one of those stars. The whole Milky Way together's expanding out. No one knows how long it will go on or how it even got started. I get lost thinking about it sometimes."

"How'd you know so much about that stuff?" Junior asked.

"The more I know, the more I don't know." Abe blew on his hands several times. "Have you ever had that feeling?"

"Can't explain why I gotta get hooked up to a machine every week. No one else I know does that." Junior gave the leash to his friend and rubbed his hands together.

ED KRAUSE

"Maybe there's a purpose to that, but we just don't know it now," Abe held back Angus as he barked at the pond now in sight.

"Well. How'd you know so much about those galaxy things? Said you don't know much, but you know somethin' bout it."

"My Mom took me to a planetarium in New York City one time. In the day-time, you can see the stars and planets in a big building." Abe sat down on the bench under the oak tree which shielded some of the wind. Angus still pulled at the leash. "The stuff moves around by a big projector machine inside a gigantic spherical dome. Everyone sits around in a circle looking up. Never seen such a clear sky before. No street lights or anything like that."

"Up on the ridge you can see the stars real good. Reckin' I seen that Milky Way before." Junior pointed up past his house to the grassy spot visible in the far distance.

"I'd like to do that at night sometime."

"I wanta go yonder in the city and see that projector thing. Say, how'd you know about God? Youins never go to church like we do." Junior buttoned his red jacket.

"I don't think you gotta go to church to know about God."

"My preacher does." Junior joined his friend on the bench, and Angus hopped up between them.

"Maybe he wants to be able to keep preaching?"

"Well, my Paw says that we always need to be reminded of the teachins of Jesus. That's the job of the preacher. He eats with us on Tuesdays for supper. Needs to keep everyone straight."

The sun appeared in a break in the clouds, and the wind died down, all happening at once like someone had turned on a light switch and shut off a fan. Abe stood up. "Checks up on you?"

"We know when he's a comin'." Junior rose, removed his red coat and tied it around his waist. He gazed over the gentle pond with mountains in the background. The boys meandered to the edge of the pond, and Angus tugged in the opposite direction towards the oak.

Abe said, "He probably wants to climb the tree and get some squirrels."

Junior bent down and unleashed him. The dog darted to the tree and circled it like a merry-go-round out of control. "Let's see if we can roust any fish. I should've brought some bread with me. They practically eat out of your hand this time of year. Hungry after winter."

"Maybe they like broken-up dog biscuits." Abe took one out of his pocket. "Do you catch fish here?"

"The only time we're allowed to catch em is the fishin' tournament."

"When's that?" Abe asked.

"At the end of school. It's a lot of fun. Do you want to be in it?"

"Sure, but I've never fished."

"First, I need to ask my Paw if you can enter. It's for our kinfolks, but I'm sure it'll be okay. I'll learn you how to do it."

Abe threw some biscuits into the pond and a dozen carp greeted them, jumping out of the water almost in his hand. If the boys had a net, they could have

caught a slew of fish. Angus came up to the edge of the water, getting his feet wet, and barked. The pair sat down on the bank and started petting the dog to calm him down.

"Let's work on some models later this afternoon." Junior grabbed a round flat stone and skipped it across the surface six times. "After we do our chores."

"Okay, but before that I need to show you something up on my place. It's up beyond the ridge." Abe took the leash and hooked the dog. "I gotta stop by the cabin to get a jacket."

"It'll be windy up yonder." Junior threw his remaining biscuits on the ground for Angus to gobble up. "First, we need to clean up the apple trimmins. It's on the way up there. What do you want to show me?"

"You'll find out."

"Did you find some more liquor stuff?" Junior asked.

"You'll see."

The boys marched up the road from the pond with the terrier pulling on the leash. They dropped the dog off with Junior's sister, who was eager to play with the family's new addition. The pair hiked up the road to the apple field to complete the chore. The sun reached its zenith in the sky, but the wind picked up again. They worked about half an hour hauling brush and stacking it in piles. After stopping at the cabin for a snack and Abe's jacket, they climbed to the top of the mountain. Abe jumped on the rock next to the big tree, pulled the rope free and had no trouble ascending the rope all the way to the wooden platform.

"Wow, I'm impressed." Junior shouted up to his friend who was now standing on the platform.

"I've been practicing. Can this thing hold the two of us up here?" Abe shouted back.

"Reckin it held my Paw and me." Junior made the climb, although slower than the first time with Abe.

For the next half hour, the boys took turns looking all over Stark County with the binoculars. The sky was clear and the view spectacular for late winter, but the wind howled. Both felt the platform sway. Abe caught sight of a train creeping through Mulberry and then crossing the river and gaining speed going downstream to Riverport. Junior spotted a deer on a field down the valley on government lands toward Bear Lick. He then focused on an eagle's nest that he had noted last season. Although the boy had lost interest in hunting, Abe could tell that he still had a concern for animals.

After the boys descended to Junior's house, they wanted to check on the pet. He was all curled up in a white furry ball on the living room sofa. The dog caught Abe's attention, "I see that Angus is being spoiled already."

"He's a loveable thing." With a gentle touch, Sue Ann petted the sleeping animal.

"Yes, he can get about anything he wants with those big eyes looking at you, perking up his ears." Abe went over to the sofa to stroke him. Sue Ann rose and went to the kitchen for a drink.

After she left the room, Junior asked, "What about the bridge we're plannin'?"

"Okay, we can start the railroad bridge at Mulberry. It's a steel truss girder."

ED KRAUSE

"How'd you know so much about them bridges?" Junior sat on the sofa with the snoring dog.

"I got a book on engineering at the library. I'm going to build bridges when I grow up. In New York, there are huge ones suspended by cables over a thousand feet long." Abe spread his arms and hands as far as possible. "Two towers almost fifty stories high set right in the water." He stretched them now in a vertical position. "Millions of people cross them every day."

"I'd love to see em some day," Junior said.

"We could go see them some day. I'll show you. What are you going to do when you grow up?"

Sue Ann returned with a drink in her hand and overheard the boys' chat, "He ain't never goin to grow up."

CHAPTER 17

A week after Angus joined the Garfield family, Becky bent over the kitchen table trying to balance the checkbook. No monetary entry appeared on the ledger for one of the items. Frustrated, she asked her husband, sitting next to her. "What's this check to the Circuit Court for? Ain't cleared the bank."

"Honey, it's, it's, um for a speeding ticket." With a guilty face, he turned away from her.

"Well, how much is it?"

"It's, it's one hundred. Um, I think."

"Not thousands?"

Buddy nodded in her direction.

"Why didn't you tell me this?" Becky stared into his eyes.

"Sorry." He stood and retreated from her questions to the coffeepot on the counter. "Didn't want to bother you with it. Sorry, forgot to write it in."

"What else have you done that I should know?" She returned to the job at hand and made the entry for the amount of the check.

"Not much, only flirtin with some of those girls at the Wagon," Buddy said with a little smirk on his face. Bringing a cup of steaming hot coffee to his wife, he sat down at the table scattered with papers and window envelopes.

The children were still up in bed so she could be frank with him. "You did that about sixteen years ago with me when I was workin there. You haven't changed a bit."

"That was serious stuff back then."

"Anyway, I notice you ain't takin your lunch to work lately. I'm gonna start makin it again for you. You're gainin a little weight." Becky glanced at her husband's mid section. He usually kept fairly thin, and Junior had the same build as his father. However, Buddy was beginning to show his age, especially in the stomach.

"Yeah, reckon too many goodies at the Wagon." Buddy winked at his wife. "Real reason is I'm not huntin with Junior no more. But I'll stay away from the Wagon."

Both laughed at this comment, but Becky cautioned, "I'll talk to Grover and make sure you're not goin to the Wagon for a lot of reasons."

"I must admit, there's a lot of temptations there."

"Speaking of Grover, I read in the paper at the library that our new neighbor is real unhappy about his survey." Becky waved her hand in the general direction of the cabin. "He wrote an editorial about unlicensed surveyors like Grover. Even mentioned his name in the paper."

"Why, that fool! He don't know what he's talkin about." Buddy stood defiant at the kitchen window and looked up Corn Still. "Grover's a good surveyor. Work with him everyday. Grew up with him."

"This article will destroy his business and maybe get him in trouble with the Commonwealth. It said on the front page it's a violation of the law." Becky threw some papers into the overflowing garbage can.

"Really, I better tell him next week at work, I wonder if he knows about this. He should call a lawyer, because they can fix things right around here. Do you know what happened in court?" Buddy sat down at the table again, this time almost stepping on Angus, asleep on the floor.

"There was a family reunion?" Becky guessed.

"How'd you know?"

"Allison told me."

"Most of our ex kinfolks were there," Buddy said.

"Not mine, they're yours." Becky moved her chair six inches back. Angus scurried away to the couch.

"Reckin you're right, they're my ex-in-laws." Buddy smiled. "Well, this guy in front of me talked to one of the Windes and got his ticket took care of by the Solicitor. I had to pay a fine and he didn't."

"Well, maybe they're good attorneys? Maybe some plea bargain. That's done all the time."

"Maybe," Buddy said.

"Well, I'm gettin tired of the good ole boy stuff that goes on in this county." Becky opened the envelope with a butter knife and unfolded another bank statement. "Look at what my brother Oscar's gotta put up with that flunky manager's daughter."

"Don't know." Buddy's tone remained noncommittal. "That judge was rude to those out-of-town attorneys. He's a good old boy if I ever saw one."

"Yeah, I know the Pickens family. The Judge wouldn't be nothin without his family name." With a pencil Becky made some calculations on the back of a statement. "He's tied into the Winde brothers in some way. They helped Pickens get to be a judge."

"I heard some of that too."

"No tellin how much those Winde boys together are makin from this place each year; they've both got those fancy cars. I see em parked at the school all the time."

"That money could probably build a library for your school." Buddy said.

"That would be nice; we need one. For some reason we're gettin a lot more children's books and more volunteers comin in. Runnin out of room. Speaking of room, Georgia's movin to Riverport." Becky folded the last bank statement and stuffed it along with some cancelled checks into an envelope. "With the baby and gettin married and all, she needs a bigger place. She asked me if we wanted to keep her trailer. Do you want it for anything?"

"May need it to live in if I get into more trouble." Buddy waited for a response, but there was none, so he continued, "Let her move it. I was thinkin about growin some more corn next year where the trailer sits." Buddy stoked the stove with two logs. "Could plow it up this fall and it would be ready for next spring. That part down there's good bottom."

"Well, we could rent it out; need the extra money for Junior." Becky stood

up and retrieved a rubber band and wrapped all the bank records into one bundle three inches thick. "Glad this is done. Won't have to do this for another six months."

"No, it's not worth the hassle of rentin. Anyway, don't want any more folks here. Reckin it's gettin crowded as is. I'll get more for the corn."

"That's a lot of work. You can't depend on prices holdin up." Becky rose from the table and tried to turn a knob on the stove, but it broke off and fell to the floor.

Buddy reached for it and picked it up. "I got plenty of good help with Junior." With a pocket knife he screwed it back on the range and turned the burner on.

"We need a new stove." Becky looked at her husband who said nothing. "You know, he's a lot happier ever since we got that dog." Becky stood on a stool and shoved the papers on a top shelf over the icebox with other bundles all wrapped in a similar way.

"Yeah, I agree, he likes it. What's his name? I forgot," Buddy said slowly.

"His name's Angus. How could you forget, you brought him home?" Becky opened the refrigerator and removed a thick strip of bacon. Upon hearing his name and the smell of food, the dog trotted back from the adjoining room. "Yeah, I did, but I've got a lot on my mind," Buddy petted the dog in a guilty way.

"You need to spend more time with the boy, not just send him to work on chores," Becky scolded her husband mildly and put the bacon in a frying pan.

"Yeah. I've been slackin off a bit. Seems he doesn't like to hunt anymore. Don't know if he gets tired or he doesn't want to go off the land to hunt. I sure miss goin up yonder on the ridge with Junior. There's good game up there. Right close by. It's a pain to drive somewhere to go huntin. The Indians didn't have to do that." Buddy's voice rose. "My Paw didn't do that."

"They couldn't afford the gas prices." Becky broke an egg into a glass bowl, followed by five others.

"Yeah, I can't either. Talkin about money, how's the fund raisin comin for Junior's machine?"

"Tammy's helpin me. We got about half of it now." Becky separated the yokes and put them in a separate bowl. "Lawyer Waddsworth gave a big gift of a thousand dollars. Buddy, don't tell anybody about that; probably doesn't want everybody askin for money."

"I really like him even though his family owns one third of the county. Ain't the type that flashes money around. I bet he don't know all the land he's got."

"That's right, but they're a generous family. You remember his Paw, the doc? Came out when both youngins was born. Never charged a penny. Doc Waddsworth knew that we didn't have much then." Becky turned the knob on the top of the electric stove. "Also treated Junior for a bad infection while back. Had trouble goin to the bathroom. It's rumored that Waddsworth's goin to will some money for the new school wing."

They heard a timid knock on the kitchen door, and Buddy's youngest sister, Henrietta, let herself in. "Sorry to bother you folks, but I've got to talk to you about my kids." Her pale face looked desperate.

"Is this about the custody situation?"

Henrietta sat down in the empty chair next to her brother. "Buddy, I need to borrow a thousand dollars."

He slid his chair six inches back from the table. "What for?"

"For a lawyer to get my kids back. You all know that I got laid off at the mill last year, but you don't know that I got real depressed." She hung her head and talked to the table. "Started drinkin, lost a lotta weight, and had to go to the hospital. One thing led to another and their Daddy took the kids to Riverport. They've been in school there ever since."

Becky rose and gave her a hug around her pencil-thin body like close kinfolks. "I'm sorry. Knew your youngins were there, but I didn't know the details. Have you got the drinkin under control?" Becky asked delicately.

"Most times. I go to these meetins in Riverport. That helps."

"What about those legal aid people, um, can't you get a free lawyer?"

"Tried that, there's a couple of problems. They say that since I own the land, I can't qualify. Also, I've gotta file in Riverport where the kids is now. They got more regulations bout out-of-state people."

Buddy tried to help. "Did you tell em that you own the land with eight other kin? It's really not all yours?"

"I told them when Paw and Ma died, we all got a share of it. Said it ain't divided up yet. Anyway, they told me that it didn't make a lick of difference. I still owned it according to them rules."

"Did you say that you don't own that trailer?" He rose and glanced out the window towards the barn.

"Yeah, also told em that it belong to both of you. Look. I appreciate all that you done for me, lettin me stay here, not payin anything. After I got kicked out of the house in Mulberry, after the mill closed, I had no where to go. You know I like it here better than in town. Anyway, I hate to ask you for the money." Henrietta dried the tears streaming down her face with a napkin. "But it's the only way to get my kids. Please? I don't know what to do."

"Henrietta, we're all kin, and we got to stick together." Buddy said. "Becky and me got some money saved. We'll do it."

Becky interrupted, "I thought that was for the youngin's college- Junior's machine."

His sister started to cry. "I'm so ashamed. All my sisters are doin good. Georgia and Peggy Ellen got good jobs. Allison takes care of all the kids round here. They all love her to death. I'm not doin nothin."

"You'll be alright." Becky hugged her sister-in-law again, this time tighter.

Buddy also tried to comfort her. "Look, we had to help Allison with her place too. Took a long time to get her on disability. She had nowhere to go after that guy from up North dumped her."

Becky saw that she could not argue with her husband about the money. Any further discussion would upset Henrietta more. Becky finally said, "Okay."

"Allison was only supposed to stay six months." Buddy chuckled. "That was five years ago."

"Don't think we could move her now with a bulldozer." Henrietta smiled for the first time this morning.

CHAPTER 18

Rick arrived at the Guardian office early Wednesday morning, his task to organize the paper so that it would be ready for the printers in Riverport the next day. This was the busiest day of the week for the editor. Yesterday Larry set the ads up and placed them on each page, but they had to be inspected, and Rick usually rearranged them slightly. The decision to do the lead story on the front page was made about noon and finalized in the afternoon. It was composed earlier in the week, but in the news business, something usually popped up at the last moment. This week the paper was fortunate not to have some emergency, controversy, or major scandal happen today.

Under Rick's management, the format of the Guardian had changed from sensational material such as car crashes and drug busts to a more issue-oriented discussion. Although it still covered some of the old material, Rick wanted to expose its readers to a more expanded view of the world outside Stark County. For example, an article on the Commonwealth funding of day care was being prepared for this week's edition. This wasn't as exciting on the front page as seeing twisted metal or some hairy looking face busted for drugs, or even a dog hanging from a rope, but pictures of toddlers happily playing during a week day affected many working mothers in the county. The debate in the House of Delegates involving local representatives appeared once in a while. Up to now, people in the county rarely saw the names of their representatives in Richmond in print.

Larry unlocked the front door. "You're here early." "There's a lot to do today. Please lock it back up. I need to discuss a few things." Rick motioned to Larry to sit down in the reception area.

Larry Butts had something to say first. "Say, this is a good time to talk to you before anyone comes." The editor's face indicated that this would be no problem. "There's a lot of grants available for day care from the Commonwealth at the State Capital."

"How come the county's not getting the money?" Rick asked.

"You need to talk to the county manager," Larry suggested. "He's supposed to be doing that."

"It's hard to talk to him; I've tried to talk to him about other stuff. Says that I need to talk to Howard about that, but I can never reach him. He's always out of the office or in conference. Seems like only Snickle and the manager know how to get a hold of him."

Larry replied, "You really need to ask Oscar McCoy some time. He's the county finance officer. Oscar's a pretty straight shooter. If it wasn't for him, nobody in the county would get paid, bills wouldn't get taken care of, and nothing would get done. Didn't take me long to figure that out."

"Why then did you flunk out of journalism school?" Rick asked in a half-serious way and then realized he was asking too personal a question. "Hope you

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don't think I'm too nosey."

"No, don't mind. Too much partyin. I tell you, I've received a better education here than anywhere."

"Seriously. I appreciate all the help you've given. I'll put in a raise for you. Can't promise those boys in New York will approve it." Rick fumbled through Molly's note pad on her desk. "That's what I really wanted to talk to you about."

"Well, thanks. I like it here now. How bout you?"

"It's tough here. People are set in their ways."

"I'd be careful about diggin into the county finance right now. There's something fishy goin on. Can't put my hands on it. You need to be settled here a little bit longer before you tangle with the supervisors on this."

"I'll hang around at least ten years then," Rick noted. "Meanwhile, Larry, could you sort out all those survey letters? It's too late to put them in now; they can wait until next week."

"I have em in two piles. Well, there's only two in favor of what you said. Seventy-six against. Your editorial about the surveyors really hit a nerve." Larry looked out the front window. "Tammy's comin. I need to unlock the door." Larry sprang from the front desk.

"Hold on for a minute. Could you get them for me now. Before you get involved with her?"

"Sure." Larry opened a cabinet and handed his boss a stack of letters. "Here's the two clipped. The rest are here."

"I thought that article would be pretty boring when I put it in." Rick thumbed through them. "It seems like there's alot of people who like Ashebrook."

"Yeah, there are some people who are out of jobs. We got letters from their families."

"Yes, I see. They're nasty." Rick examined them in more detail. "Can't print some of this stuff. I got some calls at home last week from the same people. We'll have to weed some out. Just put in a representative sample that don't have any bad words."

Tammy came in as Larry unlocked the door to start the business day. She glanced at him without saying a word, handing a single piece of paper to Rick. "Could you put this in the paper? I wrote somethin about a benefit singing for my church. We're raisin money for the Garfield boy, the one that needs the dialysis machine."

"Sure, we'll fit that in for you. I'm afraid we can't do any pictures for this edition." The editor put the stack of letters down and read what she brought.

"That's okay, we don't have any, but that's a good idea for later," Tammy said as she left the office in a hurry.

Rick went back to his office to work for an hour on the day care piece. While finishing this story, he received a telephone call from New York. "Hello, this is Scott Revis returning your call."

"Thanks, Scott. I heard you're retiring at the end of the year and wanted to know who the boys upstairs are going to get to replace you."

"Why? Are you interested?"

"Maybe. Things aren't going too well here. It's a different culture here, noth-

ing like I expected."

"No one to drink wine and munch cheese with you?" Revis said.

"Can't even buy the stuff here, other than the cheese."

"Ben told me that they made hard stuff there."

"No, the local sheriff has taken care of that." Rick picked up a picture of a prized tomato at last year's county fair. "The liquor was even made on my property about sixty years ago. That's how the place I live got its name."

There was silence for a few seconds. "If you find some, it'd be good for my retirement party."

"When's that?"

"Just after Labor Day, Ben's organizing it for me. I'll tell him to give you an invitation."

"How's the police situation in New York? That's what I called about yesterday."

"Mark Zone was just released from Attica prison last week."

"I thought he got three years." Rick's mind went back to the trial in the city, and he began to be concerned for his safety.

"He had connections in Albany through the police union. Don't worry, still on probation and can't leave New York."

"That makes me feel better."

"I'll keep you posted on what's going on. Ben keeps close tabs on the police beat now. How's your new house coming?"

"Working on the plans, got a contractor lined up already," Rick said. "Look, somebody came in. I gotta go."

After he hung up, Dr. Sammie tiptoed to his office and said in a soft tone, "I did not observe anything in the paper last week about my award from the Governor."

"Sorry, Sammie, space was tight." Rick handed her picture of the tomato. "Sorry I had to toss your article."

"Well, let me see, I just happened to have another article about my award you can use. I received it on an article on the fiftieth anniversary of the completion of the Civilian Conservation Corps project in the county. Do you know that Stark County will be two hundred years old this year? My memory tells me that it will be September tenth to be exact."

"No, I did not know that Stark County will be two hundred years old this year," Rick said, mimicking the Doctor.

"Well, how are you going to celebrate it?" Dr. Porter demanded. "I am going to compose something, a brief history paper on it."

"How brief?" Rick asked in a sarcastic tone. "I suppose you want to have it published."

"Why, that is a very good idea. I never would have thought of that myself. I am learned, but you also have that gift."

Rick reflected to himself, "I bet." He began to think of ways not to publish it and also how to get rid of her. After a few seconds, he said, "Why don't we have a contest to celebrate the bicentennial?"

"Why, that is a very great idea."

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"The paper will give a thousand dollars to the person or let's say a group who can best portray the county's past. I have it in the budget."

Sammie's face lit up like a lamp. "Why don't we have it permanently displayed in the lobby of the Courthouse?"

"Another great idea, Doctor." Rick concluded further stroking her ego. "But I'll have to ask the Supervisors."

"Do not worry about that. I will pose my idea to them personally."

Rick nodded, thinking that was terrific, but also ways to make sure someone else would win. "I'll publicize the contest in next week's paper. Can't do it this week, the ads are already set up and the front page is lined up."

This explanation seemed to satisfy Dr. Sammie. "I will have to depart at this precise moment and proceed on this project right away. I suppose that the winner will get their picture in the paper in a prominent place?"

CHAPTER 19

Stark High School sat on a small hill just outside downtown Mulberry. The sprawling brick and glass one-story building faced south and commanded a view of the town, the Dutch Curve River, and the mountains. Lady Liberty atop the Courthouse glistened in the afternoon sun. Instead of riding home on the bus, the boys had permission from their parents to shop for Easter clothes at the town's only department store, Surret's Dry Goods. They were to meet back at the Mulberry Elementary school for a ride home with their mothers. Their real mission focused on the measurement of the Courthouse for their model. It was going to be a difficult task to replicate, not only because of its sheer size, but also its complex rooflines, three turrets, triangle roof overhang, balcony, steps, big windows, and four columns.

Junior borrowed a fifty-foot coil of rope from the barn to make measurements of the prototype. Knots were made at intervals of a foot for its entire length. His father did not know that it was taken or what the boys planned to do in town.

"Let's first get the outside ground dimensions." From Main Street, Abe looked up at the imposing structure. "Hope no one sees us."

"Ain't too many people round this late in the day." Junior glanced down both directions of the sidewalk. The boys approached the end of the concrete walkway.

"Just act like we own the place." Abe said as they stood at the bottom of the steps.

"I only see Hoss sittin up there behind one of those big ole columns. Stays drunk a lot. Half the time, he doesn't know what's goin on." Junior pointed up to the old man on the landing.

"I'm worried about the other half."

"I know him pretty well, I'll take care of him. He's a little kin to me, on my Ma's side although she don't claim him. Matter of fact, no one really does."

"Then, I'm sure he'll turn us over to the Sheriff. Well, you need to stand at the front corner here holding one end of the rope. I'll take the other end through the bushes to the edge of the building next to the Wagon." In a slender newspaper reporter's pad he had borrowed from his father, Abe noted the distance. Hoss paid no attention to the boys and slouched on the bench with his sleeping dog underneath.

"How are we gonna get a measurement of the landing?" Junior asked. "With Hoss up yonder?"

"Maybe he can help."

"I'll tell him it's a school project." Junior coiled the rope from the last measurement.

Wanting to further the boys' education, Hoss did help them measure the metal front door, windows, diameter of the columns, and front landing above the steps. He even counted the number of steps by walking up and down. This was

done several times for the tally to come out the same. Then he assisted the boys calculating the length of the sidewalk to the street by holding on to one end of the rope with Junior at the other. The piece had to be strung several times to reach the curb. Abe again wrote all the dimensions on the pad. Hoss asked no questions, and the boys never volunteered anything. Luckily, no one saw any of them with the rope. Even if they did, no one would pay any attention to the town drunk. Abe gazed upward. "Now for the hard part. We need to get the height of the building."

"Do I gotta climb up on the big turret thing? Reckin it's over fifty feet tall. That's higher than the tree platform." Junior stretched his neck upward at Lady Liberty holding the Scales of Justice. Her eyes were covered with a blindfold wrapped around her upper face.

"I hope not, let's go up on the balcony there, we can run the rope down, get a marking and then estimate the rest. Also, we need to measure the size of the floor up there. Do you know how we can get up there?"

"I've been in the courtroom only once. That was with my uncle for huntin without a license. I think there's a door in the seatin area where you wait for court. Reckin it's locked."

"Maybe Hoss can help again."

"I've got an idea."

Abe was puzzled. "How?"

"You'll see, I sorta talk his language." Then Junior told Hoss the plan three times.

The drunk summoned the janitor, who investigated the balcony for a bird mess but found nothing. While the man looked around for a nest up in the eaves, Hoss yelled, "I'm sick." The janitor, accustomed to cleaning up messes after Hoss, left the balcony without delay, forgetting to lock the outside door. The boys were hiding behind a hall door outside the courtroom, and while the janitor went downstairs for a bucket from a workroom, the boys snuck onto the balcony and closed the outside door. Abe gazed down at the landing and Hoss. "Just lower the rope and I'll mark it."

Junior kept a hold of one end while Abe noted the distance. The rope was pulled up quickly. Junior yanked on the old wooden door to the courtroom. "Abe, it won't open." In his excitement, he dropped one end of the rope over the railing to the ground, but still held on to the other end.

"Oh no, we're locked out!" Abe tried the jammed door, but it would not budge.

"My Paw'll kill me."

"I don't think we're supposed to be up here," Abe said.

"We can't climb down. Reckin it must be at least thirty feet to the ground."

"It's thirty-two."

"Hoss. Hoss. We're locked out of the Courthouse," Junior shouted down.

The drunk's smile stretched the full width of his unshaved face. He yelled back with slurred speech. "I'll get a drink. Um. Get a drink. For y'all. Got some stashed. Right here. Behind the bush." The dog sleeping on the bench woke up and started to bark. "I'll tie it to the end here."

Meanwhile, a sheriff's deputy walking from the jail to the Courthouse to file some papers saw the boys up on the balcony and a rope dangling down. He heard Hoss yelling up at the boys and the dog yapping. The officer shouted as he ran up the outside stairs. "What in the heck are you boys doin up there?" The incident attracted several bystanders. They stopped and watched from the sidewalk right next to the bronze statue of Robert E. Lee. Someone climbed up on his horse to get a better look. Another deputy coming from the jail promptly removed the man and escorted him to the jail. A town ordinance prohibited anyone from riding the General's horse.

"We're stuck up here!" Junior peered down in desperation at the man in uniform.

"Don't jump, boys, I'll be up shortly." The deputy ran into the building and upstairs to the courtroom. He shoved the door open and went on the balcony to investigate. "Come on, boys, I need to take you back to the jail."

"Are you goin to lock us up?" Junior asked.

"I want to talk to you about this back there."

The group went out the front door onto the landing, and the deputy asked Hoss, "Do you know anything about this?"

"Nope. I thought I was. Um. Was seein things." Hoss was in a prone position laid out on the bench with his dog sleeping underneath.

"He doesn't know nothin about this," Junior said. Fortunately, the small crowd in front of the Courthouse disbursed after the man was dismounted from the horse.

"I hope you enjoy. The accommodations, boys." Hoss quipped still lying down. "It's Friday. They have. Um. They have good spaghetti."

"You come too, Hoss. You may be an accessory after the fact or a co-conspirator." The deputy pointed at the old man.

"What's that legal mumbo jumbo. Jumbo mumbo. Do I need a lawyer?" Hoss rose from the bench and complied with the deputy's directions. "Hay, I got a lawyer." The dog hopped up replacing him on the bench. Whenever Hoss stayed in jail, the Sheriff's Department fed and watered the dog on the landing.

The deputy took the trio back to the sheriff's office in the jail. There, Junior explained about building a model of the Courthouse. The boy was surprised that the officer believed him and relieved that he did not have to do active time. More importantly both were comforted that their parents were not to be told. However, the officer required them to come back one afternoon every week for the remainder of the school year to do odd jobs at the Courthouse as punishment. Without any protest, the boys accepted this sentence and were allowed to leave. They left the jail through a back door, hoping no one would see them on the way to the school for a ride home with their mothers. Hoss decided to stay for the night.

CHAPTER 20

Rick was surprised to receive a telephone call mid-morning Thursday from Marlene, the legal secretary. He had just returned from Riverport to deliver the paper to the printer and started working on a monthly report to be sent to New York. She usually delivered legal notices for Arthur Waddsworth on Mondays. Out of breath, she said, "Rick, I've got horrible news. Mr. Waddsworth was tillin the ground. On his farm early this mornin. Too wet. Tractor overturned. Pinned him on the ground. Killed."

"That's terrible indeed," Rick paused. "How's Mrs. Waddsworth?"

"Well, you know that she's not that well. The couple lived all alone all the way up at the head of Bear Lick. All the children will be comin home shortly. I'm sure she'll be better when they get here."

"Can I do anything?"

"Can you put somethin in the paper?"

Rick explained, "It's just been taken to Riverport, but I'll call and make a change. May have to run down there. This is an important story. Could you get me the details on the funeral arrangements? I also need something about his life and law practice."

"I'll do that right away and hand deliver the stuff down to you," Marlene said.

After the phone call, he looked for Larry down the hall and saw him in the front taking an advertisement from Tammy. "Please come here, right away!"

"Be finished in a sec," Larry shouted back. "What's goin on?"

"Mr. Waddsworth just died."

Larry rushed into Rick's office. "From lung cancer?"

"No, a tractor accident."

"Do you want me to go and take some pictures of it?" Larry asked. "Quickly would want that."

"No, don't have time for that. Anyway, hardly anyone likes that stuff anymore. We've got to call Riverport and make a change to the front page. Let's delete the story on the day care funding issue. That can wait until next week." The phone rang interrupting Rick. "Larry, could you get that? Need to get this last column added up. Hate these things."

His employee took the call and listened for at least two minutes without saying a word and then hung up. "Another one of those nasty surveyors. They're mad as hornets."

Rick stopped his work on the adding machine and looked up. "Ashebrook has called all his friends."

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, Quickly used to take a lot of pictures like that. Overturned tractors. How people died. He drew these corny arrows on the picture pointing to the exact spot where they got killed." Larry asked. "When's the funeral? The viewing?"

"Marlene's getting some stuff together. Do you know if we have a recent picture of him?"

"I'm sure we've got one. Don't know how old it is. I'll check the files. Quicky has a picture of almost everyone in Stark County. But some of them were taken when they invented photos." Larry scanned the office.

"I'll call Mary at the school and let her know."

"She probably knows already." Larry knelt on the floor over a box containing ragged file folders.

"Why's that?" Rick erased something on the monthly report. "I hate these things."

"Becky Garfield's on top of this. Her sister, no, it's her sister-in-law, I think. Has a scanner and tentacles in the community. Probably heard the ambulance call."

"I'm glad I am not the only person who has trouble keeping all the family straight." The editor made a final entry on the report. "Glad that's done."

"Anyway the word has probably gone out to all the people in the school."

"Please find his picture for me, Larry. You'll have to drive down to Riverport right now so we can get it in."

He didn't seem in the least bothered about the trip. "Okay, Quicky had this department organized once. It may take me some time to find it in all this mess now. Problem is that only he knew where the stuff was. Always told me that we need to do a good job when someone dies. Also said that if you're going to die, you need to do it between Monday and Wednesday."

"Why's that?" Rick looked at him puzzled.

"Because if you die after the deadline of the paper on Wednesday night, then the viewing and funeral will be over by the time the announcement gets in the paper the following week. If you die before Monday, they'll have the funeral stuff before the paper gets out."

"That makes sense. I'll try to do that if I'm still here," Rick signed the report.

"Well, how do you like it here?"

"It's okay. In another thirty years, I'll feel real comfortable." The financial statement was folded. "Don't know if I can last that long. This is more demanding than I thought. I'd be lost without you, Larry. Say, how would you like a real job in the newspaper business?"

"Why do you ask?" Larry stopped looking for the picture in a file cabinet and turned to him.

"Let's try to get the picture first." Rick saw Marlene slip in the front door and walk silently down the hall to his office without footwear. Larry was startled since he was facing the other direction.

She handed Rick a single sheet of paper and he glanced at it. "This'll be fine. Larry will take it to Riverport right away."

"After we get a picture." Larry returned to the floor and tore apart another box.

"Thanks. You're both so kind." She sat down on the chair a minute and rubbed her bare feet. "Was a bit cold." Both men tried to keep a straight face.

When she was out the door and no one else in the office, Rick commented, "There may be some openings at the Mirror in New York City. There's going to

be a lot of changes in the paper up there.” The editor opened the top desk drawer to retrieve a pre-printed stamped envelope and inserted the monthly report. “My old boss is retiring soon, and there’ll be a number of jobs available. I’ll talk to you more about it when you get back from Riverport.”

“No, I couldn’t survive up there from what you’ve told me.” Larry stood up and opened another file cabinet. “All those crooked cops and whacked out druggies.”

“I should’ve kept my big mouth shut then. You’d do okay. I’d give you a course in survival skills.”

“Bet you’re an expert in guerrilla warfare.” Larry yanked out some folders in the top section.

“I require lessons down here to survive. Gotta know who’s related to each other and where they all lived. It’s confusing. I’ve put my foot in my mouth several times.” Rick turned his attention to finding the photo. He helped Larry look in a bottom desk drawer. Rick had Quicky’s phone number but didn’t want to disturb him in Florida. The search would proceed for a few more minutes.

“I know. I haven’t really figured that out completely. I ask Tammy down at the Wagon if I need any of that family stuff. She knows all the intimate details of everyone.” Larry removed some newspapers from the floor. “I got it!” The black and white picture of the attorney was twenty years old, taken in the mid fifties when he had a full head of hair. The glossy photo did not even have the mustache.

“I bet you discuss a lot of intimate things with her,” Rick said with a smile on his face. Larry didn’t have to respond because the phone rang and he answered it. “Some woman wants to talk to you, wouldn’t give me her name. Look, I’m gone.”

“Thanks.” Rick picked up the phone in his office and heard a raspy female voice, “Is this Queen? I haven’t forgotten what you did last year. You better not set foot in New York or you’re dead meat.”

“Who’s this?” The line went dead. He was frightened and puzzled. How did this person get this number? It sounded like the same voice who called in New Jersey after the trial and during the holidays. Surely, he thought Revis or anyone at the Mirror would not tell. There were only a handful of people up North who knew where his family had moved.

The phone line to Mary’s school was busy, so he called the Sheriff’s office and the dispatcher put Rick through to him right away, giving the news editor preferential treatment. Rick explained at length all the problems he had in New York and why he moved to Stark County. When he finished, the Sheriff said, “Thanks for telling me about this, Rick. My boys’ll keep an eye out for you. By the way, I’ve got a contact in the NYPD. I trained with a fellow up at Quantico. Now he works there.”

“Really.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Yes.” Rick thought about this a few seconds and pleaded. “Sheriff, please be discreet.”

“Don’t worry. He goes by the book.”

“I’m not sure if this is coming from the cops or whether it’s from druggies.”

“Don’t have any friends who are drug dealers up yonder, but I’ll do the best I can.”

CHAPTER 21

"Abe, no school tomorrow," Junior said as the boys got off the school bus at Allison's trailer. They did not stop for a snack because their mission was to work on models. Both had a rough week at Mulberry High completing an English essay, a history paper, and an algebra test.

"Let's go to the loft."

Junior halted on the road. "Can we stop for a sec and rest?" The boys backtracked a few steps and sat under the big oak tree. After he caught his breath, Junior asked, "Did you get the stuff for the Courthouse?"

"It came yesterday from Walters." Abe rose to stretch his arms. "The brick's yellow just like the real thing."

"How'd you pay for it?"

"My grandparents in Jersey gave me some money for Easter." Abe looked down at his friend on the bench. "You okay?"

Junior nodded. "How are we goin to make the big columns?"

"That's easy. I bought some quarter inch wooden dowels at K-Mart last weekend. They'll do fine." Abe threw a stone as far as he could throw and hit a piece of metal siding that came off from the roof of the lower barn across other side of the pond. "That's about two feet real life, that's close enough. You know, we've got to pay close attention to scale."

"What's that?" Junior stood up and both boys meandered up the road.

"We'll, we're using HO scale, it's 1 to 87, that means for every eighty seven feet in real life, it's one foot in the model."

"Wow! You need bunches of room for a town."

After hearing about the 200th centennial contest from the library, the boys had discussed incorporating the Courthouse project into the event. Unbeknownst to their parents, they were planning and building a scale model of the town of Mulberry. The scene would be complete with all the other major buildings of the town: railroad station, churches, chuck wagon with its two big wooden wheels at each end, jail and most of the two-story brick buildings. For the railroad, Abe could use some of his HO flex track that he had saved from his layout in New Jersey. The steel truss bridge would be also utilized. They planned to finish it by the end of the summer vacation.

The boys went into the barn and Junior asked, "Abe, can you help me with some chores this afternoon? Got to cut up some taters."

"After we do that, can we start on the Courthouse?" Abe asked.

"Yeah, but we need to wash Angus. Forgot about that. Ma says he's a gettin a tad smelly. Wouldn't let him in the house."

"Well, where does he sleep?"

"Had to shut em up in the crate with the horse." Junior pointed to the dog imprisoned in the corner next to a stall. The terrier woke up as Junior bent down

and unhooked the stainless steel door. Angus jumped out of his crate and ran in circles inside the barn. He was happy to see them until he realized that they were going to give him a bath. Junior got a pail from the shed, filled it with warm soapy water in the kitchen sink and carried it out back to the side of the barn.

"Junior, do you miss Joe?" Abe watched him struggle with putting Angus into the pail. White suds spilled over the sides, temporarily hiding the dog.

"Real bad, but I've got a likin to Angus. Ma says that in every tragedy there's a silver lining."

"What's that?" Abe asked.

"Well, my life was saved by somethin bad that happened to Joe. There's a purpose for everything. That's what my preacher said. Don't really understand it at all." Junior held Angus thrashing in the water. "Could you get a brush on the shelf inside the barn?"

"You should be thankful about that." Abe turned a corner through the large barn door and grabbed the brush from a shelf containing everything from motor oil, paint, spare tractor parts and tools. "Anyway, my parents took me to church once and the minister was talking about how we need to look to the future and not dwell on the past."

"That's what's good about buildin the town, somethin positive, somethin to look forward to."

"Junior, did you read the article in 'Model Railroader' about making trees out of that stuff that goes into pillows?" Abe scrubbed Angus while Junior held him down.

"Yeah, I read it yesterday at the doctor's office. When I was hooked up gettin my innards cleaned. I'm glad you lend me those magazines. Sure helps the time go by."

"Well, how'd you feel?" Abe asked his friend.

"Okay, but after a few days, I start to drag a lot. Sure wish I could do this at home. It's a pain going all the way to Riverport."

"Who takes you?" Abe said.

"Usually my Ma, sometimes my Paw when he can get off from work. They don't usually stay at the doctor's office long." Junior picked the dog out of the bucket and placed his four paws on the ground at once like a helicopter landing. "I put the magazines between my science and math books. Don't worry, they don't see me readin em. They do errands."

The Westie shook several times spraying water and soap in all directions. Abe stepped back. "I've had a little trouble keeping this a secret from my parents. When I was in Jersey I got my stuff from the hobby shop. I rode my bicycle almost ten miles to get it. Went to a place called Highway Hobby House. My parents called it 'Highway Robbery.' Now, I'm getting building supplies delivered by UPS. Some stuff we get at the hobby shop in Riverport."

"I bet those delivery people sure don't make any money goin up yonder." Junior uncoiled a hose attached from the spigot. "Please hold Angus." He turned the hose on and pointed it at the dog, who wasn't happy at all, Abe either. After ten seconds Junior turned the water off and Abe released the Westie. The first chance the dog had he shook himself, getting the boys soaked in the process.

"Yes, my parents are wondering what I'm doing without a layout." Abe picked up a towel to dry himself after the dog was safely leashed to a wooden post inside the barn.

Junior grabbed another towel and rubbed Angus. "Allison probably seen the delivery truck by now. Might have stopped the driver. Questioned em about what's goin on."

"I read somewhere they are sworn to secrecy." Abe now dried the dog with his cloth. The terrier was snow white and pleased to be dry and free.

"Yeah, but, Allison can get a lot outta men with her pies, especially topped with some homemade vanilla ice cream."

"I better talk to these delivery people some. Tell them to watch out for her." Abe moved a few steps to stand in the sunlight in the middle of the road. "Spread the word that her pies are too fattening."

"What do you tell your parents, Abe?" Junior strolled over to a pile of stacked firewood on the side of the barn.

"Say that I'm building models for the new layout. Supposed to start building a new house with a basement this fall. The cabin's a little cramped. I share a bathroom with my Mom and Dad."

"Don't feel so bad, I share one with Sis." Junior sat on the woodpile and watched Angus. His thoughts returned to his old huntin ground, now gone forever but yet glad to have human companionship and a goal with the town project. "She spends all mornin in there before school. Sometimes I gotta go outside behind the barn to pee. But I'm havin trouble with that."

Abe didn't want to pursue that personal matter. "Say, we need a better place to work on our models and store stuff. It's getting tight up there in the loft." Abe joined his friend on the wood pile.

"It's hard to climb up yonder."

"Your Aunt Allison's starting to ask some suspicious questions. Do you have any ideas?"

"Yeah, my Aunt Henrietta's got room in her trailer. Her youngins just come on the weekends. Seems like they ain't been here in a while."

Abe rose from the wood pile and rubbed his fanny a few times. "Why don't you ask her?"

"She keeps to herself a lot."

"Not like Allison." Abe looked down the road at the four trailers lined up like a set of dominos on their long side. Peggy Ellen's was partially blocked by a Mustang propped up on concrete blocks instead of tires.

"I'll ask her some time." Junior got up and went in the barn. "First, we gotta cut some seeds."

Abe followed. "Never heard of that before. Is that something you cut off a tree somewhere? Like those half round mushrooms up on top of the mountain?"

"Nope. Gotta cut the eye out of it and bury em. We're goin to plant em tomorrow."

"Do you plant eyes around here? Never heard of that too. You do some strange things around here," Abe said.

"Abe, Abe, they're stored down in the barn basement. I'll show you."

"You hide the eyes down there? Must be dark. They can't see too well down there."

Junior looked at him as if he'd seen a ghost. "I'll show you, I got two good eyes, follow me." Junior led the way down the dark and dirty steps underneath the barn. A single light bulb dangled under heavy floorboards. "Watch out for spiders, that's where I used to get em. After what happened to Sis, Ma won't let me have em in my room." There was barely enough headroom for Junior to stand, but Abe had no problem. Junior gave his friend a lesson in cutting seed potatoes. Both boys sat on some old wooden chairs that had been discarded to the graveyard of the basement. There was also other used furniture, small appliances, mildewed cardboard boxes and junk scattered around the sides. A rusty 1952 Chevy pick-up slept in the center of the dirt floor. On the far end a tractor waited by the door ready to do its work in the fields and pastures.

"Watch me." Junior cut four pieces from a single potato.

Abe had no trouble slicing them to the desired size, leaving a little growth spot to germinate into a huge plant. "We need some hair spray for the trees you were talking about. You spray the stuff on the pillow material and then put colored flakes of foam. It all sticks together. Makes great trees."

"Reckin I'll borrow some spray from Sis."

"Will she notice it's gone?"

"Not really. She's got a lot of junk in her room. Won't never miss it." Junior had just filled up a five gallon plastic bucket with cut-up pieces of potato. He rose from the wooden chair and retrieved another empty bucket to throw the sections in.

"Tomorrow I'll bring the sheets, and we can start cutting it out for the Courthouse walls. Tonight I'll make a template after dinner."

"Dinner?" Junior paused. "We have dinner at noon time. Supper at night here in Stark County." Junior moved the burlap sack of seed potatoes out from the rock wall. Just then, a black snake behind the bag raised his head, displaying a vibrating forked tongue.

Abe leaped from the chair! Soon they could see the reptile's entire five foot body coming from behind the sack, followed by three smaller ones. The frightened boy watched them slide out together like a smooth wave on the dirt floor toward the open door. After the snakes were at a safe distance, Abe regained his composure. "I guess we woke them up from winter. You forgot to warn me about those." He slowly sat down to resume his work.

"Don't worry, they're harmless. In fact they kill a lot of rats down here."

"Rats!" Abe jumped up again, almost hitting his head on the floorboards. After he looked around for other creatures, he sat down again. The snakes finally disappeared under the tractor at the other end of the barn.

"Don't worry, the bats have eaten all of the rats." Junior waited a few seconds and watched Abe who was frozen and silent. "Just kiddin. Anyway the bats just stay up yonder in the loft where we do our models"

Abe didn't react and just continued to sit on the chair silently for a few moments. "You do things a little strange here, like having dinner at lunch. My Dad's always complaining about things they do in this part of the world."

"I don't care what they call it. When I'm hungry, I like to eat," Junior said emphatically.

Abe relaxed some after making another cursory inspection. "You're probably right, doesn't make too much difference. Nothing to get all bent out of shape about."

"To be honest, my Paw's upset over Grover. Ain't doin no surveyin work no more."

"I know, it was hard for my Dad to write that in the paper. He's been talking about it a lot with my Mom. We get calls about it."

"Why did he do it, stir up all that trouble for Grover?" Junior rose from the chair. "Grover's a real neat guy."

"He felt that it needed to be done to protect the public good."

"Well, it's not good for Grover. He's real mad bout it." He confronted Abe with a stare.

"No matter what you do, it might hurt someone. It's been real difficult for him. Look, let's not talk about this anymore. It's hard to understand these things sometimes."

"Reckin I'll ponder bout it a tad." Junior sat down.

"Let's think about building the Courthouse." Abe continued to glance in all directions for anything that moved.

When the boys finished the potatoes, they climbed up the stairs to the main floor of the barn. On the top step, Junior said, "Let's go down to Allison's for a snack."

"That sounds good. What about your other aunts? We never go see them." Abe unleashed Angus, who scurried away for the moment.

"Peggy Ellen's never around. Henrietta can't cook. Georgia's leavin soon, just had a baby. Too busy for cookin now. I gotta help her pack and move from her trailer." Junior stopped and sat down on a bale of hay. "She's gettin hitched again."

"The trailer's getting hitched again?" Abe petted Angus.

"No, no. She's gettin married again." Junior stood and strolled down the road. "Tomorrow after we plant taters, my Paw'll take us to town to eat supper at the Wagon." Angus trotted behind the boys hoping to get a treat after his ordeal.

"My Dad likes the Wagon a lot," Abe said. "At least our parents have something in common."

CHAPTER 22

Greeting friends and family at a funeral home prior to the actual service was a huge event in Stark County, bigger than the funeral itself. The 'viewin,' as the locals call it, took place at either one of the two funeral parlors in the county, one located at each end of town. To outsiders like Rick and Mary, it was hard to imagine that a county the size of Stark could support these two locally owned businesses. But the natives devoutly supported them. Generations of each family used the services of the same home through the years. Rarely would someone be taken out of the county in death. Five years ago, a couple from Riverport started a third funeral parlor in an empty church downtown, but it went bankrupt and closed its doors within three months of its grand opening. These viewins were scheduled from seven to nine in the evening so as not to interfere with work or farming activities. On occasion they had to be held at both homes at the same time, resulting in a massive traffic jam in town.

Fortunately Waddsworth's viewing was the only one that day but since he was so well known and popular, a crowd gathered. Even non-native folks like the Queens went to pay their respects to Mrs. Waddsworth and her family. "Wow, look at all the cars!" Abe peered out the back window. The Volvo crawled by the Courthouse and approached the funeral home on the West Prong.

"You know what, this is like Route Seventeen at rush hour!" Mary sat in the passenger seat staring at the bumper-to-bumper traffic. No one paid any attention to the single traffic light at the intersection of Main Street and Highway 10.

"We might as well park behind the office and walk. Or I could let you out while I park," Rick offered.

"We'll walk," Mary said.

As they approached the parlor, a line of people was strung out on the parking area and into the street. "Maybe if I show them my press card, I can cut in line." Rick reached for his wallet in his back pocket.

"Better not do that, people will think we're from Jersey."

"They already know. All right, let's go in the back way." Rick led the way around the rear of the large frame structure that had once been a residence. "Can't stand to wait in line."

They found the back door and entered a room converted from a kitchen to an office. Fortunately, no one was there. In the lobby they mingled with the crowd without using Rick's badge. From the vestibule at the bottom of a curved staircase, which was roped off, he could see a line circling the sides of an adjoining hall. Rows of metal folding chairs filled with people faced an open casket. This rectangular room the size of a four-car garage was obviously a recent addition to the older house.

In the lobby, groups of people milled about talking after viewing the casket.

Rick saw the Sheriff, the Winde brothers, Supervisor Tommy Snickle and several others gabbing together. Another group consisted of Judge Pickins and his family, all puffing on cigarettes. After Rick signed the guest register in the lobby, he blended into the procession to the large hall. Mary and Abe also joined him inconspicuously in the line. Even then, he could see it would be an hour before he could pass the casket and talk to the Waddsworth family. There was neither air conditioning nor any ceiling fans.

Buddy, with his wife at his side, viewed the proceedings from the back row of chairs with his children and all his sisters close by. Becky said to Allison, "Look, that's our neighbors up yonder in line almost to the casket."

"Wonder how they knew Waddsworth?"

"Reckin he dealt with Queen on the cabin closing."

Junior asked. "It's really hot in here. Can I go outside awhile?"

"Why don't you take off your coat?" his mother directed, "Get that hat off."

Junior unwrapped his red hunting coat and slung it over his chair.

"I'd like to go, I'm hot too," Buddy interjected.

"Just stay here. Be respectful." Becky mildly scolded her husband.

"I'll behave."

"There're just a bunch of vulture politicians outside, and you want to stay away from them," Becky said.

"Yeah, but this is borin, just sittin here watchin Waddsworth. There couldn't be any vultures in a funeral home."

"Just some lawyers." Henrietta twisted around from the row in front of them.

The others smiled, including Becky, who addressed her husband, "You can be bored a little longer."

Buddy turned to Becky's ear and whispered, "Look, if I have a tractor accident, just dig a hole where it happens. It'll save people a lot of trouble."

"Would be good for the soil." Allison strained to one side to hear her brother.

Buddy paid no attention to her but spoke to his wife, "Need to have a little prayer session with Queen about the road." Becky looked at him strangely and Buddy paused. "After he goes through the line. I've put three damn loads of gravel on it. Queen should pay at least half."

"Watch your language, dear." Her right index finger touched her lips. "I thought you already talked to him about that."

"Yeah. But he's a wimp."

"What does he say?" Becky unhooked the top button of her blouse.

"He says that the whole Garfield family uses the road more than the two of them up there." Buddy squirmed in the metal chair.

"Well, he may have a point. Anyway, this ain't the time to talk about this; go up yonder tomorrow after church."

"Okay, but can I go talk to the Windes about it some? They're out there."

"They'll probably charge you for it," Becky warned.

"Wouldn't do that at a funeral."

"Those lawyers charge for everything," Henrietta popped back again.

Becky shook her head. "Anyway, just forget it, Buddy. They're busy politick-ing, just keep still and watch the casket."

ED KRAUSE

Mr. Waddsworth looked distinguished, dressed in a black coat, white shirt and tie. An even tan covered his face with his mustache neatly combed and balanced. As Rick passed the bronze casket, he mentioned to his wife, "There's something missing about him."

Mary responded. "You know what, there's no long ash on a cigarette."

"You're right, dear."

"Don't mention that to the family." Mary passed the body and approached Mrs. Waddsworth, seated on a folding chair. "Thanks for Arthur's bequest to the school in his will."

"What will? I've been nagging Arthur to make a will. Kept puttin it off."

Mary blushed, "I'm sorry to bring this up. Your husband told me about it last week at the school. I am so sorry." But she thought it strange for a prominent attorney to die intestate.

"That's okay, whenever this mess is cleared up, I'll do something for the school. Our children's our future. They deserve a good library in their own school. When I grew up here there was nothin."

"Why don't you come over to the elementary school sometime. I'll show you the plans." Mary bent down to the elderly woman.

"Thanks, I will, I will, after things settle down," Mrs. Waddsworth started to cry and reached for a tissue in her purse.

"You know what, I'll really miss Arthur." Mary, still bending down, gave her a gentle hug. "I've talked to him several times at the school. He came in to look at some books for his grandchildren"

"I know." Mrs. Waddsworth continued to sob. "You and Rick have done great things here. We need to get together some time."

As Rick paid his respects to the grieving woman, he only shook her hand for he did not want to upset the lady any more. This tired her and there were hundreds still snaked in line. "Mary, when I die, don't put me through all this circus," Rick said beyond earshot of the widow.

"Don't worry, I won't. If you move back to New York, the cops will take your body away for me."

"They may not wait."

When the couple entered the lobby, Steve Fields came rushing through the front door, bypassing the line, and pounced on the guest registry like an eagle on a mouse.

"Steve, nice to see you. I guess you'll miss Mr. Waddsworth," Rick said.

"Yeah, I just came to sign in, gotta leave."

"Aren't you going to say hello to the family?" Mary asked.

"No, usually I don't bother. Just like to put my name on the book. Say, thanks for signing off on the Jacob's deal, I finally got some money out of it. I'm goin to take a trip to Mexico to collect some butterflies, start growin them. Put them under glass, start a new business."

"I'll miss you at the paper." Rick said.

As Fields left, Mary said to her husband. "You know what, that's strange, I wonder why he just comes in and signs the book."

"A thank you card?"

"Maybe a real estate listing?"

An elderly woman standing next to them overheard the Queen's conversation and turned to Mary, "He does this for every body."

Rick saw the same groups of people standing in the lobby as when he first came in, one Republican and the other Democrat, except that Dr. Sammie C. Porter now joined the former. Judge Pickins first approached Rick and his family. "Hi, Mr. Queen, this is my cousin, he's runnin for County Supervisor."

The Judge practically ignored Mary, but she forced herself on him and his cousin. "Glad to meet you. Our school will be doing a candidate forum, before the election. Hope you can come."

"Don't do no speakin," the Judge's cousin said.

Rick added, "The Guardian will also be doing a candidate's questionnaire in a few weeks." Last year Quicky had told Rick he had tried this in the paper a couple of years ago, but hardly anyone ever submitted anything, so he discontinued it. Queen asked the candidate, "Would you respond to some questions for the paper?"

"My writin ain't good so I don't know. I'll have my cousin help me some. He's da Judge, he's been to a lotta schoolin."

After Rick politely thanked the Pickins' cousins and got rid of the rest of the Republicans, the Sheriff approached him. "I'd like to introduce you to Tommy Snickle, he's running again."

"Yes, I know." Rick felt like fresh meat, each group sending a scouting party.

Snickle whined. "I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Democrat, and we Democrats gotta stick together. I know you'll help me, especially doin the paper." The Sheriff stood silent.

Rick explained, "It's true that I'm a Democrat, but I vote for the person. Don't care about political affiliation. I can't take sides on candidates, just put both sides out there and let the people choose. I try to be fair to all sides of the issue. While I sometimes do express an opinion on issues, never on candidates."

Snickle was taken aback by this speech. "Well, just don't vote for that Felcie Smith in the primary. He ain't a true blood Democrat and not even from round these parts. Also hangs round with those Republicans, sometimes even talks to em."

"I'll consider that, Mr. Snickle." Rick said in a half-convincing way and turned to the Sheriff standing next to him. "Can I talk to you about a matter in private?"

"Yeah, let's go into their office back here."

The pair slid into the back office of the funeral home, where Rick had first entered the building. No one was present and they sat down in comfortable chairs. Rick said in a serious tone, "Sheriff, I'm still concerned about the police in New York. Did you check on that Mark Zone I told you about?"

"Yeah. Meanin to call you. I talked to his probation officer, a young girl still wet behind the ears. She says that he's under close scrutiny. Zone's workin on the docks on lower West Side, but he still has contact with his police buddies. I'll check with her in a few days. Don't want to be too pushy. Can't tell if she's a straight shooter."

"Yes. Maybe one of Zone's relatives."

ED KRAUSE

"Just like Stark County?" The Sheriff chuckled.

Rick smiled and had no comment.

"By the way, Rick, I don't care if you vote for Snickle. I just gotta act like I'm for him."

"I know, politics is one big play, everyone has a role to act out. It's not that different up North." Rick struggled out of the easy chair. After he found the rest of his family, they left the funeral home through the front door. Outside in the parking lot, there was still a big line and people milling around, most of them smoking. Rick and Mary managed to ignore all of them. With the street lights broken, it was pitch black and all three held hands until they reached their car. When they settled into the Volvo, Mary said, "Rick, I don't want to have a bunch of politicians around when I die."

"There will be none. We can have a private ceremony up on the ridge. Where the house will be."

Abe asked from the backseat, "Say, how's the new house coming?"

"You know what, we've got the plans all made, supposed to start after Labor Day." Mary turned towards her son.

"That's great, it's getting crowded in the cabin."

She looked directly at her husband. "Yes, I know."

A vehicle tailgated the Volvo on the grade up Chicken Creek, distracting Rick. He mentioned to his wife, "That guy drives like a Yankee."

"You know what, pull over and let him go by, Rick."

"Okay, next place," Rick responded.

Rick turned off to the right into an abandoned gas station on Egg Gap. The couple saw smoke bellowing out of the exhaust of a delivery van as it passed. Rick waited a few minutes before proceeding down Possum Trot. A hundred yards on the grade, a vehicle pulled out from nowhere and started following Rick again. "Got another car on my tail."

Mary turned her head and looked to the rear. "That's the same vehicle."

"How can you tell?" Rick asked.

"One headlight's off a little."

At Fox Den as Rick made a right turn up Rooster Trace, the vehicle also made the turn and continued following close behind. "Maybe it's one of Buddy's sisters," Rick reasoned.

"No, I saw all of them still at the funeral home. Still talking."

"Well, we only have a couple of miles until we turn on our road." Rick peered in his rear visor mirror. When their Volvo turned into their road, the vehicle went straight up towards the campground. Mary twisted her head. "It's a black van. Makes a lotta noise"

"Can you see the tags?" Rick's breathing increased.

"No. I couldn't, but it's like the one in Jersey over Christmas. Dear, why don't you call the Sheriff when we get home,"

"No, he can't do anything at this point. I'll call him at the office about it. Besides he's having too much fun at the funeral home."

CHAPTER 23

Monday morning Rick had much on his mind and didn't even disturb Larry in the composing room. Just before he left home, he received another phone call from one of Ashebrook's friends complaining about the survey editorial. That did not bother him as much as the van incident over the weekend. He just did not know how to rationalize it. At times, he reasoned that it was just a coincidence that this van was similar to the one parked outside his Jersey home at Christmas. Yet, this latest incident happened just as Mark Zone got released prematurely from prison. However, Zone was locked up when the van first showed up North. Rick thought Mark Zone could have had one of his police friends drive over to New Jersey to scare him. In any case, Rick needed to speak to the Sheriff so that the authorities could be on the lookout for it if it appeared again.

Before he had a chance to make the call, Hoss came rushing in the office. "Aliens are after me."

Rick glanced out the front window. "Don't see any thing."

"They landed on the Courthouse roof."

Larry strolled up front and opened the door. "Why don't you go to the Sheriff?"

"Yeah. I'll be safe there in jail." Hoss left as quick as he appeared.

"Thanks. I see that he has done this before." Rick went back to his office and dialed the number next door. "Good morning, Sheriff, we sent Hoss over just now."

"I've been expecting him. The aliens usually chase him after a cold weekend."

"How was yours?"

"Didn't get much sleep. After I saw you at the funeral home, I had to go up to Bright Knob to investigate a breaking and entering. Some guns were stolen from one of Waddsworth's cousins. Seems like there's a lot of B&E's when viewins are goin on. The criminals know when people are going to be away. Mostly it's that white trash from Riverport."

"Just like in New York," Rick concluded. "They just need to read the papers. It's like an invitation."

"They have white trash there too?"

"A lot of different kinds of trash, all colors," Rick replied. "What I called you about is on our way home from the funeral parlor, I'm sure we were followed home by a black van."

"All the way from town?"

"Yes"

"Do you think it's connected to the New York City police?" the Sheriff asked professionally.

"Perhaps. Same type that was in Jersey stalking us. Could you be on the lookout for a van with New York plates?"

"Yeah, that should stick out like a busted finger. Mostly pick-ups around here, few vans. Did you get the license?"

"No, it was too dark. It went straight up to the head of Rooster Tail, I mean Rooster Trace. I'm a little confused this morning, Sheriff."

"Rick, I've got a deputy up on Egg Gap investigating some reports of chicken stealin. I'll hollar on the radio."

"Don't go to that much trouble."

"He could go up and look for some tire tracks or maybe they threw some trash out, or even hit a tree turnin around. Not much room up yonder. Also, there may be some campers who saw something up there. Check with the forest ranger. He goes up there some."

"I'm impressed." Rick waived his hand to Larry who put something on his desk to sign. He continued his conversation with the Sheriff. "I would never have thought about these things. You're really on the ball. You could get a job with NYPD; most city cops are really stupid."

"Rick, just save those comments till election time. Better yet, put em in the paper."

"Might do that," the editor paused for a second. "If I'm still around. Thanks, Sheriff."

The editor felt better about the situation and focused on this week's paper. A follow-up article had to be composed about the middle school merger editorial that had appeared in last week's edition. The paper had received a few letters about it over the weekend and Rick read them after his call to the Sheriff. To do another article, he needed to gather additional information on bus routes from the school administration office. Some parents complained about inadequate facilities at the smaller schools for their middle school children. He knew first hand from his wife about the overcrowding at the Mulberry Elementary School. On the other hand, some parents wanted the neighborhood schools to remain where they were and did not want their children on a bus over curvy narrow roads to a central school in Mulberry. In any case, folks in the Balds opposed going to town under any circumstances. They wanted to be left alone.

At his desk Rick grabbed his reporter's pad. "Larry, could you take over for about an hour? Going to the Courthouse."

"Sure, you must know Dr. Sammie's goin to be here."

"Let Molly handle her."

"She likes Molly." With sharp scissors Larry trimmed an ad and placed it under a picture of a group of seniors on a trip to Nashville.

"Think she likes women over men."

"I like women better myself."

"I'll keep my eyes open for a gal for you. One that likes men. What about those Garfield sisters? My neighbors, they're all single."

"They all got bratty kids." Larry moved an ad to a new location on the same page.

"Not all of them have children, I think there's one that doesn't have any. She's divorced though." Rick placed his pad on the table. "I believe her name's Allison."

"Yeah, divorce doesn't bother me. Think I know who you're talkin about."

She calls here every once in a while. Reckin she's got a scanner, listens to the police stuff."

"Probably doesn't have too much to do. I've never seen her outside. Just one of those other women down there." Rick yawned without covering his mouth. "Another one suns herself."

Larry perked up. "I know who you are talkin about."

"I never look that close."

"I bet."

"Don't ever tell Mary I even notice her." Rick examined four pages of the paper spread out on the table.

"Anyway, that Allison woman tells me who all's runnin round on their wives. I don't think she likes men too much, doesn't trust them."

"Maybe you can change that." Rick bent over, examining a picture of a bear and cat stuck up in the same tree. "It's a slow news week."

"It's hard to change a woman." Larry frowned.

"Are you speaking from experience?" Rick asked.

"Yes, did you know Allison Garfield called last Friday? I wrote up a message. You were deliverin papers."

"No, I didn't see it, too busy this morning. Anyway, what did she want?"

"She's makin a quilt for the Mulberry Bicentennial, wanted to know if that was okay for the contest. Told her it was."

"That's great," Rick said. "I hope there will be more entries."

"You know, for a Yankee, you have some good ideas."

"To be honest with you, I got the idea from old Dr. Sammie. She'll be putting in an entry for sure. Don't tell anyone she suggested that. Well, gotta go, be back in an hour." Rick turned to the front door.

Larry yelled, "You forgot your pad!" and took it to him.

"Thanks. I have a lot on my mind."

After ten minutes, Rick returned. Larry, the only one in the office, greeted him. "Back so soon?"

"They wouldn't give me any information. Said they had to check with Henry Winde before giving it to me."

"Why do they have to check with him?" Larry raised his voice. "It's public information."

"I know that. But the girls there don't know that." This would be addressed in due course. He needed to pick his fights with the Windes carefully. There were more important things than school bus routes.

"You'll learn that everything in this county goes through them," Larry said matter-of-factly.

"I'm beginning to realize that." The editor sat down at Molly's desk to sign a few letters.

"They are the attorneys for the school system, day care center and funeral home. It's the biggest law firm in the county."

"One stop shoppin," Rick observed.

"Cradle to grave."

CHAPTER 24

In the early hours of the morning, a huge storm with lightning and thunder descended on Corn Still. The rain came down in buckets, and the wind blew down many tree limbs. One of the oak branches in front of the Garfield home place broke off, missing the house by inches. A piece three feet in diameter at break point rested on the front lawn at sunrise.

With caution, Abe walked down the valley to Junior's house. The creek raged in a brownish torrent beside the road, unlike the little trickle it had been in the fall when Abe first moved there. The newly placed gravel had washed off in many areas leaving potholes and slippery mud. A portion of the road bank near the place where he looked for salamanders with Junior had caved in. Downed poplar trees blocked the road near the apple trees. Abe knew that he would be helping his dad work on the road this afternoon. But Abe had promised Junior to help move his Aunt Georgia this morning. Several puddles stretched the width of the road, and there was no way for Abe to avoid them, despite the fact that it had stopped raining and the sun was shining. His sneakers were soaked by the time he arrived at Junior's house.

The boys decided not to take Angus with them to help Georgia pack. It was too muddy and the white dog was still clean after his bath. Anyway, the little terrier would be in the way with all the people moving stuff around.

Buddy postponed potato planting as well because of the wet ground. Instead, he needed to fix the culvert between his house and Georgia's trailer. Debris, washed down from the heavy rain, dented and clogged the corrugated pipe inlet. Not serious now, but if it wasn't fixed, there would be more flooding at the next storm.

After the boys grabbed a bite to eat at Junior's house, they tiptoed between the puddles the short distance to Georgia's singlewide trailer, the first unit on the left. On the way down the road, they waved to Buddy as he finished the culvert repair. He stood ankle deep in mud, removing basketball-sized rocks from the entrance to the pipe along with man-size branches and plastic buckets of all types that had washed down from the upper reaches of the mountain cove.

Georgia's pick-up truck sat parked near the small trailer deck. With an arm full of boxes Georgia's fiancé came out from the front door as the boys approached. "We've come to help Aunt Georgia," Junior said. "This is my friend Abe. He's goin to help too."

"Good, the trailer people will be comin in an hour to hook it up and take it away."

"What do you want us to do?" Abe asked.

"One of you boys stay out here by the truck and put the boxes in." He loaded a cardboard box into the truck. "The other can help Georgia inside. Wrap her china collectables in newspaper."

"I'll be out here by the truck." Junior raised one leg off the muddy ground. "I've got these here huntin boots on."

"Yes, it's a mess out here." Abe untied his sneakers on the steps to the deck. "I'll go inside and help your aunt. I should've put my boots on."

"Yeah, it really rained last night. Did you hear all the thunder?"

"Couldn't sleep a wink." Abe yanked his shoes off and placed them to one side of the deck.

"Ain't saw the creek so high before." Junior jumped onto the pick-up bed.

"How are they going to get the trailer outta here?" With one hand Abe shielded his eyes from the sun and squinted towards the pond, out of its banks in many places. The murky water hugged the edge of the road.

"Don't know. Reckin the same way it went in."

"This should be interesting to watch." In his socks Abe went into Georgia's trailer to help pack.

After the boys completed their tasks, they ventured down to the mailboxes to pick up the newest 'Model Railroader' and sat down on the bench underneath the oak tree. Even though it had stopped raining, they saw the water creep further out of the bank and inch toward them. After reading the magazine from cover to cover, the pair went to Allison's for a snack.

Later a truck with a long flat bed trailer rolled up Rooster Trace, stopped below Allison's home and parked in the center of the pavement blocking the State Highway in both directions. On the side of the door to the cab, the words 'MIGHTY MOVERS' appeared in big letters over a picture of a large mouse. A slender kid, barely eighteen years old, slithered out. He approached the first trailer up the muddy road. Allison came out in a huff and greeted the boy. The mover removed a dirty baseball cap and wiped a hand over his greasy black hair. "Sorry I'm late. I'll have your house gone right away."

"No, no, this ain't the trailer to be moved." Allison pointed up the slippery road. "It's the fourth one up. The last one on the right."

"Sorry, I didn't know which one to get." The boy turned and skipped up to his rig.

Allison followed for a few steps. "I know some of my sisters would like me to move. But not yet anyway. Now, if I can't get the soaps up here, I'll call you in a heartbeat." She turned and double-timed back to her trailer, where Georgia's baby was still asleep.

The driver climbed back into the cab, veered the vehicle to the left and made a wide turn to the right, clearing all of the Garfields' mailboxes by a foot. He proceeded at a snail's pace up the muddy road. Allison appeared on her deck and watched the fifty-foot truck and trailer bed go past Georgia's driveway turnoff, past the repaired culvert, and stop again almost at Junior's house. Abe saw that she wanted to make sure that the driver pulled the correct trailer away. Buddy was nowhere in sight, probably inside the tool shed sharpening his chain saw.

The young mover again parked the truck, got out and spoke to the boys who came up from the pond. "Is this here the trailer to be moved?"

"Yeah, this is my aunt's. She's inside. Hold on. I'll get her." Junior replied and turned in the direction of the trailer.

Georgia came out wearing a 'Cow Girls' tee shirt dropping down to her bare upper thighs. "It's about time. I gotta get this thing to Riverport before dark. My baby's down with my sister. She's takin care of the youngin while I move. I'll hafta stop and pick up the baby on the way." Georgia told the driver more than he needed to know.

"Yeah. I met your Sis." Acting like he didn't care, the young man removed a pack of Camel cigarettes from a torn pants pocket. "You'll need to get the pick-up outta here, and I'll back in here so we can load your trailer up. Did you detach the deck and underpinnins?" It appeared to Abe that the young man wanted to be on the road with the load as soon as possible.

"Yeah, everything's ready, got the underpinnins out yesterday.

Georgia's fiancé walked out on the deck. "It's just restin on some concrete blocks."

The mover asked, "All the breakables out, ma'am?"

"Yeah."

"Good, it's goin to be a rough ride down the road." He fumbled with a lighter as he lit the cigarette.

"Have you ever done this before?" Georgia asked, seeing how young and inexperienced he looked.

"Worked with my Daddy some." The boy paused, coughed, bent his head down and wiped his nose with the bottom part of his tee shirt. "He owns the business, 'MIGHTY MOVERS'. Never really backed one this far."

"Don't you think you should get help?" Georgia's fiancé looked the young man over.

"Nope, I got one of these new radios. If I get into trouble, I'll call Daddy. He's back at the house if I need him."

"Okay," the fiancé said. "I'll help you back up."

The driver climbed into the cab while Georgia and her fiancé went inside. Five minutes later she moved the pick-up out of the way down the road to Peggy Ellen's driveway. The flatbed truck backed into Georgia's driveway, stopping inches from the bedroom end of the trailer. The young man hopped out of his truck and surveyed the situation one more time. "Okay, I'm goin to back up under your trailer here. Slow and easy like. Need somebody to remove the block as I go back. This front end fits on these here rollers on the back of the flat bed. Then I'll slowly back my truck up. Gotta do it straight."

The operation thus proceeded without incident, and soon the entire trailer rested on the flat bed. The boy threw some cotton rope over the unit and tied it down. Abe saw that this gave Georgia and the others a little more confidence in the young man's abilities. "Okay, now I'm goin forward up the road. Past your driveway here." The boy pointed with a bare arm showing a tattoo of the same mouse depicted on his truck. "I'll back her down to the paved road. Won't take long at all to get your baby outta here. Need a hand directin me down."

The fiancé said, "I'll be on one side. Junior, could you take the other? We'll both be behind you."

"Good, I'll take it slow." The driver threw the cigarette butt away, hitting a rusted engine block.

In perfect conditions, it would be difficult for an experienced truck driver to back down the narrow road because it curved slightly just above Henrietta's trailer right across from the pond. Conditions were far from perfect today, the road being uneven and muddy because of the heavy rain the night before.

The driver backed past Peggy Ellen's trailer all right by using the side view mirrors that stuck out a foot. A Volvo came down the road toward him. The mover was distracted for a few seconds and took his eyes off one of the mirrors. He could not see the driver of the car but heard the honking of the horn. The truck driver missed the curve and the back end of the truck started veering to the right towards the pond. When he looked in the mirror again, it was too late to compensate enough for the slight curve. At Henrietta's place and near the edge of the pond, the rear wheel on the driver's side slid on the mud sideways towards the water.

Allison, who stood on the paved road with her sister's small baby in her arms, shouted. "You're too close to the pond. Go back up the road. Try it again."

The driver had no chance to hear anything over the noise of the diesel engine. Anyway, it was too late; the soft earth under both rear wheels of the flat bed collapsed. The boy in the cab never saw this, only experienced a jolt to his rear. The entire back end of the flat bed with its load dropped without warning down below the grade of the road, then beneath the surface of the pond. The trailer cargo began sliding backwards on the rollers toward the water with a rumbling sound. Once it started, there was no way to stop the heavy load on the rollers. The cotton rope holding the entire trailer on the bed snapped once the trailer began its downward journey. Within seconds, the trailer came completely free of the flat bed. It made a big splash in the pond, sending a series of high waves in all directions from the point of entry.

The unit gingerly floated towards the middle of the water!

After the rear of the flat bed dropped, the driver got out and saw that his load lay in the large pond. "This ain't my fault!" He pointed up the road. "It was that fool in the Volvo up there!" The car turned around and headed up the valley and past the Garfield house. It disappeared beyond the last row of apple trees.

Everyone except Georgia and the young mover could not help but laugh. The trailer came to a stop exactly in the center of the pond. Georgia started to cry along with her baby. Allison turned to her nephew. "Junior, fetch your Paw! Have him get the tractor and, and chains."

Junior replied, "What bout a boat?"

"Maybe, just fetch your Paw. Now!"

Without delay the boy obeyed and sprinted up the road to his house. He found his father cutting tree limbs on the front lawn with a noisy chain saw, completely oblivious to the situation in the pond. Buddy drove the tractor down, and parked it in front of the cab of the truck, still in the center of the road. At Allison's trailer, he found a crowd of people now staring at the floating trailer. He too kept quiet for a few minutes. The elder Garfield broke the silence. "Georgia, does your trailer have a life boat we can use?"

"No, it didn't come with any. The next one I buy, I'll ask if it comes with a life boat."

ED KRAUSE

The retired couple that lived across Rooster Trace highway also came over to see what was happening. At first, they could see only the rear end of the flatbed truck stuck at the edge of the pond with the cab still in the center of the road. As they went up the muddy road, they were able to see the entire trailer floating motionless in the calm pond. The elderly man asked Georgia, "Is that supposed to be in there?"

"Yeah, I'm movin to the beach and wanted to see if it floats."

The male neighbor, who did not know her well, commented, "You better, we're from the coast of South Carolina and they get some bad hurricanes down there. Once I saw a trailer go out in the ocean in a storm. It never returned."

"Look! It's startin to sink!" Allison shouted, holding the crying baby.

"The front end's goin down!" Buddy looked at Georgia.

"That's where my kitchen is—or was."

Allison said, "Georgia, you should've removed all the stuff from the refrigerator I was tellin you about. You know - that beer. That stuff's real heavy."

"Okay, next time I move the damn thing, I'll remove all the booze." Georgia huffed at her nosy sister.

"I wonder how long she'll stay afloat?" Junior asked.

"I read a book about the Titanic. Built a model of it. It stayed afloat three hours," Abe pointed out.

Allison said to the boy, "This ain't no luxury liner, believe you me!"

However, the trailer did look like the ship. In a few minutes, the front end sank deeper into the pond and the bedroom end started to rise, all in perfect harmony.

"We gotta get this truck out first." Buddy glanced at the length of the flat bed and turned to his son, "Junior, can you help me with the chain on the bumper?" He and the boys walked single file around the length of truck to the 'MIGHTY MOVERS' cab.

"Okay, Paw, I'll tell you when it's hooked up."

Both boys helped put the chain around the front bumper just below a confederate flag license plate. "Okay, it's ready!" Junior yelled over the noise of the diesel tractor.

Buddy engaged the clutch to his farm tractor and nothing happened. He tried again, hoping to rock the cab a little. Nothing. "This ain't goin to work. We gotta have a big crane to get it back out. It must be at least ten feet below the road by now, stuck in all that mud." The trio gave up and went down to the group at Allison's trailer.

"Do you want me to call the fire department?" Junior suggested while everyone else just watched the spectacle, not knowing what to do.

"Reckin we'll have to. Maybe they got some ideas." Buddy removed his cap, and scratched his head. "Allison, could you call Chicken Creek? Son, I may need you here."

"What do I tell em? That Georgia's trailer is sinkin?" Allison asked her brother.

"No, don't do that. They'll never believe you. Just tell em a truck's stuck in our pond. Nobody's hurt or anything like that."

"My cat's in there," Georgia protested.

"Tell em that," Buddy paused. "Well, don't, don't tell em a cat drowned in a

trailer. Just tell em that the truck went off the road."

"My poor cat!"

"You should've put a life preserver on it," her brother said while everyone just kept staring at the middle of the pond. "Allison, you better go now."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

By this time, the trailer was not going to sink anymore because its front end was firmly stuck in mud at the pond's bottom. With its back end perched five feet above the surface of the pond, the entire unit tilted motionless at a 30-degree angle. Allison not only called the fire department, but all of her other sisters on Corn Still and some of her kin down Rooster Trace about the disaster. She even tried to call Georgia. However, she soon realized that the phone was disconnected and probably under water. She immediately hung up.

Just as Allison returned from making the calls, everyone heard a loud tearing metallic sound, followed by a shattering of glass. The trailer tore vertically in half along the edge of one of its sliding doors. The floor buckled like a cardboard box being crushed. The roof ripped apart as if a beer can had twisted around full circle. The back end, partially out of water, suddenly dropped to the water's surface. This produced another, but smaller wave than the initial launching of the trailer. Although the front end was still stuck, the back end was now completely free and floating away, more or less horizontally.

"That's just like the Titanic," Abe said. "Broke right in half. The ship couldn't withstand the shear forces on the iron." He realized that he should not have butted into this tragic, yet amusing situation. "Sorry."

"Reckin they didn't test for that when they built it." Buddy pointed to the bedroom half of the trailer inching toward the bank. "Probably not covered by no warranties either."

The driver who had been silent and speechless up to this point, finally said, "I better call my Daddy."

"Have him call his insurance company too. We need an adjuster up here right away." Buddy said to the young driver.

"You know, I wuz supposed to call em yesterday to get a policy set up. Forgot to do it. I'll call em first thing Monday to get it covered. Don't worry bout that at all!"

Buddy's jaw dropped all the way to the muddy ground. "A lot of good that'll do." There were now at least twenty people standing on the bank of the pond, silently waiting and watching, not knowing what to do. Several people from Fox Den had come up to observe the spectacle.

When the trailer broke in half, some of Georgia's bedroom furniture and personal things jarred loose. They floated on the surface, moving towards the bank, the biggest item being her queen-sized bed. The ceiling mirror had fallen down when the trailer broke in half and lay neatly on the center of the soggy mattress upside down, all intact.

The retired man said, "I thought this would be a pretty boring place to live. My wife and I came out here for the peace and quiet."

His wife asked, "What's that mirror doing on the bed?" The bed was now within arms length of the edge of the road and the crowd.

ED KRAUSE

Buddy could not resist. "Hey, Georgia, the mirror didn't break. Didn't sink either. You can still use it for your next bedroom."

"I didn't know you had one of those," Allison gasped. "What can you see with it up there?"

"Stuff that you have not seen in a long while, my dear sister. I've had enough of this! I'm goin back home." Georgia turned from the crowd and started up the road where her trailer used to be. After a few steps, she stopped, turned back, blankly stared at her brother, speechless and looking desperately for help.

Buddy replied with a straight face, "I've got a fishin boat right here at the lower barn. Do you wanna borrow it.? To go home?"

CHAPTER 25

"Can I speak to Becky, please?"

"Hold on, she's in back." Mrs. Filburn dropped the receiver on the front counter. "It's your sister-in-law."

Becky hurried to the front desk and picked up the phone. "Good morning, Allison."

"Heard a strange thing on the scanner. It was last week. Just remembered it while watchin this old gangster movie on TV. It was in black and white, but they had those big black cars. The ones with the wide runners on the side. Looks like they're about to turnover goin fast round a corner."

"Well, what about it?" Becky heard Mrs Filburn's door finally close.

"Reckin that the Sheriff's lookin for a black van up on the campground above Corn Still."

"So?" Becky sighed.

"Well, it's connected to Queen in some way in New York."

"Really, why didn't you tell me about it sooner?"

"Forgot to with all the excitement round here with Georgia."

"Mary Queen has been actin a little tense for the past little bit. We don't talk too much anyway. I'd like to know why they moved here in the first place." Becky realized that she should not have said this. Allison would now pursue this with her ad infinitum. However, Becky did want to know the answer to this nagging question. She was relieved that Allison changed the subject.

"I read in the paper that they're givin a prize for the 200th celebration. You know I like to make quilts. Well, I'm goin to do one with scenes of the history of the county."

"That's a good idea." Becky's face lit up.

"Do you mind if I call Millie about this?"

"Sure, I don't care. She's not there this mornin, got a meetin with the county manager, something to do with county finance." Becky thought this project would keep Allison busy and at least she would not be calling the school so much. "I'll tell her for you at dinner today. Get some ideas for you."

"That'll be fine."

"You'll be really busy with that quilt," Becky looked in the direction of her boss' office, the door still closed. "I hope you can still look after all the youngins?"

"Sure, what are they goin to do after school today?" Allison asked.

"Junior needs to clean his room. He can also take the clothes out of the dryer, fold em and put em in his dresser. Sue Ann ain't takin the bus today. She's comin home with me."

"Okay, I'll do that. Say, he's been up to something with that boy Abe."

"Really? What?" Becky took a seat behind the counter and pressed the receiver closer to her ear.

ED KRAUSE

"Last week I saw em totin some plastic flowers off the school bus. Junior tried to hide em under his red coat."

"Plastic flowers?"

"The kind you put on tombstones."

"Maybe they're grave robbers," Becky guessed, somewhat relieved that the boys could have been doing things a lot worse.

"You need to check it out, Becky. Hang out in the barn somewhere. No tellin what those boys are doin."

"Yeah, Allison, I'll look up in the loft some time. Seems like I heard one of them say they were doin something up there."

"Do you want me to check?"

"Nope, it can wait." Becky heard the door open to the principal's office.

"How's he doin on the machine?" Allison asked.

"Okay, but it's a lot of trouble goin to Riverport every Thursday. Takes a lot of time." Becky said as Mrs. Filburn strolled out of her office toward the phone.

"How long does he have to do this?"

"Unfortunately, all his life. We've got his name on the nationwide donor list, but that's a long shot. Lotta people on the waitin list and you need a perfect match."

"What's that?"

"Can't explain now, the whole thing's complicated." Becky whispered and tried to hide the phone. "Allison, gotta get back to work."

After Becky hung up the telephone, the principal returned to the backroom and spoke to Tammy. Becky overheard Mrs. Filburn say she was needed at a meeting at central office. After the principal had been gone about half an hour, Tammy came up to the front. "Becky, I need to go to the doctor. Probably won't be back today."

"What's the matter?"

"My stomach's actin up. Especially in the mornins. Goin to do some tests on me."

A big smile covered Becky's face. "Do you mean I have this place to myself?"

"Mrs Filburn should be back at two."

Her beam disappeared. "Can't see Millie then."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry, it's not your fault. I guess I'll survive."

While Becky was alone in the office, Mary came to the counter with a distraught look. "Mrs. Garfield, is Mrs. Filburn in? I need to talk to her right away."

"She went over to the Courthouse," Becky told her neighbor without any emotion.

"Well, you know little Julie, she's real upset today. You know what, she thinks her grandmother is about to die."

"You mean the one that takes care of the youngin?" Becky asked, now warming up to her co-worker. "Up on the head of East Prong?"

"Don't know where that is. Yes, that's the one. I don't think her grandmother's that serious, but the little girl thinks so. She has cried all morning. I need to take her out of the school, go for a walk or maybe to the Wagon. What's the school

policy on this?"

Becky nodded her head and moved around the counter to be closer. "What teacher does she have, Mrs. Queen?"

"She's out sick today. There's a substitute. That's part of the problem too. You know what, the sub doesn't know how to handle the situation."

"Reckin it'll be okay to take her. Just have her back by two. We're supposed to have a fire drill sometime after that, just before we load em on the buses. I know the youngin needs to get out. Grover told me that she's cooped up in her grandma's house all the time when she's not in school. A little fresh air might help the girl."

"Okay, I'll be back at two o'clock. I don't have anyone coming in the library. I'll lock the door. You know what, if someone needs to get in, you've got the key." Mary left before she had a chance to engage in a deeper conversation about not only the van incident, but also why her neighbor had moved to Corn Still. Up to now, the two women only had brief and casual encounters. This was the longest that they had ever talked. It bothered Becky that the two could not be friends. However, she knew that Buddy would never approve of any close relationship.

The rest of the morning Becky plodded along on filing in the back room. Five minutes before noon, Becky's brother, Oscar McCoy, came in the school office looking for her. "Hi, Sis, how's everything going with your boy?"

"It's about the same with Junior. How's county finance?"

"Still the same disorganization. We had a meeting this morning, saw Millie, didn't talk to her that much."

"At least I get paid every week. That's important," Becky said.

"Sometimes there's barely enough to cover everyone's checks. Didn't come over here to talk about money. We have a problem with Paw and Ma. It's about taking care of them. They're gettin forgetful. Last week Paw strolled down to the creek in his pajamas."

"I know. At Easter Ma left the stove on, almost burned the place down."

"Do my best to help them, but they can't live alone in the home place."

She hugged her brother. "Yeah."

"You know I'm next door, but my wife and I can only do so much. It's hard for us to stay with em all the time." Oscar was on the verge of tears. "Almost impossible."

"Wish I could help you more, But I can't with all the problems Buddy and me are havin with Junior. I hate to have them go to the nursin home in Riverport. Couldn't see them that much way down there. They wouldn't see all our kinfolks."

"Well, at least they could be together. They would at least know some people there." Oscar sighed.

"I know, but I hate those places. Depressin. Anyway, there should be one here in the county." Becky insisted.

"I agree, we got two big funeral homes in the county. One on East Prong's brand new. Seems like we should have a nursin home."

"Funerals is big business. A lot of money to be made," Becky said.

"So it's not a dying business."

CHAPTER 26

A picture of Georgia's trailer in the water appeared on the top right hand corner of page three of the Guardian. The caption under it stated, "Trailer Sinks in Stark Pond-No One Drowned except Owner's Cat." The corresponding article read:

A bizarre incident, the first in the county's history, happened near Fox Den last Saturday. It occurred while a singlewide mobile home was being moved on a flatbed truck down to Rooster Trace Highway. Due to the muddy condition of a narrow dirt road, the home slid into a nearby pond. The unit stayed afloat several minutes, sunk, and then broke into two pieces. The owner's personal belongings were also damaged as they were scattered in the water. The volunteer fire department at Chicken Creek responded and helped clean up the mess for three days after the incident. The Virginia State Police were also summoned to handle the massive crowds who came the following Sunday afternoon.

"Hi, Molly, is my husband in?" Mary entered the Guardian's office.

The young secretary seated at her desk in the reception area looked up from punching in numbers on an adding machine. A bundle of cash, rolls of quarters and a stack of checks were scattered around. "Yes, Mrs. Queen, just go back. He's just talkin to Sammie Porter."

"The good one? You know there are two of them in Stark County." Mary stopped at Molly's desk just long enough to find out this vital information.

"The good one, Mrs. Queen."

Mary thought she needed to correct Molly about her name being 'Mary Ross', but now was not the time. At least the two women had the same feeling towards the 'other' Sammie Porter.

She found her husband talking to Ms. Sammie D. Porter in his office. This elderly woman, a retired playwright from New York City, recently built a house in the Pump Gap section of Stark County. Both Mary and Rick had visited her spacious home overlooking the Dutch Cove River several times since they moved to the county. The couple had much in common with her in that all of them grew up and worked in the New York City area. They also enjoyed Broadway plays. Although much older than the other Sammie who called herself a doctor, the lady now in Rick's office was a gentle, humble, non-aggressive person.

Rick looked up at his wife. "We're planning a layout in the paper for the summer plays."

Mary bent down, giving Ms. Porter a gentle hug.

"Hi, Mary, good to see you again."

"Are you still on the Arts Council in Riverport with your sister? Mary laid her pocketbook on a corner of his desk. "She's also a talented woman. You know what, I saw her Shakespeare play two years ago. I love English literature."

"Actually she did the directing on that one and I did the acting. We work together."

Rick said with a smile, "That way, if it's a flop, you can blame her."

"Never thought of that. Anyway, we switch back and forth on plays."

Mary asked, "What kind of play are you working on now?"

"A musical, it'll be opening in Riverport in August." Sammie handed her a flyer about it.

Rick rose from behind his desk to peer down the hall. "The paper will do a preview of the play to stir up some interest. Also, she's buying some advertising in the paper."

"Glad you're paying." Mary removed a stack of newspapers from a chair, putting them on the floor, and sat down next to the desk. "Not many people around here are interested in that."

"This is going to be different." Sammie said. "It has some bluegrass and country music."

"Didn't think you did that kind of stuff."

"Trying to fit in with the locals. I found a good picker up near Egg Gap."

"I wish I knew more people here," Mary said. "I hardly know anybody, not even my neighbors down the road." No one knew how to respond to this. "Other than that, I like it here. My job at the school is a challenge."

"I need to get over and see your project"

"Please do. Any time. I'll have you meet Mrs. Fillburn. She's a neat lady."

"Who's she?"

"Sorry. She's the principal. We're working together on this. Just like with your sister. A team."

Molly interrupted the conversation by yelling from the front. "Rick, the Sheriff's on the line for you."

"Hi , Sheriff, what's going on?"

"This is deputy Parson, but the Sheriff wanted to tell you that there's been an escape from the jail."

"Wow, how did they escape?" Rick heard the front door slam and looked down the hall.

"Three prisoners were washin cars out front of the jail. Just walked away. They won't get too far with those orange suits."

"Hold on." Rick put the receiver down and left for the reception area. Through the front window, he saw Molly going across the street to the bank. On his return, he picked the phone back up. "Are they dangerous? Our office is right next door."

"No, only in for child support, bad checks and larceny of a lawn mower. Just your normal criminal types."

"You must not be feeding them properly."

"You're right, ever since we stopped gettin grub from the Wagon, there's been more escapes. Some woman from up North fixes meals now, and the prisoners don't like it at all."

"Thanks for telling me, but I don't think I'll chase this story down. Know Quicky would. He'd probably take a picture of the car they were washing. Put a few arrows on it, but I'm working on other stuff. Good luck, Deputy." After the phone call the circumstances of the escape were explained.

ED KRAUSE

Larry barged into the office and closed the door. "We got a big problem."

"I thought you were in the Balds covering that cock fighting story," Rick remarked.

"Yeah, but no one would talk about it."

"You need to get an informant."

"Someone to crow?" Larry asked with a smirk. "Anyway, the other Sammie's outside. She's complainin we didn't put her on the list of donors for the Garfield boy in last week's paper."

"She only gave a buck. I had to cut it off at fifty dollars. We had at least forty people that gave that large amount. Had hundreds of the smaller stuff."

"What do I tell her?" Larry asked.

"Say we'll put a correction in this week's paper. Well, make it, next week, it's too late for this edition."

"Okay, that should satisfy her."

"Doubt it, but do your best." After Larry left, Rick closed the door to his small office. "I need to get locks on this door someday."

"You want to keep Doctor Sammie C. Porter out?" the other Porter asked.

"Yes I do, Ms. Sammie D. Porter." Rick said with an emphasis on the 'D'. "When I do the correction next week, I'll put that she gave one buck. That should embarrass her."

"Just make sure you put Dr. Sammie C. Porter, I have enough problems as is," the good Sammie said.

"Could you see if the good doctor's gone, Mary?" Rick asked his wife.

Mary snuck down the hall and shouted from the reception area, "The coast is clear." After acting as scout, she returned to the back office.

"That was a close call," the playwright said. "I know about her. Let's get back to the layout."

"Before we start, I need to tell you that Mary and I are having a Fourth of July party up at the cabin. Can you come?"

"When is it?"

"The Fourth," Rick said with a straight face.

"Think so." Ms. Porter replied.

"They'll be some of our college friends from Vermont. The last time we saw them was about fifteen years ago at Woodstock."

"Really? Did you and Mary go?"

"Yes."

"What was it like? I heard it was pretty wild."

"Don't tell anyone, but our son is a Woodstock baby." He whispered, not wanting Larry or anyone else in the office to know.

"What's that?" Sammie asked somewhat puzzled.

"Conceived at Woodstock." Mary blushed to match her reddish lipstick and talked down to the floor.

"I understand now. Well, I would like to come and see all the Woodstock babies," the elderly women said.

"We'll send you an invitation in the mail." Mary lifted her head and faced Sammie.

Rick looked at his wife. "Just make sure it gets to the right person."

CHAPTER 27

The final days before the summer break were the most difficult for the students at Stark High School. Most of the kids had huntin, fishin, and loafin on their minds. However, Junior and Abe were planning the model town, and it had started to come together. They relished the thought of spending more time on the town project.

The staff at the high school thought that their pupils would benefit from a little more time outdoors doing physical activity during their last week of regular classes. The principal's idea was to have a baseball tournament every day after lunch period. The students could choose their own teams. That was a mistake. The kids from the Balds, Town of Mulberry, East Prong, West Prong and Rooster Neck all formed separate teams. The handful of children from Fox Den, which included Abe and Junior, did not have enough players to form a separate team so they joined nearby Rooster Neck; however, this team lost their first game and was eliminated. After four days of playing ball, it came down to a match up between Mulberry and the Balds scheduled on Friday.

Abe and Junior waited on the Balds' side of the field for the first pitch to be thrown. "Who are you rootin for?" Junior asked his friend.

"Don't really care who wins." Abe shrugged his shoulders several times.

"Hope those Townie's get beat." Junior said. "I really don't like the Balds, but can't stand the Townies at all."

"Why's that, our team didn't make it to the playoffs?"

"Townies think they're better than anyone else in the county." Junior stared into Abe's eyes.

"Can't really agree with you."

"Reckin you ain't been round em much. They think they're better than anyone else. Live up in big fancy houses in Bright Knob. My Paw can't stand them. Calls em Snob Knobs."

The game started with the Town team at bat, and the Balds' team was designated as the home team after a flip of the coin. Although the Town team got several hits in the first six innings, they could not score and appeared to be frustrated. It was a pitching duel on both sides. By the beginning of the seventh inning, there was still no score on either side, but the boys had an opportunity to talk about plans for the upcoming summer vacation. "Junior, don't forget we have to go to the Courthouse after school and finish our community service," Abe said, "This'll be our last day."

"Thanks for remindin me."

"So far our parents don't know about it." Abe sighed with relief.

"Hope Hoss ain't there."

"Why's that?" Abe asked.

"He only gets in the way." Junior covered his mouth to hide a yawn. "Hoss

tries to help, but it really don't. Remember when he painted?"

"He got more on the floor than on the walls."

"Yeah. More on Hoss too." Junior lowered his head and rested it on his hands. "Speakin of work, have you thought about makin some money this summer?"

"In last month's 'Model Railroad Craftsmen', they had an article about painting engine shells." Abe rose for the seventh inning stretch, the game still scoreless.

"Never heard of an engine shell, do you get that at the beach? Never been there," Junior said, also standing on the top row of the stands.

"No, it's a black plastic die cast of a model engine. You spray paint it with railroad colors. Each road has their own color scheme. Then the decals and lettering are put on. The article says it's a good way to make some money." Abe took his seat as play resumed with the Town team batting in the top of the eighth inning. "I have an old airbrush and some paints. All we need to do is to order the shells from the Walters catalogue. It'll cost about five dollars each to make them and we could sell them for twenty."

"Wow, is that legal?"

"As far as I know," Abe paused, "It was in the article. We could order the supplies, paint them and ship the completed engines all by UPS delivery. No one would ever know."

"Except Allison." Junior yawned. "But how would people know how to buy the stuff?"

"That's a good question; can't very well put a sign down at the mailboxes: 'Shells for sale'. That wouldn't work."

"Right. Ain't no good."

"Let's think of something. We also gotta figure a way to handle the money. You know, how to pay for it and, hopefully, get some back."

"That's complicated."

A crack of the bat by a Town's batter startled Abe. "We'll think of a way."

The eighth inning still produced no score despite two solid hits by the Town. In the top of the ninth inning of the ball game, the Town team batted and got three weak hits in the shallow outfield. However, they failed to move a base runner across home plate even after no outs. Town base runners hugged all three bags. At a full count against the next Town batter, the pitcher released the ball and all base runners sprinted off the bases. The Town batter hit a bullet directly to the Balds' second basemen standing right on his base to protect both a steal and a squeeze play. All the Town runners were in motion rolling like a freight train and could not stop. Earlier they had received a sign from the coach that it was to be a hit and run play.

Instead, it was a triple play made solely by the Balds' second baseman without even moving an inch!

This was accomplished when the Town runner on first left his base and collided with the Balds' second baseman with the ball; the second base runner could not get back to tag on second base; and the hitter was out on a fly ball. The Town's third base runner dove across home plate, but it did not count. Everyone

on the Balds' team and their fans cheered, the Town dejected and speechless. However, both Abe and Junior missed the entire play lasting only seconds, since they were talking about their enterprise. After things were quiet, Abe asked, "Are you going anywhere this summer, Junior?"

"Nope, reckon we're stayin round here for the most part, goin to church camp in July sometime." Junior stood up and stretched. "My Paw's takin me to a big race Labor Day. How about you?"

"We're all traveling to New Jersey for a week to see my grandparents. They like to show me off to all their neighbors."

"Hope you don't miss the fishin tournament."

"When is it?"

"Right after school lets out."

"That's good, I think we're visiting them just before school starts back up. I can make that." Abe's face lit up.

"Great, it's always the best part of summer."

The bottom of the ninth inning remained scoreless with the Balds batting, their last chance. They managed to get a walk by the first batter and then the next Balds' hitter sacrificed him over to second by a well-placed bunt. This base runner stole over to third. There was only one out and Abe pointed out, "The Balds may win without even getting a hit." The boys focused on the field so as not to miss the action since it was the last inning and perhaps the last play of the final game.

"If that happened, the Townies goin to get mad. Watch em, they'll be trouble."

"I'm glad we're sitting way up here." Abe tried to reassure his friend.

"Yeah, but those Townies may get so mad they come over and whip us."

On the first pitch, the next Balds' batter hit a rocket to within three feet from the outfield fence. The Balds' player waited on third base for the ball to be caught before making a dash to home. The ball was caught by the Town right fielder, and in a split second he smoked it straight to home plate. The Balds' runner beat the throw by a half a step, but it was unclear whether the Balds' player on third base waited for the ball to be caught before leaving the base. The umpire behind home plate ruled that the base runner did indeed stay, and the run scored. The Balds won the game 1-0 without even getting a hit while the Town got over ten!

The Town team and their student fans were furious. They stormed out to the field and sought out every Balds' player to knock them down and tear their uniforms apart.

"Junior, let's not get involved in this fight," Abe warned.

"You're right, Abe. Let's just stay up here."

As soon as the Town fans came on the field, the Balds' side did the same thing. Abe and Junior were the only students on both sides of the stands watching the melee. The few available adults attempted to stop the clash without success.

"This is the worse fight I've ever seen!" Abe said.

"You must've seen some real bad ones up in Jersey."

ED KRAUSE

"Not as bad as this," Abe said as the brawl continued despite efforts of the umpires, coaches and teachers who were on hand. Soon the sheriff's department and town police arrived on the scene. All of the remaining staff from the high school joined in to try to quash it.

It took almost an hour to restore order. Larry of the Guardian snapped some pictures and interviewed several of the students and teachers. He even interrogated the umpire upon the condition that his name would not be used in the paper. After the students finally returned to their classrooms, Abe and Junior were summoned to the principal's office. As the pair slowly walked into his office, standing behind his desk he said, "You're probably wondering why you've been called here. Have a seat please."

Both boys were silent awhile and eventually Abe said, "I have no idea in the world."

"I'm proud of both of you for not engaging in the immature and destructive behavior exhibited by the rest of our students on the ball field. Let me ask you both, when's your last final exam?"

"Next Tuesday," Abe responded.

"Wednesday, I reckon," Junior said.

"Well, when you take your finals you can have the rest of the week off and you don't have to go to school until classes resume in the fall. For all the others, school has been extended two weeks to sort all this out and to punish the participants. They'll have to attend in order to take their finals. Don't talk to the others about the questions on the exams. I just talked to the superintendent at the Courthouse about this arrangement. Will that be acceptable to you?"

Both boys nodded in approval without saying a word. With deliberation, the principal rose from his large desk. "You know, nothing gets settled by fighting in the streets or ball fields. There are other ways to handle controversies without force. I'll also send a note to both your parents about your exemplary conduct, and it will also go in your permanent file. You can use that for later in life. You never know, one of you may be President of the United States. Who knows, maybe both of you. Anything's possible in this country of ours. Reach for the stars. I have faith in you. I'm proud of both of you." The principal shook hands with both of them.

The pair walked out of the office and once in the hall, Abe turned to his friend. "I should've asked if he could send a note to the Sheriff."

CHAPTER 28

Every Saturday night in the summer, an informal music show was put on by local folks at the abandoned Mulberry railroad station. Superb entertainment attracted people from all over Stark County and beyond. Old church pews lined the former main baggage room facing a six-inch high stage for the musicians and dancers. Framed pictures of old steam engines and rail equipment dotted the rear wood walls, classics that the prominent Riverport attorney, Mr. Bartlett, had donated.

The first show of the season every seat was taken, so Rick and his family stood by the pictures. He saw his neighbors, the Garfields, all sitting in the front row along with their surveyor friend, Mr. Ashebrook. After awhile, people drifted back to the old lobby, where refreshments were available and tales told. Instead of railroad tickets sold to far-away places, hot dogs and drinks could be purchased at the two arched cashier windows. All of the politicians were there, even the losers from the primary election, licking both their wounds and bruised egos. Fifteen minutes after the Queens arrived, three seats became available for them about a third of the way from the front. Each music group played half an hour doing favorites such as 'Rocky Top' and 'Dueling Banjos' from the film, 'Deliverance.' It seemed like many of the locals used in that movie were here, the ones with the missing teeth. Local artists for the most part performed Bluegrass and Gospel music, although the participants were free to play anything they wanted.

After a gospel group, 'Singing Echoes', performed the song 'Seeing Eyes', Rick asked his wife, "Let's get up and dance."

"Not on your life. I'm not going to be embarrassed."

"We can dance behind everyone up there so no one can see," Rick said.

"No." Mary looked him in the eyes.

"Can I ask the young blonde lady with the tank top that's sitting two rows up?"

"Sure, I'll get the camera in the car and take your picture. You know what, that should be good for the front page, and then I would let her have you," Mary paused, "in little pieces."

"Can't you take a joke?" Rick said quickly.

"Just kidding about the camera, not about letting her have you in little pieces."

Wanting to get back in his wife's good graces, he politely asked, "Mary, do you want something to eat? I'll go back there and bring it to you."

"No, thanks."

"Do you want to come out and get some fresh air with me?"

"I'll stay here and save the seats." Mary glanced around. "Don't want to be seen in this dress. I should've worn my painting clothes."

"Do you want something, Abe?" Rick thought it would be a good time to leave.

"Sure, I'll go back with you. It's gettin a little hot in here." Abe loosened his top shirt button around his pudgy neck.

ED KRAUSE

"Yes, that's a good idea, Abe. Keep an eye on your father," Mary said to her son, but looked sternly at her husband.

The pair squeezed in front of several plump middle aged women on the way out to the aisle. Then they threaded their way in the center aisle to the back of the room. A little more air and breathing room greeted them in the lobby, although a stronger odor of tobacco permeated the air. Next to the ticket booth stood an elderly gregarious woman hawking tickets to benefit her church. "Can I sell you some chances for a shotgun?"

Captive in line for refreshments, Rick had no choice. "Okay, but what would I need it for?"

"You never know, there's some outsiders comin here, some of em bringin drugs in, growin the stuff. You don't look like you're from around here, never saw you in here before."

"Well, next time I come, you can recognize me. Won't be a stranger."

"I guess."

"Don't bother with the tickets, give them to someone else." After digging in his pocket for his wallet, he dropped a five dollar bill in a coffee can. The editor approached the window for refreshments, not wanting to have anything to do with the woman.

"Really, if you win you'll get your name in the paper." The women waited for a response and when she received none, she insisted, "Don't you want your name in the paper?"

"No."

She wasn't expecting that answer and yet continued the conversation. "I sure miss the pictures of all those wrecks."

"Me too"

"Did you see that trailer sinkin?" she asked.

"I saw that in the paper."

"Quickly would have put that on the front page with all them there arrows. Sure miss the arrows. Did you ever see the arrows?"

Thinking this person was related to Steve Fields, Rick turned away from her to order something to eat. "I'll take a couple of hot dogs and two sodas." A young man behind the ticket window responded by pushing two white packages below the metal bars.

Abe added, "How about some chips?"

"And some of those." Rick pointed to small bags of potato chips hung on a wall inside the booth where railroad tickets used to be stored.

After the snacks were paid for, the pair went outside on a landing next to the railroad tracks. After finishing his hot dog, Abe said, "I hope we can see a train tonight. It's amazing to think that fifty years ago this was the only way to the outside world."

"People went off to jobs, war, hospitals. Right here." Rick leaned on the wooden railing, which protected people from falling on the tracks.

Three burly men with a slight smell of alcohol approached Rick. One came within six inches of his face. "Didn't much like your writin about the survey. Can't make a livin now. Was takin care of granny, can't anymore because of you.

Had to move to Riverport. Reckin you outta head down the river here."

Another man said. "I'll help you pack."

Rick felt cornered and thought that this was exactly like New York, but only said, "Abe, Son, let's go back to your Mother. She's probably wondering about us by now."

"Yeah, you go run back to Momma," the third man said.

"You coward." The first man got in his face again.

Rick ignored the group of surveyors and retreated to the baggage room. There he found his wife and Mrs. Filburn sitting on some seats close to the aisle. Being a break between the music, the room had cleared out for the moment. Rick was happy to see a friendly face. "Nice to see you. Mary has nice things to say about you. She enjoys working with the students at your school."

Mary nodded her head. "Yes, I'm beginning to like it here."

"Me too." Abe took a seat.

"It'll grow on you." The principal leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear. "Don't tell anyone but I'm a Yankee. Grew up in Cleveland, but I married a native."

"Wouldn't have known that."

"Well, folks, I'll let you sit together." Mrs. Filburn rose from the hard pew. "I gotta go find my friends, they're from out of town. Wanted to show them some of the local sights. Great seeing y'all."

Rick politely shook the principal's hand and sat down between Mary and Abe.

"Where have you been so long?" Mary asked. "Find that woman in the tank top?"

"No, working on some stories."

Abe turned to his father. "Dad, I understand why you walked away from those men."

Rick, pleased with his attitude, smiled. "Yes, I was going to explain that to you. Usually nothing's accomplished by fighting or even arguing in the street. Anyway, I was out numbered. Those boys were a lot bigger than us."

"Sorta like the fight at the high school after the ball game." Abe shook his head in agreement.

"I fight with a pen."

Mary nodded in the direction of her son. "That's much stronger."

"I understand, Mom."

"Yes, your father and I are proud of you and Junior for not getting involved with the fight at school."

People started to drift into the room in anticipation of the next group. Buddy Garfield came up to Rick this time. Rick realized this was no social call either. "Had to fix the road awhile back cause of the rain, cost me fifty. You need to pay half."

Rick responded quickly. "Half. That's not fair. All your sisters use the road. Georgia messed up the road with that trailer, and I'm not paying that much. I'll give you ten dollars."

"That ain't enough." Garfield's face turned red, and his facial muscles tightened. "I ain't chargin for labor."

To avoid further argument and a fist fight, Rick reached into his pocket and gave Garfield a twenty dollar bill. He took it and left without saying a word.

It was announced that the next group was the West Prong Gospel group, the 'Shining Lights.' They took the stage and began to sing and play 'Amazing Grace.'

Rick raised his voice. "I'm not having a good time here."

"Just listen to the music, forget about the road."

"That reminds me, forgot to tell you, these people are coming to bulldoze a way up to the ridge next week."

"It's about time," Mary said.

Abe turned to his mother. "That's going to be a mess."

Mary did not look pleased. "You know what, I'm sure Mr. Garfield will like all that heavy equipment going up the road. You should've given him a few more dollars."

After the 'Shining Lights,' sat down, a slender girl bounced onto the platform to sing with a new band. The outline of her nipples could be seen over the words 'Cow Girls' through her thin tee shirt. Her golden hair dropped down to her waist, where her white skin was exposed to the crowd. This woman no older than twenty started to sing 'Burning Love' by Elvis Presley. Immediately most of the people in the room took notice. The next song, 'Long Legged Girl With The Short Dress On,' attracted everyone's attention when she pointed to her flimsy clothing. Even the people in the lobby came into the baggage room and stood in every possible place in the large hall to listen to her.

Rick heard a husky male behind him say. "That's disgustin. Her belly button's showin'."

A female voice said in response. "Yeah, that song's obscene. She should be kicked outta this place."

There was an uneasy stir in the station. After she finished the second song, she took a bow. When she did this, a little too much of her cleavage showed for the Baptists in the crowd. Immediately an elderly man proceeded to the front with an air of authority and talked to the woman singer. Rick could not hear the conversation, but he could see they were arguing. At one point, the man pointed to the door, and it was obvious to everyone that she was no longer welcome. She took her time returning to her seat next to the Garfield kin in the first row; however, her band remained in front of the crowd. There was silence because the next group was not due for another twenty minutes or so. After five minutes, her band played again, more Elvis, 'Rubbernecking.' She could not resist and bounced back up to the platform. Before singing, the woman bowed several times, taunting the audience by revealing even more of her bosom. Close to the end of the song, a Sheriff's deputy came to the front. She continued singing as the officer grabbed her left wrist and yanked her down the center aisle to the rear of the baggage room. A round of applause drowned out the last verse of the song.

As she was dragged out of the back door, she shouted and shook her fists. "I'll sue you bastards."

"You know what, Rick, I bet the next town council meeting will be interesting for you to report."

"I'll be up front."

CHAPTER 29

Sue Ann raised her voice from inside the upstairs bathroom. "I'm goin to win that tournament, you'll see."

"Are you spendin the whole summer in there?" Junior paced in the hallway. "We'll be late. The fish don't care what you look like."

"Stop it, Junior, a girl's gotta do a lot more."

"Like what?"

"Never mind. And don't peek through the crack." Then she muttered to herself, "We'll see. I've been practicing with my friend in town."

The door opened. Junior dashed into the bathroom and shut the door. He put a towel over the doorknob to cover an inch crack in the door. His prized collection of worms was hidden in the cabinet below the sink. They lived in the aquarium tank under the sink trap, a perfect environment: dark, humid and damp. A slow leak provided the right amount of moisture and no one would mess with them, not even Angus. Junior scooped them up with his hands and put equal amounts in two mason jars stored beside the container.

To mark the end of school and the official beginning of summer, Buddy allowed all the Garfield children to enter the contest and fish in the pond. It only had carp in it, not fit to eat, but the kids did not care. All of Junior's cousins were expected to be there and Abe was also allowed to participate. They wanted the bragging rights for the heaviest fish and a small trophy that was passed around from year to year.

The prize usually stayed at Fanny Mae's trailer with her fifteen-year-old son, Randy. No one liked him because he was a know-it-all, a bully and a tease. He tried to win at all costs. Two years ago Randy had soaked some of the corn in vinegar and gave it to the other unsuspecting children. The fish had discriminating tastes and would not take a bite of the sour food. Randy cleaned up with the good corn and won the prize by a wide margin. To thwart this ruse, live bait had been used for the past two years. Buddy dug up worms in the garden for the children, but Junior preferred his private supply that he nurtured to a robust size. Last year Randy had secretly fed the fish each day at the same location in the pond for a month before the contest. The fish were accustomed to this place, so Randy went over there to haul them in. The other children caught few fish at the other places and could not figure out why all the fish came to Randy. Junior later found out about the little trick from a friend at school. Apparently, Randy bragged about it at the beginning of classes last fall.

"Mornin, Abe." Junior swung open the screen door, carrying the jars out to the porch. "Sorry I'm late." Angus scurried out of the kitchen.

"I need to borrow a pole."

"Let's go to the barn." Junior handed a jar to his friend. "Gotta get one for Sis, too."

"I didn't think girls could do this. That's what you told me."

"My Paw changed the rules this year."

"Women's liberation has come to Stark County," Abe said.

"Yeah, pretty soon they'll be drivin tractors." The two boys went into the barn and grabbed three bamboo rods stacked in a dark corner. "Guess what, I talked to Aunt Henrietta, and she says we can use her spare room for workin. It'll be fun down there. She'll even set up a desk where we can build the models and there's a closet where we can store the stuff."

"Great, that's perfect!" Because Abe did not have a cap, he walked down the road with his hand held to shield his eyes against the low morning sun. "We're running out of room up in the loft of the barn."

"Tired of climbin up there." Junior stopped to pet the dog.

"Ever since you told me about the bats, I'm scared. What about your snoopy aunt?"

"Yeah, Aunt Allison knows we're up to somethin in the barn." Junior paused "She'll never go round Aunt Henrietta's place."

"Why's that?" Abe asked.

The boys resumed their walk, this time with Angus pulling on the leash. Junior pointed down the road. "One time Aunt Allison came up there to check up on one of Henrietta's boyfriends. Opened up one of them windows and stuck her neck in the bedroom. Henrietta wasn't too happy bout that and called the law on her for trespassin. Allison had to go to Court for it. They didn't do nothin to her, just told her not to do it no more. Paid a fine. Allison was real embarrassed standing up there before the Judge with all the family there. Don't think she'll ever go up there again without bein invited."

"Would relatives do that to one another? Take someone to Court?" Abe asked.

"Do more than that. My Paw told me one of his uncles shot another one over a woman. Also said that the woman ain't worth fightin over, but I guess, some people thinks it's a big deal." Junior thought about the gravity of what he said. "But if outsiders mess with kin, we'll stick together like molasses."

"Really?"

"Some guy up North left Allison for another woman. Took her money. Our kinfolks hunted him down. At least got the money back. The guy couldn't have any more youngins either."

"I'm not messing with her," Abe said. "Is there enough space to set up a six-by-six foot piece of board in her trailer?"

"Probably, what's that for?"

"It'll be the platform for the town. Something to place the models on once they're completed. Lay the roads and sidewalks." The dog barked and Abe looked down at Angus. "Say, we need to get a map of the town somewhere and trace it on the board to get it right. Would you know where we can get one?"

"I'll think of something." Junior saw Allison among a crowd of children down at the pond.

"Meanwhile, what about some boards?"

"Paw's got some old pieces of plywood layin around the tool shed. He'll not miss em." Junior stumbled on a rut in the road and fell to the ground spilling

some of the worms.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, felt a little faint."

"We may need some more to add on later." Abe bent down and helped put the worms back in the jar.

"Got a question." Junior stood up. "If we start addin on, how are we gonna get it out of her trailer?"

"We may have to just cut a hole in it." Abe looked at Henrietta's trailer ten feet away.

"Now, you're the one pullin my leg."

Allison sat on a lawn chair in front of a card table filled with refreshments. It was difficult to recognize her because she wore a big straw hat and sunglasses. A weight scale hung from one of the lower limbs of the oak tree.

After Allison gathered all the children in a semi circle, she explained the rules. "Okay, we can start now. I think everyone's here. Mr. Garfield can't be here this year, so I'm the judge. Youngins, you've got two hours to fish. You can catch as many as you want, but you can only keep two fish at a time in your bucket. The one with the heaviest fish at the end wins. There's a prize for second and third place. Any questions?"

Randy raised his hand. "Aunt Allison, who said girls could enter?"

"The rules have been changed this year," she said firmly but with a smile. Junior could tell she enjoyed having an audience even though it was only children.

"That ain't fair. They need to stick to housework, cleanin, cookin and washin," the boy said.

"Reckin I can do anything boys can do if I want," Sue Ann said.

"Shut up, Snorkle," Randy got into her face.

"Don't call me that name," Sue Ann shouted.

"Quiet," Allison barked. "Do you want to fish or argue? Okay, you're on your own, meet back here at noon with your fish. We'll weigh em. I'll keep an eye on you. So, no foolin around."

Junior stayed close to his sister and Abe near the oak tree at the outlet while Randy strolled around to the far side of the pond. Junior wanted to help the two get started, and he really was not interested in winning the trophy, although he did not want Randy to win it again. To prevent last year's little trick, Junior had fed the fish from various places every day for the past week. He used worms from the garden to save his prized collection under the sink. He figured the fish would be scattered all over the pond this time.

"This poor little worm. Do I have to put this nasty hook in it?" Sue Ann asked her brother on the edge of the pond.

"If you want to catch any fish." Junior looked at Abe as if to say that he was lucky not to have any sisters. "I'll show you, I thought you practiced." He picked up a small one from her pail, saving his bigger worms for himself. It would be embarrassing if she took home the prize.

"Not with real worms, I did it with them plastic ones. Reckin I'll be a man for a minute and do it." The worm wiggled and made a temporary escape into the

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pond. She successfully hooked a second worm and cast it into the water. The rod bent slightly and a four inch fish landed on the bank.

"It's a small one, Sis, you need to throw it back in." Junior threw a line into the pond himself.

"How do I get the fish off the hook? Do I hafta touch it?"

"Reckin it may help," Junior said.

"How do I touch the fish?"

"With your hands."

"Could you show me?"

Junior gave his pole to Abe, who had not started fishing yet, took his sister's fish in his hand, and demonstrated removing the hook from the fish.

When he finished, Sue Ann said, "That ain't too easy."

"You'll have to do it next time." Junior turned to Abe and whispered into his ear. "They should've never let girls in this here thing." Her fish was tossed back disappearing in the murky water. Sue Ann hooked another worm and started over again. Within just a few minutes, she pulled in another fish, much larger than the first. "That's good, Sis, you need to keep that one. That's at least a pound. Try to unhook it now."

"It won't keep still."

"Just hold it harder," her brother shouted.

She complied and squeezed the fish harder with her hand. "There, that ain't so bad. Reckin I'd rather handle fish than those nasty worms."

Abe threw a line in the pond. "My Mom gave me fifty dollars after getting the note from the principal."

"When my Paw got it, he wearn't too happy," Junior said in a rather dejected tone.

"Why's that?"

"Well, he said I should've gone out on the field, and whipped those Townies. Told me they deserved it. They were the ones that sent my kin off to war. You know the one that got shot up in the arm."

"Look, don't worry about it. I'm sure your Dad'll forget about it. We can use my money to get building supplies," Abe said as he reeled in a fish.

"That's great." Junior's disposition improved, although he was still concerned about his father's reaction to the note. "Seems like you got the hang of fishin. I need to get a drink." Junior walked toward the card table. "Sis, you stay with Abe." He stopped on his way to help some of Georgia's kids with tangled lines. Meanwhile Abe and Sue Ann started to haul in some bigger fish and showed them to Allison.

This caught the watchful eye of Randy at the far end of the pond near the inlet. So far, he had only rescued some of his Aunt Georgia's underwear left over from the trailer accident. "Hey, Snorkle, how's the water over there? May have to go over there and help you," Randy shouted to Sue Ann across the pond.

"We don't need any help, Randy," Abe bellowed back.

"Just stay away from her." Junior yelled to his cousin.

"Says who?" Randy replied.

"I'll get Allison, and you'll be out of the tournament," Junior threatened. "Tell

her that you're callin Sis names again. You've been warned bout that."

"Don't really care," Randy said as he finally caught one. Before he placed it in his bucket, he raised the fish to show everyone that he had at least caught something.

"Okay, I'll tell her what you did last year." Junior went to confront Allison about the problem. When he approached his aunt at the card table, it seemed to him that she was not at all interested in Randy. Right away she asked Junior to go get more cups. He complied and went in her trailer.

Randy reeled in another fish, this time at least two pounds, the biggest for the day for anyone. He boasted. "Look at this!" It almost slipped out of his hands when he put it in his bucket. While Junior was still inside Allison's trailer, Randy started throwing stones in the direction of Abe and Sue Ann.

"Stop that, Randy," Abe said.

"What are you goin to do about it, Four Eyes?"

"You'll see." Abe started to walk around the pond toward him. He made a slight detour around a pile of dead fish on the bank, some of them were stripped to the bones by crows. As soon as Abe traveled half way around the pond, Randy knew that he was serious. Without looking, Randy backed away from where he was standing on the bank. His right foot caught the bucket handle. He tripped and knocked it over, sending the fish towards the pond. As Randy recovered from his fall, he reached out with both hands for the fish flapping down the bank. He missed. Instead, he stumbled again, this time on roots, and tumbled headfirst in the mud at the pond's edge. He tried to right himself but slipped and fell on the bank. Landing sideways in the pond, the boy produced a small wave.

Randy splashed for a few seconds and stood in waist deep water. "I'm going to tell Allison on all of you." Mud dripped off his face and curly blond hair. His clothes were soaking wet.

While resting on Allison's living room sofa, Junior heard laughter from outside and ran out to the porch. "What's goin on?"

Sue Ann said, "Randy's been botherin me, and Abe came to my rescue."

Abe was finally able to stop laughing. "Randy just kicked the bucket!"

"Reckin he'll never fish here again." Junior turned to his friend.

Randy wiped some of the mud off his eyes, gathered his pole and retreated to his mother's trailer. The group saw a shiny tin can at the spot where Randy had been fishing. Junior got it and saw that it contained steel nuts and bolts. Junior surmised his cousin was planning to stuff his fish with the metal to increase their weight. On the spot Allison banned him from the contest for life, if he ever chose to return.

"Thanks again, Abe, for helping me, you're my hero," Sue Ann said in a low voice so no one else could hear. The children continued to fish for another hour until Allison announced that it was time to bring their catch to be weighed. After Randy's humiliation, no other participants really cared who won. They knew Randy would not be bothering them for a long while. After drinking some cola from the card table, Abe, Sue Ann and Junior started back up the road towards home. They passed the rotting fish near the pond.

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Abe turned to Junior and said, "Those fish bones look like a tiny baby dinosaur's I saw up in New York. We need to go see them sometime at the history museum."

After holding her nose awhile, Sue Ann asked, "Do they have them up there?"

"Yes, they are hung up from the ceiling in a big room." Abe coughed.

"Probably got a bunch of sky hooks," Junior attempted to convince his sister.

"What's that?" Sue Ann asked again, still mystified.

"Aunt Allison has em. Ask her sometime."

Abe jumped in, "Why don't you go down and get some from her now."

"I'll do it after dinner. Maybe Junior can go with me."

"Nope, I need to take a nap this afternoon," Junior said.

"You've not been feeling too well," Abe looked at his colorless face.

"Yeah it's my kidneys, they're not workin'."

"How long do you have to do those hookups?"

"Well, unless I get new ones, all my life," Junior said sadly.

"I guess you can't buy them anywhere." Stopped at the barn, the children stood in line at the outside spigot to wash before the mid-day meal.

Junior turned on the faucet and splashed his hands with water. "That's right. The only way I can get em is for someone to donate em." Junior paused.

"How can somebody do that?" Abe asked. "Wouldn't the person who gave them die?"

"My Ma said a person can live with only one of em." Junior wiped his hands dry with a towel. "Usually a family person does it because of a good match. Gotta have the right blood to do it."

"Junior, you've got a large family, surely one of them will do it for you." It was Abe's turn to wash.

"It's a hard thing for a person to do," Junior said. "It's no fun to get your innards cut up and something taken out forever. Always a risk of infection and complications. That's what the doctor says. My Ma and Paw would do it, but can't, for some reason."

"What about me?" Sue Ann asked.

"Sis, you're the wrong type too, anyway I wouldn't want yours."

"Why not?"

"Yours have been in the bathroom too much."

CHAPTER 30

"Order please," Mayor Dunn pounded his gavel several times on a card table in the fire department. It could be heard by everyone, even those standing in the rear next to the garage doors. All the fire trucks and the other equipment were parked outside on the street to make room for the town gathering. "This is a special meetin here of the Town of Mulberry. Please be seated." After a short Bible verse from the Old Testament selected and read by the Mayor, things were underway. "Henry, could you present this here thing."

"Mr. Mayor, Council, I've prepared a resolution prohibiting Fannie Mae Bunns from the premise of town property and defining what's permissible conduct on said property." Henry Winde passed out a single sheet of paper to each member of the council.

"Mr. Winde, could I have a copy of that, please?" Rick and Larry sat on metal folding chairs in the front row facing the four men.

"I suppose. Mr. Queen, here, take mine." The attorney gave the editor a copy of the resolution. Rick knew that Henry's brother, Howard, would never have provided him with one. Rick thanked the attorney with a nod.

"Do you say we pass this thing here?" The mayor glanced at Winde.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, is there any objection?" The mayor mumbled mechanically.

A slender dark-haired woman in a tight-fitting pantsuit stood up and came down to confront the group of men. "I am Rebecca Weinburg, an attorney with the Rural Southern Justice Center, and represent Ms. Bunns here. This resolution violates the First, Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution."

"Honey, what Constitution?" Mayor Dunn replied.

"The United States, last I heard, Mulberry was in the United States."

"Well, honey, we don't want to be told by the Federal Government what to do round these parts here."

"But sir, the resolution does not define what's obscene and what she can sing. There are no definite and discernible standards so that people like my client can determine whether they are in violation."

"Honey, don't use that legal mumbo jumbo." Dunn then turned from the lady and looked at the town attorney. "Henry, can she say that to us?"

"I've got to check, Mr. Mayor; may have to consult with my brother." Winde reached for a book that he carried in his briefcase. He opened the book and read it to himself. Meanwhile the crowd grew restless.

The singer's attorney, still standing and impatient, spoke after a few minutes of silence. "Mr. Mayor, the renovation to the station was done with County funds. They received a Federal grant for the performing arts from the Appalachian Regional Commission. The County must also be in agreement with this resolution according to the provisions in the grant."

Winde put the book down. "The County's in total agreement with these folks here."

"How can you make that statement, Mr. Winde?"

"Cause my brother's the County Attorney."

"Isn't that a conflict of interest?" the lady asked.

"No, it ain't. Everyone likes it that way. Is that right?" Winde looked around the room. There was complete silence. Rick wanted to raise his hand. However, he also wanted to go home in one piece. A vast majority of the audience supported the resolution, and no one wanted to confront any of the Windes.

"Honey, this is a conservative place here. We want to keep it that way." Mayor Dunn broke the silence and went on to make a speech. "We can't have these loose women showin their belly buttons and bodies in public singin those obnoxious songs and actin in a not right way. We have a nice quiet community here. There's no drinkin, and we don't allow it being sold at all. Alcohol is the work of the devil. Glad we don't have those sin-filled places like 'Cow Girls' here. Don't want some communist group like yours changin our community. For the record, honey, what's your client's full name?"

The young singer jumped to her feet, and bounded to the front as if performing at the station. She swished her hair around and said in a loud, slow and deliberate voice. "Fannie Mae Garfield Moore Bunns". After repeating her complete name again, she asked in a piercing voice in the jam-packed room, "Did everyone get that? My uncle, Buddy Garfield, is here. All of you know him and we're a good family here. This is just pure harassment. Ain't y'all got better things to do with your time? People's got a right to sing. Says so in the Good Book. You oughta live by it sometime rather than carrying it around all the time. Showin it around all the time. Spoutin it off."

"Thank you, Ms. Bunns," Winde said. Rick noted on his reporter's pad that the town attorney wanted to leave as soon as possible.

However, the Mayor was enjoying the evening and all the attention. "Henry, we'll need to change the wordin of that thing you passed out. Let's get her name correct." Dunn faced the singer. "Warn't you married to some other guy when you were fifteen a few years ago? To one of your kin?"

"It's none of your damn business," Fannie Mae shot back. "Y'all are a bunch of hot air." Then she stared at the attorney until saying, "A bag of wind."



Fannie Mae had asked all her family to attend the meeting for moral support, but only Buddy attended. Upon his return home, he was upset and frustrated about the treatment of his niece. Becky was sitting on the living room couch reading a 'Family Circle' magazine while she waited up for him. Buddy came through the kitchen door, his hunting jacket soaking wet, walked to the sofa, bent down and kissed his wife. "Becky, I don't approve of what Fannie Mae has done, but she's kin. We kinfolks gotta stick up for her." He threw his jacket on a chair and turned on the television. "Treated rude by that bunch in Mulberry. Those people think they're holier than thou. She's got a right to do her thing in

a public place. Boy, she gave em a piece of her mind. Even Winde."

"Well, what finally happened, Buddy?" she asked.

"Them hypocrites banned her from the station." Buddy tossed a pillow to the side and sat down by her on the sofa.

"Those people in town have acted that way since the Civil War. Always tellin us country people what to do. They do the same thing to my kinfolks in the Balds." The rain pounded on the metal roof and Becky glanced to the window.

"Tellin us we can't even sing. You're right," Buddy said.

"I thought I would never hear you say that."

He rose, went to the TV and turned the volume up. "Let me just listen to the racin report on the news. It'll be on in a few minutes. Anyway, the Mayor talked too much. Got on his high horse and started preachin."

"Yeah, but he's a regular at Cow Girls. That's what Tammy says at school. We may find the whole town council there."

"I've heard a little about that," Buddy grunted, his eyes glued on the TV for the moment.

"How would you know? Have you been there?" Becky cuddled up with her husband on the sofa, but he headed for the refrigerator.

Shortly he returned with a beer in hand. Buddy needed time to think about his answer to his wife's question. "Only once, but I did not look or touch. Had to pick up Georgia one time when one of the customers stole her car keys."

"Sure, I bet she couldn't find em," Becky said.

"She had a pretty rough night. That was when Richard Petty won the race at Bristol." Buddy held the bottle to his mouth, but nothing came out. "This is frozen solid!"

"Fridge is actin up. We need a new one." Becky looked at her husband. "Like one of those frost-free contraptions. Tired of defrostin every week."

Can't afford it. I'll have Georgia's new husband look at it."

"Don't think he wants to come back to this place."

"He owes me a favor. He'll come, but she won't."

Becky put down her magazine. "Do you want somethin to eat?"

"Ain't hungry. I had somethin over at the Wagon before the meetin with Grover. Had one of them mid-week specials."

"How's he doin?" Becky asked.

"Not so good. I'm worried about him."

"Why?"

"Says he's goin to get back at Queen some way. Wouldn't say too much more."

"Buddy, I hope you talked him out of that."

"Didn't say nothin. I don't think he means it anyway."

"You better not encourage that talk." The sports came on and Becky went to the next room to brush her teeth. In fifteen minutes she returned in a bathrobe and found Buddy sound asleep. She went over to the corner of the living room and turned the TV off.

"Why'd you do that?" Buddy popped his head up from one of the sofa arms.

"You was snoring."

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"No I ain't."

"Before we turn in, Allison called complainin about the road." Becky yawned. "You know that road's in bad shape down there."

"Yeah, those Yankee people brought a bulldozer up the road, tore it all up. I'm gonna need a prayer session with them people again. Get some more money. Tore a fence corner near the apples. Cows may get out. Say, I gotta go to the barn to check on the new calf."

"Let's go to bed."

"You go. I gotta check on it before I turn in. I may have to call the vet tomorrow. Ain't eatin right, not gainin weight. I need a few more cattle."

"Why's that?" Becky asked.

"Cause the brush is gettin out of hand up near the upper barn. If you don't have the right number of head, the land gets out of balance." He tried to squeeze another swallow out of the bottle, but nothing came out. "If you have too many cattle, starts gettin eroded. Then you got problems with the runoff. But if you don't have enough, it gets grown up too much, like now. I got some pigs up there now, but cattle are a lot better." He yawned and went to the kitchen to forage for some food.

Becky followed and looked at the floor. "What's all this water in here?"

"Sorry, I should have taken off my boots."

"Buddy, we have a leak!" Both strained their necks up to the ceiling and saw a steady drip. "I'll get a bucket." Becky ran to the closet and brought out a five gallon pail.

"I guess the last storm blew the patch off. The one when Georgia's trailer sunk. It damaged the tin up there."

"We need a shingle roof."

"Can't afford that." Buddy opened the refrigerator and moved several things around. "I'll go fix it again this weekend."

Becky looked up at the ceiling again. "Thought you ain't hungry."

"Changed my mind. Anyway still thinkin about Fannie Mae. Boy, them people in Mulberry treated her like dirt, white trash."

"Tell me, Buddy, I don't see what's so bad about her singin. Elvis did about the same thing."

"One guy at the meeting said he saw her belly button." He sat down at the kitchen table with some half frozen spaghetti.

"Oh, horrors! I bet the Windes see more than that when they go to those Vegas shows."

"Or less," Buddy pointed out.

CHAPTER 31

"What's goin to be the lead story?" Larry asked his boss as they stood in the composing room of the Guardian office.

This process was, in many ways, harder for the small town editor than his former job in New York. He had to make many daily decisions that directly affected the monthly profit for the owners of the Mirror. In the Big Apple, Rick never had to be concerned if the paper was making money. "A lot's been happening. There's Fannie Mae, cock fighting, school merger is still hot, the riot investigation at the high school. You know, my boy saw the whole thing. Didn't get involved at all in that mess, stayed out of trouble. The principal even sent home a nice note."

"You must be proud of him."

"I am."

"Rick, there's always something brewin up there ever since the county consolidated the High School." Larry shuffled through glossy pictures of the fight at the school.

"Why's that?" Rick looked puzzled. A decision to withhold publishing the photos had been made until the Sheriff and school officials completed a full investigation of the incident.

"Well, there's animosity between the town and the more rural areas of the county, especially the Balds." Larry handed them over to his boss. "Stems from the Civil War. The well-to-do townspeople and big farmers on the Prongs supported the Confederacy, while the poorer rural folks sided with the Union."

"I don't want to stir up a lot of these hard feelings by plastering this stuff on the front page. I'll even wait on the school merger. Think I'll do a story about the investigation back on the fifth page, no pictures." He laid the stack down on the table.

"I got some good ones. Bloody noses. Black eyes. One kid got his arm broken." Reaching over the table, Larry retrieved the photos.

"No, their parents will get mad. Would you want to see your child on the front page like that?"

"Don't have any kids; I'm the wrong person to ask." Larry put them in a file folder marked 'High School Fight'. "Not yet, anyway."

"Sorry, that's right. I'll do an editorial about the merger when things die down a little. Do some further research. It's a complicated issue, a lot of emotions. Could you help me with that?"

"Sure." Larry nodded his head. "You seem to be getting the hang of this place now."

"Thanks. We need to interview people on both sides and give them a chance to say their piece." The editor's rationale was that the stubborn feelings needed to settle down so that reason might prevail.

"You gotta talk to the principal about it." Larry examined some advertisements cut up on the table. Normally he had all the ads assembled by Tuesday, but this week he was behind in this work. After placing several ads on the back page spread out on the table, he said, "Say, I got a strange ad from the East Prong funeral home last week, first one like it since I've been here."

"What does it say?"

Larry picked up a four inch square piece of paper. "Says they're offering a two for one sale, like at Piggly Wiggly. You get two funerals for the price of one."

"There's got to be a catch," Rick wondered.

"Yeah, the fine print says both gotta be used within one year." Larry handed the advertisement over to him. "Do you think you and Mary would be interested?"

"Business must be getting slow there."

"No, it's just dead." Larry stopped talking and there were a few seconds of quiet. "Let's get back to the front page. What have you decided, Boss?"

"Larry, we'll do Fannie Mae." Rick placed the funeral ad back in order on the table. "She created quite a stir. Hassled by the town. We could have a nice picture of her on the front page."

"What kind?" Larry asked.

"Fully clothed. No skin showing. But we need to do an interview with her. Do you know her work phone?" Rick did not want any of his staff to know that the singer was his neighbor. This story needed to be kept at a professional level. There was enough trouble between the two families on Corn Still, and he did not need to invade her space at home.

"She works at a nursin home in Riverport. I'll get the number for you." Larry grabbed an outdated 1970 phone book and wrote the number on a scrap of paper. "To be honest, she's a terrible singer, butchers poor old Elvis. If the King of Music ever heard her sing, he'd come back out of his grave to haunt all of us."

"The town would just pass another resolution to get rid of him." Rick strolled back to his office.

Larry followed and grinned. "I'll try to reach her."

"I'm sure she would like to get some publicity out of this." Rick thumbed through a book on constitutional law he had brought from New York. "This would help her singing career. We could make her the 'Station Singer.' She could even have a double S on her record label like a music note symbol."

Larry trotted back to his office to make the call. While he was on the phone, Dr. Porter came waltzing back to Rick's office. "Mr. Queen, I was honored by President Reagan for my commitment and support for the Republican Party. I have a picture of President and Nancy Reagan riding on horses at their ranch. They mailed it to me. I kept the envelope."

"So?" Rick considered telling her that he had a picture of Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter in his files.

In any case, she seemed to be taken aback with the terse response but recovered in a few seconds. "Could you publish an article about me receiving the award?"

"No, but if you want to buy an ad, we'll gladly put it in."

"I do not have the proper funds at this time in my station in life. I receive my next royalty check from the book I wrote next month."

Trying to get rid of her, Rick placed his finger on the dial tone button and picked up the phone as if to make a call although he had no idea whom he was calling. His deception was foiled when his phone rang. Doctor Porter left without a word, just a smirk. Larry yelled back, "Fannie Mae can see us in about one hour. Is that okay?"

"Yes," Rick said. "Well, what else did Fannie Mae say?"

"Not much. But she told me that she can dress up the way she looked at the station."

"Let's get a picture of her taking a bow," Rick added, but Larry knew his boss was not serious at all.

"That would be good for Playboy, not the Guardian." Larry reached for his camera bag slung over an old chair. "We could get a good one."

"Say, what's this 'we' stuff. I am fully capable of taking a few pictures. Why do you want to come with me? To get a date?" Rick asked.

"She's little too young for me, but I would like to at least check her out." Larry checked the camera for film.

"Let's go and get a bite to eat at the grill before we meet her."

"You mean the Wagon, but how about a quick trip to 'Cow Girls' tonight? We could check that place out on the way back," Larry said. "Probably see more there."

"I thought you wanna talk to Tammy at the Wagon."

"No, she doesn't work there weekdays, only on Saturdays. Let's go to 'Cow Girls' on our way back. Tammy doesn't need to know I went there."

"I don't think Mary would let me go."



When Allison picked up the Guardian in her mailbox Monday afternoon, she leaped in the air! "Fannie Mae!" The headline read, 'Station Singer Sues Town.'

Rushing back into her house, she went straight to the phone and called Becky at the school. "Guess what! Have you looked at the paper?"

"No, I've been too busy." Becky coughed. "Gettin ready for summer school."

"Well, there's a big picture of Fannie Mae posing on the front porch of the nursin home. In that 'Cow Girls' shirt like the one Georgia gave us all for Christmas last year. I've never worn mine. Hold on." Allison reached down and hit the volume knob on the television, dropping the paper on the floor. "Okay, I'm back All those old folks have big ole smiles. I've never seen em so happy."

"What does it say about her?" Becky asked, now interested in the article.

"Reports she was banned from the station and is lawin the town in Federal Court. Something to do with constitutional stuff. There's also an editorial about her." Allison picked up the Guardian from the shag carpet. "Says that the Town has discriminated against her in prohibiting her from singin. Also says she's got a right to sing in a public place."

"Yeah, I heard about the meetin from Buddy; he attended it."

"Why didn't you tell me about that, Becky?"

"Didn't think it was important, you know. That's really not my kinfolks, she's Buddy's. If you're so interested in what's goin on, why don't you go up there and ask her mother about it?"

"Can never get Peggy Ellen at home. Anyway, don't want to go up there. Mess with her rowdy kids anyway."

"Gee, reckon that's too bad, Allison."

"Well that's the reason Peggy Ellen's kids are the way they are. Not goin to amount to much. No real male guidance." Allison paused, "Like Doctor Kilgore on 'General Hospital'. He's never home at night with his wife and kids. Cheatin with his nurse."

"Look, Allison, it's easy for you to say; you don't have youngins. It's tough to raise em these days, a lot of distraction. Peggy Ellen needs two jobs to make ends meet." Becky wanted to say that Allison needed a few jobs to keep her busy, but restrained herself. "Although, it's a lot better to raise youngins here, than in other places in the country."

"Like New Jersey, where the editor lived."

"Yeah, I suppose," Becky yawned.

"I kinda like them people up yonder in the cabin. The paper's been a lot more interesting. Makes you think about stuff more." Allison scanned the article about her niece a second time. "Before, with Quicky, I got bored seein all that twisted metal and hairy faces on the front page, all those arrows on the pictures."

"They have stirred things up. I'll say that for them," Becky looked around for Mrs. Filburn. "Things are in a storm at County Finance. You know my brother's the County Finance Officer. He's into it with the County Manager."

"What's the problem?"

"Well, the Manager has a flunky daughter who's messin things up. Oscar's in charge of the girl."

"What's she doin?" Allison asked, wanting more information.

"For one thing she's supposed to answer the phone, take messages, go to the post office, copy stuff, simple stuff, right? But she loses mail, gets phone numbers wrong, can't put together papers in the correct order, stuff like that. Can't write up a simple message."

"She must've had Mrs. Snickle for English."

"How'd you know about her?" Becky asked in an amazed way.

"Junior complains about her all the time." Allison sighed. "Well, why don't your brother fire the gal?"

"She's the Manager's daughter. What can he do?"

"Could go to the supervisors?"

"They won't do nothin without the blessin of the Windes." Becky was surprised that this fact escaped the knowledge of her sister-in-law.

"I remember now. Some one at the beauty shop told me that she got someone else's paycheck. My friend works for the county."

"Yeah. The daughter did that too. Used the wrong envelopes. It was a mess to straighten that out. Now, a lot of people know how much others are makin in the county." Becky saw the door to the principal's office open. "Look, I can't talk

about this here. Tell you what I'll do. Reckin I'll stop by on my way home. I'd like to read the paper, but don't wanna round here. Look, I'm comin home a little early today. Got to string some beans and use em for supper. I don't know what else to cook tonight."

"Why don't you stop on Possum Trot."

Becky was puzzled. "Why?"

"Junior says there's some good road kill."

CHAPTER 32

The Fannie Mae issue polarized Stark County; every one had a strong opinion on the subject. The Guardian received several hundred letters, people called the Queens at home, and talk at the Wagon centered around the young singer. Larry's picture of her even made it to the Mirror and several other papers in New York gave the incident wide coverage. Mary changed their home phone number, had it unlisted, and disconnected her answering machine. One group in the county agreed with the Guardian that Fannie Mae should be able to sing, while another group supported the Town in banning her. The latter group, conservative and religious, believed her conduct an original sin, rivaling that of Adam and Eve. However, both groups agreed that the nation-wide publicity hurt the county's image, and each blamed the paper for blowing the incident way out of proportion.

Unfortunately, the weekend after the editorial came out, the Queens had to attend a fund-raiser at the Mulberry Elementary school. Mary was apprehensive about the public event and would rather have spent the afternoon on the ridge with a book.

The event was to raise money for a new wing to house the library she wanted, so it was imperative she be there. Ms. Sammie D. Porter, the featured guest of honor, was to give a talk on her upcoming play for the bicentennial, the proceeds of which would benefit the project. Several students had minor parts and made some of the props. It was also a chance to meet the actors, set designers, and musicians. The Chamber of Commerce members, elected officials and candidates for public office were expected to attend.

Wearing a bathrobe and with wet stringy hair, Mary came in the common room from the bathroom. "Sorry I'm running behind."

Rick paced. "We're going to be late."

"You all wait in the car until I get dressed. Get out of here."

Without argument Abe and Rick followed orders. After fifteen minutes, she joined the family in the Volvo.

As they traveled down the road, they saw Fannie Mae up ahead sunning herself on her mother's deck. The young singer lay flat on her back in a two-piece swimsuit that exposed much of her white skin. Her hair draped over the back of an aluminum lounge chair. Mary knew that her husband was not looking at Fannie Mae's hair.

"Dad, that's Randy's sister," Abe said. "Why are we going so slow?"

"Don't look, Rick, just keep your eyes on the road." Mary turned to her husband.

"Do you want me to stop and invite her to the school this afternoon?" Rick asked in a half-hearted way.

"You know what, that would make an excellent program." Mary responded in the same voice.

Rick glanced to his left at the trailer. "She could even sing some Elvis." He took another peek, this time almost running into a rusted hood that had fallen off a pick-up. It lay among multi-flora roses on the side of the road.

Mary shouted. "Look where you're going!" After the car returned to the center, and she regained her composure, she commented, "We need some obscenity laws right here in Corn Still."

"I'll talk to the supervisors about it first thing Monday." Rick passed the now famous neighbor and made the turn to Mulberry.

Mary breathed easier when they left Corn Still. "I'm sure Tommy Snickle will want to investigate."

During the drive down Rooster Trace, the family discussed next week's Fourth of July party. There were many preparations to make for food, tent sites, bathroom facilities, and the fireworks. As they passed Junior's church at Fox Den, Abe popped up from the back seat. "Junior invited me to church camp this summer."

"When is it?" His mother asked.

"It's the weekend after the Fourth of July." Abe paused. "Can I go?"

"First, I need to talk to the person in charge. Who is it?" Mary asked, hoping the boy could go. This would be an opportunity for him to be involved with kids away from Corn Still.

"One of Junior's kin, a Mr. McCoy," Abe responded.

"I know him," Rick answered as the car made its way up Possum Trot. "I'll talk to him. I need to find out where they will be going. Sleeping arrangements. I see him at the Courthouse almost everyday."

After the car crested Egg Gap, Mary remembered, "You were supposed to get the building permit from him for the house." Her expression indicated she was upset that he had neglected to do this for some time.

"Forgot." Rick touched the brakes as the car descended the Chicken Creek grade.

"Well, I'll talk to him about the permit and the camp." Mary looked back at Abe.

The family heard a crisp rifle shot from behind and the Volvo's rear tire thumped on the pavement. Abe turned back, looking up the hill. A red pick-up parked on Egg Gap sped away, and disappeared down Possum Trot. Rick steered the car to the shoulder and stopped the car. He opened the door to find the tire on the driver's side with a bullet hole in its sidewall.

Abe ran around to the flat. "I saw a big rifle out the window of that truck."

"That was a close call." Mary came to inspect the damage.

Taking his sports coat off, Rick popped the trunk to drag out the spare and tools. He had never done this before, but had no trouble changing the tire. They were on their way within twenty minutes. "I'll report this to the Sheriff right away."

"Rick, wait until after the reception. We're late already."

"Okay."

Moving closer to her husband in the front seat, she asked, "Do you think this has anything to do with New York?"

"I doubt it, probably just a redneck with too much to drink, but the Sheriff may know. I'll let him look at the tire."

There was silence until they reached the outskirts of town. "Just thought of something else." Abe scanned for trains as the car crossed the tracks coming into Mulberry. "Junior's goin to the races at Bristol. Labor Day."

His mother asked, "I suppose you would like to attend?"

"Yeah."

"I heard from school that things get pretty rowdy at those things. I don't think you should go."

"But, Mom, I'd like to see the cars." Abe glanced at the Courthouse on his left.

"No." Mary could tell that he was disappointed about the races, but that he did not want to argue further. Her son appeared to be satisfied if he could go to the church camp.

A mix of cars and pick-up trucks surrounded the school as they turned right from Main Street and parked. Rick held hands with his wife as they strolled from the car. "I don't like these gatherings, standing around making small talk."

Mary said, "Don't worry. You'll have plenty to talk about. You're almost a celebrity around here."

"Yes, I'll need to defend myself, will you help?"

"I'm staying away from you in there. We should've taken separate cars. You know what, I may even get a ride home with someone else." Mary ribbed her husband but continued to hold his hand.

"I'm not that bad," Rick quipped. "If we see Steve Fields there, why don't you ask him for a ride? It may be safer."

"I'll go home with you. I'm not that desperate, yet. I wonder what happened to that young secretary of his."

"Haven't seen her around. Haven't seen that tiger of hers either."

"I think it died shortly after sitting on my lap." Mary dropped her husband's hand as they passed through the double doors to the school.

"Why? Did you put it out of its misery?"

"I'll never tell."

As the Queens entered the cafeteria, they were greeted by Mrs. Filburn in a formal green dress. "Good afternoon, nice to see you folks. You're late. You missed the speech by Mr. Snickle." There was no comment by the Queens, just an expression of relief on both of their faces. The principal focused her attention on Abe, "You've got a handsome boy there." The boy blushed a little and then she announced, "We're having a little talk by Dr. Sammie Porter in a few minutes. Refreshments later."

"That would not be a little talk," Mary said.

"No, not Dr. Porter. Got confused. Ms. Sammie D. Porter, the playwright."

"That's good." Another sigh of relief covered Mary's face. The Queen family mingled in the cafeteria where tables of food were heaped up. They saw Steve Fields bent over a platter stuffing a fistful of little sandwiches in the pocket of his winter coat.

"Look at Fields!" Rick said.

"Yes, he's probably going to feed them to his cows to keep them on his property." Mary smiled.

"Hi, Steve, is it cold outside?" Rick approached the startled realtor.

"No, I just have to take this coat to the cleaners tomorrow. Just put it on so I'll not forget."

"Here, I'll hang it up for you in the office," Mary offered. "I'll remind you about the coat before you leave."

"Okay, but be careful, it's got valuable stuff in it."

Mary took the coat to the break room and hung it on a wall. She removed the sandwiches and put them in the little refrigerator there. The food could not very well be put back on the table in the cafeteria in front of all the guests. Maybe it would keep until Monday for lunch. When she came back to the reception, she met her husband in the back corner standing all alone. "Where did Fields go?"

"I think he was embarrassed. Left. Said he would come back Monday."

"You know what that means?" Mary paused, waiting for an answer, but received none. "I gotta deal with him again at school. Look who's here now."

"Mayor Dunn."

"This must be the first time he's been in this school," Mary added. "Probably never been to a library."

"He's here to politic."

"Avoiding us," Mary observed.

"Also Snickle. Normally he would be coming over to ask us for votes."

"Even Felcie. You know what, it seems like everyone's staying away from us. Let's go, Rick," Mary said as she surveyed the situation. "We've made an appearance. You know what, I don't feel comfortable here at all."

"Yes, but it would be rude to leave."

"Let's find Mrs. Filburn and tell her about the car." Mary glanced over the crowded cafeteria.

"Don't bother." Rick nodded in the negative. "I need to stop at the Sheriff's office on the way home."

"We could call Sammie Porter later and tell her why we had to leave. She'll understand."

"I'm sure."

"Where's Abe?" Mary asked.

"I'll look in the library and meet you out front." Rick started to walk away to the other side of the room.

"I'll meet you at the front door."

Rick tiptoed out of the cafeteria, keeping to the walls so as not to attract attention. In the library, he gathered his son and they went to the front of the school where Mary was waiting.

"I found him reading 'Model Railroader' magazine," Rick said.

"It's about a new pulsating system." Abe's face beamed.

"What's that?" Mary asked skeptically.

"Mom, it's a new way of locomotive control. My next layout has to have it."

"I hope it doesn't blow any fuses."

CHAPTER 33

"What are you doin over the Fourth?" Junior lifted a shoe box off the floor in Henrietta's spare room and placed it on a kitchen table. Two metal chairs had also been taken from her eating area. All of the bedroom furniture was removed and put in her living room. Henrietta now had a bed in her living room instead of the sofa.

Angus claimed a small sofa which came from the living room. "My parents are having a big party. Last weekend we went all the way to South Carolina to buy a big bunch of fireworks." Abe flipped through a recent edition of 'Model Railroader'.

"When are you shootin em off?" Junior scoured the contents of the box.

"Sunday. I think that's the Fourth. What's happening with you?"

"Goin campin some with Paw next week." He found a utility knife and placed it on the table. "Just after the Fourth. Reckin he's off some for the holiday."

"What about the church trip that's coming up?" Abe located the classified section in the back of the magazine. "Mom'll let me go. Are you still going?"

"Don't worry, I'll be back to go to church camp. Just goin down by the river on Dead Bear Rapids to camp. We oughta go some time. I'll show you some neat stuff."

"Like trains, the bridges and a tunnel?" With a pen, Abe started printing on a piece of paper.

"What are you writin?"

"We're putting an ad in 'Model Railroader' to sell the engine shells. It's free."

"Great."

"Anyway, will you be able to see some fireworks?" After stuffing the letter in an envelope, Abe licked and sealed it.

"Shootin em off the Courthouse in town this Saturday night." Using a scale rule, Junior measured a sheet of styrene plastic. The embossed material looked exactly like the stone used on the front of the real Courthouse in Mulberry.

"My Dad says they have fireworks at the Courthouse every time he goes to a meeting there." Abe addressed the envelope to the magazine's office in Michigan.

"Really, who sets em off?"

"Some guy named Felcie, don't really know why. Think I'll ask my Dad about it sometime."

"Talkin about the Courthouse. We gotta finish that up." Junior used the knife and a metal rule as a straight edge to cut the plastic sheeting.

"Yes, we're waiting for some supplies. Could plant some bushes around it, just like the real thing."

"I remember those bushes at the Courthouse." Junior went to the closet and brought back to the table a two foot by two foot piece of plywood with three sides of a model building sticking nine inches up. The fourth side, the front of the Courthouse, was missing.

"Those plastic flowers we got out of the trash at the florist shop will do fine. They need to be cut in small pieces and glued next to the structure. Put some little holes on the board we got."

"What size?" Junior asked.

"Quarter inch."

"When we get to my Paw's shed, I'll get the drill and bit to make em. We gotta sneak in there, get it and bring it back there."

"Junior, when do your parents get home today?" Putting away the magazine, Abe took a piece of cardboard from a box under the table.

"We'll have enough time now, on Friday my Paw usually stops by the farmer's market below town. Ma does the grocery shoppin at the Piggly Wiggly in Riverport. All we've gotta worry about is Sis. She usually stays down at Allison's."

"To watch the soaps?" Abe used scissors to snip a piece off the cardboard, the same size that Junior had cut a few minutes before.

"Yeah, reckon she's got hooked up with Allison. Sis ain't supposed to watch em."

"I got to be back by four this afternoon." Squeezing a toothpaste-sized tube, Abe glued the piece of stone sheeting on the cardboard to form a part of the front wall of the Courthouse. "My parents will be home early to get ready for the party. People are coming from out of town, staying all weekend over the Fourth. Some are coming from Vermont. Real weird people, write poetry, meditate, smoke, stuff like that."

"What's odd about smokin? My Aunt Peggy Ellen does it all the time. Reckin Allison lights up some."

"This stuff's different, it's bizarre stuff." Abe placed a few heavy mason jars from the kitchen on top of the bonded material.

"If word gets out what we're doin, folks'll think we're a tad strange."

"Let's try to keep this secret a little while longer. So far, no one's looked in your barn or even suspected us here. We gotta move the rest of the stuff out of the loft and get it down here." Abe pressed down on each of the jars as hard as he could. "Okay, this glue needs to sit. We can go." Abe stood, and stuffed the envelope in his dungarees.

"Give me that letter. I'll put it on Aunt Henrietta's dresser. She'll mail it this afternoon when she comes back."

The boys left Henrietta's trailer and walked up the road to the shed, where they borrowed the tools. The pair also climbed up the ladder to the loft to retrieve some remaining models. Junior picked up two burlap bags in the barn so that each boy could hide all the items they held in their hands. They went back to Henrietta's to complete the work. After half an hour they returned to the Garfield home place.

"Can you come in for some drinks?" Junior stood on his kitchen porch.

"No, I better get up to the cabin. Gotta set up some tents."

"Why's that?"

"That's where some people will be sleeping. Others will be in their campers, vans, cars, whatever." Abe stood in the road midway between the barn and porch. "We cleared some brush up there."

ED KRAUSE

When Abe approached the cabin, he observed two other cars parked beside his parents' in front of the porch. As he entered there were four people sitting in the common area with his mother and father.

"This is Abe, our son. Remember the train set in Jersey; he built that all by himself." Rick said.

"Didn't know I was famous."

"Abe, these are some friends from Vermont; they are going to stay a few days. Your mother and I went to school with them."

"Glad to meet you." Glancing at their thin pale faces, typical of vegetarians, he headed for the refrigerator.

A woman Mary's age with long black hair and beads around her neck, asked him, "What have you been doing these days when you're out of school?"

"Today I planted some bushes with my friend down the road." Abe took out a slice of thick ham and made a sandwich.

"That must have been hard work."

"Yeah, pretty hard; it was difficult to get the holes the right diameter with a bit." Abe saw that the lady was somewhat puzzled.

She changed the subject and asked, "Rick, do you still smoke? Remember those days at college?"

"Haven't done that since school." Rick looked at his wife who was nodding in agreement.

"Do you mind if I light up a joint?" The women took a small plastic bag out of her purse.

"I don't. The Sheriff here in this county might," Rick said.

"Well, is he invited to the party?" The hippie woman asked, wanting to know the answer right away.

"Yes, he may stop by. Think I mentioned it to him. Went on a pot raid with him last week."

The lady rose abruptly from the sofa. "Mary, I need to use your toilet to dispose of something."

"You'll need to go outside." Mary pointed the way.

The lady looked at Abe's sandwich. "Yeah, that meat's making me sick." She wasted no time leaving.

The other lady said, "I knew down South was primitive, but at least in Vermont we've got indoor plumbing."

"Rick dug a couple of holes in the ground down at the garden spot and put some tents over them. I figured there may be fifty people here this weekend," Mary said. "You know that they can't all use this bathroom in here. That's for sure."

"How are you goin to feed us?" one of the men asked presumptuously.

"We'll do most of the cooking outside on the grill. Got plenty of burgers and hot dogs."

"Remember we don't eat meat," the hippy lady said.

"Y'all vegetarians?" Mary asked.

"What's this 'you all' stuff? You must like it here?"

"There are hard-working people here. Honest folks."

"What about the food?" The same man asked in a somewhat worried tone and looked at Mary.

"We'll also have pizza. You can help make the dough tomorrow and cook them on a wood fire. Rick built an oven outside that burns wood."

"So you don't have a stove in here. But don't worry, we brought a lot of stuff with us," the woman said. "I figured that we wouldn't find too much to eat down in the sticks."

"Don't you live on a farm in Vermont?" Abe asked, thinking these people a little strange and that it would be a long weekend. He decided to spend as much time as possible with Junior for the next few days and stay out of the way.

This time the man answered, "Yes, but there are only a few working farms left. Most of the state is being overrun by people from New York and Jersey. The taxes are terrible, might have to sell the farm next year. It's hard work also. My back's been giving me a lot trouble."

"Then you'll need to move into a nursing home?" Rick asked.

"No, not yet. I'm waiting until they build some new age holistic places. They have started some in San Francisco." The man did not to appear to be joking. "It will take a while for them to get to Vermont."

"You know what, it'll take at least a century to get here," Mary said.

Rick added, "Mary still has some crystals left over from Woodstock. Do you want them?"

The man replied, "That would be good; I could save them. Maybe when I get a wheelchair, they can be put on the sides, like a wind chime."

"Yes. Every time you roll down the hall, the folks will know you're coming to bring them good karma."

CHAPTER 34

"Paw, what time are we goin to the fireworks?" Junior asked his father with a wide grin at breakfast Saturday morning, July third. The Garfield family was finishing their meal and Angus gnawed on a T-bone under the table.

"Reckin bout five. They're havin a barbeque in front of the Courthouse. Some music, then they shoot em off."

"Fannie Mae singin?" Becky asked with a chuckle. She rose from the table and reached into the hamper for a pile of dirty clothes.

Buddy responded with a wink, "Don't think so."

"Who's makin music this year?" She stuffed the clothes into the washing machine next to the stove.

"The 'Chicken Creek Criminals' doin some fiddlin."

"Can't wait," Junior said. "That's always fun." The boy had watched the fireworks at the Courthouse as long as he could remember, although this was the first time that food was being served. However, because of his special diet, Junior could not have any pork. His mother told him that she planned to bring some broiled fish for him.

"We need to pick some corn this morning before it gets hot," Buddy reminded his son. In Stark County, the Fourth of July is good pickin time for early sweet corn. The Garfield farm was no exception. This year was a good year because of the heavy spring rains and a plentiful supply of sunshine for the past month, with only occasional afternoon thunderstorms.

"Can I drive the tractor some?" Junior asked .

"Reckin so, part way anyway."

"Abe's parents are havin a party tomorrow. They're settin off some fireworks too. Can I go up there?"

"Fireworks on Sunday!" Becky dumped a cup of detergent into the machine and slammed the top shut.

"Never heard of that," Buddy pointed to the family Bible lying open on the cupboard.

"Well, if the Fourth falls on a Sunday, there's nothin in there that says fireworks can't be set off on the Sabbath," Junior politely argued.

"That's true, but it's supposed to be a day of rest. How can we rest with all that racket?" his father asked.

"They have them races on Sunday. What about the noise of that?" The boy again questioned his father.

Becky looked at her husband. "We probably should end this talk." The phone rang and Becky picked it up and said without hesitation. "Hi, Allison, what's goin on down there?"

"There's been lotsa cars goin up the road this morning. Are you selling drugs or something? Do I turn you in to the Sheriff?"

"No, not yet. If the school doesn't get funded this year, we may, I'm out of a job then. Allison, I got to go. This is laundry day, and we're all goin to town later. If you're not doing anything why don't you come up and help me?"

"I'm workin on my quilt today. It's hard to keep my mind on this with so many people round. Look I gotta go."

As Becky put down the phone, she turned to her husband. "Allison says that a lot of people are comin up the road." She turned the washer on and sat down.

"Ma, that's Abe's party," Junior said almost shouting over the noise of the machine.

"Why don't you go by there this afternoon and check it out." Taking his cup to the counter by the sink, Buddy peered up the road through the kitchen window. "Reckin you can be our little spy. That's after you've done all your chores."

After a morning of driving the tractor, picking corn, and dinner, Junior took a little nap and woke up about two o'clock. His mother was folding clothes on the table next to the washing machine when he came down to the kitchen. "Ma, I'll be up at Abe's for a while."

"Okay, be back at four. You need a bath before we go."

"No problem, Ma."

When Junior approached the cabin, there were cars, vans and campers spread out everywhere. Several tents were pitched in the recently cleared area behind the cabin. People either played or watched a game of volleyball in front of the house. He sat down on freshly cut grass and observed. After a few minutes, Abe came out and placed two soda bottles on a card table on the front porch. He noticed his friend sitting on the ground. "Do you want something?"

"Sure, pretty tired goin up that hill," Junior complained as he stood up rather slowly. The boys went to the table to fix a drink and grabbed potato chips from a punch bowl. "Where did all these people come from?"

"Vermont," Abe said, "There's a few from around here."

"That's far way," Junior exclaimed.

"Yes, when I lived in Jersey, we went up there to some farm." Abe munched on the chips. "Two women lived together like they were married or something."

"Really? Never heard of that."

"You know, we called the Vermonters 'Yankees' when I was up there."

Junior sipped on a drink. "My Paw says that people from Jersey are 'Yankees.' If that's true, then, if people from Jersey call the people from Vermont 'Yankees,' then the people from Vermont are true blood 'Yankees'. Do you follow that?"

"I don't follow you, Junior, but you can ask my Dad if you like."

"Nope, I'm sorta outnumbered up here." Junior gazed at the people playing and watching volleyball. "Don't want to get in trouble up here, have a riot."

"I'll protect you from all these folks." Having finished his soda, Abe put the cup on the card table. "Let's go up the mountain. There's some people up in the clearing. Setting up the fireworks for tomorrow."

"Okay, I reckon." Junior was curious about what all the people were doing on his old hunting ground. During the last week, a rough road with several switch-backs had been cut from the cabin to the ridge. A bulldozer had obliterated the footpath and the forest was replaced with freshly exposed dirt and downed trees.

As the boys approached the clearing from the new road, they found a heavysset man bent over a box of fireworks spreading the contents out on a blanket. He said in a husky voice, "One of you Rick's boy?"

"Yes. Who are you?" Abe said.

"I know your father from the city." The man examined a single piece of paper written in Chinese. "I'm a retired firefighter trying to sort all this out for tomorrow."

"Have you ever done this before?" Junior asked.

"Not really, I always put fires out, not start them." The man studied the pictures on the sheet while he talked. "If it gets out of hand, I'm here to help."

"I know folks round here who start em and then help put em out," Junior said.

"We don't have many of those in the city, mainly people who want to collect on insurance or get even with someone." The man packed the material back into the cardboard box. When he was finished, he stood up and admired the vista, "Sure's a pretty view." The firefighter meandered down the newly cut road.

The boys watched a group of adults the age of Abe's parents play frisbee. "Have you been on those rocks on the far ridge?" Abe pointed across Corn Still valley past the apple trees.

"Few times with my Paw, just in the dead a winter."

"Why's that?" Abe asked.

"In the summer, copperheads like to sun themselves on the ledges." Junior faced in that direction. "Some caves up there too. No tellin what you'll find in there. My Paw says that during the War they stored stuff in em. Deserters lived up here near the cabin. You know, the people that I was talkin about at school. They went into Riverport and stole things."

"I'd like to go up there this winter when there's no snakes or bears," Abe said.

"Maybe I'll take you up there after first frost. There's bunches of briars up there now, pretty grown up. Almost impossible to get around there in the summer. A lot of old fences you gotta climb over or under, on your hands and knees in some places."

"I love those hawks circling around the rocks there. They seem to just float up there." Abe gazed upward to the clear blue sky above the ridge.

"They like the air currents. They're lookin on the rocks for snakes and small animals like mice, and chipmunks." Junior waved to the flock of black birds with four foot wingspans, their wings motionless but moving effortlessly through the clear atmosphere.

"Easy pickings," Abe said, "like a take out order for lunch."

"Nope, not at this time of day; reckon they're lookin for some dinner."

"You're right."

"I wish I could be as free as that, I gotta be hooked up to that machine," Junior lamented. "I hate it, it's a real pain."

"Junior, let's go up the mountain. Look at all the people from the platform," Abe suggested.

"Okay, I reckon." The boys climbed the short distance to the top of the mountain. It was more difficult than the last time because the underbrush and briars impeded their progress. Junior had to stop on several occasions. Abe led the way

swinging a wooden walking stick to clear a path. After ten minutes, they reached the top of the mountain, and Abe jumped on the rock beside the big tree and yanked the rope down. He scurried up the rope first, and Junior began to climb. About four feet from the ground, Junior fell, landing on his left foot. He tumbled, ending on his back.

"You okay?" shouted Abe from above on the platform.

"Yeah, for some reason I couldn't hold on." Junior crawled to the rock and struggled up, using it as a support. "Think I sprained my ankle."

"Wait! Don't walk on it." It took only a few seconds for Abe to slide down the rope.

Junior hobbled for a few steps and sat down on the rock to catch his wind. "Reckin I'll be okay, just need to work it out." He took off his boot and rubbed his ankle, relieving the injury somewhat. After putting his footwear on and using the walking stick as a crutch, Junior was able to survive the trip to the cabin. He collapsed in a chair on the porch. An ice pack furnished by Mary helped Junior's pain. "How long is these people stayin?"

"Till Monday. They all came for the Fourth celebration. There's some coming tomorrow for the fireworks."

"How can you fit any more here?"

"Don't know." Abe looked around at all the cars, tents and campers. There were more people around and vehicles now lined the road all the way down to the apple trees. One family even brought a small plastic swimming pool and were filling it with a garden hose from the cabin. Harley-Davidson motorcycles were parked on one side of the road. Some had little trailers hooked on the rear packed full with gear.

While the boys were on the porch, a bearded man came running up the road shouting, "Help me! Help! My Volkswagen went off the road down there. My girlfriend's still inside!"

"I'll get my Dad." Abe rushed into the cabin.

They ran out and Rick recognized the man. "Johnny, where's Bunny?"

"Down the road, bus is stuck in the ditch. Could you help us?"

Rick stood there motionless for a few moments. Then he turned to his son, "Abe, could you call a wrecker? On the other hand, have your mother do it. I'll meet you down the road."

"Okay, Dad."

"Have your Mother call Garfield too." Rick turned to the man. "Where's the bus?"

"Below the house down there, above the trashy trailers."

Junior did not say a word, but he knew this was not his friend's fault. Abe shrugged his shoulders and went into the cabin.

"Okay, I'll go with you, Johnny." Rick followed the man down the road with Junior lagging behind. The Volvo and Audi were blocked in, so neither vehicle could be used to help the Volkswagen bus. After he made the call, Abe sprinted down the road overtaking Junior at the fence line below the apple trees. Both boys could see a tractor pulling the stranded vehicle with a chain just below the Garfield house, and a young couple standing close by.

ED KRAUSE

"It's my Paw with the tractor, he's got it!" Junior exclaimed, now limping noticeably.

As Junior got closer, he could hear Mr. Queen say, "Are you okay, Bunny? Nice to see you in one piece."

The woman pointed to Buddy, "I'm fine, thanks to this nice man who pulled me out."

"Thanks, Mr. Garfield," Rick said.

"Okay, Mr. Queen, but the bus damaged the culvert. It's gotta be fixed right away. If it rains, it'll flood."

"Sorry about that, I'll pay for it," Johnny said.

"It's not a matter of payin for it," Buddy said rather bluntly. "I gotta fix it now. Why don't ya'll just go and have your fun."

Knowing his father was angry, Junior tried to diffuse the potential confrontation, "Paw, Abe and I'll help you."

"Okay, we need to fetch some shovels and dig around the pipe. I just replaced this thing awhile ago. Was brand new."

The engine of the VW bus started up fine. Rick and his two friends rode up the road while the boys went to the barn for the tools. Buddy drove the tractor down to the pond and hooked a chain to an extra culvert section discarded next to the lower barn. He dragged it back to the place where the VW bus went off the road. It took two hours to remove the crushed corrugated pipe, replace it with the new section and backfill the dugout part. The wrecker truck arrived as they were finishing the job and Buddy told the driver to send the bill to his neighbor. By then, it was after five in the afternoon and the Garfield family would arrive late for the festivities in Mulberry. As the boys put the tools away in the barn, Buddy said to his son, "Those damn Yankees don't know how to drive."

CHAPTER 35

"Junior! You need to wake up!" Becky yelled upstairs from the kitchen. "Get ready for church!"

"Ma! Ma! My ankle's hurtin'!"

"Can you walk?" His mother climbed the stairs.

When she was halfway up, Junior said. "Think so. I'll be down in a bit."

"All right. Your breakfast is gettin cold." She returned to the kitchen, where Buddy and Sue Ann were eating the last bites of their pancakes and bacon, the family's favorite. As Becky sat down to eat, she looked at Sue Ann. "Could you check on Junior? And get dressed."

"Could I have some more orange juice?"

"I'll have to make some more." Becky went to the refrigerator and took out a can of juice concentrate. "I'll have this ready when you come down." The drawer squeaked as she found an opener.

"Okay." The girl petted Angus on the floor and hopped upstairs.

Buddy put down an empty coffee mug. "Becky, I've got to do something about the road. Can't let all this traffic keep goin up and down. It'll tear it to pieces. I just put two loads of gravel down last week. They won't even contribute their fair share. Yesterday one of em got stuck in the ditch, busted the culvert up."

She opened the can and poured its contents into a glass pitcher. "Fourth of July only happens once a year. Maybe this'll be their one and only party." Becky went to the sink and filled the pitcher with water.

Buddy rose from the table for another cup of coffee. "Maybe I'll put a gate across the road just above the house. They would have to get out of their car every time they go up and down. Mess with a key." He paused, "not give em one."

"Don't do that, Buddy. That'll only cause trouble." She poured juice for herself and Sue Ann. "I'm sure there won't be anymore problems."

The phone rang and Becky acknowledged the caller. "Hi, Allison, how are you this mornin'?"

"Fine, but there's a whole bunch a people down here fishin in the pond." Out of breath, Allison asked, "Do they have permission to do that?"

"Don't think so, but let me ask Buddy, hold on." Becky put the receiver down as she asked her husband. "Did you let anyone fish in the pond?"

"Hell, no," Buddy said, "Don't tell me those damn Yankees is fishin in my pond! Knew they didn't have no manners!"

Becky grabbed the phone and listened to her sister-in law. "Some of those men are kinda good lookin without their clothes."

"Why don't you invite them in for some pies?" There was no response from her. "Thanks, Allison, let me know if anything else happens." Becky hung up the phone.

"Honey, dear, I think I need to have a little prayer session with them up yonder!" He slammed down his cup, spilling coffee over half the table.

"What are you goin to pray about?" Becky asked with a little grin. "How many of em's up there?"

"Junior says that there must be a hundred people up there. That was yesterday, probably more now." With a towel he wiped the table, cleaning the mess. "Cars all over the place, people sleepin everywhere. There's no tellin what all they're doin. Junior says there's only one bathroom in the cabin."

"It must be a busy place." After pouring a refill of juice, she took a swallow.

"Reckin I better ask Junior what's goin on up there." Buddy meandered to the window and looked at all the vehicles lined up on the road next to the apple trees. "Those damn Yankees are on my property."

"Cool it, Buddy." She put an apple pie in the oven.

Sue Ann came down and joined them fully dressed. "Ma, you better take a gander at Junior's leg." The girl gulped her juice down and motioned she wanted more.

Becky refilled the glass. "You're right." She turned to her husband. "I'll go up there, you sit down. I'll see how he's doin and ask him about all that." About ten minutes later, she returned to the table. Buddy and Sue Ann were sipping their drinks and Becky reported. "Junior's not feelin good. His ankle's big as a pumpkin. He shouldn't be walkin on it now. I'm gettin some ice to put on it."

"I guess he had a hard day yesterday. He helped me with the culvert in the afternoon and picked corn in the mornin. Do you think he needs to go to the Doc?"

"I'll stay home with him. You take Sue Ann to church. If the swellin ain't down by tonight, I'll call the doctor."

"Okay. Did you talk to him about the bathroom situation up there?" Buddy fumbled with his mug.

"Yeah, he says they dug some holes down at the old garden spot."

"What! That's right above our spring. We drink from that. Put down that juice Sue Ann." Shoving his coffee from his place at the table, Buddy's face turned a shade redder.

"Should we have our water tested?" Becky asked.

He sprang up and darted to the window. "Can't do it today. There's probably a place in Riverport we can call. But the damage's already done. Those Bastar...."

Becky cut him off. "Tomorrow they'll be closed for the holiday. The school's closed tomorrow too."

"What a mess!"

"Reckin we need to let your sisters know about this. They're on the spring too. Buddy, why don't you go to church and stop at the school afterwards? You can get the big blue containers from the water cooler. There's some milk containers in the shed, and you can fill them with tap water at the school. I'll call Mrs. Filburn. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Need to go and talk with Queen," Buddy paused, "with a shot gun!" He slammed his chair against the table as he stomped around the kitchen. Angus jumped up and scurried to the living room sofa.

"Don't go up there yet; you'd be outnumbered!"

"They're just d... Yankees! I can lick em all with a couple blasts! Lee did it at Fredericksburg. He was outnumbered."

"I'll call Mary Queen while you're out to church gettin that stuff. Go to church, Buddy."

"They can't even crap without messin it up."

"I think you need some religion! Go!" Becky insisted.



Mary peered out the picture window of the cabin and saw her husband holding a wine glass in his hand. He stood in front of several flimsy card tables and an assortment of aluminum lawn chairs, none of them matching in color or style. A plentiful supply of wine, cheese, plastic cups and punch lay on the tables. Since it was early Sunday morning, only a small group of people milled around, but all had drinks in their hands. Most were sound asleep in cars, vans, tents and on tarps on the ground. Fortunately, there had been no rain during the night, although there were darkening clouds in the west over the Balds that morning.

She hadn't slept a wink during the night, worrying not only about the crowd that had gathered over the past two days, but more about the additional people who'd be coming during the day for the fireworks that night. There was no way to stop them. Some of their friends in Vermont had put an article in a local new-age newspaper about the party. Mary did not even know the names of most of the people that were now descending upon their property. She realized that this was turning out to be more than they had expected and that Rick was trying to overlook the problem with alcohol. He had not drunk like this since the night the trial concluded in New Jersey.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the telephone. After a minute on the line, she shouted, "Hey, Rick! We have a little problem!"

"What's that, Mary? Only a little problem?" he said from the outside. "We can handle little problems! It's the big tribulations I can't handle well now."

Mary rushed out onto the porch. "I just got a call from the Garfields. They're worried about their water." Abe followed two paces behind his mother.

"Why?" Rick poured another glass of wine.

"Says that the latrines that we dug are too close to their spring. You know that..."

"Oh, no, they could be right! There's, there's a lot of people using that by now!"

"What do we do, Rick? We still have more people coming in. I've had to tell them not to use the road anymore. I have someone posted down there by the pond. You know what, they have to park at the Forest Service Campground up on Rooster Trace and walk up. It's one big mess."

"This has gotten out of hand."

"Yes, what do we do about the bathroom? Tell everyone to use the Garfields?" She pointed down the valley.

"That wouldn't work. Mary, I'll go out and get some volunteers to dig a couple of more holes far away from the spring. Then I'll go up to the clearing up on the ridge and get the fireworks ready. Why don't you call Garfield back and tell them that we're not going to use those holes anymore. I should've thought about that. Should have. Abe, could you come with me? We've got an important mission. I guess we'll need shovels. Maybe we can borrow some down there. Abe, could you go down there and bring some back? Take all of our friends down there."

"All of them?"

Mary interrupted. "Don't have them go down there. Rick, you need to gather the people here first and tell them about the problem, and also, quit drinking that wine." She grabbed the Dixie cup from his hand and threw it on the ground.

"You're right. Hey, Abe, don't go down there yet, we need to tell everyone to come to the cabin. Could you go up to the clearing to those people up there? I'll go down by the apple orchard."

"What do I tell them?" his son asked.

"Tell them we have an environmental crisis. Tell them we have to celebrate Earth Day right now. Tell them the world 's coming to an end, and we need to be ready. Tell them the government has collapsed and there are riots in the streets, and we need to gather for instructions." It sounded like preaching although his son and wife were the only people in the congregation. He slammed down his fist on the card table and broke one of the flimsy legs. "Tell them..." As he plopped down on one of the lawn chairs, he caught the metal arms on his buttocks and his hand punched through the fabric webbing on the seat. Rick tumbled down on the porch floorboards. There was a loud thump on the old lumber, and the aluminum made a metallic sound.

"Will they understand all that, Dad?" Abe looked at his father strangely for he had never seen him in this condition before.

"They'll know," his father said confidently from the floor.

Trying not to laugh, Mary soon burst out in a hoot. The family split to gather the assemblage.

Half an hour and two Dixie cups of wine later, he readied for the real sermon. Mary stood by his side in case he fell over again. With all the people and liquor around, it was difficult for her to control her husband's drinking. About one hundred fifty people sat Indian style in front of the cabin. It looked like Jonestown with Jim Jones on the front porch, punch bowls and little cups on the remaining two card tables. Then Rick delivered a message to the masses. "Sorry folks, to get you here so early in the morning, but we do have a little problem. We can't use the latrines down there." His unsteady hand waved several times. "It's too close to my neighbor's spring. We need to dig new ones and I need your help."

Someone in the crowd yelled, "Just go easy on the baked beans."

There was a little laughter in the crowd as Rick continued to preach, "No, we need to divide up in groups of three people. Each group will get a shovel. You all can take turns digging. We're getting some more shovels, and we need to dig some new holes down near the apple trees. No, can't do that, we would pollute the trees. Let's dig near the ridge. No. Go up the new road, there's fresh dirt on

the banks there. Dig on the side of the road. Hope you don't mind, not too much privacy. I'm sorry about all this, but I didn't know so many of you would invite friends and show up. I guess you all wanted to relive Woodstock and share the experience. It's all my fault. We'll still have the fireworks tonight. Remember Woodstock? With all the rain and mud, we survived, we'll survive this also." Just then, the crowd heard some distant thunder and Rick asked, "Did anyone bring any extra tents?"

A large fat woman yelled, "Can we still take a bath in the pond down by the highway?" Before Rick could respond, another woman said, "This is the first time I've been invited to a party where I had to dig my own bathroom."



Becky removed a pie from the oven and placed it on a metal rack to cool. "Finally, you're back. Did you get the water?" Her husband had returned from church much later than normal. This was not going to be a typical Sunday.

"Yeah, Grover's helpin me get the bottles from the truck."

The surveyor came in carrying two cooler jugs filled with water on each shoulder. Becky nodded. "Thanks for helpin us. I guess Buddy explained the situation. Sit down, and I'll make some sandwiches."

Buddy grabbed a jug. "We need to go up there with guns and shoot a few tires."

"I'd like to do more than that." Grover placed the water on the counter.

This upset Becky. "Just sit down. I'll get you both a beer."

Buddy said. "Can't drink the water anyway."

Grover asked, "How's Junior doin? Buddy was tellin me about his kidney problem."

"Well, he's gotta go to Riverport every Thursday for dialysis." Becky cut up cooked chicken for sandwiches. A few days before, these chickens had been waddling around the barn. She mixed in some mayonnaise with the meat. "The machine takes his body's waste out of his blood. His kidneys' supposed to do that, but they don't work for some reason. In youngins it doesn't happen that often."

"Reckin the kidneys is like an oil filter in my pick-up?" Grover relaxed some after finishing a beer.

"Yeah, somewhat, only in this case you don't change the kidneys every five thousand miles." She took a solid loaf of bread out of a tin box on the counter. "They're supposed to last a lifetime."

"Reckin what can be done?"

Becky looked at their guest while slicing the fresh bread made the day before. "He's gotta have the machine hooked up every week or gotta get a transplant from some one else. He gets tired by Thursday as the stuff builds up. Yesterday we had a busy day and I think it got to him." She spread the chicken salad on the bread. "Lately, he's gettin more tired. I think I need to talk to the doctor again; the swellin ain't gone down. Because of the stuff that's in the blood, his swellin don't go down like me or you."

"Is he awake?" Buddy picked up a sandwich and started to gobble it down.

"No, but he did get up round noon for a while. Said he wanted to go down to Henrietta's, but I wouldn't let him do that. Could hardly walk. Allison says he's been spendin a lot of time down there with that boy Abe. We need to ask her what's goin on after all this mess is over. At least Henrietta's feelin better these days. Finally gainin some weight back."

"Did Junior have somethin to eat today?" The sandwich disappeared from her husband's plate.

"Gave him leftover pancakes, also had some milk. Couldn't give him any juice." Becky went to the foot of the stairs. "Now he's sleepin. He wants to go up there and see the fireworks tonight. Told him we can watch em right out on the kitchen porch."

"Did you talk to my sisters about the water situation?"

"Yeah, Henrietta's goin to her friend at Turkey Neck to stay the night."

"You know she's doin alot better. Remember how pale she was?"

"Yeah. Her color is alot gooder." Becky poked at the apple pie with a fork. "Peggy Ellen's takin her kids to Riverport. Her daughter's makin a special appearance tonight anyway at 'Cow Girls.' She's famous now."

"I'll probably see her tonight. That's where I hang out now." Grover went to the refrigerator for another beer. "Can't afford to go out West no more."

Buddy's eyes were glued to the pie. "What about Allison, did you talk to her?"

"Yeah, but you can't get her to move. Told her we would be down later with some bottled water. Says she needs to stay put and see what happens. Anyway it would be good if she could keep order."

"Doesn't want to miss a thing." Buddy picked up a beer and finished it in three swallows.

"I bet she didn't sleep a wink. Wouldn't surprise me if she snuck up there last night to see what was goin on." With a knife, Becky divided the pie into six equal pieces.

"She probably got out some of her beads, put on a peace necklace and wore a rainbow colored T shirt without a bra."

"We need to send her up yonder tonight for the fireworks. Reckin she'll meet some nice hippie man that will take her away." Becky put a slice of pie on each of three small plates.

"I'll let her use one of my sleeping bags. She can spend the night up there with them," Buddy offered.

"I was hopin that she could share one with somebody." With a faint smirk on her face, she opened the refrigerator then the freezer door. "Oh dear!" The ice cream had melted and it was in a big puddle on the bottom of the tray. "Thought you fellows fixed this. Now it's not cold enough."

"My next pay check we'll have to get another one." Buddy was not a happy camper because he would not have any ice cream on his apple pie, nor did he have his normal dose of caffeine.

Grover shifted the conversation. "Do you care if it's a man or woman that hooks up with Allison?"

"Not really." Buddy helped his wife clean the mess in the freezer. "You know

I saw some same sex couples go up there together. They were holdin hands. One couple kissin."

"Men or women?" Grover asked.

"Couldn't really tell what kinda couple, come to think of it." The pies were served without any topping, but Buddy polished off the beer. "I mentioned our problem to Tammy at church; she'll be up here later with some of her water. That should last us and Allison at least to Tuesday."

"I heard the preacher was sick. How's he doin?" Becky asked.

"He was there, preached a good sermon. 'Love your neighbor as yourself' right from the New Testament."

"I bet you asked him after the service if Yankees were our neighbors," Becky said.

"Didn't want to ask him that."

"Why?" Becky asked puzzled.

"Cause I don't wanna know the answer."

CHAPTER 36

Summer sunsets on Corn Still were usually beautiful, and the Fourth of July this year was no exception. Red and pink cirrus clouds stretched like giant fingers high in the west over a brilliant orange sky, the mountains bathed in the same color. The air was clear enough to see down the entire Rooster Trace valley, past the church at Fox Den, a rare sight. A full moon rose in the east, partially obscured by distant clouds, the last remnants of the late afternoon thunderstorm. The air was fresh and still after the storm. The fireworks were all in place and blankets spread on the clearing. People gathered around with glasses of wine exchanging news and gossip of their lives back home. Everyone had a good meal. Rick and his family ate thick juicy burgers, but others had a good tofu sandwich or a crunchy granola bar. Some made their own pizza and cooked it in a wood-fired oven. The crowd had dried out from the rain, and everyone was satisfied.

The last time many of Rick and Mary's friends had seen each other was their tenth college reunion. That was a more sedate and formal affair with no children. Now there were hordes of kids running aimlessly around. Many dogs roamed in the field searching for a tasty meal of uneaten pizza or burger. Some were on leashes sharing food with families seated on blankets. It was a festive time, just like Woodstock for many people here. Today, instead of talk about the Vietnam War, big evil corporations and the oppressive government, they chatted about issues of childcare, cars, retirement plans and jobs. There was still some talk of politics and religion. Some people were dissatisfied with the current administration in Washington. But Mary knew that at least one of their friends had removed the Reagan-Bush bumper sticker from his car at a rest stop in a nearby state.

As soon as the last vestiges of light in the west were extinguished, Mary distributed sparklers to all the children, including Abe. Soon the field blazed with small flashes of flickering light. The full moon high in the sky, illuminated the valley in dim white. Several people noticed that three planets lined up in a straight line in the western sky; Venus, the brightest, was just above the horizon with Jupiter and Saturn higher up. Someone set a telescope on the ridge clearing to view the rare celestial event, while other people went further up the mountain to meditate.

Several times Rick announced that everyone should sit down. Once the crowd was seated and quiet, he not only thanked everyone for their cooperation in solving the crisis earlier in the day, but apologized for not being prepared for the late afternoon thunderstorm. He was more coherent than he had been in the morning because Mary had literally locked him in their bedroom for rest and abstinence during the entire afternoon. In his place, she instituted almost martial law in dealing with the crowd.

Rick lit a flare to prepare for the first volley of fireworks, and it flickered in a slight breeze from the west. He had never shot off fireworks, but did not disclose this to his guests. A firefighter friend was enlisted to assist in the display.

"Ready?" Rick bellowed.

The crowd roared back, "Ready!" and there was complete silence in anticipation of the show. Only the gentle rustle of the trees could be heard.

"Let'er rip!" the firefighter shouted back.

The massive crowd yelled in approval. The first set of fireworks consisted of faint streaks of light that shot up several hundred feet and then exploded into concentrated white clusters producing deafening noises that echoed from the rock ledges to the west. Several dogs barked. Next a dazzling shower of small red, white and blue stars lower in the sky made a prickly noise like shaking a bag of popcorn. Everyone clapped. The colored lights reflected faintly off both the land and gathering clouds in the west. Rick lit fuses at the bottom of a series of tubes the diameter of oatmeal boxes. Then several rockets twisted upward, spewing sparks and making siren sounds. One of these rockets veered off course horizontally and whizzed right over the heads of the crowd. A basketball player could have reached up and caught the missile. Then it dropped out of sight down the valley to the south.

Rick could hear one woman yell, "Hope it don't hit that farm down there." Mary realized that he had not positioned one of the tubes correctly. They were supposed to be completely vertical.



Becky and her family sat on their back porch facing up the ridge. They, too, were anticipating the light and sound show from this vantage point. First, white clusters appeared, illuminating the upper field and barn. Loud noises soon followed. Angus awoke, lifted his head, growled and went back to sleep. During the next silence Junior said, "Wish I was up yonder."

"I want you right here. You don't look so good. Can see it just as good from here," Becky said softly and watched intently as rockets twisted upward. Junior's right leg was propped up on a bench with an ice pack over his ankle.

"You're right Ma, my leg's a hurtin'."

"Hold on, I'll get an aspirin." Becky left for the medicine cabinet in the downstairs bath.

As she returned, a beautiful display of red, white and blue stars lit the night sky. The family could even hear the crowd's approval of the show. Next they saw three spirals of light rising straight up and one coming right at them! Fortunately it dropped to the earth before it reached them. "Boy, that was close." Sue Ann pointed to the downward trajectory of a trail of smoke.

"It hit the upper barn," Buddy said frustrated. "Those fools!"

"Hope it doesn't catch fire," Becky said.

"Ain't nothin we can do! By the time we get up there, it'll be too late. Once that hay gets started, nothin's goin to stop it. Nothin. Any way, there ain't no water up there to put it out. Let's just keep watchin the barn." Buddy stood up, his eyes fixed on the upper field bathed in moonlight.

Five minutes later, the Garfield family saw a yellow flicker of light near the loft window of the barn. It gradually expanded with flames leaping out of that

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opening. In fifteen minutes the entire structure was ablaze, with sparks flying three times the height of the barn itself. The fire brightly lit the surrounding field and the tree line that was the property boundary between the two families. A westerly breeze carried the heat down the valley to the Garfields.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Becky. The family heard the phone ring inside the house. "Forget it, that's Allison tellin us our barn's on fire."

"Shouldn't we call the fire department?" Junior asked.

"Ain't nothin they can do," Buddy said in disbelief. "By the time the fire department can get to it, zilch'll be left. The ground up there's clear of brush and grass."

"What about the trees up there?" his son asked weakly.

"The barn's far enough from them. The wind's goin the wrong way. The fire won't spread. Anyway, it's wet up there. In fall, it could've been a different story," Buddy said, still astonished at seeing one of his most familiar landmarks destroyed before his eyes.

Becky tried to be consoling. "Glad we had that storm this afternoon! Anyway, those trees are on his property." They saw the burning skeleton tumble like a house of toothpicks on fire. Half a second later they heard a crashing sound. In a few minutes, the barn was just a big campfire. It started to drizzle but the damage had been done.

"I need to see Howie Winde tomorrow about a few things," Buddy said as his wife watched the disbelief in his face turn to anger. "Can't let those damn people get away with all this!" He stomped his foot on the wood floor several times, splintering a floor board.

"Buddy, watch your language!" In a meek manner Becky scolded her husband. She did not want to further upset her husband with a heated discussion in front of the children, especially with Junior now in pain.

"Paw, what about the two pigs in the barn?" Junior asked.

"Oh no! Forgot about that!" Buddy's face was red as the fire.

"They're probably burned to a crisp by now." Sue Ann pointed to the blaze.

Becky stared up Corn Still now raining harder. "Well, we can have some barbeque tomorrow for dinner?"

CHAPTER 37

"Heard you had quite a party, boss." Larry entered the Guardian's office Tuesday and found the editor bent over the large table in the composing room.

Rick glanced up. "I bet the whole county knows about it by now." Since this was a short week, Monday being a holiday, they had much to do. He had planned to go the office yesterday, but he spent the entire day moving people off his property. The new road up from the cabin had turned into a mud hole, and the existing road below the cabin was not much better.

"Are we going to do an article about it?" Larry asked.

"Funny!"

"I can go up to Corn Still and get some great pictures of the burned out barn." The young man paused, "We can even do the arrows on the pictures."

"There's not much left of the barn. It wouldn't make a good picture," Rick assured him.

"What about the toxic waste? Someone told me about that at the Wagon this morning."

"It's only some regular sewage."

"That's not what I heard at the Wagon. They said—"

"Never mind, it was only a spring. Who would be interested in that?"

"The Board of Health?" Larry asked, this time seriously.

"I think they have already done that. Wish I could go take a vacation and get away from here. The problem with this job is that you can't," Rick complained. "Didn't realize I had it so good in New York." He pointed down the hall. "Let's go to my office and talk a little before someone comes in."

"Why don't you call New York and ask for some more help?" Larry followed him back.

Sitting behind a stack of letters to the editor that were piled as high as the memory typewriter, Rick addressed him. "New York won't do anything to help us. I want to be up front with you. Mary and I are thinking about moving back to Jersey."

Raising his eyebrows Larry asked, "Won't that be dangerous?"

"I'm tired of running away from problems with the cops. I think they know where we live anyway. I don't think they're stupid enough to do anything. They just want to scare me for some reason. Anyway, they're probably mad at someone else by now."

"I bet your boy will like it back in Jersey."

"Not really, he's fond of it here. This is a good place to raise children. There's not much real crime. The outdoors has been good for him."

"Have you told him about movin'?"

The editor's face tightened. "No." This would be a difficult task. "Keep it confidential."

"Okay, but what about Mary?"

"She knows, but she likes her volunteer work at the school. It's going to be difficult working with Garfield's wife there." Rick foraged for the rolodex. It was buried under a pile of press releases from politicians in Washington. "I'm going to call Scott Revis. See if his job is going to be available. He's retiring at the end of the year. With that job I'd stay in the office most of the time. Wouldn't have to beat the bushes around the Courthouse, drug hangouts and crimes scenes in the City. A nice office job. I could even do some of the work at home in Jersey." The editor slung the entire pile of releases in the direction of the trash can, some of them hitting it. "No bushes at all to beat!"

"I didn't know they had any bushes up yonder."

"You're full of laughs today. Have you been smoking anything, Larry?" Rick fanned through the cards and stopped at the 'R' section.

"No, but I heard some of that happened at your place over the weekend. I hope the Sheriff doesn't get a whiff of that," grinning, Larry left to give his boss some privacy.

Rick dialed the direct line to the senior editor at the Mirror. "Could I speak to Mr. Revis?"

A woman's voice said, "Hold on, I think he's in Ben Jackson's office. I'll transfer you there." An air of apprehension took over him during the wait.

"This is Ben Jackson, what do you want?"

"Let me talk to Mr. Revis." When Revis was on the line, Rick felt better dealing with his mentor. "Hi, Scott, this is Rick. Do you have time to talk? Privately?"

"Yeah, I'll take this in my office, hold on." After a delay of a few minutes, Revis got back on the line. "How's everything down South? I heard you're really doing well. I loved that piece on the singer, what's her name, Fannie Gay something or other. You're really setting the place on fire," Scott Revis said with innocence.

"That's right. Literally setting the place on fire. But I wanted to talk to you about your position after you retire."

"Why? Do you want it?"

Rick responded without hesitation. "Yes, I would definitely consider it."

"Well, I'll talk to the boys upstairs. They haven't decided yet. I was just talking to Jackson about it. He's put in an application along with three others here. Wants it bad. You know this place is like home to him. Poor guy, I feel a little sorry for him."

His inquisitiveness kicked in. "Why's that?"

"Lately he's obsessed with this place. Thinks he owns it. Anyway, you're probably the most qualified."

"Good, so a decision has not been made. Could you mail me an application?"

"Yeah, I'll put one in the mail today. You'll need to list some references."

Rick quipped. "Have plenty at the New York Police Department."

"I'm sure that they'll give you some good ones so as to get you back. Say, I heard Mark Zone got out of prison."

"Yes, I know that, but, seriously, how's the situation there with the cops?" Rick asked and listened intently.

"Can't really tell." Revis' voice showed no emotion. "They're always complaining about something. Jesse Jackson came in here last month, and stirred things

up a bit. Claimed police brutality and all that garbage.”

“Good.” Rick had the sense that things had settled down and the police were harassing other souls. “Maybe they’ll move on to something else.”

The door to Rick’s office opened and Larry entered, saying loudly, “the Sheriff has a summons for you, Rick.”

“Gotta go, Scott, I think I may have some problems with the cops here.”

“Good luck, I’ll put in a good word for you upstairs. Sounds like you need to get out of Dodge.”

“Keep all this close to your chest.” He hung up the phone and walked to the reception area.

Without emotion the Sheriff greeted him with a handful of papers. “Sorry I have to do this. I have a Civil Summons for you.”

“Okay, Sheriff,” Rick said, somewhat relieved not to be under arrest for something related to the past weekend’s events. But Rick could think of several charges the solicitor could bring up, such as possession of controlled substances, willful destruction of property, environmental violations, littering public highways, disturbance of the peace, aiding and abetting the cohabitation of unmarried persons of the opposite sex, child abuse, overthrow of the government, to name a few. With the Winds’ help, the solicitor could think up a lot more. Rick knew it would be easy to find twelve people in Stark County that would convict him of just about anything.

“Almost forgot, Rick, I found the bullet in your tire. Came from a high-power hunting rifle. It’s used for big game.”

“Like me?”

The Sheriff did not answer and as he left, Dr. Porter strolled into the reception area bringing a photo clipped to a single sheet of paper. “I have an advertisement to be inserted prominently in next week’s paper.”

“Really? Are you going to pay for it?”

“Why, yes, of course, sir. Will it be any extra for the photograph of President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan?”

“Let me see it first.”

A glossy black and white picture showed the Reagans sitting on horses at their ranch in California. The heading in the ad read ‘REAGAN HONORS LOCAL WOMAN’ in bold letters followed by a story:

President Ronald W. Reagan has honored Dr. Sammie C. Porter of Stark County, for attaining the prestigious Golden Elephant Award. Dr. Porter has a doctorate from the Allied Institute and is the author of many historical biographies receiving many honors for her excellent writing. Dr. Porter was also praised as a supporter of Reagan’s agenda to fight the evils of communism through military strength and to keep the United States on a balanced budget by reduced government spending.

At the bottom of the ad in small letters it stated:

Paid for by Dr. Sammie C. Porter, D.D., P.H.D.

“That’ll be eighty-five dollars for one week, one hundred fifty for two weeks.” Rick said firmly.

"I will take the two weeks." Dr. Porter reached in her large pocket book and fished her checkbook out. "Can it be inserted in this week's edition?"

"No."

"Well, why not?" Porter sat in the chair that Larry was in a few minutes before. She shoved a stack of papers aside and using the corner of Molly's desk, started to write a check.

"Too late."

"Well, you make sure you get it placed in next week's paper." The doctor paused from writing the check and looked at Rick. "In a prominent place."

"Of course," he nodded. After she finally finished writing the check, Rick, saying nothing further to Dr. Porter, took the payment. He returned to his office, leaving Sammie sitting in front of Molly's desk with the ad on top.

Rick closed the door to his office and sat down at his cluttered desk. His hands shook as he read all twenty pages of the civil complaint and then called Mary at home. "The Garfields have sued us over the road, barn and water. Says that we don't have a recorded right of way in our deed. The Windes represent them."

"This morning after you left, Mr. Garfield put a gate up, just above their house. It's locked! I tried calling you but your line was busy. How am I supposed to get out?"

"You always wanted to be a stay-at-home mom," Rick replied.

"Funny! You need to do something about this mess right away."

"I'll call an attorney in Riverport. No one around here wants to go up against the Windes."

"Need to do it pretty quick. You know it's going to be hard even in Riverport. We have to get this gate removed."

"How's Abe doing?" Rick asked, wanting to change the subject.

"He's all right. Down at the Garfields with Junior."

"Playing with the enemy."



"Becky, how was your holiday?" Mrs. Filburn greeted her employee on the first day of summer school. Since Mulberry Elementary was the only school for grades K through 8 in Stark County to have a summer session, all the younger children from the entire county who needed extra help in their schoolwork had to enroll. Most of the parents were unhappy about providing transportation since no buses ran, and certainly no child enjoyed attending. This was especially hectic for the adults and children who had not previously attended the school. Fortunately, for Mrs. Filburn and her two secretaries, school did not start until ten so they had time to talk among themselves for a few minutes.

"Other than our barn bein burned, water polluted, road torn up and Junior takin sick, it was great." Becky responded with her head lowered. Instead of being rested after a month of vacation like many of the staff, she was dragging this morning.

"Sorry about that." The principal turned to Becky. "I'll try not to be too hard on you then. But Mary Ross called and said she won't be in school this week. You'll have to take over the children's story in the library this afternoon."

Not a happy camper, Becky's face turned sour. "Just what I need, Mrs.

Filburn."

A further explanation was needed. "I debated whether to offer this at the summer session, but the kids need a break from the classroom. They enjoyed the stories last spring with Mary."

"I got an appointment to take Junior to the doctor tomorrow. He's supposed to call about some medicine today. I think Junior's blood levels and phosphates are out of whack. The swellin in his leg won't go down. Had too much meat over the holiday."

"I bet it was hard for him at the Courthouse celebration."

"Yeah, I gave in. Let him have a half of a barbeque."

"What's he doing today?" the principal asked.

"He's in bed down at Henrietta's."

"Okay, I'll have Tammy cover for you tomorrow." Mrs. Filburn looked around for her other employee and found her hiding in the back room. "Tammy, could you come over here for a minute?"

She came to the two women who were still drooped over the front desk. Before the principal had a chance to speak, the young girl blurted, "Mrs. Filburn. Becky. I need to tell you something. You might as well hear this too, Becky. This is a good time to talk, no one else's here. I have to tell you."

"Don't tell me any more bad news," her boss said. "Becky has a lot of problems too, and it's going to be a madhouse within the hour."

"It's really not a bad thing, but I'm. I'm. Pregnant," Tammy said in a soft voice, not wanting anyone else to hear, although there wasn't anyone else around.

Becky, who was desperate to find something positive in her life, ran over and hugged her like a close kinfolk. "That's great!" After a few seconds, Becky's inquisitiveness started to act. "Who's the father?"

"It's Larry," Tammy said, still speaking quietly so that no one could hear. The front door opened and a young woman came in with three children. Mrs. Filburn acknowledged the parent and directed her to the appropriate classroom.

After the family left, Becky said, "Buddy told me that Larry was spendin a lot of time at the Wagon on the weekends."

"I guess he was doing a little bit more than eatin." Mrs. Filburn swung the door around to a hook on the wall. It latched so the public could enter freely without opening the door.

"Well, are you goin to get married?" Becky asked, her snooping not yet satisfied and her own problems seeming to melt away.

"Don't know yet. We still have a lot to talk about." Tammy watched to see if some other person came in.

"Are you going to keep on working here?" The wrinkles on the principal's forehead seemed more prominent.

"Havin the youngin round Thanksgiving. I can work until about Labor Day," Tammy said.

"That would be an appropriate time for you to leave," Mrs. Filburn said, not intending to impose humor. "We'll do fine. I'll ask Mary Ross to work in both the library and the office next year. She can come on full-time. How are you feeling, having any sickness in the morning?"

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"Fine, so far, I rested over the holiday."

"I wish I could have rested," the principal said in a manner that begged further explanation.

"What did you do over the Fourth?" Becky asked, wanting to know what her boss did that might be exciting and hoping to get her mind off the events of the past weekend.

"I went to a wild party."

"Oh no, I'm not goin to ask where you were." Her boss might have gone to her neighbor's circus.

"Please don't, we have enough problems."

The phone rang and Becky was quick to pick it up before any one else got to it. Right away she recognized the caller. "Allison, I can't talk now. I'm busy."

"I've got an emergency."

"What's it now?" Becky asked in a dejected tone, expecting another disaster.

"A UPS truck's blockin my drive with Henrietta and I can't get out. Reckin it's been there for at least thirty minutes. I've been checkin at every commercial break. Seems like Junior and his friend are hangin around there. I want you to call the Sheriff."

"Why don't you do that."

"They won't do nothin. Well, could you call Buddy to do somethin? Lately, there's been a lot of comin and goin of those delivery trucks. I can't figure it out. Henrietta's probably dealin in drugs or something illegal. Been some strange noises too, like a machine or somethin."

"Allison, I don't have time to mess with this now." Becky slammed the phone down and asked the others, "Does anyone else have a problem?"

Tammy said, "I have another problem."

"Is it twins?" Mrs. Filburn asked.

"No, no, it's really not a problem, but I thought the County was broke. My paycheck's a lot more than usual."

"How about yours, Becky?"

"With so much goin on, I haven't even looked at mine."

"You need to examine it closely. I noticed that also. I think it's something to do with withholding. Why don't you ask your brother about this?" Mrs. Filburn said, looking at Becky for some assistance.

"I really can't. I've got too much goin on. Can't worry about this now. Anyway, he can't do nothing about that mess there. Got too much goin on. Forgot to tell you. Gotta leave early tomorrow. I need to stop by Howard Winder's office." Becky realized she had said too much, but her boss needed a reason. "To deliver some papers. Buddy has lawed our neighbors up yonder. I didn't want to do this, but there's too many problems."

"With Mary Queen?" Tammy asked.

"Yeah."

"This is not goin to be a pleasant place." Tammy emphasized the word 'not'.

"I'll try to separate you two," Mrs. Filburn said.

Tammy asked with a smirk, "Do you want me to buy a referee suit?"

"Yes, but do they make those in a maternity style?" the principal joked.

CHAPTER 38

Thursday morning following his son's church outing, Rick delivered the proof of this week's edition to the printers in Riverport. While there, the editor met with an attorney to discuss the Garfield lawsuit. At noon he returned to Mulberry and unlocked the front door to the empty Guardian office. Rick had assigned Larry to take pictures of a deadly auto accident with a train up on East Prong, and Molly was on an extended summer vacation with her parents. Rick left the 'CLOSED' sign on the picture window facing the street and locked the door back. The lights in the reception area remained off. Expecting an important call from New York, he went back to his office, and shut the door. A roster of the fall high school football team lay on the top of his desk. He could no longer put this off; the readers of the county expected a gridiron edition of the paper around Labor Day. The editor picked the material up and glanced through it.. The phone rang. "This is Felcie Smith."

"Hi, are you calling to borrow my bullet proof vest for the next meeting?" Rick replied.

"That's not the reason I called, but I could still use one. There should be some fireworks."

"I've had enough fireworks for a while."

"Sorry to hear about your Fourth of July party. The county will never be the same. Well, the real reason I called is that there's a crisis in County Finance."

"I knew that." Rick tried not to be sarcastic.

But Felcie laughed anyway. "We're having a special meetin of the supervisors at two this afternoon. Won't be tonight."

"Why did they change it?"

"I think Howie had to go out of town late this afternoon."

"Probably to catch a red eye to Vegas. Anyway, thanks for letting me know. I'll be there. What's going on?"

"I can't tell you the details. You'll find out."

Just as he finished reading over the football lineup, the phone rang again. "This is Rick Queen."

"Hi. Scott Revis. Things must be tough when you have to answer the phone."

This was the call Rick expected. "I do everything here, Scott."

"Couple things I need to discuss. Did you get the application I sent you last week?"

"Yes. Mailed it back this morning while I was in Riverport. Why?"

"That's good," Revis replied. "The boys upstairs are going to make a decision in two weeks and I wanted to make sure you got it in. I'll look for it next week."

"Thanks for helping me out. When would the job start, Scott?"

"It'll start Labor Day, that's when I'm officially retiring."

"Where are you going to live?" Rick asked.

"Going to Vermont, buying a farm up there. What about your family? Have you told them about this?" Scott asked. Rick could tell that his concern was genuine.

"Mary knows of course. Abe doesn't. It'll be hard on him, changing schools and all. At least it won't be in the middle of the school year like the last time we moved. Anyway, most of his trains are still in the basement in Jersey. He can go right back to them. You know, Scott, we haven't even sold our house there."

"That's good. I bet the neighbors think you haven't even been gone," his former boss said.

"Maybe, when I move back and if they noticed we were gone, I'll just tell them we were visiting a foreign country for a while."

"That should be the truth. Say, before I go, Ben Jackson says that Mark Zone skipped on his parole. Zone was working on the docks. Can't find him anywhere. Something else interesting. Someone stole his service revolver in the evidence room."

"Thanks for the tip." Rick could hear a pounding on the front door even with his office door shut.

"You better be careful."

"The Sheriff down here is watching out for me. Real pro. Look, gotta go." He hung up and went to the front door. Steve Fields stood outside. Rick unlocked the door and turned the sign to read 'OPEN' to the street.

The pony-tailed realtor came in the office, picked up the current week's paper from the rack, and started to read it. Rick stood by for a minute and asked. "Are you going to buy the paper?"

"No, I just wanted to see if it was worth fifty cents." He put the paper neatly back in the rack. "Anyway it's last week's news." Fields left and Larry came in, all at the same time.

"Glad you're here."

"What did he want?" Larry asked.

"A free paper. Did you get good pictures?"

"Great ones. A bad accident. People think they can out-run a train. Look, I'll work something up this afternoon on it."

"Good. I'm going to the Wagon, and then to a meeting. Don't wait around for me. Never know how long these are. See you tomorrow."

Shortly before two that afternoon, Rick went to the Courthouse and sat in the press section. Precisely on the hour, Chairman Tommy Snickle called the meeting to order. There was no prayer because he didn't have an audience other than Rick. "What do you got for us this afternoon, Howie?"

"We have a vacancy for the job of County Finance Officer. The board needs to find another person," Howard Winde said.

"I've got somebody," Snickle grunted.

Felcie turned to the Chairman. "We need to advertise for this position."

"My brother-in-law's got qualifications. Um, he does the books for my store," Snickle said. "Reckin to put it in that rag of a paper we got would be a waste of money."

"This County is not like a grocery store," Smith replied. "The reason the Finance Officer quit is because the County Manager's daughter always gets in

the way. Messed all the memory typewriters up and who knows what else. We need to get a certified public accountant, from outside the county, to make an investigation. Can't have people in Finance like the Manager's daughter. Last month she deleted all the withholding and the County workers got a big bonus, or so they thought. Now they have to pay it back. It's a big mess."

Howie interrupted. "If they don't pay it back, the County can go to court and sue them."

"That will be just more money for you, Howard," Smith said. "I'm sure these lawsuits will be good for employee morale."

"Um, all in favor of this here motion in hirin my brother-in-law," Snickle retorted. Only Smith voiced an objection, and the other supervisor nodded, like a bump on a log. Howard Winde had a big smile. This was exactly what happened in the approval of the expansion of the coal quarry. Snickle continued, "I knows this here's a special meetin and all, um, but we gotta do somethin else. What Howie?"

"The next item on the agenda is a request from the Pump Gap Volunteer Fire Department for five hundred dollars to buy a rescue boat."

"I live down ther, and we need one, um, gotta lot of folks using the River," Snickle said. "Everyone in favor." This time it passed unanimously.

Rick could observe that Felcie Smith did not see anything wrong with this because the expenditure was needed, but Smith said, "I don't know how we can pay for the boat. The Finance Officer who quit is the only person who has the key to the safe. The Manager doesn't know how to get in. All the checks are in there."

Winde turned to Snickle. "Think we need to call the safe company tomorrow. I need to get paid too."

"Mr. Chairman, we need to discuss the matter of the County Manager," Felcie Smith said.

Howard Winde interrupted again. "That matter is out of order. It's not on the agenda and it's a personnel matter. You need to go into closed session."

"Why, he's doin a gooder job than anybody," Snickle said, this time ignoring the attorney.

Felcie quickly rebutted, "The Manager hasn't brought any business into the County. Just here to protect his relatives and there's low morale among the County workers. We need somebody who will stand up to Howard. Therefore, I'm making a motion to replace him with a professional County Manager, someone who can get some grants and money in the County. Need to advertise in the paper." Felcie looked around the room.

Rick could not contain himself and blurted, "I'll second that." He wished he could have taken these few words back. It crossed the line of journalistic ethics.

Howie Winde rose and walked over into Rick's face. "You be quiet, Queen. I'll have you arrested for disturbing the peace at a public meeting." Winde could not openly attack Felcie, but the editor was fair game.

Rick stood up and turned to Snickle. "Sorry I said that." His apology was directed to the Board.

The attorney did not see it that way. "You shut up, or I'll have your ass in jail or worse."

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Felcie attempted to muzzle Winde. "Howard, sit down. Let it be. He said he was sorry."

The attorney backed off and stomped back to his chair. The other two supervisors stared into space. After two long minutes Snickle looked at the attorney. "The resolution dies for lack of a second. Dead on Arrival, DOA, we need to move on."

"You need to adjourn," Howie said.

"Wait a minute," Felcie interrupted. "We need to get rid of the County Attorney, this whole bunch. Even if we get good people in here, Winde here will be always telling them what to do. I make a motion to——"

Snickle snapped back, "Meetin adjourned. I'm goin back to the store."

CHAPTER 39

Nothing was supposed to happen in the dog days of summer, but Abe and Junior's business of painting engines took off. In the beginning of the summer, they only did simple paint schemes like the nearby Clinchfield railroad's yellow stripes and lettering on a battleship gray background. After the boys mastered that, they moved on to the more complex paint jobs of the Santa Fe, with its bright orange and red southwestern colors on a silver base with black and yellow lettering. The demand was high for that popular road, and easier to market.

It was difficult to keep the enterprise a secret and the boys always thought of ways to elude Allison, who shared a common drive next door. They came in separately to Henrietta's trailer and only then, when a good soap or sitcom ran on TV. Henrietta subscribed to TV guide to determine the current program times and content. The UPS drivers had to be thoroughly debriefed, and Henrietta brushed up on her cooking to keep them quiet. A larger mailbox replaced her old one to accommodate the orders. Allison was beside herself in that she could never peer inside the box squatting right next to hers. Henrietta even opened up a separate bank account under the name 'A & J Enterprises' to handle the financial aspect of the business.

By the end of July, things were about to get out of hand. When the boys were in her trailer one morning, Junior noted, "Hey, Abe, we're runnin out of red paint."

"I'll have to ask your Aunt to get us some more when she goes to Riverport next week." Abe put the finishing touches of lettering on a F-7 unit engine. "Let's just wait on the red anyway. We need to put a blue base coat on the new shells we got yesterday for that Baltimore and Ohio order."

"Okay, but do we gotta spray again? The fumes is startin to get to me." Junior complained, "Last week end, I got a headache. Reckin I still have some of it left."

"The new nozzle came in, and all I need to do is hook it up. Your Aunt Henrietta put a little fan in here." Abe pointed to the window of their private room. "It should be a little better now."

"Yeah, but will my Aunt Allison smell it? Our room's on the same side as her bedroom. Sometimes I can hear her snore when she takes naps."

"We might want to wait until the wind's right."

Junior stuck his head out the tiny window. "This would be a good day. It's comin up Corn Still." Once inside, he said, "Say, while back you told me about some dinosaurs all locked up in a building up North. What's that?"

"It's the Museum of Natural History. They have all these animals from all over the world," Abe said. "They're in these glass enclosures with their natural habitat, like trees, mountains, grass and stuff like that."

"What's the glass for?" Junior asked innocently.

"So they won't escape." Abe grinned and then asked seriously, "Would you like to go there with me sometime, maybe over Christmas?"

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"Sure, if I'm able to go."

Henrietta called from the front end of her trailer, "Boys, time for dinner." They put down the engine shells they were cleaning and let them dry on old editions of the Guardian. The black die plastic molds were to be painted after the break. Abe soon devoured two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in her kitchen area, but Junior could only have one, and that without the jelly. Instead of dessert, he had a bowl of chopped spinach covered with honey that his Aunt specially prepared for him. Angus enjoyed a dog biscuit for his snack.

When Junior finished his sandwich, he asked, "Aunt Henrietta, could we do some paintin this afternoon?"

She put a pail of ice cream in the freezer. "Just be careful. Don't get nothin on anything."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Garfield, we just got a new air brush thing. It's accurate." Abe put a fork to freshly baked blueberry pie topped with homemade vanilla ice cream.

Junior sneaked a bite from his plate when she wasn't looking. "Abe, let's get back to work."

Henrietta sat down to enjoy some pie. "Allison'll probably be watchin 'As the World Turns' in a few minutes. According to the TV Guide, the doctor's girlfriend finds out whether she's pregnant by him."

"That'll keep her in the living room on the Rooster Trace side. She can't hear the airbrush from there." Abe ate the last morsel of the pie.

The boys with their mission in mind went back to their room with Angus following close behind. The dog curled up on the sofa and had no trouble napping. Abe poured dark blue paint in the bowl of the airbrush. However, Abe had hooked up this new piece of equipment wrong; instead of the air going straight through the nozzle, it went through the open bowl filled with the paint. When the unit was turned on, the paint exploded, splattering in all directions. A large blue cloud disbursed throughout the small room. After the blast, everything was blue: walls, ceiling, and the boys. Even Angus, innocently sleeping, was not spared. Fortunately, Abe wore his glasses and Junior had goggles. Neither boy was injured in the mishap, but both started to cough.

"Quick, open the windows," Abe yelled. "Turn on the fan."

When the windows were opened and fan started, the blue mist escaped outside clearly visible to anyone looking in that direction. All of the noise and commotion woke Allison from her nap, her soaps pre-empted by President Ronald Reagan's address to the United Nations on the Berlin wall. She peered out her bedroom window and saw the smoke.

"What in the heck's that?" Allison shouted out her window. "I gotta go over there." Without delay, she went outside and pounded on Henrietta's door. No answer. "I know you're there; let me in, or I'll call the cops," she yelled. Still no answer. "Okay, I'm goin to call the Sheriff." Still no response, so Allison called their office. When the dispatcher answered, she said, "I'd like to report some suspicious activity that's goin on with my neighbor, up on Corn Still."

"What's happenin?" the deputy asked.

"Well, for one thing there's been a lot of deliveries and pickups at my sister's

trailer next door."

"Is that all?"

"No, just now there was a blue cloud comin from her trailer. It smells like some chemical; don't know what it is really, maybe she's making some drugs. There have been strange noises coming from there also, like a machine."

"Really, we probably should check this out. We'll be there within the hour. There's a deputy around Turkey Neck."

"Thanks, I'll keep a watch out. Boy, I'm glad Reagan can't run again."

"Why's that?"

"This is the second time this year that he's given a big speech at two in the afternoon. I miss my soaps!"

"Okay."

"Better send the fire department too."

"Is anything on fire?"

"No, just blue smoke. Hold on! Let me look again." Allison left the phone and went back to her bedroom window. The cloud had dissipated, but a strong odor remained. She returned and reported the situation. "No smoke, still that smell of chemicals."

"Are you the same one that reported the sinking trailer?"

"Yeah, I did."

"I'll get a boat out there, anyway."

For the next half hour, Abe and Junior took turns in Henrietta's bathtub trying to remove the lacquer-based paint from themselves and Angus. The boys had forgotten to order enough of the thinner to clean everyone properly. It was difficult, especially for the dog with his white matted thick coat. The blue color seemed to grow deeper and more pronounced on the Westie each time he was shampooed. Angus kept on getting whiter while the dark blue did not fade or vanish in the slightest. Hearing a siren outside her front door, she looked out the living room window. "Oh no, there's a Sheriff's car in my driveway. What do I do?"

Henrietta opened the front door and greeted the potbellied, uniformed deputy outside on her deck. "Good afternoon, officer, what can I do for you? Is there a problem?"

"Are you the owner of the trailer?"

"No, my brother up the road actually owns it, but I live here." She pointed up the valley.

"Okay, well, we've had a report of suspicious behavior coming from your place. Can I come in and search?"

"Do I have to?" she asked in desperation. "It's a mess."

"No, you've got the right to refuse, but I could go back and get a search warrant from Judge Pickins in Mulberry."

"No, I have got nothin to hide. Just some industrious boys. Come on in. I know that my snoopy sister must have called you."

The officer did not answer and was professional in all aspects of his search. "Why do you have a bed in your living room? No sofa. Isn't that odd?" Henrietta shrugged her shoulders. He did not pursue this line of questions. In the kitchen

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area he lifted several cookie jars, only to find some freshly baked oatmeal goodies, a favorite of the delivery men. She could tell that the deputy desperately wanted a few, but did not ask. Instead he again glanced around the living, kitchen and dining areas. "Where's your table for eatin'?"

Henrietta replied, "I use TV trays."

The deputy was not satisfied with the situation. "Can I go back there to your bedrooms?"

"You won't find nothin interesting, but go ahead if you want."

He opened the first door to the right. "Oh my, what are all these blue spots all over your room? What are you doing boys? You're the same ones that I found at the Courthouse."

"Yeah, reckon so." Junior admitted.

Abe pleaded, "Officer, we've been doing nothing wrong."

Junior tried to explain. "We were just tryin to use our new airbrush, the old one made too much noise, didn't do an even job. My friend hooked it up wrong."

"Is this part of your project?" The officer asked somewhat puzzled.

"Sort of, I'll show it to you. Fortunately it's in the closet on the shelf. If it wasn't, it would now be painted blue." Abe produced a half-finished Courthouse replica with the roof missing.

"That's great, it almost looks real." The deputy remarked, still surprised by the whole situation. "Amazing, there's the benches and tables inside the building. Got the people too. Even have the balcony where you boys got locked out."

"All we've got to do is the roof and Lady Liberty." Abe touched the top of one of the sides on the model. "She has to come all the way from Germany, special order from Marklin, That'll take some time to get here."

"Really, that's amazing! But where's Hoss?" The deputy bent down closer to see the steps.

"We have him ordered too. He's coming from England," Abe said.

"Please don't tell our parents," Junior pleaded.

"As far as I can see there's nothing illegal here. Good luck on your little enterprise. I won't tell anyone about this, not even the IRS."

"Please don't even tell nobody we were here. Tryin to keep this a surprise for our parents, part of the bicentennial thing." Junior could tell that the deputy would comply.

He then went to the living room, making a cursory search again. Henrietta gave the man some cookies and he thanked her on his way out. In the driveway, just as he was about to get into his parked patrol car, Allison ran up to the deputy and asked, "What's goin on in there?"

"Your sister's just doin a little redecorating." He took a bite of the cookie.

Allison asked. "How bout some fresh apple pie?"

The deputy looked down at his belly. "I better not."

"With some ice cream?"

After some hesitation, he said, "Thanks, but I gotta go."

Junior at the living room window peeked out and knew that Allison wished she could have gone in the trailer. The boy left to help cleanup.

Everyone outside heard the fire truck come up Rooster Trace. Within min-

utes, it arrived with a trailer carrying a small boat in the rear. Meanwhile, the people in Henrietta's trailer were oblivious to the excitement outside. "Mrs. Garfield, how are we goin to explain the way we look to our parents?" Abe said with a look of desperation.

Junior examined the dog. "What about Angus, he's worse than us."

"Do you have some white paint?" she suggested.

"That's a good idea," Junior quickly said. "I think we've got some."

"Good, you boys do that, I gotta clean the bedroom. It's a mess."

For the next fifteen minutes, both boys used small fine hand brushes to touch up the dog's spots. It worked, the white paint masking the blue. But Angus sure didn't like being painted. The terrier sneezed repeatedly because of the smell and would not sit still at all. Finally, one boy had to hold him while the other painted. Henrietta stuck her head in the bathroom and peered at the Westie, "That looks great, there's no blue left on Angus at all." Then she glanced at the boys' faces. "Now. Do you have any flesh colored paint?"

CHAPTER 40

Each had his own smell, Hoss a strong odor of alcohol, and his dog just smelled like a dog. It was hard to tell which was dirtier, animal or man. However, both were friendly and acknowledged Rick on the landing of the Courthouse.

"How'sss Abe, Abe gettin along, along?" the drunk asked in a slurred speech.

"Fine." Without stopping, Rick walked past Hoss, for he had more important things to do than talk to the drunk and did not particularly want to take in any of their fragrances.

"How's the Court-Courthouse comin'?"

"Fine, I guess." Curious about these questions, Rick turned back just as he opened the front door. "Why do you ask?"

"Your b-boy are build-buildin it." Hoss spit out some thing on the steps next to one of the columns.

"Okay, that's nice, I knew we needed another one here. This is getting a little cramped. I'll ask them how it's coming."

"Let me me know."

"I will."

"Reckin I'll help them build-build the building."

"I'm sure that would turn out perfectly."

Entering the small center lobby, he found his wife sitting on a corner bench.

"Hi Mary, waiting long? Did you talk to Hoss outside just now?"

"Who's Hoss?" She asked puzzled.

"He's the town drunk. Guy outside with the dog."

"Didn't say anything to me. He appeared a little dazed."

"Well. He's really off his rocker," Rick observed.

"Let's go up and get this over with. We don't have time to mess with drunks." Mary trotted across the stone tiled foyer to the stairwell.

The old wooden stairs creaked as they climbed to the second story courtroom. A case was in progress as they sat down in the back row next to Mr. Bartlett, their attorney from Riverport. Since this was civil court, no one else was in the courtroom other than a full panel in the jury box, judge, attorneys, clerk and clients. This was a highway condemnation case and the Winde brothers sat next to a man in overalls. Several maps were posted to an old blackboard near the jury box. Mary whispered to her husband, "How can Henry represent a landowner against the State when he's on the Road Commission?"

"Anything can happen here," Rick said.

"Shouldn't have asked."

After listening to the proceedings for fifteen minutes, Rick said into his wife's ear, "Boy I'm glad we don't have Judge Pickins."

"Why's that?" Mary asked.

"He's prejudiced against outsiders like us. Larry told me that he's lazy too,

couldn't make it in the practice of law."

"This Judge here seems fair," she said quietly. "He doesn't let the Windes run the show."

"He's from Richmond, a special Judge. Our attorney Bartlett requested it."

"Maybe he can also request new Supervisors. That is, with the exception of Felcie," Mary replied. "Say, why are both Windes here?"

Rick said, "Garfield has brought all the big guns."

Mr. Bartlett reassured them, "Don't worry I can handle them."

After the Judge gave legal instructions to the members of the jury in the high-way case, he told them to be back at nine in the morning for deliberation. After they filed out a rear door, the Judge picked up another file on the bench. "Next we have a hearing by the Defendant in the matter of Garfield vs. Queen. Is everyone here?"

"Yes, your Honor." Both attorneys rose.

The Winde brothers just moved from the Defendant's table to the Plaintiff's. Buddy Garfield and Grover Ashebrook appeared from the rear, filed down the aisle without glancing or talking to anyone else, and sat beside the Windes. Rick, Mary and their attorney came forward from the back seats and took their places behind the table to the left. The Judge broke the silence in the empty courtroom. "Good afternoon, Gentlemen, are you ready?" The lawyers nodded. "I'll hear from the Defendants' attorney first. Mr. Bartlett, please proceed."

"Your Honor, I represent the Defendants in this action brought by the Plaintiffs, the Garfields here. Mr. Queen and his wife, the Defendants, have filed a motion for a preliminary injunction to prevent the Plaintiffs' from blocking the road, the Defendants' only access to their house." Bartlett extended his finger at Buddy. "He put a gate across my client's road. To have access to the public highway, they must go through the property of the Garfields, The issue is--."

Interrupting Rick's attorney, Howard Winde stood and said. "Your Honor, I've filed a motion to dismiss the Defendant's counterclaim on their claims of prescription and adverse possession. This should be heard first. If they can't prevail, then their argument is baseless and we're all wasting our time."

"Mr. Winde, I do not want to have you barge in on the Defendants' attorney. I've read your motion to dismiss, and it's frivolous. The Defendants have stated a claim of adverse possession for the apple tree section of property and for easement by prescription for the road. It's a question of fact for a jury to sort out the Defendants' claim to the property and road. Your motion is denied."

"But the Queens' deed has no right of way."

"Sit down now, and be quiet."

Rick could see that Howard was taken aback by this, as this was the first time in covering public meetings and probably in his legal career that anyone had told him to sit down like that. He started to stroke his short beard.

"Proceed, Counsel." The Judge looked at the Defendants' table with Mr. Bartlett still standing.

"I would like to present several affidavits to the court." The Judge nodded and Mr. Bartlett continued. "These people state that the road in question has been unobstructed since 1920. The road was built way before that time."

"Okay, let me read them. Give Mr. Winde a copy," the Judge said as Mr. Bartlett gave one to his opposing council and then approached the bench with the documents. "Do you have anything to say, Mr. Winde?"

Howard continued to stroke his beard as he read the document for a few minutes. He rose behind the table. "Yes, your Honor, these affidavits are from people who do not live here in Stark County. They may have known about the road in the past, but I question whether they have any knowledge about its present status. I would like to present some affidavits from local people here who will testify that the road was used with permission of the Garfields. This can never ripen into an easement by prescription according to the law of this Commonwealth."

"Okay, let me see them." Winde went up to the bench and handed his affidavits to the Judge. After reading them a few minutes the Judge turned to the Defendants' table. "What do you say to that, Mr. Bartlett?"

Rick's attorney rose. "Your Honor, we're just here on a preliminary hearing and not on the merits of the case. These affidavits may be conflicting, but I believe we've shown a prima facie case with these statements."

The Judge nodded and then glanced briefly at the Windes. Henry jumped up this time. "But your Honor, the moving party must show that there's a likelihood that he'll prevail on the merits. An easement by prescription is defined as..."

The Court interrupted the attorney, "I know what that means, Mr. Winde. You don't have to read the definition for me. Now I want to hear from Mr. Queen's attorney about the significance of your affidavits to your case."

"Your Honor, those affidavits set out that there was a non permissive use, basically they say that Jacobs and his family, the predecessors in title to the Defendants, all used the road without asking anyone, including the Garfields. For purposes of today's hearing, it doesn't make any difference if the affiants do not live in the county. They do say that they're familiar with the property and that's what counts. It's for a jury to determine the credibility of the people at the trial. Where they live may be a factor at that point, not here. I believe you need to take the affidavits at their face value." Mr. Bartlett continued to stand and Garfield's attorney waited for the Judge's reaction. Rick knew that there was nothing Winde could say. Howard stroked his beard faster.

"Go ahead, Mr. Bartlett." Rick could see that the Judge was not completely ready to make a ruling and wanted additional information.

"Also we have an affidavit from a Riverport attorney, who has examined the title to the property and states that the Queen property came from a common source with the Garfield tract. In addition it says that the land was divided, having the road as its only access to the upper parcel, the land that my clients now own." Bartlett put his hand on Rick's shoulder for a second. "This would be an easement by necessity."

"What do you say to that, Mr. Winde?"

"Your Honor, these attorneys from Riverport don't know what they're talking about. That's a different state."

The Judge was quick to react. "That's an improper statement about one of your fellow attorneys, and it doesn't matter if he's from out of state. You know

he is qualified to go downstairs here and look at our records at the Register of Deeds. I grew up around here and I'm familiar with the practice of having Riverport attorneys come to court here." Rick observed that the Judge was losing patience with the Windes. From the bench he raised his hand, pointing in the direction of Main Street. "My Daddy used to own the dry goods store over there. If you make a statement like that again, I'll put you in jail for contempt of court. Mr. Winde, I'm going to require your client to remove the gate, at least until we get to hear all of the evidence next month at trial. A jury would have enough evidence to find that this is an unreasonable burden for the Defendants here. That's all that's required here. Their motion is allowed."

It was obvious that the Windes did not like to lose even if it was a minor skirmish like today. Howard continued to stroke his beard, this time almost pulling some hair out. Henry's feet shook against the leg of the table, and he glared at Rick, who was seated next to his attorney. Neither Winde brother could belittle him as Howard did in the Supervisor's meeting. Their anger seethed without a safety valve.

"Is there anything else we need to do, Counselors?" All the lawyers remained silent. "Court dismissed," the Judge said. "Be ready for trial in September." He disappeared to the back.

The Windes, Buddy and Grover shook their fists at Rick and stormed out of the courtroom like a pack of wounded animals. Rick waited until they were completely out of the Courthouse. This was just like New York. Justice was served, but at what price?

CHAPTER 41

By the second week in August, things seemed to return to normal in Corn Still. Buddy removed the gate according to the Judge's decision, Rick sent the Garfields a check for some road gravel, and the boys volunteered to pick up the last of the trash from the party. However, a lawsuit was pending and much ill will between the families existed. News leaked that Rick wanted to leave Stark County. He was a controversial and polarizing figure. The dyed-in-the-wool natives hated him for his position on the coal quarry, surveyors, Fannie Mae and alcohol sales, to name a few, while the few more educated, liberal-minded people loved him and thought he was the best thing that had happened to the county since sliced bread. It was especially hard for Mary since she enjoyed the volunteer work at the school and crossing paths with Becky Garfield was unavoidable. She eventually returned to the school, although she kept to herself as much as possible, not even socializing with Mrs. Filburn or Tammy. Mary spent more time with little Julie than anyone else.

Junior grew tired and fatigued between the dialysis sessions. He also developed memory loss on occasion. Becky discussed these problems with the doctor in Riverport, but he did not seem to have much to offer other than a transplant. He did suggest that the boy be taken to Johns Hopkins University Hospital in Baltimore, for further tests, but Becky did not feel this offered much hope. Nevertheless, she planned to visit there in a few weeks just before the new school year started. At least she could meet with the top doctors in the country and participate in a support group of parents with similar problems.

The middle of the summer was especially hot and dry. After the paint explosion, the boys scaled back their shell painting business, although work on the town proceeded on schedule for completion next month. They had more than enough money to continue the project as they were still receiving a few checks for work completed. In the mornings Abe and Junior worked on models while in the afternoon they did chores and spent time down at the pond under the shade of a big oak playing Frisbee with Angus, throwing stones and boating in the pond with the fishing boat which Buddy never used. Despite many attempts, Allison could not pry loose any information from them about what had happened at Henrietta's trailer a few weeks before.

In the summer the boys usually ate lunch at Allison's, but today's meal was special; they smelled hamburgers on the grill outside her trailer. Usually she just fixed sandwiches. She told the boys she wanted to reward them for removing the trash the length of Rooster Trace in front of her trailer. Junior knew that her ulterior motive was to find out what the boys did at her sister's next door. This gnawed at her soul.

Allison held up a metal flipper. "How many burgers can you eat?" The boys

each put up two fingers in response. Angus barked twice. "Sorry, Junior, you can only have one. Forgot about your diet. Why don't you play some frisbee awhile. They should be ready soon."

"Okay," Junior picked the plastic disk off the picnic table and went across the gravel road to an open area. Abe walked up, and stopped at Peggy Ellen's drive. On the bank above the highway, Junior tossed it uphill.

"Don't throw so hard," Abe said as the flying object whizzed above his head and landed on a washing machine discarded on the side of the road. Abe retrieved it and gave a heave downhill. He had both gravity and the wind on his side.

The frisbee sailed ten feet over Junior's head and landed on the far side of the highway ditch. He scampered down the grassy bank onto the pavement without looking for traffic. Just then, a noisy van coming down from the campground swerved and slammed on its brakes with a loud skid. It missed the boy by inches! Allison turned from the grill and ran to the intersection near the row of mailboxes. Junior saw the vehicle coming at the last minute and jumped away, but fell on the hard pavement. Even Angus up the road near Abe raced down and started barking at the black van. The vehicle stopped with one wheel in the ditch on the far side of the State Highway. It backed up until all four wheels were on the pavement. Allison memorized the license plate just above a 'Support the Police' bumper sticker. Angus chased it the length of her trailer as it sped away towards Fox Den.

"Are you okay?" Abe asked as he arrived on the scene of the near miss. Angus came back panting and licked the boy still lying on the asphalt after the fall.

"Yeah, it's only a scratch." Junior's knee throbbed and a little blood started to ooze from the wound. The frisbee lay squashed in the grass.

"That was a close call."

"Look, you scraped your knee pretty bad," Allison said out of breath. "I need to put somethin on that right away. Come in the house."

"I'm okay."

"I heard a few months ago that the Sheriff was lookin for a black van round these parts." Allison bent down and put her arms around the child.

"How'd you hear bout that?" Junior did not complain about the pain in his knee.

"I listened to it on the scanner. Think I'll call the Sheriff right after I doctor you up." She held him by the hand as he rose from the pavement. Once on his feet, Junior shuffled unassisted towards Allison's trailer to get it bandaged. Before she went inside, smoke bellowed from the grill. "Oh, no! Abe could you take those burgers off?"

Shortly they were all back at the picnic table ready to eat their burgers. Allison said a short blessing. "Forgot to call the Sheriff. I need to eat first." She watched the boys devour the burgers. Angus sat patiently close to the table near them in case any food was dropped. "How'd you like those burgers, boys?"

"Great! Much better than school," Abe said.

"Reckin that ain't sayin too much," Junior commented.

"Just forgot, I need to go to Peggy Ellen's for some cloth. I just need a little bit to finish the quilt. You'll see I'm gonna win the contest." The boys remained

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silent. "Got to get a better bandage on that knee, Junior. She'll probably have somethin. Finish your potato salad and I'll be right back."

When she left, Junior said to his friend. "You know, I'm sorry that my Paw got mad at you over the Fourth. Called you a 'Damn Yankee.' He gets that way sometimes."

"Don't worry about it. That's a long time back," Abe replied.

"It's always been in the back of my mind."

"I've been called worse."

"He was real upset, what all happened up yonder. Never seen him so mad." Junior hung his head down in shame.

Abe put down his second burger. "My parents are not happy either. They didn't mean to burn the barn. Was an accident. Names don't bother me anymore. Don't even care if Randy knows about the model."

"Yeah, he's goin to know bout it anyway soon."

"We're almost finished. If I enjoy doing things and it makes me happy, doesn't hurt anyone else, I don't care what anyone else thinks. Doing models is something positive, better than getting in trouble."

"Yeah, like gettin stuck up at the Courthouse." Junior started to eat his salad.

"No, not that kind of trouble. I mean drinking beer and stuff like that. That can hurt other people."

"I think that's why Allison's up at my Aunt Peggy Ellen's house. Her oldest boy's startin to drink some and runs around with a drunk, too."

"Don't tell anyone, but my Dad got drunk over the Fourth. Never saw him do something like that. There were some wild things going on up there. I don't think that'll ever happen again. Well anyway, my parents didn't mean to do anything against your family."

"I know, I hope somethin could be worked out." Junior sipped some cola. "But Grover's really mad. He don't have no money to go huntin anymore out West."

"Say, I'd like to go down there where your Dad caught the fish at Dead Bear. Get some pictures of the railroad stuff. If we're lucky, we can see one of those new cabooses, one with the side sticking out. Maybe a shot of it going into the tunnel."

Junior was pleased that he had changed the subject. "I can show you where it is. But somebody's got to take us in a truck. Road's pretty steep and curvy. One time my Paw got stuck there in a ditch comin back up."

"I'll ask my Mom, she's got a four wheel drive that'll go anywhere."

Just then, Allison returned holding a red patch of fabric and a first aid kit. "Got a better bandage for you, Junior. I'll put it on again. Put some more of that spray stuff too. I see you polished off my burgers."

"Forget it, ain't hurtin no more."

"We gotta go." Abe stood up from the picnic table.

After the boys left to do chores up the road, Allison phoned, and was fortunate to find the Sheriff in his office. "Do you remember huntin for a black van back awhile?"

"Yes, Rick Queen said something to me about it," the Sheriff noted without interest.

"Well, it was here about an hour ago and I got the tag. Almost hit one of the boys. He's okay now."

"Really! What is it? I'll do a check right away," the Sheriff perked up.

"It was XCL-925, couldn't get the state, but it had a tall building on it, think it said 'Empire' or somethin like that."

"Thanks, that's New York plates."

"Could you tell me who the van belongs to?"

"Sure thing, Ms. Garfield. Any more blue smoke up there?"

"Nope, I'll let you know. But you need to watch those boys up here very carefully. They're up to somethin."



After the Sheriff hung up with Allison Garfield, he called the Commonwealth's Central Office of Motor Vehicles in Richmond. After thirty minutes, they called back, "The vehicle belongs to Loretta Perez, 5036 Flatbush Ave. New York, New York."

The Sheriff immediately called his former police academy classmate, the NYPD detective. He left a message on his friend's answering machine at the police station, and made another call to the Guardian.

"What did I do this time, burn some more buildings?" Rick asked with concern.

"No, we got a report that you were flirtin with some of the girls at the Wagon."

"Really, who was the tipster?"

"That's a county secret. Like you, I don't reveal my sources. Seriously, we got word of a black van in the county and a make on the owner."

"Is it still around?"

The Sheriff spoke in an official tone, "No, it's out of the county by now, but it belongs to a Loretta Perez. Lives in Brooklyn on Flatbush Ave. Does that ring a bell?"

"I know where Flatbush Avenue is. Did a story down there on a messed up drug bust by the cops. Don't remember this Perez lady." Rick opened a desk drawer and took out a file.

"I'm checking on it and I'll give you a call when I've got something."

"Thanks, Sheriff." He thumbed through a file entitled 'NYPD' and put it back down on his desk. "Say, we changed our home phone because of the Fannie Mae thing. Also the surveyors are still harassing us."

"That reminds me. You need to watch out for them. They get too much to drink. Do crazy redneck stuff."

"Like shooting people's tires?"

The Sheriff answered, "I got some people at 'Cow Girls' watchin."

This didn't not make the editor feel any better. "Look, our phone is unlisted now. I'll give it to you. It's. It's. Forgot it now. I'll call you back in a few minutes. It's around here somewhere. Please call me anytime when you have anything."

"Listen, I need a favor from you this time."

Rick looked in the file again. "Do you want me to go on another drug raid and get some more pictures of you, Sheriff?"

"No, not this time. That can wait till just before election. But I've got to find a foster parent for this kid up on East Prong. Lives with her elderly grandmother. We've been gettin reports from neighbors that the old lady can't keep Julie anymore. The kid never plays outside or socializes with anyone. The teachers at the school say she's dirty, never bathes. We're gettin to the point where we could remove her from the home."

"Why do you want me to take care of her? We have too many problems." Rick was empathetic.

"No, not necessarily, but I know you and Mary would provide a good place. But, could you do a story on the need for foster parents? If we don't find any, we'll have to send the girl up to Byron County. Can't tell you what to print, just a request."

"That's the county to the north of Stark?" Rick put the 'NYPD' file back in the drawer and shook his head in disappointment.

"Yes, it's, it's far away by road, and we don't have too much in common with those folks up there. We don't even get their criminals. Just get the Riverport trash."

"That's good, Sheriff."

"They have a group home up there and sometimes we send kids there, most of the time we can find relatives here in the county to take care of them. Seems like we need foster parents more now. When could you do the article?" the Sheriff pleaded with him.

"Can't do it next week, I'm working on a little County project." He looked at a stack of files in the corner of his office on the floor. "Maybe in a few weeks."

"Is that the bicentennial contest?"

"No, it has to do with County Finance."

"I know they're messed up with Oscar leaving. My department's hurting. Can't order any bullet proof vests for my deputies."

"Can you order one for me?" Rick asked half seriously.

"When I get the money."

"I'll take a large." Then Rick asked more sincerely, "Are you interested in the contest?"

"Maybe. What sort of things are people doin?"

"I don't even know all the entries; it has to go through the Windes. But I can tell you that someone is doing a history project, my friend from New York is producing a short play, and my Corn Still neighbor's making a quilt."

"Is that Allison Garfield?" the Sheriff interrupted.

"Yes, it is."

"She's the one who saw the van."

"Really." Rick's stomach had knots in it, close to home again.

"We'll keep an eye out for it. I need to ask you if the Sheriff's Department can enter?"

"Sure you can, but you need to do it soon. The Supervisors will decide next month, or I should say Howard Winde. What do you have in mind?"

"We found the old scaffold used for the hangins down in the Courthouse basement. Thought we might set the platform up in a corner of the lobby, and give a brief history of all the bad criminals in Stark County. Have their pictures and a story about them."

"That's a great idea. People would enjoy that."

"Yeah, they could see some of their kin."

"You could come and look at the back issues of the paper." Rick paused and yawned without a sound. "I'm sure that there are many articles about it. Also you can look at the death notices. The genealogy people could help you. They really get turned on by reading those obituaries. Some of them spend hours looking at old issues; never seen those folks so happy."

"I'll have a deputy go down there later this week."

"Why don't you have him come Thursday," Rick suggested. "It's not as hectic around here then. I won't be here, but Larry could help you. He knows my home phone, and he'll give it to your deputy when he comes."

"Good, I'll keep it on file with the dispatcher."

"Thanks, just don't give it to the New York cops."

"Never." The Sheriff paused, "Do you think you have pictures of the scaffold all set up? It's hard to put together. No one in my office has done it before."

Will the hanging platform be operational?"

"Yes," the Sheriff said. "We're need volunteers to see if it'll work. Do you know any?"

"I've got some names in New York. Do you take out-of-state people?"

"Yes, but how would you get em here?" the Sheriff asked.

"I'd throw another party."

CHAPTER 42

Buddy came home from work early on a weekday and called the law offices of Winde and Winde in Mulberry. "Could I speak to Mr. Howard Winde?"

"Who are you?" was the terse response from a secretary.

"I'm one of his clients, in that road case with the Queens."

"No, he's in conference."

"Is Henry there?" Buddy's voice sounded desperate.

"They're both in conference."

"Could you have them call Buddy Garfield. I don't care who."

"Okay, I'll write up a message. Give it to him when I see him," she said impersonally.

Buddy slammed the phone down and went to the icebox to get a beer. He sat at the kitchen table furious about the delay in the court proceedings. The wait until next month upset him. Henry Winde had told him before the hearing a few weeks ago it would be over. Instead, he had to take down the gate and prepare for a trial. After finishing a beer, he telephoned his wife at the school. "How are you doin'?"

Becky taken by surprised, answered with a question. "Why did you call?"

"Tried to getta hold of the Windes about our case." Buddy took another bottle out of the icebox. "We need to be ready next month. I just called over there, and was told they were in conference."

"That's what they're trained to say, always in conference," Becky paused and asked, "Are you interested in Junior?"

"Oh yeah, what did the Doc say?" He fumbled with the empty bottle on the table.

"The swellin in his knee should go down in about a week." Becky kept her eyes on Mrs. Filburn's door. "He needs to keep off it as much as possible. Doctor gave him some medicine for it. Said that swellin lasts a long time in his condition."

Where is he today? Ain't home."

"I took em down to Allison's place in the car this morning. Say, she called, said that a suspicious black van's stalkin our road again. Connected to the Queens in some way."

"Maybe they can scare the Queens off," Buddy suggested. "That'll solve our road problem. Need some good cheap, hit men. Was there a phone number on the van I can call?"

"Now Buddy, remember what the preacher said, 'Love your neighbor.' That's what last week's sermon was about."

"Yeah, but he don't have to live by these d... people." Buddy responded decisively. "Have you seen Grover around?"

Becky was puzzled. "No, why?"

"Hasn't shown up for work for a couple days. Acted a little strange last week. Depressed. He sold his red pick-up. That was like a youngin to him."

"I hope he doesn't do nothin bad. Say, you usually don't never call me here. You're always on the road somewhere." She waved to Tammy who had just come in, but continued her conversation on the phone. "Are you feelin guilty about something?"

"Nothin. I'm home for dinner, but I'm leavin soon. I'll be a little late for supper. Going over to Grover's house. See if I can find out what's goin on."

"My brother, Oscar, is sorta down also. He had to quit the County, couldn't get along with the Manager."

"What's he doin these days?" Buddy asked.

"Takin care of my folks mostly, they're gettin worse. Oscar's over in Riverport today, checkin out nursing homes."

"Reckin that ain't fun."

"I know, but it's gotta be done," Becky said.

"Just like the lawsuit with Queens, we gotta do this. Can't let them get away with what they did to us," Buddy asserted.

"I reckon. Look I gotta go, things have been busy at the school. All these kids and parents came in to sign up for the new school year. Summer school's endin next week. Gotta get grades out." After she hung up, she went to the County Library for her dinner. The change of scenery helped her disposition, although the smell of oil started to give her a headache. Her relationship with her husband concerned her for she could sense that the lawsuit consumed his life and could eventually split them apart.

As soon as she returned to the school, her boss came out of her private office. "Becky, could you come back here. I need to talk to you." Mrs. Filburn waved her back.

"Sure." Becky dropped a list of students' grades on the front counter. When Mrs. Filburn shut the door, Becky knew that this was going to be serious and slowly sat down in the chair she had been in many times before.

Now seated behind her desk, the principal started the conversation. "Becky, I know you have a lot of problems, but you've been receiving way too many phone calls and visits from family members. Our enrollment will be up in the fall and you need to pay attention to your work here. I've been under a lot of stress with that girl up on East Prong."

"Julie?"

"Yes. Her grandmother can't keep her anymore. I'm worried about where she will go."

"I wish I could keep her, but there are too many problems. Buddy would never do it. He's all wrapped up in this lawsuit thing."

"You would do well with her, but you need to get yourself together here first."

"I know, I'll do better and stop the talkin," Becky admitted.

"I realize that you can't stop it totally, but you need to get this under control." Mrs. Filburn placed her hands together and remained still.

"There's been too much goin on lately. You know with my brother at Finance, my parents are not doin good, there's Junior and this thing with the Queens."

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Becky started to cry and bent her head over the desk.

"Look, I don't want to interfere, but perhaps you need to go away for while. Go on a cruise, they're great."

"You're right. I wish I could go on a cruise or somethin. Wouldn't have to worry about nothin for a while, but I know when I get back all this stuff will be here. Can't afford it anyway."

"Why don't you take about two weeks off before Labor Day? Take sick leave. Tammy will still be here. You can be back then, ready for school when the kids return here."

"I wanted to tell you this, but Buddy and me are takin Junior up North to a big hospital the week before Labor Day." Becky avoided eye contact.

"Why don't you stop in Washington DC or go to the ocean? It's close by."

Becky's face perked up. "That's a good idea. We've never taken Junior to the beach."

"Great, that'll do all of you good." The principal rose and put her hand on Becky's shoulder. "One other thing, this is none of my business, but you need to settle this thing with Mary. It's not good to have this thing between you goin on at the school. I know that nothing has been said openly here, but I can feel the tension between you."

"Mrs. Filburn, I appreciate your concern, but this is a family matter. I've been courteous to Mrs. Queen. Never a harsh word." Becky looked up at the principal standing over her.

"I know, but I wish you could come to some agreement. They're good people." Mrs. Filburn returned to her desk.

"Maybe I can talk to my husband when we go up North. Wish I could go on a cruise."

"You could get some good deals this time of year." The principal opened a desk drawer and took out some postcards of the Caribbean, handing them to Becky.

"Goin to be hard to get Buddy on any ship." Becky's fingers shuffled through the pictures but her eyes never touched them. "He won't even set foot in that fishin boat we've got."

CHAPTER 43

A few weeks before school started, it was a tradition in the Garfield clan that all the children go into Mulberry to prepare for the new year. They spent a day in town getting haircuts, buying clothes and gathering educational supplies. This year was no exception, but it did have some differences. Abe went along with the Garfields and he was pleased to leave Corn Still for a day. Having time on her hands, Aunt Henrietta volunteered to take the children. This was fortunate for both Junior and Abe because she would help them in the final stages of building the model of the town. The pair needed an accurate map of the downtown streets and needed an adult accomplice to procure a copy from the Deed Office in the Courthouse. The only problem for the boys, Sue Ann tagged along.

It was getting more difficult to keep the project a secret, and even Sue Ann wondered what the boys were doing at Aunt Henrietta's trailer. Allison devoted more time to investigating their operation. She even read Henrietta's electric meter on a nightly basis and reported the excessive use of power to the company, hoping they could provide clues. She tried to have the phone people send her sister's bills to her so that Allison could find out what long distance calls were made. Allison scoured her sister's trash for any leads. All of these efforts were unsuccessful.

This year's day in town was also different because there were no other Garfield children along. Aunt Georgia had moved, and Henrietta's children were still with their father in Riverport. Junior, Abe and Sue Ann had persuaded the adults in charge not to take Peggy Ellen's unruly kids. Although Angus did not have to go to school, he needed personal attention, as well. The Westie could hardly see with all the hair covering his eyes, and some blue paint remained under his matted coat. One of Henrietta's friends laid off at the mill had started a pet grooming business at her home in Turkey Neck. This would be a good opportunity to have the terrier shampooed and trimmed.

All three children and Angus walked down the road from the Garfield home place, the first time Junior had walked on his own since his knee injury. Abe noticed that the swelling had subsided, but he still had a noticeable limp. Just before Peggy Ellen's place, the dog started growling which he rarely did.

"Stop it, Angus." Junior looked down at him. "We're just goin to take you to the groomers." The Westie barked and would not move down the road.

"Don't worry, we're not going to paint you again," Abe said with authority.

Sue Ann asked, "Angus, what did those boys do to you?"

Ignoring his sister, Junior picked up the dog and carried him to Henrietta's car parked in her driveway. Everyone piled in and the dog curled up between the two boys in the back seat.

As they traveled down Rooster Trace, Sue Ann blurted, "I gotta go to the bathroom."

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Henrietta turned. "Why didn't you go before you left home?"

The girl did not respond other than, "Gotta go bad."

"I'll stop by the church. You can go there." Henrietta parked the car in the gravel lot at Fox Den and everyone jumped out. "Don't go too far, Boys. I'll have to unlock it." She went to the church door and retrieved a key hidden under a mat.

Meanwhile Junior ushered Abe around to the side of the building and pointed to a grave site. "That's where I'm goin to be. I was meanin to ask you. Could you be buried next to me?"

Abe was speechless for a minute, then asked, "Why?"

"Cause you're like our kinfolks."

"Well, I'll have to ask my parents, for one thing."

"When I go up North, I'm goin to ask my folks. It'll be okay. Will you do it?" Junior begged.

"I'll ask them sometime." Abe was still confused.

Henrietta called for the boys and they were on their way. Instead of turning left at the church at Fox Den, which went directly towards town, Henrietta drove straight for five miles north on Rooster Trace Road. Then she turned left up on Rabbit Run and crawled up the grade behind a truck loaded with hay. Her friend lived in the little community of Turkey Neck at the crest of the hill. The community was a little larger than Fox Den, having a small school, now closed, a general store and three churches, two of them abandoned. Henrietta pulled into the gravel parking lot of the store that was the entire downtown Turkey Neck. She parked in front of old gas pumps under an overhang supported by wooden posts. Even though the prices were higher, she purchased gas here at the store owned by her youngest brother. As everyone got out of the car, she said. "I'll take Angus to my friend, she's right next door. Junior, here's some money. You can get drinks for everyone and a large package of chips. I'll be back in about half an hour. Just stay round here."

"Thanks, Aunt Henrietta."

"I forgot. Here's the keys to the car in case they gotta move it. Have em fill it with gas."

Without delay Sue Ann headed for the bathroom behind the store. After Henrietta pulled Angus away on the leash, Junior commented, "We could take her car to Mulberry ourselves."

"You know how to drive?"

"Reckin it's not much different from a tractor, but my Paw would come and get us for sure."

"At least we would get away from your sister," Abe chuckled.

The boys trooped into the store and were greeted by one of Junior's distant cousins, who pointed them to the back section where Wise potato chips hung on the wall. After buying the chips, the pair found the coke machine and Sue Ann waiting on the porch. Each put in a quarter and a glass bottle popped out every time. They sat down to eat on a bench below a rusted 'Sinclair' gas sign on the outside wall.

A noisy jeep came up Rabbit Run attracting the boys' attention. Junior

ran out and waved. "That's Grover!" The vehicle continued on towards the East Prong and Mulberry. "That's strange! He didn't stop. Didn't have his red pick-up."

Abe looked again at the back of the jeep. A high-powered rifle hung on the rear window. Henrietta interrupted his thoughts and the children climbed in her car. This time Junior claimed the front seat of the car. "How did Angus do?"

"Once he got there he was fine."

"Thanks for the drink and chips, Mrs. Garfield." Abe said as she drove towards town.

As the car approached the bridge, the boys saw the railroad crossing sign on the other side. "Aunt Henrietta, can we go right and go up East Prong a bit?" Junior asked.

"That's the wrong direction to Mulberry," Henrietta said.

"You're right, Mrs. Garfield, but there's a new type of signal tower that the railroad installed last year; it's only a mile up there." Abe put his nose up to the glass making a smudge mark the size of a nickel.

"Do we gotta do this?" Sue Ann whined. "Junior'll be in the front more. Ain't fair."

"Better go straight to town. If we have time on the way back, I'll go up there. That is, if you're all good." Henrietta glanced at her niece in the rear mirror. "You can be up front all the way home."

A few miles down East Prong and just inside the town limits, Henrietta pointed out her window to the left. "Look there's the old mill where I worked. Spent many a night there. Worked third shift. It's all closed down now." Soon they arrived at the Courthouse and parked in the rear lot behind the imposing structure. "Okay. Children, I'm goin to take Sue Ann to do some shop-pin. You boys go get haircuts. When you're finished, I'll take you to the dry goods store for clothes. Meet me back in an hour or so at the bench in front of the Courthouse."

The boys ran off past the Courthouse to the barber while the ladies went the opposite direction to the store. "See how lucky you are, Abe." Junior said on their way to haircuts.

"Yes, I'm glad I don't have a sister," Abe guessed.

"Peace and quiet." Junior paused, "I wish."

The barbershop was crowded because many of the parents in Stark County had the same idea as Henrietta. Abe had his haircut first after about half an hour wait. Then he walked alone back to the Courthouse while Junior's hair was cut. When Abe arrived, he found Henrietta sitting alone in front on the bench with a manila envelope in her hand.

"Got the map you wanted." She held it up for the boy to see.

"Thanks. Say, can I call you Aunt Henrietta?" Abe asked. "It's a lot easier that way. Hate to say Mrs. Garfield. That's too formal, like school."

"Sure, that'll be fine. Any way my name technically ain't Garfield no more. You can be one of our kinfolks."

"Super! I get a little left out sometimes with all Junior's kin here."

"Where's Junior?"

"He's still at the barbershop. I think he wanted to stay a little longer, talk to some of his cousins. Anyway, I wanted to come back and survey the Courthouse again. See how that turret thing's connected to the roof." After he gazed upward, the boy looked down the street in the direction of the dry goods store. "Where's Sue Ann?"

"She's over at the Wagon with a friend. That'll take a while."

"Aunt Henrietta? Could I talk to you about your family a little?"

"There's a lot to talk about, I'm sure." Henrietta said tenderly.

"I know. But, you know there's conflict between my parents and Junior's. I like them all, but some of them are stubborn."

"Yeah. Especially Buddy," Henrietta said without further comment.

Abe took a seat beside her on the bench. "Didn't really want to say that in front of Junior. He loves his Dad a lot. I know you've helped Junior and me with the model, it's been good for both of us. When I came to Corn Still, it was a big change. I was lonely and Junior's been a true friend."

"Well, I believe you've helped Junior too. He's got a lot of problems. Don't know how it's all goin to turn out. His Ma's takin him up North before school for some more tests or somethin. Don't know all the details. I've got a lot of problems, too, with my kids."

"Don't know how to say this." Abe hesitated, "but could you help me? Again?"

"I'll try."

"Could you talk to Junior's dad and try to work out this problem with the road and all? Didn't want to say anything to Junior. Neighbors shouldn't be fightin."

"I agree with you, Abe. To tell you the truth I'm fussin with my ex-husband over the kids. It's tough on a person. Wears you down. I'm sick of it."

"That's about the situation with families on Corn Still." Abe hung his head down. "No one's goin to win."

"Yeah. Abe, you gotta see where Buddy's comin from. He feels a bit threatened by you folks up yonder. Used to doin things the same for a long time. I don't know your folks good, but you know, at the dance, I talked to your ma some."

"Really? Didn't know she was even there."

"She didn't want you to know. Somethin to do with the paper. But what I can see is that they're good people. They mean well even if they're Yankees. Me, I don't care. It's just like the colored people. I used to work with some of em at the mill." Henrietta waved in the general direction of East Prong. "People's basically the same, and they really can't help where they're from. Or what their backgrounds is."

"Do you think you could talk to my folks? That would help."

"I would, but that would be difficult. Can't just go up to the cabin, knock on the door and say to your folks, let's all sit down together and sing 'Kum Bye Ya'. I'll look for an opportunity to talk to them about this. Specially your Ma. You probably know by now, there's been a lot of conflict in Corn Still over the past hundred years, with the Civil War and bootleggers stuff."

"I hope it doesn't take another century." Abe looked down the street towards the Wagon and pointed his finger. "Look, here comes trouble."

"Who's that, Sue Ann?" Henrietta asked without turning.

"No, it's Hoss. He's walking crooked in the middle of the street."

She twisted around. "He's goin to get hit by a car."

Abe yelled, "Hoss! Watch out! Hoss!"

The drunk staggered to the bench spitting in a slurred voice. "Hi, Boys."

"No, Hoss, this is my aunt," Abe attempted to correct him.

"I'm Junior's aunt too," Henrietta said. "Also, Abe's aunt now."

"That's impos....ible. You can't be an an aunt to both boys?"

CHAPTER 44

The sun low over the rock cliffs blinded Rick as he parked the Volvo in front of the cabin that evening. He was tired after delivering the paper all over the county. As he entered the house, his wife held the phone up. "Rick, it's the Sheriff."

He rushed over to the receiver. "Hi, what's up?"

"This Perez woman's the secretary to a NYPD precinct in Manhattan. In the seized evidence unit. Lately, she's been takin a lot of time off on vacations. That's what my friend said, you know, the one I did training with."

"That would explain why the van appears now and then."

"Maybe Zone had somethin goin on with her," the Sheriff said.

"Possibly." He took the lid off an aluminum pot on the stove and placed it back without a sound. "Why would a secretary to the cops have it in for me? Haven't done anything to her."

"These women will do anything for love. I see it in law enforcement all the time."

"You may be correct, Sheriff. Why don't you check if Perez worked with Zone at any time during his career?"

"That's a good idea, Rick. Maybe that's how Zone got the seized cash. I'll follow that up Monday with my friend. Probably already checkin on that angle. He's a pretty smart cookie. He even told me he knows some people at your paper up there."

"You know that name, Perez, rings a bell." Rick sliced a thin piece of cheese and munched it for a few seconds. "When I covered the trial, her name came up someway. Don't remember it now, it's been about a year. Maybe I'll call Revis to check my file up there. I only brought a few things down here, and they're at the office. I'll check it all out Monday. That name rings a bell."

"I don't know for sure, Rick, but there's some connection between her and whoever's doin this with the van. So far, I or for that matter the New York cops, can't arrest this Perez woman. We can't even mess with it."

"What about a traffic violation?" Rick cut another piece of cheese. "Almost hit that kid down there."

"Still no probable for a search."

"You're right, Sheriff, but sometimes those cops don't pay attention to the niceties of law. I know that from experience." Mary came up to the counter taking the cheese and putting it in the icebox.

"Say, another thing. One of my contacts at 'Cow Girls' says that the surveyors are up to something. Be careful."

"I have a good spare."

The Sheriff laughed. "I'll call you if I hear anything else, or my deputies will if I'm gone."

"Thanks. I've lost touch with stuff in the City." Rick thought about telling the Sheriff his moving plans but decided against it.

"Say, when are you going to do that foster child article? That's why I called too. The girl's grandmother died."

"Sorry about that. We've been busy. Sorry, I'll work up something about foster parents Monday."

"The county welfare people are desperate at this point."

"That girl's Julie?" Rick asked. His wife looked at him as she stopped stirring the gravy.

"Yeah, but don't use her name," the Sheriff said.

"Don't worry. I won't."

"I'll be over to Bristol for the races this weekend. If I hear something more, I'll be sure to call or leave word with one of my deputies."

"Thanks, Sheriff. We'll be around most of the weekend. Going into the big city tomorrow night. Have fun at the races!" After he hung up, he looked hungrily at the stove.

"Sorry, dinner's going to be late." His wife stirred a pot. "I wish we could take care of that child."

"I know, but we can't. I'm just going to do an article for the Sheriff about the need for foster parents."

"He's been so good to us."

"Yes. I want to help him. Anyway, how was your day?" Rick took a few steps and collapsed on the sofa. He picked up a week-old New York Times that was spread out on the other end of it. However, he could not focus on the paper for his thoughts turned to Perez and her possible connection to Zone. His memory was blank right now.

"Busy. Stopped at the farmer's market. I bought a watermelon. That reminds me. It's still in the car. Could you go get it? I need to slice it up for a salad."

"I suppose." Rick complied and lugged the fruit back and put it on the tiny countertop.

"Sorry, dear. One more thing. Could you sharpen that big knife? It's down under the sink in the bottom drawer. The stone is right next to it. I have more stuff in the car. I can get that." When she left, he did his chore and left a nine inch sharpened knife on the counter. Returning with several produce bags, Mary placed them on the sofa.

He stuffed the stone back in the bottom drawer. "What else did you do?"

"I took Abe and Junior down to the River by those rapids to take some pictures of trains."

"How'd they like it?" Rick returned to the sofa and the paper.

With a towel she wiped clean the watermelon on the counter. "Had a blast, but you know what, Junior doesn't look too well. Didn't eat a bite."

"That's too bad. He seems to be a nice kid. I wish his father was like the boy." Rick continued to be buried in the paper.

"Yes, it's tough with this lawsuit between us." Mary sliced a quarter of the watermelon into bite sized pieces.

"Maybe they'll drop the lawsuit when we move."

"We'll need to ask Mr. Bartlett about that." After cleaning the knife, she put it back in its home in the drawer.

"What did you do down at the River while the boys were taking pictures? You must have been bored with trains."

"I had a good book" She scooped up the pieces of melon with her hands and arranged them in neat rows on a plate. "I love to read with the sound of rushing water in the background. Don't want to move back to Jersey. You know what, it's peaceful here. Like to read by that little brook by the apple trees or go up on the ridge."

"I told Revis I would be coming."

"Couldn't you stick it out here until next year? So that Abe can finish school here." Mary left the kitchen to go the bathroom for a dry towel.

"Tried that for awhile. Almost everyone here is against me. It's worse than in New York." Smelling something good, he went to the stove to lift a cover and sampled its contents. "If I wait, the job will be gone. Jackson'll probably get it."

Coming back to the common room with a cloth over her shoulder. Mary scolded her husband. "Get out of there, you can wait for dinner. Before we call Abe to sit down, we need to let him know what's going on with the move."

Rick retreated to the chair at the other end of the room. "I've been dreading that for some weeks now. He may have an idea that something is in the wind. Where is he now?"

"In his room. He can't hear, has that paint thing on."

"I'll tell him tomorrow."

"You need to when we go to the Chinese place." Mary poured the gravy into a bowl on the counter. She opened the oven door and with two pot holders took a roast out. The phone rang again. "Honey could you get that?" Rick struggled out of the chair and went to the kitchen end of the cabin, grabbing the phone. "Hello."

"Hi, this is Sammie Porter, the good one, returning your call."

"Oh yes, we called you some weeks ago, almost forgot. We've had a lot going on here."

"Been at the Big Apple working on a play up there."

"The reason Mary called you is that we're sorry that we left early. You remember at the school reception you had. We ran into some problems."

"That's okay, I understand. I was surprised that there's a lot of interest in the play. That's why I'm back here to put the finishing touches on it. I hope you and Mary can go. It's about a month from now, in September sometime. I can call you back with the exact time."

Rick glanced at his son coming out of his room and turned away, facing the wall. He whispered into the receiver. "You know we may be moving in a few weeks, back to New York. It's a long story. I'll tell you about it sometime, haven't told Abe yet."

"I know you have difficulties. It's not because of the other Sammie Porter, is it?" their friend asked.

"No, no, she's only a minor problem. I know how to handle her. But we're having a lot of problems with the neighbors here, and this Fannie Mae thing has

gotten out of hand. Surveyors harassing me.”

“Look, sorry to call around supper time, but I did want to return your call. Let’s talk sometime.”

“Sure, we should be here a few more weeks.” Rick turned, seeing the rest of his family at the table. “I’ll talk to Mary about having you and your sister over.”

“One more thing, Rick, sorry I missed your party, something came up at the last minute. I had to go out of town for a while again. I hope my cancellation didn’t cause a problem. I know when you plan for those things, you’re disappointed when people don’t show up.”

“No, Sammie, that wasn’t a problem at all. I need an hour to tell you what happened.”

“Really? Maybe it can be a basis for a book or even a flick! I know a director in Hollywood and he —”

Rick interrupted, “It would have to be a horror movie. Bye.”

CHAPTER 45

When Abe woke up the next day after the river trip, mixed emotions floated around in his mind. Although he'd had a nice time with his friend, he felt apprehensive about a change he could sense. It was not a natural change like the shortening of daylight and crispness in the morning, but something else. For the past few weeks, his parents had stopped talking about their plans for the new house. Junior had wanted his picture taken with him in front of the church yesterday on the way to the river. The contest winner would be announced in a few weeks. But the most perplexing was the burial request. There was a sense of a future dramatic change that would affect Corn Still forever. After breakfast with his parents, he snuck out of the cabin.

Abe's most immediate concern was to talk to Aunt Henrietta to find out if she had spoken to Junior's parents about settling the problems between the two families. Ever since the conversation with her on the Courthouse bench, Abe had not slept well wondering if she could solve the controversy.

He needed to talk to her alone again before the Garfields went North. Abe did not want anyone to know he was down there, especially Junior. So he had to slip by the Garfield's house and avoid being seen by Allison next door. The best route would be to go across the creek before he got to Junior's house and follow the creek on the other side of the road. This path took him behind the barn and tool shed out of sight of the house, behind a broken down tractor overgrown with weeds at Georgia's trailer site, and then between Peggy Ellen's and Henrietta's mobile homes. The plan went well, helped by the late summer morning fog that settled in the lower reaches of the valley.

When he neared Henrietta's trailer, Abe heard some music inside so he knew she was awake. He banged on the unit below her bedroom window, not being tall enough to tap on the glass itself. She peered through a small bathroom window and saw the boy. Turning the corner he ran to the base of her landing and leaped up the steps to the front door. Henrietta opened it so he entered without breaking stride. "Sorry to come so early."

"Come on in, do you want some breakfast?" She went to an end table and twisted the dial down on the radio playing 'Back in the Fifties Tonight.'

"You can leave it on, I like that song." Abe moved an empty cardboard box from an easy chair to the floor.

"Didn't know you liked country music."

Abe sat down and looked at all the boxes stacked on the bed in the living room. No pictures hung on her walls nor drapes on the windows. "I'm a closet country music lover. Love his other song, 'Smoky Mountain Rain.' Have you heard that one?"

"I would never have guessed." She sat down on a folding chair and yawned. "Both of you boys have really surprised me. Made my life worthwhile. Now I

have a purpose for livin. You know most people don't have a real reason in life. They just go on doin the same thing day after day."

"Did you know Ronnie Millsap, who sings that song, is blind?"

"No, but I know that he comes from Robbinsville way over in North Carolina." Henrietta went to the kitchen and took some eggs out of the icebox.

"They have an old logging steam engine over there. My Dad took me over there at Easter."

"I knew there had to be a connection with trains somehow." After fumbling through a cardboard box on the floor, she retrieved a small pan and filled it with water. She lit a match on the gas stove to start it boiling.

"Country music and trains go together, like salt and pepper." Abe sat up and looked down her narrow hall cluttered with trash. "Why all the boxes in here?"

"Next month I'm movin. Not far, just to Riverport." She strained as she lifted a griddle from the same box to another burner. "I was goin to tell both of you."

"Why are you leavin?" Abe moved to the kitchen to watch breakfast being prepared. However, his round face looked grim learning that his newly adopted aunt was about to depart Corn Still.

Henrietta separated bacon strips and placed them on the griddle in neat rows. "I'm goin back to school, the community college there, so I'll have a better chance to get the kids back. Closer to their school. Don't worry I'll come back to check on you boys once in a while."

"You've been a good friend. One of my kinfolks now."

"I'll miss you boys."

"At least we're about to finish the town up."

"I was goin to move sooner, but I wanted to wait awhile until you and Junior were done." Henrietta mopped up some of the bacon grease and poured pancake batter on the same griddle. "Say where is he?" Breaking some eggs over the skillet, she yawned. "Still not feelin too good from yesterday?" Henrietta left the stove for a minute and peered through the slits in the blinds toward her sister's trailer. There was no sign of her except her car parked in the driveway. She turned the pancakes over. "Becky told me he was pretty tired from your trip yesterday. Real nice of your mother to do that."

"Haven't talked to Junior this morning." Abe's face tightened up. "That's the reason why I'm here alone. You were goin to talk to his parents."

"I've been thinkin about that too. That's why I'm up so early."

"You look tired."

"Couldn't sleep. You know that these problems have been round a long time. It's goin to take more than a week to solve." Henrietta fixed two plates of food and placed them on separate TV trays. "But I did talk to Becky after church Wednesday night. Buddy was workin late."

"I bet she wondered why you went to church then. I thought you went to the Baptist church in Mulberry?" Abe dug into his second breakfast.

"Yes, usually go to the one in town, but Becky invited me." She found two mugs and poured boiling water in each for coffee and hot chocolate. "We had one of those special dinners for some missionary and his family from some foreign country. Can't remember which one."

ED KRAUSE

"Was it New Jersey?" He gobbled the bacon in one bite.

"You should be a comedian when you grow up. You know that?"

"You're the first one to tell me that."

"Well, anyway, Becky's goin to talk to her husband about it. Buddy can't back down." Henrietta picked at her food. "It's a matter of family honor to him. I think he has even forgot who he's fightin. He just wants to fight somebody. All his brothers is pushin him on the court case. Corn Still to him is like 'Tara' in the movie 'Gone with the Wind.' Have you seen it?"

"I know what you're talkin about." Abe finished his breakfast and edged to the door. "Do you think something can be worked out?"

"Reckin we're makin some progress. There's a change goin on here in these parts." Henrietta put her plate in the sink and went to the door. "I can't put my finger on it. Maybe it's the way your Paw is writin stuff. Maybe since the mill closed, people are thinkin they have to start lookin elsewhere for solutions. A lot of my friends at the mill are goin back to school." They heard a car pulling out of the drive. She cracked the front door half way for a few seconds and then swung it open. It was Allison leaving for the beauty shop. Abe followed his adopted Aunt on the landing and both watched the car disappear down Rooster Trace.

"What are you goin back to school for?" Abe enjoyed the freedom and the fresh air.

"I'm goin to be a draftsman or a draftsperson I should say." She leaned on the flimsy railing to the deck. "Sometimes I go in your model room there and look at all your drawings and the models. Hope you don't mind my snoopin, but I'm impressed with what both of you've done. Look, I'll still be around some and work on this problem between the families even after I move. I haven't told any of our kinfolks about leavin. If I tell Allison, the whole county will know. Don't tell anyone yet."

"I won't." The fog lifted. Abe shielded his eyes with one hand and pointed with the other to the pond visible in the sunlight. "Hope it doesn't make big waves."

CHAPTER 46

Abe hung his head low so he saw only his shadow. It was all that he could do to put one foot in front of the other as he plodded up the road from Henrietta's. He was depressed about her leaving, she was the one adult he could talk openly to about how he felt. Angus jumped on the frayed screen from the inside of the Garfield house as Abe stepped onto the kitchen porch. Becky heard the dog and opened the door for the boy. "Good mornin, Abe, how about some pancakes? I'll make some more sausage if you want."

"I couldn't eat a bite." An audible burp came out of his mouth. "I'm stuffed."

"Well, come on in and sit down. I'll give you some juice." Becky opened the refrigerator to reach for a pitcher. "It's nice to have a guest."

"Paw, Grover hasn't been over in a piece. When's he comin'?" Junior drooped over a little scrambled egg white.

"Don't know where he went. Maybe went huntin out West somewhere."

Abe felt uncomfortable about the survey situation and turned to Junior. "What's going on today?"

Junior lifted his head. "Got to dig taters."

"If there's time, beans gotta be picked too," Buddy said.

Becky poured a glass of juice. "Take it easy on the boy. He still can't walk that good."

"The doc says that he should exercise some."

"All right. Junior, you gotta take your pills."

"They make me sicker."

Becky gave a stern look to her son. She gave Abe the glass of juice and returned to the sink to wash dishes.

Abe sipped his drink. "Seems there's always a lot to be done on a farm."

"Sue Ann, I want you to help Junior." Becky turned with her hands covered with soap suds and stared at her daughter.

"Do I have to, Ma? I don't like to get my hands dirty, especially those nasty taters."

"They're cleaner than those worms." Junior mumbled while staring at his eggs. With his right hand he aimlessly stirred his food in circles with a fork.

"Yeah, but those taters have been sittin in the ground doin just nothing. At least the worms come out for some fresh air sometimes."

Becky came back to finish her coffee. "Junior, reckon you can't argue with your sister."

"Reckin you can't reason with any women," Buddy added.

Abe thought it was a good time to say, "I'll help Junior a little. Just have to be back by noon to do some stuff up at the cabin. There's still some trash up on the ridge." He realized he should not have brought up any association with the Fourth disaster and tried to change the subject. "My parents are taking me to a Chinese

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Restaurant in Riverport tonight. That's why I couldn't eat too much this morning. Want to save some room for dinner." Abe was not completely honest since he'd already had two separate breakfasts and no way he could handle a third.

"That's good. Could use some help. We'll dig some taters this morning before it gets too hot," Junior said in a monotone.

Buddy turned to his daughter. "Okay, Sue Ann, you can help me pick the beans so you can keep your hands clean."

"I'll slave away here makin some pies, do the laundry, do the bills and vacuum the house."

"Is that all?" Buddy asked.

"Why don't you all go?" The children filed out of the kitchen with Junior lagging behind. Becky looked at her son. "Junior, if you don't feel good, you come back here."

"I will."

Junior and Abe trooped out to the tool shed to retrieve five-gallon plastic buckets and pitchforks. They lugged them up a hundred feet toward the place where the upper barn had burned. Junior picked up the first potato. "You know I ain't feelin well."

"How are the treatments doing?"

"Not too good, still get tired. Supposed to go up North for more tests with my parents, but I can't see what they can do. My Ma's takin me to Washington, DC on the way up. Goin to visit all the history stuff. Even visit the White House."

Abe put his pitch fork into the ground. "After the town, let's model the White House."

"Yeah, I'll bring Hoss to help measure it. There's even a porch up there just like the Courthouse. It's called the Truman balcony on the South lawn. Read bout it in a book."

"Don't think we can use the same trick we used at the Courthouse."

"You never know about Hoss. It's surprisin what he can get away with."

"I hope everything goes okay. Who's going to take care of your sister?"

"Don't worry. Aunt Allison's takin care of her. I was goin to talk to you about Angus. If somethin happens to me, could you take care of him?"

"What's going to happen?" Abe stopped digging and rested on the pitchfork.

"You never know, they gotta put me to sleep while doin the tests. I'm not lookin forward to that. My parents don't really want to go."

"I'm sure everything will be alright."

"What I really need is some new kidneys."

"Let me know how it goes. Send me a postcard." For about an hour the boys turned over soil and tossed potatoes in the buckets. During this time Abe returned to the shed for more buckets while Junior sat on one of them in the field resting. A total of eight buckets filled with freshly dug potatoes were scattered in the field for Buddy to gather with the tractor later in the day.

The sun shone brightly in a clear sky, and it started to warm up. Junior said to his friend, "I feel a little faint, could you fetch my P ..." Before he finished the sentence he collapsed on the ground, barely missing his pitch fork. Abe bent down, and checked his pulse. Weak, but still breathing. Abe dragged him by the

feet so that Junior's legs were up hill. Wrestling his red coat off, Abe placed it under his legs further elevating his limbs. He plucked the John Deere cap off the ground and used it to shield Junior's eyes.

Abe hurried across the field to the barn, and sprinted down the road towards the pond. He saw Junior's father picking beans with Sue Ann near the lower barn. Within ten minutes, Buddy was back to the potato field with the tractor. His son was sprawled out on the ground face up just as he was left. Buddy cut the motor, and hopped down to Junior.

"Paw, I need to rest a while." Junior struggled to gain a sitting position. "Can't get up no more."

Buddy could see that the boy was weak, and could not walk. "Okay, Abe could you help me? Let's put em in the cart, and I'll drive em home." The pair carried Junior, and lifted him into the empty cart hooked up to the tractor. Instead of hauling buckets filled with potatoes, Buddy pulled the boy lying flat on his back with his cap over his eyes.

At the kitchen window doing laundry, Becky saw the tractor coming with Junior in the cart. Leaving wet clothes on the washing machine dripping on the floor, she ran outside. "What's the matter with Junior?"

"He felt a little dizzy." Buddy turned the engine off but continued to talk loud. "Picked him up in the field. Couldn't walk."

"Do you want me to call the doctor?" Becky asked.

"I'm okay," Junior mumbled faintly.

"Think he needs one." Buddy looked at him flat on his back.

The three of them carried him inside, and laid him on the living room couch. Within seconds he fell sound asleep. She called the doctor's office in Riverport, but had to leave a message on their answering machine since it was Saturday. After hanging up, Becky hugged Abe like close kinfolk. "Thanks for your help today. I think it best if you go home."

"Okay, let me know if you need anything."

After Abe went out the door, she asked her husband politely, "Where's Sue Ann?"

"Still down there pickin beans. She's doin fine." Buddy paused. "Probably just sittin at the pond."

"Good, because I need to talk to you." Becky pointed to the door. "Let's step outside. Junior may hear us in here."

He knew his wife had something important to say. Just then the telephone rang and he returned to the kitchen. It was Grover. Buddy's face lit up. "Where have you been? I've been lookin all round for you."

"Sorry I should've told you. I'm movin to Alaska."

"Why?"

"Can't make a livin here and hunt, but I still have some unfinished business here."

"What's that?"

"Can't tell you now. When I get up there, I'll call you. Just don't tell anyone where I'm goin, even Becky." Grover hung up before Buddy had a chance to ask him what he meant or even inform him about Junior.

The couple sat down on the kitchen porch, the same place they watched the fireworks. "Buddy, I'm worried about Junior. Don't know what to do. You know my folks ain't doin too good livin alone." She looked him in the eyes. "I'm upset over this lawsuit with Abe's folks. I can't take it any longer. All this goin on at the same time. Abe's a nice kid, he's helped Junior a lot." Becky came closer, practically touching his face. "We need to drop this thing with Queen up there."

"Henry Winde says we can win; I'm entitled to some damages from that party up there."

"I don't care a damn what he says, he's not goin to tell me what to do." Becky shook a finger in her husband's face.

Buddy rose and backed off a few feet all in the same motion. "Look, this is family land, if they get away with this, next thing they'll take part of my land."

"It ain't all yours. It's your sisters' too."

"Well. They're claimin the apple trees up there." He pointed up the road toward the orchard clearly visible from this vantage point.

"Sylvester Garfield SENIOR, I don't give a damn about the land!" Becky stood up and confronted her husband. "They can have the apples and all. What difference does it make if something happens to Junior? How'd you think Abe feels with this silly thing goin on between us?" She waited for an answer, but received none. Buddy knew Becky was mad. The only other time she repeated his God-given name to him was the time he forgot their tenth wedding anniversary. This time she not only added 'SENIOR' to his name, but clearly emphasized it. She continued in a loud voice. "I'm serious! If you don't drop this lawsuit, I'm leavin, I want some peace where I live!" Becky sat down and sobbed. "I've got enough problems without this stupid feud. I'll live in the Balds with my kin." Becky bent over in her chair wiping her eyes with her hand.

"Okay, let me think about this, but I get mad at those people up there sometimes. Got different ideas, tryin to change things. Can't hunt up there. Fetch no firewood. While I was fightin in Nam, I bet those people were smokin pot, may still do now. Life ain't fair!"

"I know, Buddy. Life's not fair, but that was twenty years ago." Becky regained her composure and sat up straight in the chair. "That's the past. We need to think about Junior, and what's best for him. You need to be a good neighbor and help them people. They're no different from you or me. Look, they can't help where they came from, and you can't help where you came from. Most of our kinfolks were even fightin with the Yankees. There've been enough problems up here on Corn Still for a long time, even before they ever came to this place. It's not their fault. This land'll be the same after we're long gone." Becky's face turned red and her speech quickened. "What have we accomplished by all this fightin? Who really cares who wins? What'll they get? What difference does it make when we are gone?"

Buddy had no time to respond to these rapid fire questions and even if he did, he did not have any satisfactory answers. "Let me ponder bout it over the weekend."

CHAPTER 47

At least Abe would have the opportunity to pick up the special order of Lady Liberty at the hobby shop. The model town would be complete! With all that happened today, this would be one positive event this Saturday. His parents had promised over a week ago to take him to the mall before dinner at the Paradise restaurant.

After leaving him at the only shopping center in Riverport, Rick and Mary went to the liquor store across the highway to purchase some wine to sneak back to Stark County. After they returned, the couple waited a few minutes while Abe finished looking at the new products at the hobby shop. Then the entire family walked to the only Chinese place in Riverport. As they waited to be seated, Mary said to her son, "Before we go in, I need to tell you something. There's no reason why you can't go to the race on Labor Day."

"That's great, Mom.!" Abe hugged his mother.

"Racing isn't that bad. I can think of a lot worse things you could get into."

He thought about the Courthouse and paint explosion incidents, but only made a comment. "Thanks, Junior'll be happy about that."

After going through the extensive buffet line and sitting down to enjoy the meal, Rick hesitated and looked at Abe, "Mom and I are thinking of um, moving to Jersey. You know we've got a lot of problems with the Garfields."

"But Dad, me and Junior's buddies." Abe turned to his mother, but she froze. The boy tried to explain, "He's goin to need me after getting back from the hospital up North." Abe ignored the food stacked on his plate.

Rick tried to argue. "I know that, but um, things are not so simple. There's lots of problems here. The Garfields. With the entire culture. They'll be a good opening at the Mirror in New York; running a paper by myself is tough here. It'll be a promotion, better job. Not as much stress. I'm not a young man anymore."

"You have Larry and Molly!" The boy slammed his hand on the table spilling some water.

"They only work part time." His father tried to reason with the boy, but he did not speak with authority.

His son knew it. "Don't want to move again!" he cried.

Mary rose from the table and wrapped her arm around her son. "Abe, you know what, we all need to be adaptable as life's always changing."

Abe settled down and tried to explain again. "I like Stark County. It doesn't really change. People like the Garfields go plant in the spring, tend crops in the summer, harvest in the fall, and cut wood in the winter. There's a purpose for every season. I love Becky. She treats me good, even Mr. Garfield's okay once you get to know him. The whole family's just like our kinfolks. I wanna live here!"

"If you want to farm some day, that's fine." Rick cut an egg roll on his plate but couldn't eat a bite.

"I didn't know that you're that attached to this place." Mary looked down and could not eat anything. "We've been here less than a year."

"Mom, Dad, could you promise me something then?" Both parents had a worried expression, and waited for their son's request. "Junior wants to be buried with me at his church down at Fox Den."

Rick nodded slightly and appeared astonished. "That's not going to happen for a long, long time. Your mother and I will be long gone by then."

"We promise." She hugged Abe again.

It was not a pleasant experience and no one enjoyed the meal. They decided not to go to the movie as planned and left the restaurant around eight in the evening. On a Saturday night, heavy traffic traveled the opposite way on Highway 10 with teenagers and rednecks from Stark County going into Riverport to party. The curvy two-lane road, which the Queen family used towards Mulberry, could not handle the increased volume of traffic. A new four-lane divided highway was being talked about to replace it; however it would be difficult to build because it depended on the cooperation of two different states.

As Rick passed the 'Cow Girls' beer joint, his Volvo remained stuck behind a dump truck creeping twenty miles below the speed limit. In his rear view mirror, a car tailgated for about two miles. Rick squinted into the low western sun in front of his car. After crossing the State line into Stark County, he could see that the car back of him wanted to pass. There was no place to pull over and let him go by. Driving the grade up Pump Gap, the truck chugged even slower. In a relatively straight section of highway, the car came around the Queens from behind and into the left lane across the centerline. At the same time a Trailways bus approached in the left lane coming down towards them. It was obvious that the car behind did not see it because of the setting sun. Rick blew his horn to no avail. Abe woke up in the back seat. For a second the passing car traveled side by side in the opposite lane going in the same direction as Rick's car. The bus swerved three feet onto the shoulder but could not reduce speed down the grade. The other car veered to the right, trying to avoid the oncoming Trailways. He missed the bus by inches, but hit the Volvo on the driver's side rear door. By instinct Rick swung off to the right, leaving the road a few seconds.

"Goin to hit that tree!" Mary screamed, seeing it fast approaching her.

Both air bags inflated before anybody realized it. A loud metallic noise pierced the air. The passenger side headlight hit a two foot diameter pine tree. The car spun around clockwise in a full circle swinging onto the left lane and then back to the right shoulder. Luckily, no one was in the opposite lane. The Volvo jolted to a stop by a rock just off the pavement. The front bumper remained wrapped around a portion of the splintered tree, the main stump left standing forty feet behind. The passenger side of the car was completely demolished and pinned against a rocky bank.

Rick unsnapped his seat belt. "You okay?"

Mary grunted. "Arm hurts. Can't get out of the car."

"Honey, don't move!"

Rick shoved open the driver's door. He stumbled onto the pavement. After he regained his balance, Rick heard his wife. "Can't move. Help me!" The smell of

gasoline permeated the twilight air.

"Hold on! I'll get you out!" Rick stuck his head back into the front seat, grabbed his wife by her left arm and pulled. She would not budge.

"Seat belt's stuck!"

"Hold on! I gotta pocket knife." Rick yanked the keys from the ignition and opened the knife attached to the key chain.

A voice from the road shouted, "Your car's on fire!" Rick sawed on the thick shoulder harness with the small blade. "You better get outta there!" The same person cried with more urgency.

Rick calmly said, "I'm half way through." After ten seconds that seemed an eternity the belt tore loose. Rick and Mary lunged out through the driver's door.

"What about Abe?" Rick yelled as he pulled himself off the pavement a second time. Steam and flames rose from what was left of the hood of the Volvo. The rear door on the driver's side was buckled and dented. It would not open. Rick peered in the back window through the shattered glass. "ABE!" No movement. No response. Rick jumped back in the driver's seat again and then stuck his head in the back. The boy was upside down with blood and glass covering everything.

"Call an ambulance!" Mary cried. "I should've made him wear the seat belt!"

I gotta get him out too." Rick could not risk pulling him over the front seat and out the driver's door.

Another bystander came to their side. "They're on their way!"

Rick saw that his son could not wait until help came. He had to act. Fortunately the rear of the car was not damaged and the trunk opened with ease. Using a tire iron like a crow bar, Rick pried open the door after several attempts. "Someone help me!" A bystander and Rick carefully slid Abe out of the back seat head first directly onto the pavement. He lay there motionless, immersed in blood, while fire raged in the passenger compartment. Rick shouted, "Get a blanket!" A truck driver grabbed one from his rig. They slid Abe onto a blanket. Four men each lifted a corner and carried him off the pavement beyond the range of the gas tank. Rick did the best he could to stop the bleeding and treat Abe for shock. A stranger put the fire out with an extinguisher.

Rick went to his wife who knelt on the shoulder of the road. "You're hurt!"

Her right arm bled from a two inch gash just above the elbow. "Don't worry about me."

The State Police arrived from a stake out at 'Cow Girls' even though the accident had happened out of their jurisdiction. Minutes later the ambulance came. Rick knew that his son had sustained a major head trauma, but he did not know the full extent of his injury.

After Abe was wheeled into the ambulance, a lady approached Rick. "I was followin that Cadillac and he pulled out to pass and hit you!"

Another eyewitness said, "I saw the whole thing! It never stopped.! Kept right on going after it hit you."

Both parents took turns holding Abe's limp hand and talking to the boy in the rear of the ambulance. He did not speak, just moaned a little as they made the trip to the hospital in Riverport. There, after Abe was wheeled into the emergency

room, Mary received ten stitches for the gash on her right arm. She joined her husband who had waited for an hour in the crowded lobby.

After five long hours at the hospital at three o'clock in the morning, a young doctor came to the waiting area and greeted Abe's parents. "Your son has suffered a subdural hematoma on the brain and is on life support. We were able to stop the bleeding, and we'll know more about his condition tomorrow. Had a little trouble getting the anesthetics right since your son had eaten a short time before." Both Rick and Mary appeared tense. "Do you need something for sleep?" the physician asked warmly.

"No doctor, we need to stay awake with him. He may need us," Mary said firmly, not looking at her husband.

"When can we see him?"

"Sure, I understand. Your son's upstairs in the pediatric intensive care unit now. We've stabilized him, and you can go visit with him although he can't talk or move at this point. I'll come and see you around six before my shift ends to give you an update."

Rick and Mary went up to Abe's room on the third floor, but they could only sit and watch him. It seemed like every fifteen minutes someone came in the room to check him, do some tests and monitor the IV. At six in the morning, the doctor entered the room with another physician and spoke to them. "I'm sorry folks, there's nothing I can report at this time. Later today, we'll do another MRI and EEG test. I need to leave now, but this is Dr. Bradley who will be in charge while I'm gone. He's a pediatric trauma specialist. Dr. Bradley needs to look at the situation closely. I'm very interested in your son, and I'll be back around five this afternoon. Some of the tests should be complete by then, and I can talk to you more about what we can do."

The parents waited in Abe's room all day without leaving even for food. They were both in a state of shock. All feelings of guilt, anger and depression were gone. At various times Abe was wheeled out of the room to places unknown to his parents. They never saw the older Dr. Bradley. As promised, the same young doctor came in Abe's room at about five in the afternoon. It seemed like a whole year had passed since the couple had eaten dinner last night. "Let's go down to my office and talk."

After taking the elevator down a floor and traveling through several long corridors, they reached his comfortable office. When all were seated, the doctor said, "As you're aware, your son is in bad shape. Dr. Bradley is the best in the state for this type of injury. He has been on top of his condition all day, but he had to go into another surgery. Dr. Bradley wanted me to talk to you. It's difficult for me to tell you this, but there's little brain activity. He's on a respirator and cannot breathe on his own. Hydration and nutrition are solely by IV."

"Do you mean he'll be a vegetable all his life?" Rick put his filthy elbow on the spotless desk and held his head.

"Yes, to put it simply," the doctor responded sadly. "I'm pretty sure."

"We can't let that happen, doctor," Mary said. "He can't live like this. He's such an active boy now."

Rick nodded his head in agreement.

"We need both of your consents to take him off life support. I want you to go home and think about this."

"We don't have to think about it, that's what he would want." Mary started to cry. Rick was speechless.

"Are you sure, Ms. Ross?"

"Yes."

"How about you, Mr. Queen?" the doctor asked, wanting a verbal consent from both of them.

"Yes."

The doctor looked at Rick. "How about other family members?"

"Only my parents. I don't want to upset them." Rick wiped a tear from his right eye. "Anyway, they would probably agree to this. They don't want to see Abe in this condition. It would be too upsetting to them, especially at their age."

"Rick, we need to at least tell them what happened." Tears streamed from Mary's bloodshot eyes.

"Yeah, I know."

"Doctor, we'll do it." With a tissue that the doctor provided, Mary wiped the tears from her face.

"This'll take awhile. I need to check a few things. Make sure this is terminal. There's no need for both of you to stay. Nothing you can do for a few days. Ms. Ross, I need to change that bandage before you leave."

"Rick, why don't you go home?" Her tears continued to flow.

"No, I want to stay with you," Rick insisted.

"You look a mess." Mary went up to him and held him tight. "You're my hero!"

"Let me stay!"

"Go home. Clean up and get some things from home. I'll stay, anyway you've got a paper to put out next week, or tomorrow. My days are mixed up." She insisted.

"I really don't want to do that."

"It'll keep your mind off this," Mary said, fighting back the tears. "You need to rest, and it's impossible to get any sleep here. I need to be alone awhile. This is all my fault. This is my fault!"

Rick went over and hugged his distraught wife. "No, no it's not our fault, let's not blame ourselves!"

"Just go!"

"I'll be back tomorrow after I stop by the office. Molly's coming back next week. She can help."

"Doctor, do you have a chapel here?"

"Yes, Ms. Ross, it's on the top floor, I'll show it to you in a minute."

Rick left the hospital in a rental car about dusk Sunday evening. Twenty-four hours earlier, they had been a happy family sitting down to a good dinner, he thought, "Why did I upset the boy? Was all this worth it? How can I go on? How can Mary continue? This burden will be on us forever." He had to take the narrow road back to Stark County, and past the same spot where the tragedy had taken place; there was nothing left but an orange cone

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on the side of the road and a splintered pine stump. The Volvo was towed away to a junk yard. Rick thought about calling someone for help, like Sammie D Porter, Larry Butts, Mrs. Filburn, Oscar McCoy, the Sheriff or even Mr. Bartlett living in Riverport. Anyone of these would have taken him home in a heart beat, but he wanted to cry alone.

This was the first time in his life that he felt he had a connection with a place on the Earth. His only child would be buried here. How could he move away?

CHAPTER 48

This Sunday evening was quieter than most, half the adult males in the county being at the Bristol speedway for a stock car race. At the Sheriff's office in Mulberry only one dispatcher remained on duty, serving also as the jailer on the night shift. One other deputy on the road patrolled the county.

At 9:07 PM a telephone call was logged in at the jail. "I'm a friend of the Sheriff. He asked me to call him if I had some information about Rick Queen. Is the Sheriff there?"

The dispatcher recognized the voice of a man who had called several times before to speak to his boss. "No, he's probably at home. No, No, come to think about it, he went to the races this weekend. He should be back later tonight. Did you check his home?"

"I tried there. Left a message on his machine." The caller paused and talked slowly. "Tell him that someone is going to kill Mr. Queen. Tonight!"

"What! Who's comin here? Why?"

"It's complicated. Just warn Queen, right away! Protect him! There's nothing I can do."

After hanging up with the informant, the dispatcher wasted no time calling the deputy on the radio. "Where are you?"

"I'm checkin a domestic at a trailer park on Panther Branch way up at the head of the Balds."

"We have an emergency! Can't get the Sheriff. Hasn't come back from Bristol yet. Look! I just received a reliable tip that someone's goin to kill Rick Queen."

"That's the new reporter for the Guardian."

"Yeah. You know his youngin. Nice kid," the dispatcher said.

"Doesn't he live on Corn Still up from the Garfields? That's where the trailer sunk in the pond?"

"Yeah. Yeah."

"Why don't you try the telephone to warn him? I'm at the opposite end of the county. Can't get there for about forty-five minutes."

"Put on your lights! Get up there as soon as possible! Forget the domestic!"

"I'm on my way! Most of em amount to nothin anyways."

The dispatcher then tried Rick's unlisted phone. No answer. He dialed again and let it ring longer. Still nothing. He finally hung up.



Rick pulled the car up to the cabin. It was pitch black with no lights on anywhere. He didn't even have a flashlight. As he stumbled onto the porch, the phone rang. After fumbling to unlock the door, he dashed inside, hoping to hear

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from Mary at the hospital. "Maybe Abe's condition had changed!" The phone stopped just as he got to it. He immediately called the hospital in Riverport. After going through three different people and ten long minutes, he finally reached Mary, still beside Abe in ICU.

"Honey, did you just call?"

"No, I didn't. But the doctor came in, and I've just started talking to him. Hold on, he wants to speak to you. Hold on."

The young doctor who had talked to Rick before came on the line. "Mr. Queen. I'm sorry. There's nothing we can do for your son. I looked at the tests again and made a few calls."

"I understand," Rick murmured.

"But we have a match for the kidneys. I checked the National Registry. Will you consent?"

"I suppose."

"This boy will be one lucky young man. He'll get two good kidneys. Normally we only are able to do one. I know this is tough on you, but there's some good coming out of your loss."

This did not comfort Rick, but he asked, "Who is it?"

"Sylvester Garfield, Jr."

"What! That's Junior!"

Rick could hear Mary gasp in the background and say to the doctor. "That's our neighbor's boy!!!"

"Are you still there, Mary?"

She came back on the line. "Yes, Rick."

"A reason to stay here now."

"Yes, Rick. I love you." She cried but regained her composure. "I'll call Becky right now."



Allison slouched in her chair Sunday night watching the new situation comedy, 'Family Ties'. It was neither absorbing or trashy. Not up to par with the soaps, so she was half-asleep and listening to the scanner at the same time. Allison perked up when she heard 'Corn Still' and something about 'kill' on the short band radio. It was difficult to get the entire message; she rose, tiptoed around her completed quilt spread out on the living room floor, turned off the TV, called the Sheriff's Office and talked to the dispatcher. "I live on Corn Still, what's goin on?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Allison Garfield."

"You're Rick Queen's neighbor?"

"He lives up the road a piece. I heard somethin about a killin here on the scanner. Reckin I'm his neighbor."

"Warn him immediately! Someone is goin to kill him. Don't know the details. Tried callin him, but no one answered. Our deputy is on route, but it will be about forty-five minutes before he can get there. He's on the other end of the

county. I'm the only person here at the jail and can't come. Gotta baby sit the prisoners."

"I'll call my brother," Allison said.

"That's a good idea. Hurry!"

Just then, Allison heard a noisy vehicle pass her house. She looked out the kitchen window and saw a car heading up the road. She couldn't get a good look at it in the dark. Rushing back to the phone, she dialed her brother's number. "Becky, this is Allison. Gotta talk to Buddy. Now!"

"He's in the shower. We're gettin ready to turn in." Becky said in an exuberant manner.

"Have him call me back!" Allison, out of breath, paused. "It's an emergency!"



After talking to his wife at the hospital, Rick fell on his bed. He didn't have the energy to shower or even take his dirty clothes off. All lights in the cabin, even the ones in his bedroom, were left on to combat his loneliness. With no sleep or food in over thirty hours, he was exhausted, both mentally and physically. At some point tonight, he had to tell his parents in New Jersey about Abe. What was he to say? The boy was their only grandchild, and they would be devastated. No one expects to lose a child. How would he and Mary handle this tragedy? Life usually brings the loss of a parent, but not a child. What about the guilt they would carry for the rest of their lives? He would have to tell them about not returning to Jersey. They would be disappointed, but that would pale in comparison to the loss of Abe. He had no energy left, yet he could not sleep.

Rick heard a splintering crash out in the living room. "Who could that be? Maybe it's the Garfields trying to get revenge for the party," he thought wearily. "Possibly Mark Zone or another New York cop. Perhaps drug dealers. Surveyors. Even one of the Winde brothers." He had no protection. No weapon. He grabbed a broomstick and opened the bedroom door. The front door rested flat on the floor! Rick took a step back in amazement. Ben Jackson! "What in the world are you doing here?"

"Before I kill you, I'll tell you why." Jackson responded impersonally and without remorse, while advancing purposely into the center of the room.

"That's nice of you," Rick said, not knowing what to say, but he retreated back to the bedroom door. He was not scared and thought Jackson was bluffing.

Rick wanted to learn why Jackson had come, so he remained silent and allowed him to ramble. "I've slaved at the Mirror for ten years, doing all the grunt work. Acting as a lackey for Revis! I heard you're comin back to New York to get his job. They hired you. Well, the job's mine and not yours!"

"I thought the police were after me."

"My sister works for them and I've been using her van. She's outside, matter of fact, waiting for me. The designated driver, of sorts." A smile cracked Jackson's gritty face. "First, I tried to scare you away from Jersey after the trial. The druggies helped a bit too. That wasn't a good solution, was it?"

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Rick stood motionless and quiet, not wanting to excite the man, for he was beginning to be afraid. Jackson had caught him off guard at a vulnerable time. Rick could not even remember the conversation with his wife a few minutes ago. Of course, the intruder didn't know about Abe's death.

It did not take long for Jackson to answer his own question. "Well, this is the only way now. When I heard you were thinking about coming back, I came down here to the sticks to scout you. Almost blew it, nearly hit that kid down the road a couple weeks ago." This comment took Rick's thoughts back to the car accident and he didn't care about his safety. He couldn't think clearly.

"My sister stole Zone's service revolver from the police storage unit where she works."

"Is she a Perez?" Rick finally made the connection.

Jackson nodded. "Made it look like Mark Zone took it. He skipped on parole after his gun was discovered missing. I have it right here, and after I'm finished with you, I'll throw it in the pond down there. Eventually they'll find it. If not, I'll leave some clues. The hick Sheriff here will think this is revenge from the cops. Even got one of Zone's cigarettes butts. I'll leave that outside as a souvenir. Everyone will be looking for him, but he won't be found. Matter of fact, he'll never be found!"

Rick wanted to ask him what this meant, but did not want to further antagonize the deranged intruder.

"I'll get away with this, and that job will be mine!"

Rick felt compelled to rationalize. "Now wait, if you want this job, you can have it, Ben." The phone call with his wife came back to him. "We're not even moving back."

"You're bull-shitting me."

"Honest. You can call my wife. She's at the hospital. We had a bad accident."

"Yeah, right."

"Look at me!"

Jackson would not be persuaded by any reasonable arguments. "You're just a coward!" He drew nearer to Rick who could see an unnatural bulge at Jackson's waistline beneath his clothes.

Rick's thoughts returned to his safety and to Mary. It would be unbearable for her to lose both a husband and a son at the same time. He tried to reason with the trespasser. "You won't get away with this!" It had no effect. Jackson continued to glare at him just as he had when he first entered the cabin a few minutes ago.

Jackson drew out Mark Zone's pistol from underneath his shirt and pointed it in the general direction of Rick. It was tiny, compared to the giant man, but deadly. Jackson waved it back and forth several times. Though it was obvious that he was not too familiar with guns, Rick shook with fear.

They heard heavy footsteps on the porch. Jackson turned towards the sound. Rick stepped sideways and dove across the room to the floor beside the couch. Jackson turned back towards Rick and fired a shot that missed Rick and hit a plate on the kitchen wall.

As soon as the dish broke and before Rick could reach the relative safety of

the sofa, the picture window exploded, shattering glass all over the room. Rick lying flat on the floor near the sofa was still able to see, had no pain, and could move his hands. He slowly rose to his feet using the sofa not only as protection, but also as a support. All his limbs were still shaking. His ears hurt from the blast and he felt a small piece of glass on his forehead. He got to his knees unable to move further. Jackson's brains and blood were scattered over the room and his headless body lay in a gory heap in the center of the living room. Rick froze.

A man came through the front door with a shotgun. Buddy Garfield!

Before he could gather his thoughts a stocky woman appeared behind Buddy in the open doorway. She had a handgun pointed at his back, yelling, "What have you done? What have you done to my brother?"

Buddy turned and stared. The same voice he'd heard on the telephone after the trial!

"Drop that gun, you redneck!"

"Who are you?" Buddy rested the barrel of the gun on the floor, but held the wooden stock with his hand. "What's goin on?"

"You shut up!" The woman did not see Rick, peering from behind the couch near the kitchen. He had to protect Buddy. Rick remembered that Mary kept kitchen knives in the bottom drawer of the cabinet below the sink. It was within reach, but the woman intruder might see him.

Perez shouted, "You drop it! I told you!"

Rick waited until Buddy let the shotgun fall to the floor, making a clanging sound as it hit a lamp pole and bounced two times on the wooden floor. Rick opened the drawer and grasped the knife he had sharpened for the watermelon. Within seconds, he was back behind the couch with the knife in his left hand. Now Rick had to wait for the right moment.

When Buddy refused to lie on the floor as ordered, Perez cursed him. This had to be the time to act. Rick gathered his wits, rose and leaped on the couch lunging forward towards the heavy woman. She turned, facing Rick for an instant, and he stabbed her in the throat. Both tumbled to the floor. For a split second he and Perez embraced.

Buddy crawled forward grabbing the pistol from her limp hand.

Both men staggered to their feet and hugged each other like close kinfolks.

EPILOGUE

In a brief period of time, the lives of the people on Corn Still were changed forever, yet the land remained the same. Rick and Mary had lost their only son; the Garfield family had regained one of their clan. The two families were now joined eternally together as kinfolks.

The seasons marched on. The lives on Corn Still had a more focused purpose. Now the Garfield name through Junior and his next of kin would continue living on the land. Buddy and Becky had a new reason to spend the rest of their lives on Corn Still, knowing their heritage would be kept alive.

The Queens adopted Julie, but every time Rick went into the Courthouse at Mulberry, he stopped and paid his respects at the boys' model, permanently displayed in the lobby. All the other people entered in the contest withdrew their entries, even Dr. Porter and Allison. For the first time since the Civil War, Stark County pulled together. Although Mary had lost a part of her soul, she also had a vital interest in living near Junior. This place on the planet was an anchor that forever connected her to her only son, something that could not be taken away in the many storms of life. She took comfort in the words of the 18th century English poet, William Cowper that she remembered from her college days:

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.
Happiness depends, as Nature shows,
Less on exterior things than most suppose.

The Queens tore down the cabin and replaced it with a new home on the ridge with a commanding view of the mountains, farmland, and Rooster Trace Valley with the church in the distance. However they did not focus on this vista, rather they watched Junior as he got off the bus, was greeted by Angus and played with the dog near the pond. They could not see the boy's face at that distance; only a small red figure with a little white dot close by, but knew that Junior

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was content to have a part of their son with him. It took some time after the tragedy, but the kinfolds on Corn Still realized there was a higher purpose to all that had happened. They understood the Biblical passage, "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven." God's peace and joy finally returned to this beautiful valley.

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AUTHOR'S BIO

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