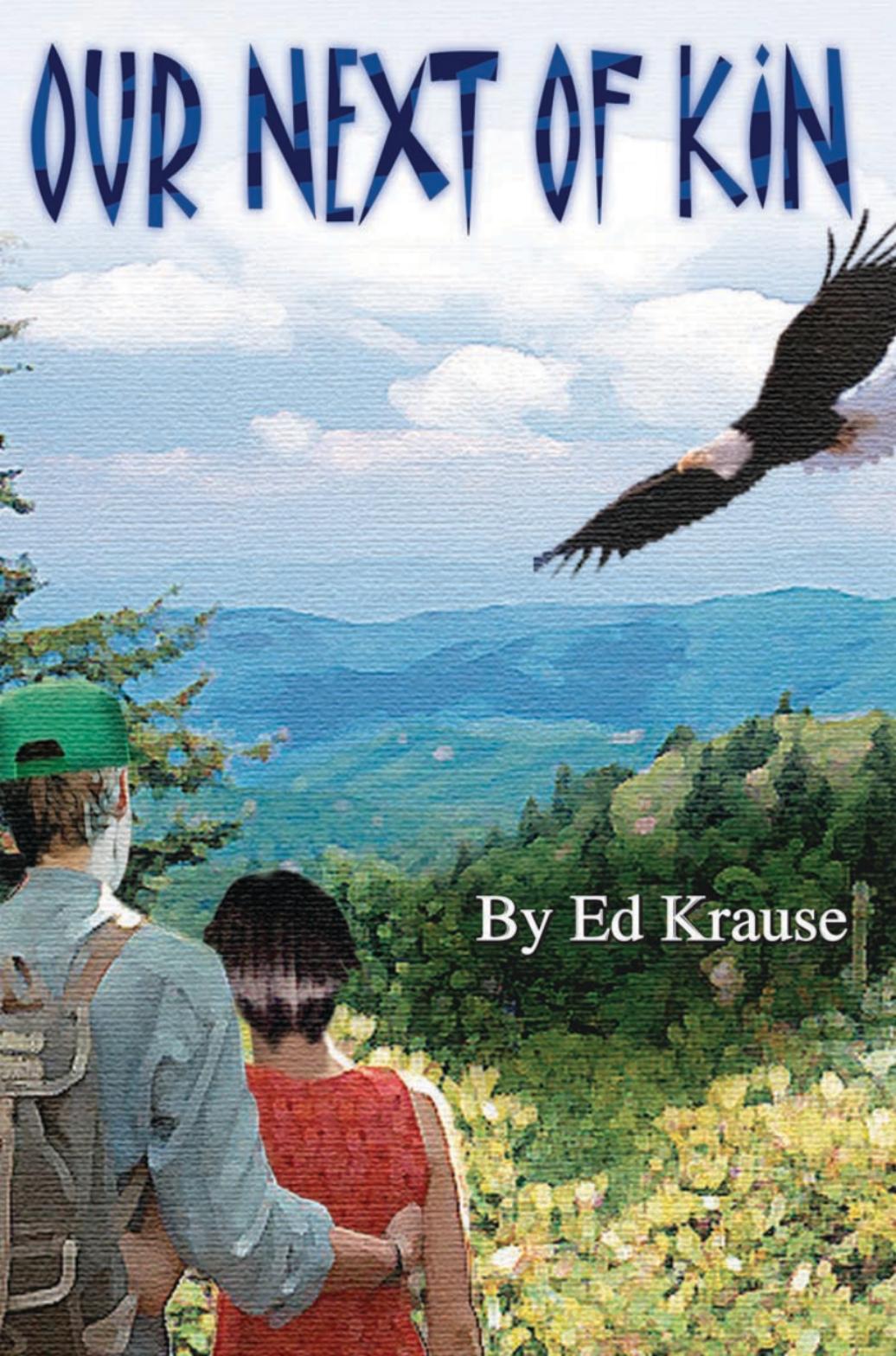


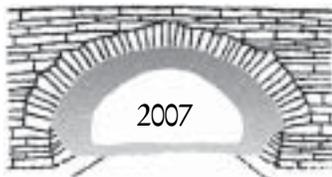
OUR NEXT OF KIN

The book cover features a textured, painterly illustration. At the top, the title 'OUR NEXT OF KIN' is written in a large, blue, stylized font with a slight shadow. Below the title, a bald eagle is shown in flight, its wings spread wide, flying from the right side of the frame towards the center. The background is a vast, scenic landscape of rolling green mountains and valleys under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. In the lower-left foreground, two people are seen from behind, looking out over the landscape. The person on the left is wearing a green baseball cap, a light blue long-sleeved shirt, and a brown backpack. The person on the right is wearing a red sleeveless top. The overall style is reminiscent of a fine-art print or a textured book cover.

By Ed Krause

Our Next of Kin

Ed Krause



Parkway Publishers, Inc.
Boone, North Carolina

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2007

Published by Parkway Publishers, Inc.

Box 3678

Boone, North Carolina

www.parkwaypublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Krause, Ed, 1947-

Our next of kin / by Ed Krause.

p. cm.

Summary: "Our Next of Kin is a sequel to Our Kinfolks. Junior, now twenty-four-years old, moved back to his native Stark County upon the death of his Native American high school friend, a lover and protector of birds. Junior wants to figure out what is going on in the Indian Reservation"—Provided by the publisher.

ISBN 978-1-933251-45-5

1. Mountain life—Fiction. 2. Indian reservations—Fiction. 3. Native Americans—Fiction. 4. Appalachian Region, Southern—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3611.R3766O97 2007

813'.6—dc22

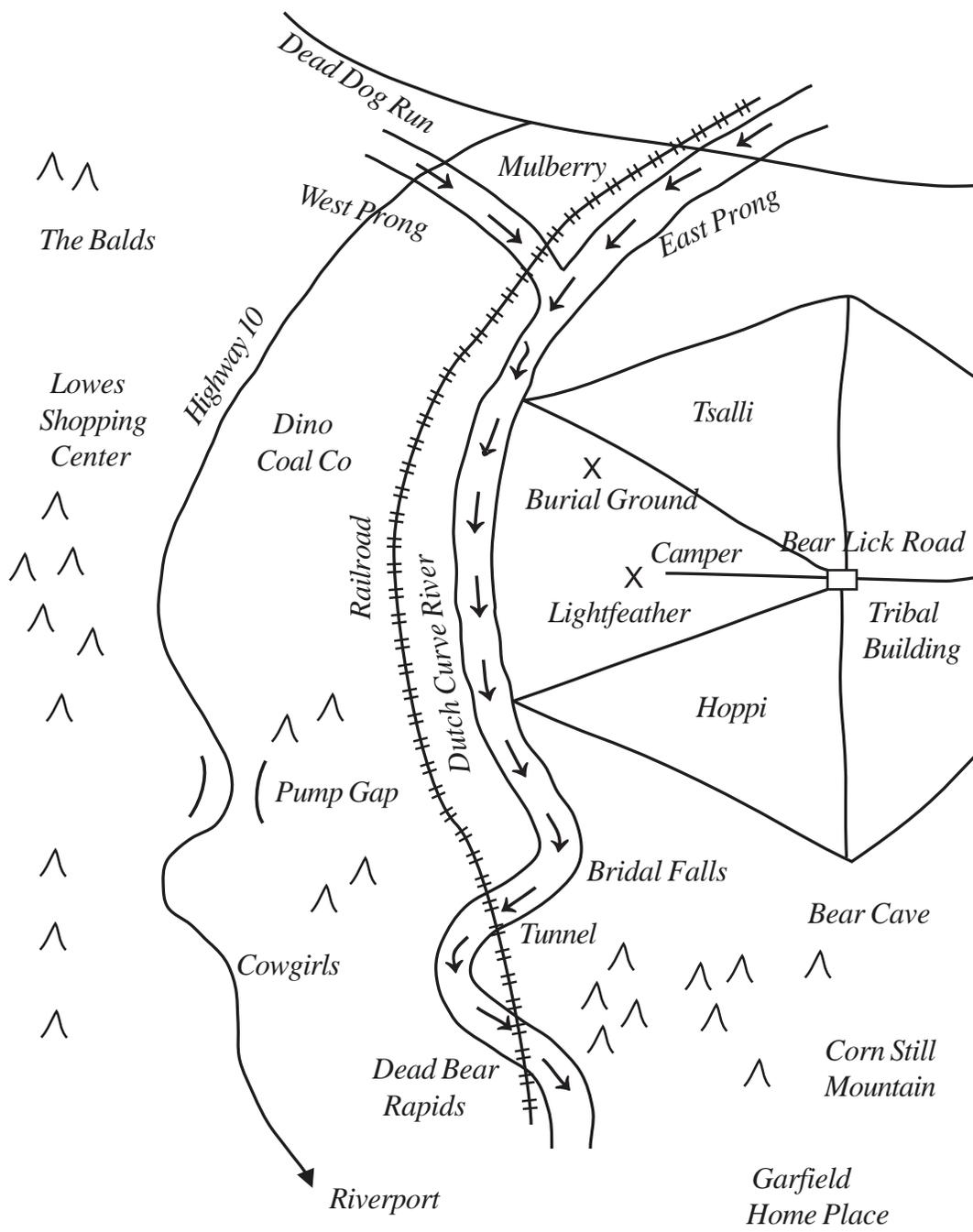
2007009479

Editor/Book Designer: Julie Shissler
Cover Design: Jeff Duckworth

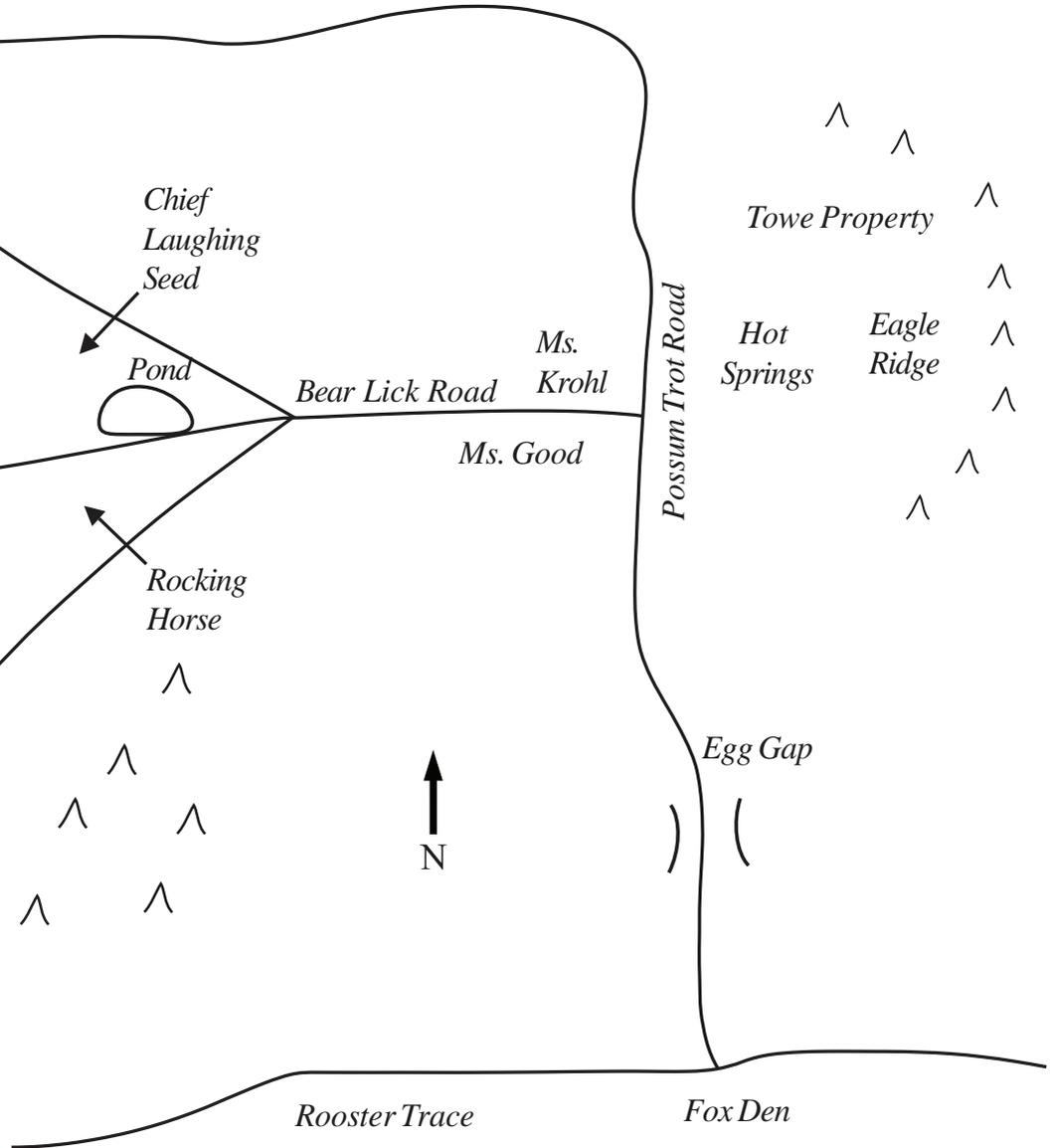
This is a work of fiction.

Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Map of the Bear Lick



Indian Reservation and Surroundings



Acknowledgements

As in the first book, many people helped me edit, gave me much needed encouragement and insightful suggestions: my wife who put up both with my obsession and lawyer-like writing; my stepdaughter, Jennifer DeHart who has a vast knowledge of animals; a fellow student in a writing class, Joanne Johnston of Asheville NC, formerly of Marion; Carolyn Hensley, also of Marion; long time clients, Jeff and Kathy Boyea of Leicester, N.C., Rao Aluri, who gave me the chance to get published, and Jeff Duckworth of Marion, who did the maps and covers.

I have plans for a third book in this Our Kin series, *Our Kindred Spirits*. It will deal with Hispanic folks, a political campaign in a rural county and our primary educational system in the United States. Hopefully, this will be completed before I forget all of my life experiences. Junior and his family live with me and it is important to keep them alive. They still have great things to do. Many readers of *Our Kinfolks* enjoy my characters and want to see them mature in Stark County. To make people laugh has been the most rewarding thing I have accomplished.

Chapter 1

Last night's ice storm not only toppled trees, caused several traffic accidents and downed power lines but also destroyed one of Stark County's few known bald eagle's nests. All of these homes were located in or around the Bear Lick Indian Reservation. In the mid 1990's, these birds, national symbols of freedom and liberty, made a comeback from near extinction; however there was always a constant battle between their habitat and man's greed.

White pines and oaks that once towered three stories high lay scattered like toothpicks over a wire fence that bordered the burial ground. The sacred place, a perfect hundred foot square, sat on a grassy knoll surrounded by fields and cow pastures on three sides. It commanded a clear view up the Bear Lick Valley to Eagle's Ridge to the east, Corn Still Mountain to the south, and other distant Southern Appalachians to the north. A stiff breeze brought a whiff of woodsmoke from dwellings on the Reservation. Two young men worked on the western margin of the Indian cemetery at the edge of the woods.

Junior Garfield laid his chain saw on the frozen ground and his gloves beside it. "Lightfeather, help me get this out of the way."

"Did you find it?" the Native American asked.

With a bare hand, Junior lifted a branch the length of a fishing pole and tossed it to the side. "Think so."

"Great!" Lightfeather shouted.

"Never seen one up close." Although pleased about finding it, Junior's face remained blank showing no outward expression of joy.

In contrast, his friend was ecstatic about the treasure trove and warned, "Don't touch it!" Lightfeather limped toward a downed upper bough of an oak stuck under a pine trunk half as long as a telephone pole but just as thick. With his clubfoot anchored behind a stone, he helped Junior yank it away. A large portion of an eagle's nest appeared in full view, the size of a rolled up sleeping bag. Removing both wool mittens, Lightfeather picked it up like a newborn baby and cradled it in his arms. "Wow." His expression changed to sadness.

Junior saw tears running down Lightfeather's tan face. This bald eagle would not have living quarters in the spring. Junior asked, "Could we put it back in another tree somewhere?"

The Native American rested the nest on a patch of brown grass bristled with ice, away from the broken limbs. "It wouldn't work. Eagles go back to the very same spot." Lightfeather gathered some of the smaller twigs that had broken off the main frame of the home.

“I’ve been watching this couple for close to five years. Anyway, their nest is torn apart. They’ll have to make a new place close by.”

Impressed with his expertise, Junior wanted to know more, “Do they have a family of younguns?”

“Yeah, but the kids are gone.” The Indian began to place all the parts together like a jigsaw puzzle. “Just the parents come back to have more babies.”

“How many do they have?”

“About three or four. Usually only two survive.” Lightfeather blew on his cupped hands. “Last summer I found a baby on the ground. I took it down to my place and tried to feed it.”

Junior felt the inside of the nest with hands sticky from pine tar. “How long did that one live?”

“Only a few days. I kept him in the bedroom with me.” The Indian paused. “But I got attached to the little critter. Its name was Cirrus.”

“Like a high cloud?”

“Yeah. He’s buried up here.” Lightfeather pointed to a place reserved for his animal friends. “I have better luck with owls.” He wiped his eyes with his mittens and laid them down on the center of a fresh pine stump, the tar oozing down the bark.

“Don’t know how you sleep at night with all the hootin and hollerin.” Junior tried both to get his fingers unstuck from the sticky substance and to divert Lightfeather’s depression from his loss of the eaglet.

“I get used to the owls.”

“How many do you have?”

“I probably have too many. But it varies. They come and go. I have about twenty-five now.”

“Wow. How do all of them treat you?”

“After I fix em up, they like me.”

“How long do they stay with you?” Junior asked.

“Depends. Some have to be released in the wild. Others stay with me all the time if they can’t fly too good.”

“Can you show me how to fix em up?”

“That takes years, but I’ll show you the basics sometime over your Christmas.”

“If I have time.” Junior looked pleased. “I bet you get attached to them.”

“Matter of fact, they keep me company way out here.”

Lightfeather stared blankly into space. “If anything happens to me, could you take care of them for me?”

“Why? What’s goin to happen?”

“You never know around here.”

Junior felt that he didn’t want to get involved in Reservation affairs, so he did not follow up Lightfeather’s intriguing comments. Junior had enough of his own problems and challenges to deal with in the next few months.

The Indian focused on a black airplane that droned over Corn Still Mountain. “That’s been flying low for several days.”

Junior gave the aircraft a cursory look into the midday sun and lowered his head to the horizon. A white glaze topped the dull brown landscape in the distance. On the closer hills, faded green blotches of hemlock and pine stands could be distinguished. Several outcropping of rocks covered with icicles shined in the drab background.

Bittersweet memories of the tree platform on the pinnacle of the vista returned. Ten years ago from that vantage point, Junior looked in this direction at this exact spot for eagles with his friend, Abe Queen. Then, they were both fourteen year-old freshmen at Stark County High School. Now Junior’s lanky face reflected a sense of sadness for his deceased boyhood pal.

“You still miss him?”

No response other than a nod with only the trees rustling in the wind and the ice crashing from the upper limbs of the pine trees.

Lightfeather broke his companion’s silence. “Look, I appreciate your friendship when my folks died. I’m the only one left in the tribe. Don’t have any next of kin.” The winter sun went behind a cloud bank and the Indian buttoned his parka. “I’m going to pass the ring to you in my will. I need you to draw one up for me.”

“What ring?” A puzzled look came over Junior’s face.

“Well, whoever has the ring gets to vote at the tribal council. There’s one catch.” Lightfeather paused. “They gotta live on the tribal land.”

“Why’s that?” Junior asked as he bent down and rolled a freshly cut trunk away from the fence.

“Because you need to have a spirit with the land and the people here. Just like with your friend that died in the auto accident.”

“He’s buried at my church at Fox Den. That’s where all our kinfolks are.” Junior continued to be perplexed, but did not want to ask more personal questions or engage in a conversation that reminded him of his childhood memories. On one hand, he wanted to commiserate with his friend but needed to move on with his life in a different place and culture. “Let’s finish the job. I’ve gotta get back to Corn Still.”

“Why?”

“Got to paint the downstairs of my house before I leave.” The twenty-four year old native of Stark County attended law school in Washington D. C. and spent his Christmas holiday helping both his Indian friend on the Reservation and his father on the Garfield home place.

They returned to the task at hand of cutting and removing trees from the western border of the burial ground. Within an hour, a clear path existed on this line and the pair turned to the fence repair.

With heavy-duty pliers, Lightfeather cut a single strand of barbed wire. “When are you goin back up north?”

“Few days after Christmas. Why?”

“Can I borrow your truck a bit to haul some stuff?”

“Sure,” Junior said without hesitation.

“I wish I could afford a pick-up like yours.”

“Anytime I’m round here, you can use it. But watch out for the door on the driver’s side.” Junior picked up a hammer from a tool box.

“Why’s that?”

“It doesn’t close right. Make sure you use the seatbelt. One time when I was goin around a curve down Pump Gap, it swung open.”

“Okay. I may need a good lawyer then.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll have you sign something.” Junior did not tell Lightfeather that release of liability forms were worthless and unenforceable.

As Lightfeather held a top wire to a post ready for Junior to nail, they heard a splintering thump as if a piece of two by four lumber cracked in half. The Indian let go of the wire and ducked. The metal recoiled like the back blast of a shotgun, almost hitting Junior in the face. An arrow with orange markings at the end of the shaft was stuck into the base of a pine tree ten feet away. Five seconds later another similar missile followed, its metal tip hitting the side of a wooden tool shed not far away. Lightfeather peered into the forest. “Someone’s shootin at us.”

Junior stood from a kneeling position. “Let’s get out of here.”

They saw a third arrow skimming the surface of the grass in the cemetery. Lightfeather yelled, “Follow me,” and retrieved his walking stick. He started to hobble down the path towards his trailer to the south.

“You forgot the nest.” Raising his head, Junior glanced around for more projectiles and offered, “Don’t worry, I’ll get it.”

“Thanks.” The Indian continued to limp down the trail through an open field as fast as his clubfoot could take him. Junior stayed close even though he could have run down faster and left him far behind exposed on the hill. A hundred yards from the burial site, the pasture gave way to the protection of a clump of oaks. When he reached the first tree, Lightfeather leaned behind it. “We’ll be safe here.”

“What’s going on?” Junior followed him to the trunk.

“Don’t know.”

“What should we do now?”

“Let’s stay in this area for awhile. We’ll be all right here.”

Although Junior felt more at ease, he still questioned his friend, “Who would be doing this?”

“Don’t know. First time this has happened.”

“Really? I thought Indians shot arrows all the time.”

“That’s just in the movies or on television,” Lightfeather said, “The arrows are probably made in China.”

“By Chinese Indians?” Junior joked.

“I’ll go up there tomorrow and check it out.”

“But are we safe here?” Junior kept his body behind the same tree as his friend.

“Just follow me a bit.” Both men crouched down while walking down the path. In the center of the island of trees, a clearing the size of a bedroom appeared. It was like a swimming pool on a cruise ship. Lightfeather deviated a few feet from the trail. “Look out for the rope.” Upon close inspection, a single coil of cord lay on the forest floor masked by wet leaves. One end of the rope ran free to the backside of an oak and disappeared behind the main trunk.

“What’s that for?” Junior asked, tiptoeing around the hidden danger.

“It’s part of a booby trap. I set it up so no one’ll mess with the burial ground. Also the eagles up there. Some of the other tribes would like to get their hands on one to stuff it. Recently some strange things have been goin on here.”

“Like the arrows?”

“Yeah, but not as bad. Stuff like sugar in my chain saw. Logs blocking the road. Clogging my water. But if anyone comes up here and trips the rope, they’ll find em upside down and swinging from their feet by that tree there.” Lightfeather went over to the nearby oak and checked the mechanism by feeling a special knot with his bare fingers. Then he yanked on it with all his weight.

“Why are you doing that?”

“The tension has to be just right.” Lightfeather rubbed his exposed hands. “I left my mittens up there.”

“I’ll run up and get em for you.” Junior volunteered.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be up there tomorrow.”

“Will you be okay then?”

“I got something right here.” Lightfeather grabbed a high power rifle hidden from behind the tree that the rope was tied to.

Now assured by the Indian’s calm voice, the elaborate booby trap and the weapon, Junior felt safe, “You like to go up there?”

“My favorite spot to be with the spirits.” Lightfeather bowed his head for a moment. “It’s a good place to view the eagles up in the sky. They’re like acrobats putting on a good show. Those birds love to stay near the river and pond.”

“I hope they come back this spring.”

The Indian nodded, “They like the tall oaks up there to make their nests.”

“Are there other places to see them, closer to Corn Still?” Junior asked.

“Yeah. Right where Bear Lick turns off Possum Trot. It’s where we parked to go up to the hot springs last summer.”

“That’s by the old Towe place.”

“Yeah but this is the best place. Close to home. If you live here, you get to know the Kawhawee spirit.”

“How do you pronounce that?”

“Kay. How. We.”

“Thanks. But what does it mean?”

“God of the earth. He watches over the land. We need to treat Him right. If we don’t Kawhawee’ll get mad and punish us. See the earth is like a little canoe on the great sea. We can’t get off and we’re all stuck together. Whether we like it or not. We’ve got to take care of our little life boat.”

This made Junior think. “That’s not too different from my religion. My preacher at Fox Den says that we are stewards of the earth. We don’t own the land, water and air; just use it for awhile. It’s like an *inter vivos* trust.”

“What’s that big attorney word?” the Native American asked.

“It’s a trust made up by a living person.”

“I should hope so.” Lightfeather cracked a smile. “Not many dead people can make em up.”

“Sorry I’ve been in law school too long.” Embarrassed, Junior had to explain. “This type of trust is in existence while that person is alive as opposed to a testamentary trust where it is set up in a will and

is effective only at death. I learned that in my first year estates class. But in this case, God set it up and we are the trustees. We have to account to Him for what we have done with it at the end of our lives.”

“We ain’t that much different then.”

“Next time I am here, I’d like to come up and see those eagles. Maybe get to know your God.”

“Sure, anytime. I’ll take you up this way.”

For the first time in the clearing, Junior looked confused.

“This is not the way we came up.”

Lightfeather pointed up to the burial ground. “I took you up the back way. No one knows about the way we came from the river.

“Even the rest of the tribes?”

“Cept you and me now. Hoppi knows. Forgot about my good neighbor.” The Indian put his arm around him like a blood brother.

“There’s another way from here no one knows.”

“Where does that go?”

“It follows the river to town.”

“Mulberry?” Junior was surprised as he looked at the rope apparatus.

“Yeah. I know ever inch of this place.” Lightfeather turned, his facial muscles tight and spoke with deliberation. “Don’t want to see it ever changed.” They relaxed when Junior nodded in agreement.

“I’m glad we didn’t go up this way.”

“Why?”

“I’d be still upside down.” Junior sighed with great relief.

“I’d let you down after awhile on one condition.” Lightfeather promised with a twinkle in his eyes replacing tears.

“What’s that?”

“Only if you give me the keys to your pick-up.”

Chapter 2

The Bear Lick Reservation encompassed five hundred acres shaped like a pentagon, most of it in open pasture. The Dutch Curve River formed the western boundary laying almost in a due north-south bearing; the other four sides for the most part bordered U. S. Forest Service lands, although private property touched the extreme eastern portion.

The only admittance to the outside world was a gravel road starting at Possum Trot, a paved State Highway. Then it ran west following Bear Lick Creek down a gentle valley through non-government lands for a mile to the easternmost point of the Reservation. From this spot, the private road continued in the same direction, following the creek and dissecting the Indian land north and south almost down the middle. Water flowed to the west and emptied into the Dutch Curve River. However, the road did not go all the way to the river; it stopped at Lightfeather's residence. Only the original footpath used for centuries by the Native Americans, remained from this point to the main waterway.

The Reservation was divided into five parts, one apiece for the each of the tribes. Each pie-shaped section met in the center of the pentagon where a one-room block building served as the tribal center. Lightfeather's western land was the most valuable for several reasons. First, it was the only portion to have river access for hunting and fishing; second, although the topography of the Reservation was not steep in any place, most of the rich bottomland lay in this region through the lower reaches of Bear Lick Creek next to the river. Its chief disadvantage was its remoteness with a long unpaved access road through all of the other people's property. The tribe of Hoppi bordered to the south of the road and Tsalli's to the north, both of these properties contiguous with Lightfeather's. The eastern two "pies" were owned by Chief Laughing Seed on the north and by Rocking Horse on the south.

In the early 1700's the entire Bear Lick watershed, comprising twice the present day Reservation, served as home for close to a thousand Native Americans. They came from at least a dozen different tribes, all displaced by English civilization on the east coast of the Colonies. Legend has it that the first person born of English descent on American soil, Virginia Dare, was kidnapped and brought to these lands. Five years after the Civil War, as revenge for supporting the Confederacy, Yankee carpetbaggers forced out again all but five tribes and reduced the Indian land to the lower western valley in its present

location. Today, only twenty people eked out a living farming here, growing several kinds of substances, some lawful and others not.

Still in the clearing surrounded by four-story oaks, Junior and Lightfeather heard a vehicle's engine start up in the distance down the path. Then the noise faded up the valley to the east. The constant humming of the airplane circling overhead replaced this sound. Using the gun as a support, the Indian stood up from his resting position on a fallen log and shuffled a few yards to the edge of the trees and open field. He gazed to the south and to his residence. Lightfeather used a gentle voice, indicating that the danger has passed. "Let's go now."

"You forgot the nest. I'll carry that down for you." Junior backtracked a few steps and picked the ball of twigs off the ground.

Coming from the east, soon both men approached an open field on both sides of Bear Lick road and creek. Lightfeather's rusted jeep stood in front of his oversized camper, the place he called home. To one side of the vehicle and next to the road, lay a partially open wooden shed almost the same size as the main dwelling. On the solid front of the outbuilding was a door with a sign above it, which read 'OWL HOUSE'. A westerly wind brought a putrid smell from the structure. Chicken wire skirted this structure at waist level to the roof on the other three sides. Wooden shutters, as big as picture windows, hung down to six inches from the ground attached horizontally at the mid section. In the extreme cold, these flaps could be raised shut so the open area would be covered to provide protection to the small creatures. A slanted shingled roof enclosed the building. The wood trim, sides, shutters and door shone with a fresh coat of forest green paint. Yellow emblems of owls, eagles, bears, coyotes and deer, all indigenous to the area, were emblazoned on the front of the shed on both sides of the entrance.

Junior laid the nest on top of a bale of straw in front of the shed and removed his red wool hunting jacket. He headed for his truck parked behind the bird's house and beside a wooden privy.

As Lightfeather stepped up on the first concrete block to his front door, he motioned Junior inside. "Got some time for a hot chocolate before you leave?"

Junior could not reject this subtle cry for companionship. He wished he could spend the afternoon on Corn Still with his dog, Angus, and start the preparations for painting his parents' house. However, it would be months, maybe years, before he would return if he did not have the time over Easter. "Sure."

"Great."

Junior joked, "But I need a stiff drink after being hunted down with a bow and arrow."

“Got a beer for you.”

“That’ll work.” Junior walked toward his Indian friend.

On the landing, Lightfeather rested the rifle on a piece of torn siding beside the flimsy aluminum door and muttered. “I left my walking stick up there.” He then fumbled with a key and continued to mumble. “I don’t know why I even lock this place.” The nocturnal birds lived in luxury compared to the accommodations of their keeper.

Just as the door swung open, the spitting sound of an airplane engine grew louder and then stopped. An eerie silence pierced the cold air. Within seconds, an explosion rocked the ground and black smoke rose above the woods to the southeast across the creek.

Lightfeather pointed, his arm shaking. “It crashed on Hoppi’s place.”

“We need to go now,” Junior blurted and then thought about this a few seconds. “Is it okay to go there?”

“We’re friends, not like the other tribes.” The Indian limped as fast as he could to his vehicle. “You go across the field. It’ll be faster.”

“Sure?”

“I’ll take my jeep.” Lightfeather used the side mirror as a crutch to enter the vehicle and gazed around searching for the keys to start it.

Junior did not wait, but jumped the creek and made a dash across the pasture leaping over fresh piles of cow manure.

Just before he reached the tree line, Junior smelled the petroleum based smoke, unlike the friendly aroma of firewood. As Junior took giant strides through the bare undergrowth, he saw a ball of fire swirling upward into the upper branches of the pines. The damp boughs crackled all around him as he approached the inferno.

On the other side of the pile of twisted red metal, he saw three illuminated male Native American faces, all unaware of his presence. Forced to walk around a charred circle in the woods, he observed evidence of an even bigger explosion after impact. Upon coming closer, he saw that the trio was standing a few feet away from the tail section, the largest intact piece of the plane. With his hunting boots, Junior crunched on some downed limbs on the ground to announce his arrival. When the group turned he asked, “Anybody survive?”

The three men lowered their heads.

Junior tried to ask a more sensible question, “What happened?”

One of the younger men muttered, “Plane crashed.”

The oldest and the best dressed of the group asked. “Who are you?” The Indian put his hands on his hips as if asking what Junior was doing on his land.

“I’m Lightfeather’s friend.” Junior felt out of place on the property of this group of Native Americans whom he had never seen before. Yet, they lived less than one mile as the crow flies from his Garfield family property line on the Corn Still Ridge. His home place lay on a cove on the other side of the mountain. To reach it by road from here, one would need to travel up Bear Lick Road, turn right up on Possum Trot, formally known as Chicken Creek, go over Egg Gap, down Possum Trot, turn right at the Fox Den community and go up Rooster Trace, a total of ten miles over curvy roads. Until he visited Lightfeather in his high school years and for most white people in Stark County, this place was like the far side of the moon. Although he went to his friend’s trailer, he never ventured to other parts of the Reservation and stayed close to Lightfeather at all times.

Before he had a chance to give his name, the same man volunteered, “It’s a real old plane. Probably engine failure. That type of plane is known for problems with fuel filters clogging.”

“What should we do?” Junior asked.

“Nothing. I’ll call the Sheriff’s Department back at the house so they don’t send out a rescue plane. Anyway, the fire has to burn itself out before they can take a look at it. That metal will stay hot all night.”

“Glad we had a storm last night.” Junior said as he removed his John Deere cap and wiped the sweat off his brow. He now felt more comfortable with the Indians.

“We had a dry fall.”

“Haven’t been around.”

“A few weeks ago and this whole place would be burning.”

The Native American introduced himself. “I’m Hoppi.”

One of the younger men stuttered, “You You Bud Buddy’s boy?”

When he spoke, Junior smelled alcohol, strong enough that his breath might ignite from one of the sparks from the fire. As a result of this possibility, Junior moved back a step from the circle they formed. “Yeah.”

Hoppi extended a hand. “I haven’t seen your father in years. How’s he doin since your mother died?” The white haired Indian paused. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. Ever since Ma got ate up with cancer when I was in college, he ain’t been doin too good. He’s gained a lot of weight. Got high blood pressure.”

“Is he still living on Corn Still?”

“Yeah. But it’s tough without Ma. My two aunts help him out some, but Allison can’t get around too well.” Junior did not want to talk about this, but had to add, “The Queens help out a lot.”

“Who are they?” Hoppi asked.

“They are my godparents. Rick Queen runs the *Guardian*.”

“The what?”

“The daily newspaper.”

“Don’t read the paper. Don’t really care about what goes on in town.”

Junior looked around his property. “You have a nice place here.”

“Do you still live on Corn Still over yonder?”

“No.” In truth, Junior planned to take a job in DC with a law firm upon graduation this summer. Among other things, it was too painful to return to the home place without his mother. He was torn between helping his father and pursuing his own goals. His Paw was not in the best of health and most of his other family gave him much grief about deserting him.

The flames on the wreckage subsided and Junior approached as close as the heat would allow, while keeping a safe distance from the man with the potent breath. Junior’s eyes bulged. On the tail section he saw almost the same identification markings as the one he had seen ten years ago, not far from here. Only one number was different. He always remembered that day, the time his trusted hunting dog died from a bear attack. There had to be a connection between the two planes.

“This is my boy Frank.” Hoppi put his arms around one of the young man who had not spoken yet and then, pointed disapprovingly at the other young man, “This is Rocking Horse’s boy.”

Junior shook all of their hands and asked Frank. “Didn’t you graduate from Stark High School when I was a freshman?” Junior recognized both young men, but did not want to engage in conversation with the other person who appeared to be drunk.

“Wasn’t that years ago when that kid from up North got killed?” Frank asked as he threw a rock at the smoldering plane.

Hoppi scolded him, “Don’t do that. You should know better.”

“Why?”

“Cause they might have to investigate that.”

Frank did not argue or respond to his father, but turned to Junior. “What about that kid?”

Junior did not want to get in the middle of a family fight. “Yeah. He was my best friend.”

“Didn’t he donate one of his organs to you?”

Junior could smell alcohol on Frank too, although not as strong as on the other young man. “Well sort of. I had real bad kidneys. He got killed in a car crash and I have his. I got em just in time. The doctor said I would have died in a month if I didn’t. I think of Abe every day of my life.”

The Rocking Horse boy chuckled. “I remember now. Tha-that was the weird kid with ga-glasses. Played with those t-toys.”

Junior’s blood boiled, not from the fire but from the dart-like comments that pierced his heart. Despite these wounds, he remained silent. He did not want to do anything to provoke a fight with an Indian on his own turf, although his tribe did not technically own the land they stood on. Frank seemed to be friendly and Hoppi especially congenial, but they would stick up for their neighbor in a clash with a white man. Junior wanted to leave the Reservation, his home on Corn Still, and Stark County: too many painful memories here. He needed to be in a different place, culture and with diverse people. If he had stayed here after graduation from high school, he might have fallen into the same rut as these two young men had well as many of his family and friends that stayed. He was fortunate to have a taste of the outside world. Abe exposed him to a fresh way of thinking and gave him a new life in more ways than one.

The group heard a vehicle on a gravel road and then a shuffling sound through the woods. Junior was relieved to find Lightfeather approaching the wreckage. “Oh, my word.”

“No one’s alive.” Junior said.

“Terrible.” Lightfeather paused to catch his breath. “Sorry I was late.” Another delay for more oxygen. “I couldn’t find my keys.”

Junior looked toward Lightfeather and saw his own truck through the woods. “Glad I left mine in the ignition.”

“Hope you didn’t mind.”

“That’s fine.”

“Yours runs a lot better than my beat up thing. Let’s just trade.” Lightfeather seriously suggested.

Laughing at that statement, Junior felt more secure with his friend there. “I better not leave the keys in there when I visit you the next time.”

“I may be gone with it.”

Junior surveyed the area of the crash site in detail. Yellow plastic objects the size of a half dollar lay scattered haphazardly around on the forest floor. He picked one up, but couldn’t tell what it was. “What in the heck is this?”

Ed Krause

Hoppi grabbed another close by and examined it. “It’s a casino chip.”

Junior looked at the smoldering rubble. “I guess they weren’t too lucky.”

Chapter 3

Two weeks before Easter at his Arlington Virginia apartment, Junior received an urgent call from Lightfeather. Junior was at the other end of the Commonwealth from the Mountain Empire, the extreme southwestern part. Lightfeather needed to talk in person and in private. Junior told him he would make every effort to travel back home from the Washington DC area during the spring break from his classes.

Junior made good on his promise and returned on Good Friday to Stark County. The next morning he opened the wooden door of the Chuck Wagon for his Aunt Allison. They entered the restaurant, a landmark and institution in the town of Mulberry. Friendships, relationships and marriages began and were nurtured here. According to reliable rumors, even a child or two was conceived in its restrooms, although it remains unclear in which of the genders this was accomplished.

Two wooden wagon wheels were propped up on each end of the outside front of the eating establishment. No commercial signage of any form existed on the exterior; none was needed because everyone knew this was the best and only place to get a good meal in Stark County.

Once inside, he went around Aunt Allison with her walker and into the waiting area. He took hold of the top horizontal bar of the cage-like device. He then pulled it up and over the threshold to assist her. With Junior still in front, Aunt Allison inched forward on the drab tile floor. The procession looked like a young stud horse pulling a plow with an old time farmer in overalls bent over in the rear.

“I can get along without you,” Allison bellowed as she pulled the walker from Junior’s grasp. He was surprised at the strength in her hands when she showed her independence.

Junior turned his attention to the young girl behind the cash register making change for a customer. The curly metal-sided machine stood on top of a thick glass that had a crack running through the center. He always remembered that fracture; it was made as a result of a fight he witnessed as a boy of seven; then, a woman barged in to pound a young waitress to death for having an affair with her husband. The face of the waitress changed but it was the printed numbers on the all-mechanical machine that popped up showing the price of a meal that stayed the same.

All the women serving food and taking orders were attractive girls in their late teens. Although this was the first time Junior had

breakfast here in over three years, that being with his father, nothing much changed in the packed greasy spoon. Saturday mornings at the Wagon were like church on Sundays, in that almost everyone sat in the same place and complained about the same things about the world going to pot and sin. But here they bitched about their wives or about the weather. They left satisfied in their souls and stomachs but always came back for more the next week.

Allison plodded along to the rear of the restaurant unassisted except for the walker. While focusing her eyes straight ahead, she asked, "You find your friend?"

"Where are you going?"

"Don't you worry; I'll join up with you later." She continued but rested after taking each step.

Junior noticed one thing different in the dining area; a steady high pitched pinging sound, one per second, emitted from a video poker machine set up on the back wall. A line of three men waited in front of it. The person playing was a prominent figure in Stark County, the Honorable Judge Joseph J. Pickens. Junior turned in the opposite direction and scanned the tables for Lightfeather. The back of his braided hair stuck up behind a booth near the kitchen door. Junior took long strides down the aisle to him. "Sorry I'm late. I had to pick up my aunt."

"She's here?" Lightfeather asked, putting down a glass of ice water.

"Yes."

"Really. I need to talk."

"We still have time. She'll gossip down there more than anything else," Junior pointed towards the cashier. "Sorry I had to take her."

"I thought she could drive herself."

Junior hopped in the booth on the opposite side of Lightfeather so he could both face his friend and keep an eye out for Aunt Allison, still way beyond the cash register. "Not since last Thanksgiving when she fell and broke her hip. After breakfast I gotta take her to the beauty shop." Junior paused, "She really needs to be in a nursing home."

"You know I did the same thing with my father, taking him places."

"It's a tough choice for families."

"He refused to go to those nursing things." Lightfeather showed more emotion. "He didn't want to leave the land. He didn't want the Chief to take his land."

Inattentive to his friend for the moment and preoccupied with his own family, Junior said, “Well, Aunt Allison refuses to go.”

“Thanks for coming. I need” Before Lightfeather could explain why he asked Junior to meet him this morning, a small perky waitress appeared in front of the table. It was Julie, Rick and Mary Queen’s adopted daughter. First, she bear-hugged Junior, and then Lightfeather.

“Turn him loose, Julie.” Junior directed.

She complied. “I’m a little kin to Lightfeather.”

The Indian perked up. “Really? How?”

“Never mind.”

Lightfeather sighed and pulled back from her a few inches. “I better watch out then,”

“Why?”

Junior felt both left out of the conversation and a growl in his stomach. “Do you have anything to eat in this place?”

“What can I get you handsome boys?” She giggled as she wrangled out a pad of paper from her tight fitting dungarees showing her well proportioned figure.

Junior commented, “I thought you had to be at least sixteen to work here.”

“I’m almost eighteen.” Her happiness disappeared for the moment.

“They let anybody in here these days.” Junior knew what he wanted. “I’ll have the special.”

Just as the waitress finished scribbling the order, Aunt Allison joined the two men and demanded, “I need a menu.” From her walker parked in the aisle, she slid in beside Junior.

Julie squeaked her words as she handed a single sheet of paper with blotches of grease. “What can I get for you, Auntie?”

After peering out from the booth in the direction of the poker machine, Aunt Allison focused her eyes on the menu. “Same as Junior.”

The petite waitress smiled and giggled at the Native American. “What about for you, cutie?”

“For me, I’ll take a stack of pancakes with bacon,” Lightfeather replied.

She asked if anyone wanted coffee and all nodded. Hugging everyone again, she then bounced back toward the kitchen.

Allison turned to Lightfeather. “She’s a jewel. You should ask her for a date. I can’t get Junior to take her anywhere.”

Both young men blushed but Junior warned, “She hasn’t even finished high school.”

Lightfeather added, "We'd be robbing the cradle."

The elderly woman looked at her nephew. "She likes you."

Junior scowled at Allison. "Auntie, I'm dating an attorney who graduated from law school last year. I told you that last night when I came in."

"Well then, maybe you did. But I didn't ask you what kind of family she has."

"She has a Ma and Paw."

"That tells me a lot." Aunt Allison still not satisfied, asked.

"Where does she work?"

"At the White House," Junior said.

"With that skirt chasin President we have?"

"Auntie, she doesn't work directly under Clinton."

"I should hope she never gets under Clinton. If I had a daughter, I would never let her near that creep." Aunt Allison shook a finger at the two men.

"Auntie, don't worry, she works for Hillary."

"That's even worse."

Lightfeather made a big mistake and asked, "Why?"

"She stays round there just so she can be president some day.

Once she gets it, Bill's goin to be history. She can't have him runnin loose in the White House with nothin to do. Mark my words. Anyway, if I were Hillary now, I wouldn't put up with his runnin round. For all the world to see! No one on the soaps would stay with that creep. Those doctor's wives don't stand for it. They get big wheel lawyers to get big bucks outta their husbands."

It was obvious that Lightfeather realized he should not have asked that question and turned to his friend. "Well Junior, how's law school?"

"This is the home stretch. I graduate in June." Junior gladly answered but wondered why his friend asked him to come to talk, certainly not about his career. He wished that his Aunt were not here.

"So, you're finally going to be a lawyer?"

Junior saw that Lightfeather was proud of his accomplishment but said, "I take the Virginia bar in two months, right after the exams. I have to pass that before I can work."

"What are you going to do after that?" Lightfeather asked as the steamy drinks were served by Julie without comment or hugs. She rushed back to the kitchen to fill another order.

"I have a job already lined up at a big law firm in Arlington."

"Where's that?" Lightfeather fumbled with his coffee cup almost spilling it on the table.

“It’s just across the Potomac River from Washington where I go to school. I won’t have to move. Can’t wait to start making some money.”

Aunt Allison butted in. “You need to pay Rick and Mary back. They busted their butt so you could go to school.” Despite a blank stare from Junior, she continued her tirade, “You need to take care of your Paw.”

Annoyed at his aunt, Junior wanted to say that he needed to be as far as away from her as possible and still stay in Virginia. He remained silent and smiled when she left the table plodding in the direction of the video poker machine where there was no line. Her coffee remained untouched.

“Junior, what I wanted to tell you is that we had a tribal meeting last month.” Lightfeather fidgeted with a metal spoon. “There’s a lot of problems.”

“What kind?” Junior moved his head closer to him across the table to hear over the steady pings emitting from the poker machine.

“Tribal meetings are secret. I can’t tell too much but the Chief has big plans. I can’t say much more.”

“What are they?”

“Can’t tell, but he didn’t get the votes.” Lightfeather picked off an owl feather that stuck to his left shirt sleeve.

“Will he try again?” Junior asked now interested in what the Indian had to say.

“I’m afraid so.”

“How did you vote?”

“Against him. But then he cut me out of fishin in his pond. My tribe has been doing that forever.”

“Doesn’t the road to the River go through your property?”

“Yeah, I could stop him from using the River, but that would be trouble. I sure like fishin in the pond there.”

“Why don’t you ask one of your eagles to help you fish?”

Junior tried to diffuse the dejection in Lightfeather’s voice.

The Native American smiled for the first time this morning. “Junior, I want you to keep the ring for awhile. I know he’s going to try again.”

“When’s the next meeting?”

“Under the rules, he has to wait one year.”

“Really?”

“When you come back this summer on vacation, I’ll get it back from you.”

“I may never get one. You know with a new job and all.” Junior took a quick sip of coffee. “Anyway I’d like to visit some other foreign countries. Until I graduated from high school, the farthest I got was Riverport.”

“I’m not going to worry about you keepin the ring.”

Junior looked perplexed and asked. “Why don’t you just hold on to it?”

“I can’t keep it at home. It’s not safe.”

“Why don’t you hide it somewhere?” Junior asked as he peered down the aisle. Allison came out of the rest room and was sliding toward the video machine with her walker. A man sat on the stool focused on the screen.

“I’ll forget where I put it. I’ll always check where it is. The Chief follows me around some. Or he’ll get Rocking Horse. Or even Tsalli to do it next to my place. Please take it.” Lightfeather reached in his shirt pocket clasping his right fist together. He looked around for the waitress and opened two fingers.

Junior gasped. “That’s beautiful.” A deep green emerald glistened under the stark fluorescent lights.

Lightfeather returned to an airtight fist as Julie appeared with the meals. When she put the plate in front of Junior, a biscuit slid off onto the chipped formica table top. “Sorry.”

“Got a nice date tonight?”

Julie placed a meal in front of an empty space. “Um. Um. Where’s Allison?”

“She’ll be back soon. Um, she’s powdering her nose.”

When the waitress left, Lightfeather ignored the steaming pile of pancakes and the aroma of crisp bacon below him. The Indian opened a crack in his hand and reached toward his friend.

“I don’t want it.” But Junior accepted it and without anyone having an opportunity to examine it, he stuck it deep in his pants pocket.

“Thanks.” Lightfeather grasped his hand in appreciation. “If something happens to me, please take care of the animals for me. I’d like for them to always have a home.”

“I promise,” Junior blurted without thinking of the consequences.

“I’d like to deed my share to the EEO.”

“What is the ...?” Both men heard a commotion in the rear of the Wagon and turned that way.

Aunt Allison screamed in front of the poker machine. “It’s my turn.”

A young man with long stringy hair remained on the chair glued to the video screen.

She bellowed, "It's still my turn."

He looked up. "No, it ain't."

"It's still my turn." She raised her voice over the sound of the constant pinging. "You redneck."

He paused from his hand of poker, "You left."

"I just had to go to the bathroom," Allison tried to explain.

The man retorted right back. "That ain't my problem."

"I had to leave for a minute. Couldn't help it." She bellowed louder, attracting the attention of all the patrons, but the servers still buzzed around. "Could not help it. Do you understand, Redneck?"

"You were too long in the potty."

This infuriated the elderly woman who yelled over the relentless pings of the machine. "Don't you tell everyone I go to the bathroom!" All of the waitresses now stopped and listened to the altercation.

The man shot back even louder, "You were too long in the potty."

"No."

"Yes, you were, Granny."

"I'm no Granny."

"Then Great Granny." Junior saw that the man knew how to push her buttons and for now, Junior enjoyed it. Except for this banter, there was silence in the room.

"I'll teach you, buster." She lifted her walker over her head with its legs pointed up in the air almost touching the ceiling. "It's still my turn." She swung it at the unsuspecting poor soul. Junior jumped to his feet and ran down the aisle, but it was too late. Unfortunately, one of the metal legs caught the poker player in the stomach. In pain, the man doubled over, grasping his midsection. Aunt Allison would not give up. She placed the walker to her left side on the floor like an anchor and with her right foot, kicked the man in his shin. He straightened up and grabbed one of the metal bars as protection. She wrangled it out of his hands and continued rotating it to her left so she was pinned between the walker and the man at the machine.

Once there, her nephew tried to restrain her, but the walker was in the way. He only tangled himself in the bars. Allison, out of control, had fire in her eyes. "Give that to me! It's mine!" She pried the walker out of Junior's grasp. Once assuming full control again, she put all her weight and strength behind it. The metal device twirled around her body like an Olympic athlete doing a shot put.

Junior stepped back for the moment and warned, "Watch out!"

The man ducked, but one of the front legs smashed into the screen of the poker machine at shoulder level. Glass shattered and sparks flew several feet out as she tumbled to the ground still clinging to her walker. Smoke poured out from the top of the machine and a mushroom cloud formed on this end of the Wagon. Yet there was still life in the machine, as noises emitted from its innards at slower and slower intervals. Broken glass lay on the tile floor beside her. Despite being on the ground, Allison still had control of the walker and pointed it upward like four spears poised for battle. Finally, Junior grabbed two of the legs and wrestled it from his aunt.

She had no weapon but kept on bellowing over the sounds of the pings. "It's still my turn! It's my turn!"

A Sheriff's deputy entered the restaurant and ran down the aisle. With Junior's help, the officer subdued the woman at the same time the machine took its last breath with the pings fading. For her protection and those of the patrons, handcuffs were placed on Allison's wrists and she was escorted out, with the two men each holding one of her armpits. Lightfeather followed the group and once outside he said to Junior. "I think she needs a good lawyer."

Chapter 4

Leaving Arlington at seven p.m., Junior drove straight through to Corn Still. Earlier that afternoon, he had received a telephone call at his work from Stark County Sheriff Franks, this on the first day of his new job with the law firm. He felt a sense of accomplishment with not only the high dollar salary, but on being informed that he had passed the Virginia bar exam the day before. This was the second emergency trip back home in the last two weeks; the weekend before the test he had to make a brief visit to his father. Buddy Garfield was admitted to the Riverport hospital because of a stroke. At that time, Junior didn't even have time to see Lightfeather, the rest of his family or even his childhood dog on Corn Still. In spite of this burden, he did well on the three day test in Richmond.

The Sheriff did not give any details on the phone, just that Lightfeather was dead. As soon as he learned of this tragedy, Junior thought about the ring and this preoccupied his mind during the eight hour drive back to Stark County.

Arriving at three in the morning, he found the Garfield home place deserted, dark and lonely. The only reminders of his father were his old red pick-up parked in the garage and his tractor resting in the barn. The first place he looked upon returning home was in the aquarium tank in his room. Under a turtle shell, the ring glistened under a bare bulb on the ceiling. Feeling the stone reminded him of the good times he had with his friend in high school, on the Reservation and on Corn Still, all of this after Abe died. Ten years ago he thought he could never have another friend but his prayers were answered and God gave him one. Now, why did He allow this to happen and take Lightfeather?

Junior had so much to accomplish at daylight: feed the animals on Corn Still, find out why a perfectly healthy man of twenty four years old died, check on his dad at the hospital, visit Aunt Allison at the home for the insane, decide what to do with the ring, and figure what was going on at the Indian Reservation. A visit to the Sheriff would be the first on his agenda.

He found Donald L. Franks, the High Sheriff of Stark County, in the Courthouse lobby talking to one of his deputies. They were standing in front of a ping pong size table on which lay a scale replica of the town of Mulberry. The Courthouse building with Lady Liberty perched on top dominated all the other downtown buildings and landscape. Nothing had changed since he helped build this

reproduction with Abe. It was perfect HO model scale, eighty seven feet in real life condensed to one foot on the model.

When the Sheriff noticed Junior, he extended a firm and genuine handshake, ignoring his employee. "Sorry about your friend."

Junior thought about his two buddies, now both dead, and he was confused as which one the Sheriff meant. It didn't matter so he just said, "Thanks."

"Let's go back to my office." This was the same officer who had escorted Junior and Abe back to the jail after being locked up on the porch on the second floor of the Courthouse. They took the same route now and his heart rate increased as it had then.

Walking on the sidewalk next to Main Street, Junior tried to make small talk. "Looks like we're going to have a storm."

Franks said, "A flood watch has been issued for this afternoon. All through the weekend. We may have a tornado."

At the jail, Junior relaxed into a leather chair and got to the point. "What happened to my friend?"

"He was found shot on his property."

"Murdered?"

"Yes, right in the animal house of his."

Junior hung his head low. "You mean where he kept his owls?"

"Yeah. It was a mess in there. Several got killed."

"At least he was doing something he enjoyed."

"There was no struggle as far as we can tell."

"Did he suffer?" Junior asked with tension in his voice.

"No. A bullet to the head." Franks pointed to a spot next to his ear. "Apparently the first shot missed."

Junior didn't want any more gory details at this point and was relieved that his friend died without pain, although he might have been frightened before his death.

The Sheriff volunteered some information about the possible motive. "They ransacked his trailer. It's a mess. They were probably looking for something."

"Do you mean there was more than one person?"

"Yeah, it's hard to tell, but we found footprints of a man and a woman, a tall woman."

Should Junior tell the Sheriff about the ring? Not now. He wanted to find out more about the reason for the murder and who was responsible. "What were they looking for?"

The Sheriff was quick to respond. "Don't know. But it wasn't cash. Three one hundred dollar bills lying out on the kitchen table."

“Probably from his paycheck at the convenience store.” Junior fiddled with an oversized desk placard with the Sheriff’s name and a star shaped seal on it. It was meant to impress the run of the mill defendants charged with crimes into cooperating with him and confessing to their sins. However, it had no effect on Junior.

Franks continued, “Didn’t take his electronic tracking equipment.”

“That’s valuable stuff.”

“We can rule out hunters.” The Sheriff said with confidence as a deputy entered his office without a word and sat down in the only other chair in the office.

“Well, who did this?” Junior asked

“Don’t know. This Indian kept to himself.”

“You mean Lightfeather?”

“Yeah. Sorry.” The Sheriff looked at his notes. “Come to think of it. He came to me about a month ago and reported some pot growing on the Reservation. He was a nice kid.”

“Really? Where was it?”

“Sorry, I don’t remember. We checked it out and found nothing. But, it’s big place out there and we couldn’t spend a lot of time on that stuff. Now, we’re concentrating on meth.”

“Did you talk to the people in the store where he works?”

Junior corrected himself. “I guess where he used to work.” It was hard to think of his friend dead.

“Yeah. Everyone liked him. Went over to his neighbor tribe. You know where the plane crashed in the winter.”

“Is that Hoppi?”

The Sheriff peered down at his file. “Yeah. He heard a motorcycle drive up to his place late that night.”

“Is that all?”

“And two gunshots. Not far apart in time.”

“An automatic weapon?” Junior asked.

“No, but enough time to reload. But that’s not unusual for this time of the year.”

“Yeah, the snakes are out now.”

“Well, this Hoppi person said that at approximately one in the afternoon he went over to borrow Lightfeather’s chain saw and found the body.” The Sheriff rose from his desk and handed a piece of paper to the waiting deputy. After the officer left, Franks directed his attention to Junior. “Do you think this Indian neighbor is involved?”

“No. They were friends.”

The Sheriff asked, “What about his boy?”

“That I don’t know.” Junior thought about his drinking and hanging around with the Rocking Horse boy. But he remained quiet and did not volunteer anything for now, wanting to learn first what the Sheriff knew. “Did you talk to the Chief? Think his name is Laughing Seed or something like that.”

“Couldn’t get him. One of his friends out there said he’s out somewhere.”

“Did they say where?” Junior asked quietly.

“No. Seems like all those redskins clam up when I’m out there.”

“There’s some bad blood between them.” Junior wanted to divulge this tidbit of information to appear helpful.

“I gathered that, talking to Hoppi. We’ll follow up on that.” The Sheriff glanced at his notes another time. “We took some tire prints. It is a common motorcycle.” Then his face went blank for a few seconds. “That’s about it.”

Junior stood up to stretch his legs and realized there were no other leads to be gleaned. “I need to go see my Paw in Riverport.” He paused. “Who’s taking care of all the owls?”

“An animal group from Riverport. Some of the birds can’t be moved. Several are hurt. It’s a bad situation. The smell in there was awful.”

“Can I go out there tomorrow?”

“Sure. We’re finished taking prints.” The Sheriff rose besides his desk. “I know that you were the only friend he had.”

“Yeah. I’ll miss him.”

“We found a handwritten will in the top drawer of his dresser.” Franks said in a matter of fact voice.

“What else did you find there with that?”

“Why?” The Sheriff appeared confused, but Junior knew the question was important. Franks retrieved his notebook. “Mixed in with his underwear.”

“Anything else?”

“Just the title to his jeep and this printed sheet with symbols on it of some sort, other papers.”

“Could I see it?”

“What?”

“The one with the symbols.”

“Sure.” Franks handed the piece of paper to him.

“It’s an old writing of Indian customs. Lightfeather told me about this. Is there another sheet with English on it?”

The Sheriff fumbled through his file. “Yeah, here it is.”

Junior examined it with a legal eye. "It is dated 201. Probably according to the Indian calendar. All of this should be in a museum somewhere. It has a bearing on the validity of the will."

"Why?"

"Because a holographic will has to be found among a person's valuable papers at his death. Can I see that also?"

Franks pulled the paper writing out of a file, small portions of the edges of it falling to the floor. "It says that you get everything."

"Does this mean I inherit the owls?" Junior brightened up.

"I'm not the legal expert." Both laughed at the Sheriff's remark and Franks casually mentioned. "Also, we found a big chart under his bed."

"Really? Let me see it."

Franks rose and went to a filing cabinet and retrieved a cardboard wad. He opened it up like a greeting card on his desk.

Junior took a closer look. "It's a family tree of the five tribes." The attorney recognized some of the names such as Hoppi and Laughing Seed. Lightfeather's name was missing; his Indian friend never told him about this family lineage.

The Sheriff was not interested in this detail about the tribes on the Reservation. "Hope you didn't mind me calling you up in DC."

"I'm glad you did." Junior's life had suddenly become more complicated. At the very least, he had the responsibility to take care of Lightfeather's owls. He could delegate this out, but he had a duty to his deceased friend to find out what was going on at the Reservation and to protect his tribal land, the sacred burial ground in particular. He didn't know from what. Maybe all of this involved moving back to Stark County, the home place, or even the Reservation. Who would protect the returning pair of eagles? Who would keep up the farm on Corn Still? One of his uncles put in some corn, but only to prevent the weeds from taking over the lower field and to provide forage for the hogs. The animals needed constant attention of feeding, watering and doctoring. Certainly not Rick, he was a good newspaperman but when it came to anything that had four legs, watch out.

An immediate concern entered Junior's mind and he asked the Sheriff. "What about the body?"

"It's still with the Medical Examiner. There's nothing much left of the head. No one to claim it."

"No next of kin?" Junior asked.

"Right."

"I'm sure Lightfeather wants to be with his kinfolks at the burial site." Junior left out the fact he wanted to be with the animals

because that was personal between friends. “But I’m really not sure how to do this. Do they have someone like a preacher to say a few words? Or some type of dance?”

“Don’t know.” The Sheriff shrugged his shoulders. “Why don’t you get together with Hoppi tomorrow?”

“Thanks, that’s a good idea.”

He could see that the Sheriff was pleased to solve this little problem, but he must have observed the worry on Junior’s face. It could no longer be hidden.

“You ok?” Franks asked.

“I don’t know what to do. I like Washington. There are a lot of things going on. I can finally make some money up there. Travel with my job. It seems like I have been going to school forever.”

“What did you take?”

“I took geography in college at U Va and majored in international law at Georgetown University Law Center. My Paw always wanted me to come back to Stark County, but I can’t make a living here. He said it would even be better if I lived in Riverport and opened an office there. But if I practiced there, I’d have to take another test.”

“Why’s that?” the Sheriff asked slowly.

“It’s in a different state.” Junior knew that it was a stupid question and he tried to give an explanation. “Tennessee has different laws. I’d have to take a special course. It would be hard to pass.”

“You had no trouble with Virginia. I know you passed with flying colors. Rick told me. It’s even in the paper this week.”

“Must be pretty slow around here.”

“Listen, can I give you some advice?” Before Junior had time to answer this question, a deputy barged in the office, handing his boss some papers. The Sheriff looked at them and faced his employee. “Wait a minute. We’ll both have to go up to the Balds and serve these warrants. These are felony meth charges. That’s dangerous stuff. I’ll be finished here in a few minutes. Get the protective gear now and put it in the van.”

“Okay, chief,” the junior officer responded dutifully.

“How many people are involved in the operation up there?” the Sheriff asked with a sense of urgency.

“At least a dozen. Maybe more.”

“We won’t have enough space in the jail here. Most of them will not make bond. I need to call the new State prison up on East Prong.” The Sheriff flipped through a half inch thick phone directory as the deputy left. After the phone conversation, Franks turned his attention to Junior. “What did I say?”

“Advice you wanted to give.”

“Oh yeah. Don’t say this to anyone. Do you want some advice?”

“Sure if it’s free. I charge for mine.”

The Sherriff chuckled. “Mulberry needs a good attorney. All we have is the Winde brothers and now that Winde woman.”

“You mean that gal who went to Atlanta?”

“Yeah. She came back to practice with her brothers. Well, Howard stays in Richmond most of the time. Henry’s ready to retire.”

“I guess Helen would rather be a big fish in a small bowl than a small fish in a big bowl.” Junior concluded.

The Sheriff nodded in agreement, but added, “I’d say she’s a tiger.”

“Is she a straight shooter?” Junior sensed that the Sheriff wanted to follow that comparison up in more detail.

“For awhile, but the Winde’s power got to her. She picked up all their bad habits of making deals with everyone. Brought some bad stuff back from the big city.”

“Like what?”

“Snobby and pushy.”

“That’s too bad,” Junior said.

“Look, people don’t like them, but they use them to get things done. They are connected well to the power brokers. Probably know all the dirt on them. That firm can’t handle all the stuff that goes on here. We’re gettin a little more building here.”

“Yeah I noticed the new Lowe’s on the way to Pump Gap last time I was here on Easter break.”

“We’re supposed to get a Burger King soon on Dead Dog Run.”

“That sounds appetizing.” Junior smiled.

“A lot of lawyers come from Riverport to do work here.” The Sheriff rose motioning he had to leave. “Judge Pickens can’t stand them. You could clean up here.”

“I wouldn’t have to change my name like I did in Washington.”

The Sheriff had a puzzled look and waited for an explanation from him.

Junior gave one. “There I am known as Abraham Garfield.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t very well be a “Junior” at law school, or for that matter at the law firm. Could I?”

“Well, no.” The Sheriff nodded as both went out of the office into the front booking area. A deputy sitting behind a desk cluttered

with files gave his boss a message. Franks handed it back. “Let’s get the lab to look for meth.”

Junior said to the Sheriff, “Just don’t tell my Paw that I changed my name. Rick and Mary know but that’s about it. As long as Paw’s alive, I’ll be a Junior.”

“If you stay, you could keep the name.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“If you want to talk more about it, let me know. I’d like to help you.” Franks laid a hand on Junior’s shoulder. Assisting people was a big part of the Sheriff’s job in a rural county for the reason that voters would remember the favors on Election Day.

Junior knew that the Sheriff concluded that the young attorney would be a valuable asset to him in the future. “You always have.” Junior thought about the Courthouse balcony and the painting incident in his first year in high school.

The Sheriff turned to the front entrance. It opened and a female deputy assisted a disheveled man by holding him under one of his armpits. A strong whiff of alcohol permeated the place. His snow white hair and beard smelled like a gin factory.

Junior gasped, “Hoss.”

Franks pointed to the town drunk with a straight face. “Junior. Here’s your first client.”

Chapter 5

The morning after his meeting with the Sheriff and a visit with his father, Junior phoned the animal group in Riverport and told them he would take care of Lightfeather's owls for a few days. The volunteers in the non-profit were pleased not to make the round trip of fifty miles for awhile. Then he drove his truck up the steep road from the Garfield home place on Corn Still to the Queens' home on the ridge. His dog Angus lived with the Queens and Junior wanted to take the West Highland Scottish terrier along for the day. After Junior's graduation from high school, Julie had fallen in love with the Westie and adopted him in Junior's absence. Whenever Junior came home from college and law school, he usually exercised his visitation rights, despite protests from the dog's new mistress. Although now thirteen years old, Angus remained active and alert, despite tumors on his feet and a chronic infection in his right ear. Junior had to pick up the dog and place him in the front seat of his pick-up.

Soon they were on their way to Lightfeather's place. Although Junior journeyed to the Reservation before Lightfeather's death, he had always met him at his camper and stayed close with him on his tribe's property. Since he was apprehensive about going alone, he made sure his shotgun was fully loaded with an unopened box of cartridges under the front seat. Junior needed to take care of the remains of Lightfeather's personal effects, drop in on the owls and look for possible clues into his death. Junior opened the truck's window a crack and left Angus curled up on the front seat before he tackled these chores. A sense of loneliness struck him at the deserted property; just like he felt ten years ago when he returned to Corn Still from the hospital. Everything there reminded him of Abe: the tree platform, the barn where they first built the models, and the pond where he played.

The Sheriff was correct; the camper's insides looked like a tornado came through it. In the back room, the twin size mattress was cut down the middle with the stuffing all over the floor. The wood of the box spring was in splinters with the metal twisted in several places. The contents of the chest of drawers were dumped out with clothes shredded into pieces like cleaning rags. Animal magazines were scattered and torn over the floor. An empty cage that Lightfeather used to care for the eagles lay overturned in one corner; a strong smell of urine originated from that direction.

In the front room, the only sofa was slashed and the foam scattered over the torn carpet. The cabinet in the kitchen area was bare;

utensils, pots, pans and tin plates ended on the floor. He searched the premises for perishables, but found none. Some canned goods remained scattered on a sagging shelf. The only lamp stand was bent and perched sideways on the sofa ready to fall again. The shattered 40 watt bulb lay nearby next to a broken lawn chair; Lightfeather was not much of a reader. The propane stove was turned over with its burner dangling on its case and the empty apartment size refrigerator was missing a door. Junior hauled out all the large contents that weren't nailed down and put them in the back of his pick-up. He would need to come back for the smaller items and bring cleaning supplies.

Junior then turned to the owl shed. Surprised, he found fresh straw and clear water. Still, there was a putrid smell coming from the place. The birds seemed content, purring upon his arrival, but they kept their distance from him. The flock had been thinned out since the last time he was here; that was when Lightfeather showed him basic first aid the day before Junior returned to law school over Christmas. He counted ten birds. Junior only had to repair a gunshot hole on the front door and a two inch tear in the wire mesh in the rear. For some strange reason, his despair disappeared. Maybe Lightfeather's God was with him, he thought.

After these tasks, he wanted to scout around the property. Maybe some clues were left down the path to the River, the way he had taken with Lightfeather many times before. Lightfeather's fishing rod hung on the inside wall with his tackle box underneath on the floor. He took them and left the shed. The gear would be a good cover for anyone he might encounter, except the game warden. Anyway it would be relaxing and he had nothing to do for the rest of the morning except feed the animals before he left at lunch time. He woke Angus and the dog jumped from the floorboard of the truck to the ground. The Westie sought the nearest tall weed to relieve himself.

As he passed the privy, he laid the fishing equipment on a pile of firewood. Junior thought that the Sheriff probably hadn't looked in there, so he peeked in. A shaft of sunlight touched something that sparkled: a diamond earring wedged between a crack in the boards where the shelf for sitting meets the floor. He held his breath, bent down and put it in his pocket. Outside in the fresh air, Junior retrieved the gear and started down the path. He climbed over a chain strung over the walkway to prevent vehicles accessing the river.

After a ten minute hike he came upon the Dutch Curve River. A freight train, fully loaded with coal, rumbled down the valley on the other side on the western bank. He made a left turn on another footpath that followed the river downstream to the south. He never went down this way, but he knew it led to Dead Bear Rapids where he had fished

many times with his father. At those times he had always approached the spot from the other side of the river in Buddy's truck. The only vehicle access was by means of a gravel road that wound down the mountain from Pump Gap. It was a circuitous route because one would have to go into Mulberry from Possum Trot and then travel south on Highway 10 to the turnoff.

The path and the eastern bank rose steeper as he passed a National Forest sign indicating he was leaving both the Reservation and Lightfeather's property. Angus' age began telling on him, and Junior waited for the dog to catch up on several occasions. The view of the river in both directions was spectacular. Soon he saw and heard Dead Bear Rapids downstream in the distance. The trail hugged a rock cliff for a hundred yards and then traveled back down to the river bank. As he made the journey, he had to crawl down the steep slope on his hands and knees in several places. Angus even had to be carried once. Near the river's edge, he stopped to brush dirt from his pants. Two men stood on a rock shelf, the size of an outdoor patio, protruding into the rushing water. A hunting dog lay asleep nearby. Both people had a beer in one hand and a fishing pole in the other. It was Frank, Hoppi's boy and Joe, Rocking Horse's son. Junior approached them with caution. "How's the fishing?"

The startled pair turned and the Rocking Horse man asked like it was his property. "What are you doin here?"

"Just hikin." Staying on the bank a safe distance, Junior did not want to invade their space nor antagonize the two Indians who appeared to be inebriated. Angus remained with him, panting from the trip.

"What are you doin with a pole then?"

"Just lookin down here. I caught my limit. They're back in a cooler." This false explanation seemed to satisfy them for the moment. Angus trotted to the water's edge and satisfied his thirst. Junior pointed upstream to rainbow colored stick-like figures squatting on the surface of the water, one to each similarly colored watercraft. Car-sized boulders sat in the middle of the river with white water churning around them. "Look. There's some sorta boats comin down the rapids."

"They're kayakers," Rocking Horse responded without any emotion after he swallowed the remainder of his booze.

Junior tried to make conversation with him. "Wish I could do that someday."

"Most of em's potheads." Joe scowled at the people in the boats and tossed the empty can in the main current.

“Why’s that?” Junior asked as Angus circled around, trampling a clump of tall grass to make a temporary bed.

“When I did my community service, I had to clean up the mess they made. The Commonwealth had to replace a bunch of signs they destroyed up in Mulberry.” Joe spit into the river as far as he could. “They camped right outside of town and made a mess of the place. Didn’t care where they took a crap. Left a whole bunch of beer cans. Other stuff can’t tell you bout. I had to help clean up the mess.”

“They seem to have fun. Can even travel upstream.” Junior paused looking for a reaction from the men.

His face remained stern. “They must have had somethin to drink last night.” Rocking Horse opened up a cold beer from the cooler.

Junior pointed, “Look at that, they’re goin straight up with their front end stuck in the water. OH MY! That guy just did a half circle turning over. Now he’s capsized, landed upside down. Can’t see his face at all, just the bottom of his boat. Hope he’s okay.”

“Who cares? They must have really smoked a lot last night,” Rocking Horse said, still not too interested in what was happening upstream. “Don’t need to mess with those boats, too dangerous. People have drowned here.”

“Well, he’s up again. How’d he do that?” Junior was amazed and forgot about his company he encountered on the rock shelf.

“We ain’t got time for that.” Hoppi’s son grumbled.

As the paddlers came within ten feet of the bank, Junior shouted, “Hey, how’d you do that?”

“It’s easy, it’s called an ender,” the boater about Junior’s age said.

“Well how’d you right yourself? Didn’t see your head at all, just the bottom of your boat.”

“That’s a roll. Used my paddle. I’ll show you.” The kayaker put his paddle parallel to his boat and in a flash, completely submerged himself. Though the water was murky, Junior could see a wide sweep with his paddle just below the surface and while his body was underwater upside down. Shortly after that, his torso popped right back up, his head being the last part of his body to come out of the churning water.

“That’s cool. Wish I could do that,” Junior said still fascinated by the seemingly impossible maneuver.

The young boater smiled back while paddling upstream in the current, but stayed in the same place relative to the men standing and staring on the bank. “Practiced that in a pool back home.”

“Where bout do you live?” Junior asked.

“In Pennsylvania, near Gettysburg.” The paddler breathed heavier and faster. He positioned his boat on a sand bar, slipped out of the cockpit of the small craft using his paddle as a crutch, stood in the shallow water, pulled his boat on the bank and spoke to his boating group, “I gotta go pee. I’ll meet you down at the railroad bridge.”

The other kayakers kept paddling upstream in a group as if a school of red salmon were ready to spawn. After a minute they peeled out like a squadron of air fighters and went downstream, leaving the lone boater on the bank. He pulled off a black rubber skirt-like article of clothing from his waist to his feet as if taking off a pair of shorts, unsnapped the red helmet on his head, unzipped the purple life jacket surrounding his upper body, and took a drink from a tube attached to a water bottle fastened to the back of his life jacket. The Indians’ dog came into the water and licked the kayaker, a being that looked like something from the ‘Star Wars’ cafe. Angus stayed far away on the grassy bank, still curled into a white ball.

“Is that where the Civil War battle was fought?” Junior questioned, wanting to make conversation.

“Yes, that’s where Lee was defeated. A lot of men died on both sides,” the paddler noted as he went down the path to seek privacy.

After he disappeared behind a rock, Frank interrupted. “Let’s get back to fishin. Don’t wanna be reminded about those da—Yankees, I mean Yankees.”

Joe responded, “Let’s give his boat a sendoff.” The Indian grabbed his kayak from the bank and shoved it into the water. It sailed down the river, leaving its occupant stranded.

Junior, disturbed at his action, asked, “Why did you do that?” Even Angus stood erect and stared at the empty craft moving down the current.

Both Native Americans said nothing. For a minute Junior wondered what to do. He decided to collect Angus and follow the boater to warn him. Any further contact with the Indians would not be productive and he was outnumbered. Junior found the boater behind the rock ten feet away and whispered, “They messed with your boat.”

He looked downstream at his overturned boat floating away in the distance. “Those darn people.”

“Will the boat sink?”

“No, it has air bags in it. Gives it flotation.” The kayaker pointed downstream in the distance. “But it could get pinned in the rocks.”

“I didn’t know they were going to do that.”

“What can I do now?” The boater could not go downstream by foot because the trail ended at the base of a waterfall fifty yards away. This cascade, called Bridal Falls by the locals, tumbled two hundred feet from the top of cliffs skirting this side of the river. The relentless water pressure had carved a smooth rock bowl running its length down to the river. Water dumped directly into the main channel like a faucet into a bathtub.

Downstream from the falls, the bank remained a sheer rock wall with the Dutch Curve River twisting to the west for a half of a mile and then reversing direction back to the east making a half circle. The railroad sliced this loop with a tunnel and two bridges, one on either side of the underground passageway. The water dropped sixty two feet in this mile long section making it the most rugged, spectacular and beautiful sections of the river. Lightfeather told him that there were Indian paintings on the vertical shale face but his friend never got around to showing him. Anyway, only experienced rock climbers with the proper mountaineering equipment could ever safely reach the artifacts. Thus, these works of art still remained in their original pristine condition beyond the reach of irresponsible people. Then the river channel turned back south and opened up into a gentle valley on its way to Riverport.

“You could go back with me.” Junior wiped the spray of water from the falls off his face with the shoulder portion of this tee shirt. Angus tried to shake it off.

“Thanks, but my friends will start looking for me.”

Junior asked the dejected boater, “Will it be hard for them to go up here against the rapids?”

“They may have trouble if they go down past the second railroad bridge.”

“Look, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. It’s not your fault. You seem different from those people.”

“My friend has a fishing boat up where Bear Lick comes in the river. I can take the boat across up there.”

“That may work. The river is flat up there and I can walk down the railroad on the other side. Will it be out of your way?”

“No. I have to go back there anyway.” Junior looked at his watch. “It’s only eleven o’clock. I have to meet someone in town at two.”

The discovery of the diamond earring, the good feeling in the owl house, the promise made to Lightfeather and this encounter with the Indians cemented Junior’s decision to move back to Stark County. Bad things were happening on the Reservation and he wanted to know

why. He could both make a living here and a difference in the lives of the people. First he needed to work out an important matter with Rick Queen, the father of Abe and the editor of the *Guardian* newspaper.

The two men and Angus turned and headed north upstream. Fortunately the trouble makers were gone and on their way home. They saw them scurrying up the path towards the Reservation. Junior and the boater kept a safe distance as the Indians too went up river and then turned up Bear Lick. Lightfeather had hidden the craft well in some brush so it took Junior a few minutes to locate it. Once found, the kayaker helped him drag it to the water's edge. In no time, the stranded man was on his way to the other side where he would have an easy walk along the tracks.

When the rowboat reached the other bank, the boater hopped out onto the gravel on the bottom of the railroad bed. "Thanks. I really appreciate all your help."

"No problem. You won't find any Indians on this side of the river."

Chapter 6

Five years earlier the office for the *Guardian* moved from the first floor of a brick building on Main Street into a pair of railroad box cars. They were lined up, end on end, on an unused track siding next to the abandoned mill, three blocks north of the renovated depot. Construction vehicles and equipment, used for the building of several new rail branch lines to serve a future computer assembly facility, stood outside.

Instead of being coupled together, the abutting ends of these two units were cut out and an addition was built between them. This new section housed a reception area, bathroom and main entrance. Stacks of newspapers were piled waist high around the inside walls door, ready to be distributed throughout Stark County. Outside, wooden steps and a handicap ramp lead to a deck that connected to a front door. The box car closest to downtown and Main Street was one big room that served both as a composing room with a billiard sized table and an office for the news editor, Rick Queen; the other one was partitioned off into four sections so that each of his four employees had a separate office, a luxury in the newspaper business. The entire suite doubled the size of the previous quarters, but for the most part, it was still box cars with metal sides and no windows. The interior walls of the units were painted an off white, but shades of rust showed through in several places.

After his visit at Lightfeather's place that morning and a quick bite to eat at the Wagon, Junior parked his pick-up in front of a 'GUARDIAN' advertising banner flapping in the strong gusts of wind picking up in the afternoon. The yellow sign with red letters partially covered the words 'SOUTHERN.' on the outside of the red clay colored car with only the first two letters visible with the center of the 'O' filled with green. Below the banner on the face of the car were the faded words, 'Green Light for Innovation.' As he climbed the outside steps, Junior heard faint thunder in the distance.

Junior found the editor sitting at his oak desk which was almost the size of the composing table. "Hi Dad, do you have time to talk?" Rick was not his natural father, but ever since Junior received kidneys from Abe, the son of the Queens, he considered Rick and Mary his second set of parents. This was comforting to Junior since his natural mother had died several years ago and now his father is in a hospital incapacitated with a stroke and memory loss.

"Sit down, son." Rick shoved a stack of press releases aside.

"I'm thinkin about moving back here."

The editor's round face lit up like a living room table lamp. "I thought you took the job with the big law firm in DC."

"I did. Things have changed."

"You broke up with that high priced lawyer?"

Junior didn't know how to take that but remained polite. "We were too different. We parted ways. But that's not the reason."

"Why don't you help me here with the newspaper? Ever since I went daily, it has been tough. I could use another hand."

Junior chuckled. "No. I may practice law."

"That's great."

"When?" Rick asked.

"Right now. I guess."

"Mary and I need to update our wills. Still have the ones we did in Jersey."

"Yeah, I'll do them for you. I wouldn't want you to die having Yankee wills." Both men laughed at that possibility and then Junior's tone turned serious. "I need an office."

"I can ask the railroad for another box car."

"No. I don't think that would work for a law office."

"What about Waddsworth's old place then?"

"Yeah. That's an idea."

"I'll check it out for you. Mary and I know all the children well."

"I need a lot of other stuff." Junior remained skeptical as he thought about all the details to start a business from scratch.

"If you are going to practice law, I'm sure Mr. Bartlett will help you get going."

"Who's he?"

"He's an attorney in Riverport and represented me against your father in the road dispute between us. Of course, it was dropped right after Abe's death."

"I remember now. Paw was impressed that Bartlett stood up to the Winde brothers." Junior remembered that his father was furious about losing in court at a preliminary hearing, but he didn't mention anything more to Rick for he did not want to open old wounds.

"That's the one."

"But, I really wanted to talk to you about the loan you gave me for law school." This was the only obstacle left to his moving back to Stark County.

"After your mother died, we wanted to do something for you."

"I can't pay it back for awhile. I had a good job in DC and it will be tough getting a law practice goin."

Rick seemed unconcerned. "Don't worry about that."

"You sure?"

"Business has been good. Circulation increased ten percent over last year. Ad space has doubled with the new Lowe's shopping center." Rick talked a notch louder over the rain tapping on the roof. "There'll be a new four lane road coming to Stark County and there'll be more stuff going on."

"Really? I hope this place doesn't change."

"It's tough. I don't want this county looking like New York."

"It has changed. Seems that my high school friends are all gone." Junior wished he could have taken this comment back, for it might have reminded Rick of Abe's premature death.

It did and the editor tried to hide it. "Mary and I think of him everyday. But we're sorry about Lightfeather. I know you were close."

"Yeah, I miss him. That's why I am stayin," Junior said as the storm intensified, water pounding on the sides and roof. "I promised him I would take care of his animals."

"Is that it?"

Junior, forced to tell the real reason for his visit, explained, "I need to know what is goin on at the Reservation." They could feel the boxcar starting to sway in the rain and wind.

"There's something afoot there. Look at the new housing development up on Possum Trot near Egg Gap. One of those gated places."

"Yeah, it looks like a fort." Junior commented but that was not on his mind. "Do you have any theory about what happened to Lightfeather?"

"The Sheriff doesn't have too much there to go on."

"He seems not to have it all together." Junior surmised.

"Yeah, the last Sheriff we had was great."

"What happened to him?" Junior asked as he looked at the pen on Rick's desk slide around with each gust of wind.

"After he helped me get Jackson, he took a job with the NYPD in Internal Affairs." Rick said as he picked up the pen before it went to the floor. "He was so interested in police corruption that he moved to the Big Apple."

"I got a likin for city life."

"That's strange. People are starting to move here from all parts from the country." The editor tried to grab a rolling pen on his massive desk, but it escaped to the floor. "I have to meet a couple from the Great Plains in a few minutes to work up some ads for their new business."

“Yeah, but it’s forcing the natives away.”

“Look at the Sheriff we had. Wish we still had him.”

Junior nodded his head in agreement.

“I tried to do a follow-up on the murder. Sheriff Franks won’t tell me too much.” Rick paused while lightning struck somewhere downtown and the lights in the office flickered. “I tried to interview people at the Reservation.”

“It’s a closed place. The Indians stick together pretty tight.”

“Yeah, I know about that.”

“I may have to live there after awhile.”

“What! Are you crazy?” Rick picked up the pen on the carpet.

“It’ll be okay. There’s a neighbor who seems to be pretty nice. But I miss Lightfeather. He never hurt anybody.” Junior’s eyes watered. “Helped the animals on the place.” He composed himself when Molly came into the boxcar with a stack of papers. Junior gazed at her and stood up to shake her hand. “You still look the same as in high school.”

It appeared to Junior that she did not take that as a compliment. In a professional manner she reached for his hand. “Yeah, I was a senior when you just started at Stark High.” She placed the material neatly on his desk and left.

“She’s married,” Rick noted.

Junior shrugged his shoulders as the car shook from a volley of thunder rumbling nearby. The early summer storm would not let up.

“Look, why don’t you go to church with Mary and me?”

“Why? I like the preachin at Fox Den.”

“There’s a youth group here in Mulberry.” Rick suggested.

“I’m too old for that.”

“No, you’re not. Julie says there’s a girl twenty in the group.”

“I’m a lot older than that.”

“Yeah, real old.”

“Anyway, I don’t fit in with that snobby crowd from town.”

“I know, Junior, but you’ll need to get out and socialize.” The editor held on to his desk during a lightning bolt.

“Yeah, I admit, there’s not much night life on the Reservation.”

“More than Corn Still?” Rick asked with a hint of cynicism.

Junior remembered and tried to equal the sarcasm. “I forgot. There’s a lot of night life out there.”

“What’s that?”

“I’d live with a bunch of owls.”

“Seriously, you’ll need to get out.”

“Yeah, my Paw wants me to get married and have younguns.”

“Mary would like a little grandbaby.”

“Not from you folks too.” Junior blushed. “What about Julie? She’ll have kids for you soon.”

“Maybe in a few years. I don’t like the kid she’s hanging out with.”

“Why?”

“He’s just a redneck.”

“It seems that someone could take advantage of her.” Junior concluded.

“I agree. She’s too trusting.”

“Look, I have to go back to the Reservation to feed Lightfeather’s owls. I forgot to do it when I was there this morning. I was delayed. Anyway, they’re probably freakin out in the storm.” Junior looked at all the metal in the office. He thought this was not the safest place to be in a lightning storm. The steel boxcar sat on wheels and springs made of similar material lying on a ribbon of rails stretching across the United States, all of this being an excellent conductor of electricity.

“Son, if you are going to practice here, you need to join the Chamber of Commerce. Go to one of the service clubs in town.”

Junior was concerned for his safety but needed to be polite. “I wouldn’t fit into those clubs. That would bore me.” Junior still had a free spirit and did not like organized activities. It was bad enough to follow a host of rules, deadlines and regulations being a lawyer. He rose from the chair hoping Rick would get the message.

“You’ll get to know important people.”

“No thanks.” Junior politely said.

“Well, if you change your mind let me know.”

“If business gets too bad.”

“I have a favor to ask you.” Rick leaned forward from his desk.

“Sure. What?”

“I have to be out of town next month in Richmond at a press convention. Now those will put you to sleep. Have no one to cover the road hearing.”

“What about your other employees?”

“They’re going on a hunting trip together.”

“You’re in bad shape.”

“What can I do?” Rick pleaded. “You sure you want to start your own business?”

Junior wasn’t going to be talked out of his decision and didn’t need to answer his question. “So do you want me to report on it for the

paper?" After Rick nodded, Junior tried to think of an excuse. "I've never done this."

"I'm sure you can. You'll meet Ms. Winde there. She's a single woman. The word on the street is that she has a lot of money."

"I know who she is. But thanks anyway. I don't want to get involved with women at this point."

"You would have a lot in common with her."

"Like what?"

"You are both tall." Rick paused. "Both attorneys."

"No thanks."

"Will you do this for me?" Rick begged once more.

"What about Larry?"

"He'll be on the hunting trip."

"I guess I can start paying off the loan." Nervous about the weather, Junior glanced at his wristwatch. "I need to go."

Molly came rushing in the office. "There's a big hole in the front. Water's comin in."

Both men followed her to the far end of the reception area where it met with the other boxcar. Instead of being connected, there was a six inch gap surrounding them on the top, floor and two sides. A young couple held each other for dear life on the couch. Wind and rain poured through the opening. The addition section, sandwiched between the box cars, remained stable; however since the partitioned car was not as heavy with furniture and files as Rick's car, it swayed back and forth. The folding table and seats rolled back and forth like deck chairs on a ship in heavy swells at sea.

Junior volunteered, "I'll go and get some plastic at the hardware store."

"Son, there's no time for that." Rick's newspapers piled up in the reception area were starting to get soaked. "Let's move these papers." Before the men had a chance to act, a rumbling sound like an approaching train came from downstream toward the town. It became louder and closer.

The young man on the couch still holding his wife said, "That's a tornado!"

His wife added, "Force four."

"Where can we go?" Rick shouted.

"We need to get under that deck outside," the female visitor said.

"I need to get my umbrella." Rick said.

"No time," she shouted. "Right now."

The group went out in the pouring rain and crawled underneath the wooden structure. Barely enough room for the five

Ed Krause

adults, they squeezed together lying flat on sharp railroad ballast. All got soaked and were uncomfortable but they were in the safest place available. After the tornado passed harmlessly below both the railroad bridge and the confluence of the East and West Prong, the young woman was the first to scamper out. “We moved from Oklahoma to get away from these things.”

Chapter 7

Lightfeather's remains were disposed of at the burial site according to Indian custom, as set out in the document containing all the symbols. After this, Junior decided to live in Allison's old trailer on Corn Still. It was too painful and lonely to stay at the big home place by himself. Lightfeather's trailer remained uninhabitable and Junior felt uneasy about living on the Reservation just yet.

Within a month after his return to Stark County in June, he opened a law practice in the first floor of an old two-story brick building one block from the Courthouse. Renting the space from the estate of Arthur Waddsworth for a nominal amount, the young attorney moved in the very office once occupied by the respected late barrister. That family was happy not only to have it finally put to good use after years of being vacant since his death in 1985, but to have an attorney from a well-liked clan in Stark County who could pass on a tradition of providing quality legal services. The place still had a smell of stale cigarette smoke, a feel of dust over everything, and burnt spots in the carpet.

Between taking care of Lightfeather's owls, doing much needed chores on Corn Still, visiting his father at the nursing home, and starting up a law practice, Junior did not dwell on the ring or even on his friend's untimely death. The latter was the job of the Sheriff's Department, but after a few weeks it started to bother him, especially when he went over to the Reservation to feed the birds.

Law school curriculum didn't include a course on either establishing a law practice or its operation. Junior had little guidance on how to buy a typewriter, rent a copier, set up a business checking account, or order supplies. Clients didn't flood his office at first, but he was busy with land titles referred by attorney Bartlett from Riverport and court appointed criminal defense work. These tasks didn't require much typing, but when needed, he resorted to the hunt and peck method on his Remington machine. At first, the only people to frequent his office were sales people of every type, lost travelers seeking directions, the postman delivering mail addressed to the 'occupant,' and Hoss seeking companionship in place of his dog that had recently died.

By late summer, paying traffic increased. He now required a secretary and placed an ad in the *Guardian* to solicit help. The mail brought over a dozen resumes that he whittled down to four people. Prospective candidates making the first cut lined up for interviews on the Friday morning before the Labor Day holiday. He didn't have any

appointments with clients or court appearances that day and devoted his time to the selection process. Anyway, the judicial system consisted of Judge Pickens, who usually took the day off before any long holiday weekend.

The first applicant was a middle aged woman who still lived with her parents and needed to get out of the house to have someone to talk with. The second was an elderly lady who could hardly hear and shouted in her normal conversations. None of these facts appeared on their bio sheets.

The third person he knew, and addressed her right off the bat, "I thought you were still in high school." Junior got a big hug upon Julie's arrival in the reception area. The top of the girl's head barely came up to his broad shoulders.

"I went to summer school and got out last week," she proudly said and added, "With honors."

"Well, what's your work experience?" Junior ushered her to a second hand sofa that came from the living room of his home place, the only piece of furnishing in the reception area other than a square coffee table with three good legs.

"You know I'm a waitress at the Wagon."

"What's wrong with stayin there?"

"I want a challenge."

"Have you worked in an office before?" Junior asked as he moved a pile of books off the other end of the couch and sat down.

"I do stuff with Dad at the paper."

Junior thought about the rain and wind damage at the *Guardian*. "Dad needs a lot of help now."

"I had to clean that mess up. But I need a challenge." She gazed down at the stained, torn and burnt carpet. Her eyes turned upward to the flakey plaster walls and then straight to the smudged front window. "This place needs a woman's touch."

"But you're not even eighteen."

"So?" Julie moved a pile of *Bow Hunter* magazines on one end of the table to the center causing a slight change in the weight distribution, but enough to cause the other end to collapse, sending the periodicals over the carpet.

Junior crawled across the floor picking them up. "Can you type?"

"No, but I can use the keyboard. I was the top student at Stark High in computer science." She looked at his typewriter on the desk in the adjoining room. "Where did you get that? At a flea market?"

Junior stood silent and did not argue or respond to her leading question. He hoped that the meager compensation would deter her. He still had one other potential candidate to interview. "I can't pay you that much."

"How much?" Julie asked as she took a water bottle from her purse.

"Just five an hour."

That did not seem to bother her in the least. "That's okay." She dug a Baby Ruth candy bar out of her dungarees pocket.

The telephone rang and he left for the empty secretarial space in the adjoining room. Junior squatted down on the floor to take the call. The clerk at the Circuit Court told him that he was appointed to represent a man in jail on drug charges. He promised to stop by the Courthouse to pick up a copy of the file and to see the defendant before noon.

After this interview, he decided to take a chance on Julie, liking her enthusiasm and spunk. Anyway, how could Junior refuse his godparents' daughter, almost like a blood relative? In a convoluted way, she was kin to him; she was Abe's adopted sister and Junior had a part of Abe in him. Julie was attractive and pleasant, a little childish in her ways, but Junior thought he could mold her into a real asset to his business. It was getting close to dinnertime and he needed to see his new client in jail before they were fed the noon meal. "Okay, you're hired." Junior moved back to his office and the girl bounced behind him.

"When do I start?" Julie tore the wrapper off the candy and threw it in a paint bucket that served as a trash can.

"Why don't you come in Tuesday after the holiday?"

After looking at his office again, she shook her head in a disgusted way and said urgently, "I need to clean this place now."

"Right now?"

"Yes." Julie took a drink from the bottle.

"I guess so." Junior glanced around. "Maybe it needs some sprucin up."

"If I'm going to be in this place, I need it the way I like it."

"Really?" Junior thought he might get more than he bargained for. "Are you really serious?"

"I am. Do you mind if I come in here this weekend?" She took a bite of the Baby Ruth and started munching.

Junior shrugged his shoulders but he remembered something that was nagging him. "Say I want to keep Angus over the long weekend."

Julie mumbled as she finished the candy. "I haven't seen him much myself."

"But he's my dog," he said in a possessive, lawyerly tone.

"I have been taking care of him while you are away." She took a swig of water to wash down the candy.

Junior didn't want to antagonize his new employee right off the bat. "How about if I have him Sunday?"

"Okay, I'll be here some and at church most of the day. Just have him back by six."

Junior was confused and then tried to be sarcastic. "So he can get ready for school on Monday?"

"There's no school on Labor Day. If you really want to know, it's because he needs to be fed at that time. He gets a special diet for his skin."

"Fine. Sorry I asked." The attorney grabbed a yellow pad of paper on the floor while she sat down in the chair in front of his desk and started scribbling a list on one of her pads from the restaurant.

"What are you doin'?"

"Stuff I need at Lowe's for this place."

"I suppose you want my charge card."

"That would help."

"Anything else?"

"A key to the place." She emphasized 'place' in a disapproving way.

He pointed to a spare that dangled on a nail holding up a cardboard sign touting his profession. She shook her head in disgust. After digging the plastic money out of his wallet, he walked to the door. Junior met the next person looking for a job, a woman with a triple X rated tattoo plastered on her arm; that too was not disclosed on her resume. Traveling to the Courthouse, he was satisfied with his choice of an employee.

At the Clerk's office he requested the Defendant's file and an assistant handed him a slim 'shuck' with a Chinese name on it. He made a copy of the warrant indicating charges of possession of less than one half of an ounce of marijuana and drug paraphernalia. The District Attorney would, in all likelihood plea this down to the latter offense and drop the possession of pot. If the DA felt good that day, he would even agree to a deferral so that the charge would not go on the Defendant's record. Junior had done this a few times before for similar crimes, but this would not be a sure thing. He learned fast in dealing with criminal clients not to give them false hopes or to raise their expectations.

At the jail, a deputy unlocked a storage room and Junior waited for his client to be brought in from the upstairs cells. During this time, the attorney examined the papers. The Defendant had a Las Vegas address with no past criminal record. Soon a small-framed Asian man came in dressed in an orange jump suit. The hair on his head and in his mustache was immaculately groomed, not typical of the common person charged with drugs.

“I’m your lawyer. My name is Mr. Garfield.”

“This is a setup. I didn’t know the stuff was in the glove compartment. It’s a rental car, I picked it up at the airport.”

“Hold on. Let me explain, I want you to be truthful to me. If you do not tell the truth as to what happened, I can’t help you.” Junior paid close attention to his choice of words and his client’s surprise reaction. This was unusual in a number of respects; there are not too many rental cars around, not many people from out West, and a different story than what your garden variety druggie would say. “Who set you up?” The man clammed up and took a step back. Junior tried to convince him that he was here to help. “I’m your attorney. Sworn to secrecy.”

The client came closer and whispered. “It’s the mob. The owners of the Jackpotty on the Strip.”

Junior chuckled to himself, then said ‘Jack Potty’ but was confused as to its location. “Where?”

“Las Vegas,” the accused prisoner said slowly.

Junior felt embarrassed but continued. “Why would they do that?”

“I’m here to give it to a big shot attorney for something.” He looked at Junior’s dungarees. “It’s not you.”

“Who is it?” Junior tried to deflect his casual dress.

“I really don’t know who it is. I was to call when I got here.” He continued in broken English. “Had a half a million cash in the baggie. The mob never wanted it delivered. They tipped off the cops here to get me busted. The mob has someone here in the Sheriff’s office that would get the money back and ship it back to Vegas. The attorney’ll have to account for the money even if he didn’t get it. They want some something more than money.”

“What do they want?” Junior didn’t expect a truthful or even a plausible answer.

“I don’t know. Honest to God.”

“Well, where’s the money?”

The man sat silent as a church mouse.

“I’m sworn to secrecy.” Junior assured him once more. “Professional ethics.”

“I hid it before coming into town. I got wind of the plan in Riverport.”

Junior interrupted his broken English. “Is it an airplane?”

“No, it was a plan by the mob.”

“A what?”

The Asian spelled it. “P L A N.”

“Why didn’t you just get rid of the pot stuff?”

“I had to act this part out to stay alive. If they ever suspect me, I’m a toasty fortune cookie. Can you get the bag and use money to get me out of this hole?”

“Do you mean use it for bail?”

“Yeah that’s what they call it. Will you get it for me?”

“I guess.” Junior felt skeptical about not only this request, but also more about his entire story.

“You can have ten thou of the money.”

“Is that ten thousand dollars?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t take a dime. I don’t know if I can even do this for you.” Junior thought about this scheme a few seconds while bending down and tying one of his work boots. “I can’t see why I can’t use the money to bond you out?”

“Please. When I get out of here, I’m getting out of the country. I have some friends in Chinatown in San Francisco. They will help me get home.”

“I’ll do it because I must represent you to the best of my abilities. I guess I’ll get the money and make your bail. I’ll take just enough money so you can get out. You can get the rest on your way out of town. There’ll be a failure to appear and an order for your arrest when you don’t show up to Court next month.”

“I’ll be long gone.”

Junior was confused about the whole thing, but had an ethical duty to do what his client wanted within certain bounds. He thought that to retrieve the money that was under his client’s control and to use it for the benefit of his client would not violate any canons of ethics. However in an around about way, Junior consented to his client not attending court, perhaps a technical breach of the rules that the attorney overlooked for the present. The man’s eyes brightened when Junior said “Okay.”

“Can you do it now?”

“No, I can’t right now.” Junior still wanted to think about this overnight and a night in jail would not hurt the man too much.

“When?”

“Tomorrow. First thing.”

“Thanks. I’ll leave fifty thou for you.”

“No, I told you that before,” Junior said.

“Sure?”

“Well, where is it?”

“It’s just on the top of the grade from Riverport. Then you go down the highway to this place.”

“Pump Gap?”

“Yeah. I think I saw a sign or something. It was Pump Gap Store. Behind there. It’s in an old washing machine.”

“A washing machine!” In Junior’s mind the Asian was probably not used to dealing with an honest person, and for that matter, a straight lawyer. They may not have existed where this chap was from. “Where’s the money?” Junior wanted to make sure but did not expect an honest answer.

“In the washing machine.”

The entire story seemed bizarre and Junior would probably end up on a wild goose chase. Even if money existed, would someone follow him to it? Would he be in danger? Junior needed to be careful of this scheme.

In any case it had to be laundered money for sure.

Chapter 8

The day after Junior met with his Chinese client, he left Allison's trailer on Corn Still first thing in the morning without breakfast. He planned to stop for something to eat at the Chuck Wagon, drop by his office in Mulberry to make phone calls, and pick up a file. Then he would head out of town down to Riverport to visit his father. On his way there, south on Highway 10, he could retrieve the bail money. Would anyone follow him?

He checked his rear view mirror as he turned on Rooster Trace from Corn Still. At the Bear Lick turnoff on Possum Trot he stopped a few minutes to determine if he was followed. The sun just appeared far in the distance over Mount Clifton and spread its rays over the gentle upper land to the west towards the Indian Reservation. A ribbon of fog obscured Bear Lick Creek and the pastures beside it. He wished he could have been an eagle to float without a sound in the sky and to take it all in as no one else could. Forgetting to worry about the possibility of being followed, he waited for a chance to see the eagles for there were three nests on or near the Reservation this summer. On the journey to Mulberry, he never looked back and he didn't need to.

It was Saturday and the restaurant was filled as usual. He had spent a sleepless night alone in the empty trailer and it was good to be with people. His thoughts drifted back to his meeting with Lightfeather at the table next to the kitchen, the last time he saw him alive. The burned out video poker machine on the other end of the Wagon also reminded him of his Aunt Allison. Unfortunately, she would never play again, for Junior had had to commit her to a mental hospital. The good news was that she might be transferred soon to the same nursing home as Buddy, her brother. Junior parked himself on a stool on the counter next to the cash register. A middle aged man came up to pay his bill and spoke to Junior, "I have a closing for you to do."

"What's your name?"

"You know, I go to the church with the Queens."

This did not jog Junior's mind. "Sorry."

"Well, it's Tollman. I need to see you now."

"Can't it wait until Tuesday?" Junior asked.

"No." The man almost pounded his fist on the counter.

"What's this about?"

"I am a real estate broker and I want it done now."

"I can't do anything over the weekend." Junior tried to be civil with the pest. "I'll be in the office first thing Tuesday."

"What about Monday?"

“It’s a holiday and I’m goin to the races. Haven’t been for years.”

The realtor was not interested in any excuses or Junior’s personal desires. “It has to close next week.”

“Why?”

“The sellers are moving to California and need their money.”

“Well, who are the buyers?” Junior asked, not taking his eyes off the waitress trying to work the cash register. Obviously, this was her first day because she didn’t know how to punch the numbers in the correct order and didn’t have the strength yet to perform the task. A veteran waitress at the Wagon had strong finger muscles.

“A Bartlett woman. The property is up in the Balds.” The realtor reached in his pocket for his wallet.

“Now I remember. She talked to me last week. She is related to an attorney friend of mine,” Junior tried to ignore the man by turning to the menu which he knew by heart, but could not shake the guy off. “I told her to have you fax me a contract. Did you do that?”

Tollman hemmed and hawed. “Um. I’ll check with my secretary. She was supposed to do that.”

“Look, there is a bank involved.” Junior motioned to the waitress across the counter. “They take forever.”

She responded. “Sorry, this is my first day.”

Junior apologized. “I wasn’t talking about you.”

The realtor demanded, “Call them to speed this up.”

“You contact them.” Junior was not interested in pursuing the conversation, this was not the time or place. “Anyway, the property has to be surveyed.”

“Why’s that?” Tollman looked glum.

“Because it has to be done.”

“Well then, you better get on that.”

“You call the surveyor. I don’t want my client obligated for that if the deal falls through. Besides, if I call him, then I’m responsible.” Junior slid off the stool and went back towards the disabled video machine pretending to go to the rest room. He looked back at the cash register. The realtor left but the waitress was talking to an Asian man, a person with a similar build as his criminal client sitting in jail, but without the mustache. She pointed across Main Street towards Junior’s office, and the man promptly left.

Upon Junior’s return to his place at the counter, the girl complained, “That cheapskate. He only left a dime for a tip.”

“Are you talking about that foreign person?”

“No, that man you were talking to.” The waitress said as she poured a cup of coffee in front of him. “The Chinese guy only wanted directions to a lawyer’s office.”

Junior didn’t have to ask any other questions. He gulped the drink and didn’t bother with breakfast. He would get something at a fast food place in Riverport. That’s if he ever got there.

Instead of returning to his office, Junior cased it from behind the statue of Robert E Lee on the Courthouse lawn. Inside the old Waddsworth building, the lights were on with a flurry of activity with little people swarming inside. From this distance, Junior could not tell who they were or even their gender. It could be a bunch of Chinese ransacking his office.

From behind a bush right next to the Courthouse building, a slurred voice shouted. “Wha-what What are y-you doin here?”

Junior jumped almost to the saddle of the General’s bronze horse and then turned around. “Hoss! You scared me!”

“Sorry I, I, was I look, lookin for some some em.”

“Could you do me a favor?”

“Like the I-last t-time?”

He remembered being stuck up on the balcony with Abe Queen and then escorted back to the Sheriff. “Not exactly.”

“Will I g-g-go to to jail?”

Junior did not tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth to the drunk. “Don’t think so.”

Hoss was no dummy and asked, “You, you sure?”

“You will not go to jail. Even if you do, I’ll personally get you out. I’m a lawyer now.”

“They let, let anybody do that now. There’s too too many of em around. When I I watch TV at the the jail. See em all the the time on those ads. Haven’t seen you you on TV.”

“I’m not that desperate yet. Please, can you help?”

“Wh- what do you want?”

“Could you go across the street and see who’s in the office over there?”

“Th, that’s old man’s Waddsworth place. He’s in there. I saw him. Go in there this m-morning when I got up.”

“Yeah.” Junior did not have the time to explain that it was his office now and that the senior attorney died years ago. “Just tell me who’s in there.”

Hoss complied willingly just like he did ten years ago with measuring the Courthouse. The drunk walked in a fairly straight line across Main Street. Hoss peered in the window for ten minutes. It

must have scared the occupants half to death. Junior grew impatient and paced around in the bushes surrounding the Courthouse. He found the liquor bottle the town drunk was looking for and then glanced at his office across the street.

The door opened for Hoss and he slipped inside for a minute. When he returned, Junior asked, "What's going on?"

"Just a bunch of of aliens."

"Are there still aliens around?"

"When I g-g- go, in the W- Wagon, all all the time."

"What do they look like?"

"Have black hair."

"Have you seen them before?"

"Everyday. They work at the W-Wagon. They giggle a lot."

"Thanks." Junior handed the drunk the bottle. "Is this what you are looking for?"

A big grin covered the man's unshaven face.

Junior left Hoss to his pleasure and not only found a group of high school girls buzzing around inside the building, but his office in the process of being transformed. Curtains hung on the spotless front window; walls in the reception area had been cleaned of the layers of tobacco smoke; and most of the carpet looked a uniform color. End tables magically appeared, shined, with flowers on top and 'Good Housekeeping' magazines were neatly stacked on a new matching coffee table, all of which were absent yesterday. One little girl had a paint brush in hand, another lugged a steam cleaner across the carpet, and the third stood on a ladder rubbing a light fixture with a cloth. Julie, the ringleader, came from the back with a wet mop no bigger than her body and hair. She dropped it and squeezed Junior tight.

He squirmed. "Let me loose."

She complied. "Come back to my office." Julie grabbed a water bottle in one hand and Junior's hand in the other. She led him through an open doorway. "I hope you don't mind. I like this for my office."

Junior's eyes squinted in disbelief and he stood speechless for the moment. Half the room was painted pink!

"You can have any color for your office." After taking a drink of water and time for Junior to recover from shock, she guided him to the adjoining room.

"Thanks."

"I prefer this red." Julie pointed to a color chart that was taped on the wall next to his law license, the only item hung up in the room. "It would go with my office."

“Whatever you say.” Junior sighed. “Boss.”

Then she chuckled and asked, “What are you doing here?”

“I just stopped on the way out of town to get a few things. I’ll be out of your way in a minute.” Junior felt like an intruder in his own home. Upon a closer inspection of his desk top, he said, “Where are my files?”

“Junior, I organized them and made these.” The teenage girl handed him a three by five index card taken from a shoe box.

“I don’t have that many. I just keep the ones I am working with on top of my desk.” Junior pointed to a spotless desk. “What have you done with the State vs Wong file? Now, I can’t find a thing.”

“It’s in the file cabinet. Top drawer.” She pulled a file out neatly labeled with all the papers clipped in and gave it to him. “I did it last night. Hope you don’t mind.”

What could Junior say? He couldn’t very well fire the girl. She hadn’t even started working yet. Anyway, he was outnumbered, and they had weapons.

A man dressed in overalls and muddy boots waltzed into his office ignoring the girls. Junior shut the door, leaving the female worker bees to their tasks in the front of the building. The unexpected client shook some papers in the air. “I’ve been lawed by this Doctor Cohn. He bought the Simmons place on Panther Branch. Tore the home place down and built a mansion. Even the barn was replaced with a gym of sort. Another thing strange I saw.”

Junior was forced to say, “What’s that then?”

“There’s this here bathtub mounted on a deck. Why would anyone wanta take a bath right outside where everyone can see you. When the guy turns it on, water bubbles up. Like a big mixing bowl. Those people do some strange things. I seen em in there drinkin wine while takin a bath together.”

Impatient, Junior said, “I have to meet someone in Riverport.”

“Okay, well the doctor has lawed me over my dog. Ole Yeller just jumped his fence and mauled a llama. Don’t know why in the world he keeps a pack of em runnin round. Can’t eat em. Good for nothin.”

“Has your dog done this before?” the attorney asked.

“No.”

“That’s good.”

“Why?”

“Usually a dog is entitled to a free bite.”

“Really? Does that go for my other dogs?”

“I wouldn’t push it.”

“I tried to be a good neighbor. I had to go over yonder to show the doc how to run a chain saw. Another time I had to show him where the reverse gear is on his big ole John Deere tractor. It’s the biggest they make.”

“Sounds like he’s not from these parts.”

“Yeah, boy!”

Junior was now curious about the situation. “Where did he come from?”

“He sold his doctoring business in Atlanta. He said he was one of those cardiologists. I go to one of those people in Riverport for my ole ticker.”

“Let’s get to the heart of the matter. I have to go.”

“Can’t help if the dog goes out and has some fun. Will you help me?” The man handed the papers to Junior.

“I’ll look at it Tuesday. I have to go.” Grabbing the criminal file, Junior beat the man and the girls out of his office and retreated to the safety of his pick-up.

But he had another gang after him; a white limo tailgated him out of town south on Highway 10. As Junior speeded up, it followed suit. One mile out, trying to shake them off, he made a sharp turn to the right into the Lowe’s shopping center. Junior saw the limousine try to do the same, but the vehicle the size of three cars side swiped a ‘Do Not Enter’ sign knocking it over in the grass median. It did not faze the driver in the least and the limo kept following his pick-up in the crowded lot. Junior parked in a handicap place near the front door and rushed into the store. He had been in such a place in Northern Virginia and this was identical to it, right down to the placement of the shopping carts and the credit applications on the service desk. It was still hard to find anything in these mega warehouses, so it was easy for Junior to get lost awhile. He found some insulation batts stacked all the way to the two story ceiling and blended in with the building material. However, a man removed a roll of fiberglass from a shorter pile and he was discovered. Junior gasped. “Grover Ashbrook. What are you doing here?”

“What are you doin in a bunch of insulation?”

“It’s getting a little hot for me.”

“You’re in the right place then. What’s goin on?”

“Can’t explain.” Junior whispered. “I need you to do a favor for me right now.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll give you the keys to my truck.” Junior dug into his pocket. “It’s parked outside in a handicap space. You can’t miss it.”

“You want me to pay a parking ticket that you got?” Ashbrook asked seriously.

“No. Just drive it back to your house.”

“That’ll take at least a month.”

“Why?”

“I live in Alaska now. I’m just visiting here. Matter of fact, I heard your Paw was sick and I am on my way to Corn Still to visit with him. I tried calling the house from up there, but nobody was home all the time. Hope you don’t mind if I stay a few days.”

“That’s fine. Stay as long as you want,” Junior said quickly.

“I was getting some supplies before I came. I know your attic needs some of this and I was going to help out.”

“He isn’t there.”

“Where is he?”

“Can’t explain.” Junior glanced around searching the store.

“Why don’t you drive my truck back to Corn Still and wait?”

“What’s goin on?”

“I need to take your truck. I’ll explain later. It’s complicated.”

Junior handed over the keys.

Grover complied and Junior knew he would do almost anything for the Garfields, without an explanation. After he got the new keys, Junior waited fifteen minutes before he ventured out of the store. His pick-up and the limo were nowhere to be found. With Grover’s truck, the drive on Highway 10 south was not relaxing for several reasons. Ever since the new Lowe’s was built, traffic was awful. It took Junior half an hour to get to the Pump Gap General Store. The limo, the money, and his Asian client bothered him the most.

On the crest of the grade, he parked in the rear of the store next to the dumpster, not wanting anyone to see him. There were several old washers and dryers scattered about. It looked like an outdoor laundromat! Junior took a leak behind an appliance for the benefit of anyone who might be watching. So much for modesty. After searching three machines, Junior found one washer containing a plastic garbage bag stuffed with one hundred dollar bills. He waited a minute to survey the area again and then counted out ten from the top of the wad. It didn’t even make a dent in the contents of the bag. He had never seen so much money; a few bills could have been taken and they would never be missed.

His visit with his father was longer than expected. They talked about Corn Still and his law practice only in general terms, nothing about the Chinese connection. Junior had to cut the stay short and left at three in the afternoon for he wanted to return to Mulberry before dark. The magistrate's office where the bond would be posted would close at five. After that time he would have disturb the man at home; based on prior experience, that would not be pleasant or productive. When Junior arrived at their place in the Courthouse just before closing time, they told him that some one had put up Mr. Wong's bond and that the Defendant was released earlier that morning. This was confirmed at the jail by a deputy. What would Junior do with the money? Return it to the washing machine? To be recycled again? Did Wong go back and get the money? Where did he go? Should Junior go back and check it up on Pump Gap? His mind was in a spin cycle. He certainly didn't want to go back to his office.

Chapter 9

Junior sat alone on the front row in the courtroom in a section designated for the press. With a reporter's pad in hand, he waited to cover the public hearing on the building of the four lane Interstate 26 extension north through Stark County. Eventually the highway would run from Charleston, South Carolina to Cleveland, Ohio. At present, the northern terminus temporarily stood at Riverport, Tennessee. He knew that although the road was designated as an even number in America's interstate system and the rules required east-west signs, everyone was confused in North Carolina and Tennessee. Both on the map and on the ground in these two states, the road ran almost in a due north-south direction. There would also be the same bewilderment here in southwest Virginia. No one would be going east to west or vice versa to travel on the new road. Moreover the highway in parts of North Carolina was labeled 'Future I 26'. What did that mean? Where is it? In Outer Space? Some of the less astute drivers spent days riding around the countryside trying to find the present I-26. Their tale would have been a good episode for the TV series, *The Twilight Zone*. All of this nonsense was the brainchild of some bureaucrat in Washington DC, a place light years away.

Tonight, to be debated, were two alternate routes up the Dutch Curve River valley to Mulberry, one on each side of the waterway. Then, a final vote would be taken by the Highway Commission. Each course had only one interchange in Stark County, located just above Mulberry to serve as access to the town and the county. From there, both proposals would merge and follow the East Prong to the north, eventually ending at the industrial shores of Lake Erie near Cleveland.

The western route was an expansion and widening of the present U S Highway 10 through Pump Gap on the railroad side of the Dutch Curve River. It deviated from the existing Highway outside of town near the Lowe's shopping center, keeping those stores intact. However, it would destroy the prosperous Dino coal quarry on the west bank of the river below town.

From Riverport, the other route ran up on the east side of the waterway cutting a swath through virgin forest on government lands both above the shale cliffs and skirting the Bear Lick Reservation to the south of the Indian property. Then the road would turn north and pierce through farmland between its eastern periphery of the pentagon and Possum Trot Road.

It was expected that the TV and a news reporter from Riverport were to be there, but they had not yet arrived. People started

drifting in and soon both sides of the large audience section were filled to capacity. Everyone waited for the members of the Commission to begin the meeting at seven.

On the right side of the room facing the crowd were all men wearing work boots, dungarees, hunting caps and red jackets. All that was lacking were the shotguns that they hung on racks in their pick-ups parked outside. An aromatic mixture of woodsmoke and body odor hung over this section.

The left side of the aisle contained a gender mixed audience, better dressed, some even with ties and suits; it was clear that many of these people were from out of town. On their lapels or shirts, each person of this group wore a green button with a yellow eagle in the center; the exact logo appeared as one of the animals on Lightfeather's shed.

About half an hour after the meeting was scheduled, four men and a woman marched single file out from a side door in the front of the courtroom just to the side of the Judge's bench. A cloud of cigarette smoke followed them as they all sat in the old wooden tables beyond the bar where the lawyers typically sat for court. Unlike the attorneys and their clients, this group now faced the audience. A tense silence fell over the room as all the Commissioners stared at the audience.

The Chairman, Brent Tingle, took out a pocket size King James Bible from his dungarees and opened the meeting in a shrill prayer breaking the long silence. It sounded like a Southern Baptist preacher at the end of a week long revival service. During the diatribe, Junior opened a slender reporter's pad on his lap and started doodling without any one watching. After Tingle finished, there were several amens all coming from the right side of the room. "I'd like to call this here meetin to order. Helen, what do you've got for we folks tonight? You're the local commissioner here in these parts."

"The board needs to hear from these local folks on the highway." Helen Winde, also the county attorney, looked at the right side of the room with a smile. "The staff of the Commission has proposed two different routes. The Pump Gap and the Possum Trot. They say that the one on the east side, the Possum Trot, will cause less damage to any businesses. The Pump Gap route will destroy the General store up there. And more importantly, close the Dino quarry. This company provides many jobs in Stark County and has been a good neighbor. It's the biggest employer in these parts." The attorney pointed to Mr. Dino and a scattering of amens originated from the right side. This statement was not entirely true because the schools

employed the largest number, but the quarry was the main private concern. “There’s an increased demand for coal due to the energy crisis in the Middle East. You folks all know that a few years ago we had lines at the gas station here in town.” Winde waved to a map hung on a blackboard in the center of the courtroom in front of the judge’s bench. “I know Mr. Dino here. He’s a good man and my brothers represented him over the years. My daddy knew him well.”

“Sounds like a winner,” Tingle said.

Garland Jones had to act fast. The young commissioner stood up and took off his sports jacket, ready for battle. “Property owners on the upper part of Bear Lick Road near where it goes by Possum Trot will lose their homes. Some of them will be adversely affected by the noise. We need to listen to them.”

Helen interrupted a short applause from the left side of the courtroom. “I know there are plenty of outsiders here and they don’t live in this county. A lot of them are from some environmental group, out of town types. I recommend that only people from Stark County be allowed to express an opinion.” This time a round of clapping came from the right. “In fact, why don’t we save a lot of time and have people who live here, stand in support of the Possum Trot route? We can’t be here all night.”

Before anyone had time to act on this request, Jones again responded without delay. “Ms. Winde, this is not a popularity contest here, we need to listen to both sides on this issue. A fair way is to give each side an equal amount of time, let’s say, one hour.” The left side of the room erupted in a sustained applause while the other side booed.

It appeared to Junior that Tingle felt a little threatened and that Helen’s authority was being questioned. The Chairman wanted to save face for the attorney and defuse the tension, “Okay, let’s listen to all the folks here a bit.”

Jones spoke. “Each side gets an hour.”

The other Commissioners nodded together like a family of monkeys caged up at the zoo.

“The Dino and the business folks should go first.” Helen said. Junior figured that she wanted the environmentalists and press to wonder off by the time it was their turn, but he was determined to stay to the bitter end to cover the story for the *Guardian*.

Mr. Dino first approached the board, giving a history of the company, stating all the names of the people in Stark County that worked there and touting his contributions to the community. After the owner of the company spoke for about a half an hour, speakers lined up who were both past and present employees. Then, it was the turn of

a representative of the railroad; they were going to lose business from the closure of the coal operation. In addition, attorneys from a paving company and building contractors droned on with self-serving statements. The left side grew impatient and restless. The Dino Company side lasted a little over the time limit, but nothing was said by the chairman or attorney. Even Jones sat mute about the technical violation of the rule imposed by him. When the last speaker finished, Commissioner Helen Winde called for a recess of fifteen minutes.

As the members of the Commission filed out the back for a smoke, a crew of three people in their late twenties filed down the aisle lugging camera and lighting equipment. An attractive busty woman sat down on a vacant seat next to Junior. She brushed her long blond hair away from her eyes, revealing a ton of make-up on her forehead. “What’s happening here?”

He stared at her expensive clothing and jewelry for a few seconds and then longer at her slight cleavage. “Um. Um. They are taking a break. The coal people presented their side in opposition to the Pump Gap route. The other side is supposed to start whenever they get back.”

“Sorry we’re late.” She looked down at Junior’s bare ring finger on his left hand and then at the two men in her crew setting up the television gear.

Junior felt obligated to respond and volunteered. “You didn’t miss much.”

“Could you fill me in on the details?”

“Sure. But this is my first time doing this. I may have to get some pointers from you.”

“What about if we go out for drinks after the meeting at that restaurant next door and spend some quiet time together. I’ll buy.” She unhooked the top button of her blouse revealing another two inches of her chest. “I’ll show you some good stuff.”

“Stark is a dry county.” Junior pointed out, trying to keep her on a professional relationship for he knew where she was headed, and it wasn’t the kitchen, living, bath or dining room in her apartment. He was surprised that she was unaware of this common knowledge. She had to be from a big city somewhere on either of the coasts of the United States and certainly not from the heartland. He really didn’t care where and he was glad he was back in the flyover zone of America as his liberal professors called and mocked it.

“Forgot.” She pushed on. “How about if we go to Cowgirls?”

“That’s not a quiet place.”

“That’s okay,” the woman said.

“I better not. I have to write this thing for my Dad.”

She would not give up. "You'll have plenty of time to do that. Haven't you seen me on TV?"

"No, never watch it except for the races."

Disappointment showed on her face, but she plowed on. "My name is Wendy Sniff. I'm the new TV anchor in Riverport. I didn't catch your name."

"Junior Garfield."

"That's a nice name. Where did you get that?"

"From my parents."

"Well, I always wanted to be a print reporter. I guess I wasn't as smart as you." She was interrupted by the Commissioners coming back.

As soon as Helen saw the TV people, she frowned. Junior chuckled and thought that the attorney now wished that her side had gone last and had it recorded on TV.

Wendy whispered in his ear. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing." The TV reporter had no clue what had transpired. Junior knew that the television station management out of New York only wanted a pretty face that could read from a teleprompter.

Now Helen allowed the other side to present their case.

Jennifer Krohl spoke first for the opposition. By this time, Junior could see that Tingle was tired, well past his bedtime. Ms. Krohl, a petite elderly lady, hobbled up front. Her delicate frame shook as she stood within arms length of the front table and addressed the Commission. "I bought my house and a few acres to live in peace and quiet." She paused a few seconds. "This will destroy my whole life. I love to putter in my rose garden. Even Possum Trot Road bothers my husband with all those pick-ups racing down the road. There is a lot of dump trucks going up the grade to that gated place." Krohl paused again. "To that Egg place or something." Laughter came from the locals. She continued, "They spew smoke and their engines grind away up the road. Then, the same ones come barreling down. I've got all their license numbers. My husband's confined to a wheelchair and is on oxygen for breathing problems. He couldn't even come up the stairs back there. You people need to put in an elevator in this place." Her shaking increased.

"Get to the point," Helen said while Tingle yawned.

"If the Commonwealth is allowed to build a big highway near my property this will be worse." She started to cry at this point. "In the morning, the noise is deafening. I can't sleep, eat meals in peace, read a book...." Her bawling was now uncontrollable and silence prevailed between her sobs as everyone watched her stumble up the aisle.

Helen Winde could not let her have the last word. “Well ma’am, how long have you owned your house here in Stark County?”

“Two years,” she said still in her seat, now still fighting back the tears.

“Well, ma’am, you bought your property knowing about Possum Trot, didn’t you?” It was obvious to all the people, even to the natives, that Winde knew the answer. The attorney still badgered her. “That road has been there forever.”

This time she rose and spoke with her nervousness gone. “No, Steve Fields never told me about it. I looked at the property over the holidays two years ago when there was snow and ice He didn’t tell me it was a drag strip. Not about that Egg place.” This comment brought a few chuckles, although the entire crowd began to feel her pain.

“Ma’am you should’ve done more inspection when you bought the house, is that right?” the attorney responded while the people on the left moaned in disapproval.

At this point, Ms. Krohl had enough of the public humiliation and retreated up the center aisle to the rear, still sobbing. Junior could sense that even the other side of the room sympathized with her and that Helen Winde had crossed the line of decency.

“Well, I guess that about wraps it up.” Tingle said, as he appeared to be dozing off. It was apparent to all that he had enough and wanted to go home to Richmond. It was also clear that the others besides Jones were fighting back sleep.

A slender bald man with a white beard and wire-rimmed glasses rose up to the front to address the board, “I’m Aaron Frobstein, president of the Earth and Environmental Organization.”

“What kind of orgasm is this?” Tingle shouted as he woke up.

The entire courtroom exploded in laughter. After Wendy stopped roaring, she said to Junior “I hope my crew got that.” Even Helen Winde cracked a smile.

After order was restored, the environmentalist continued, “We represent people who are concerned about the animals living in the path of this proposed route through our forests. I would like to give you some facts about the American bald eagle.” A scattering of booing came from the right side of the room. “May I continue without interruption?”

Helen was reluctant and forced to dictate, “Okay, but make it brief, let’s give these out of town types a chance to say their piece and get this over with.”

Frobstein handed a thick package to each of the five commissioners with only Jones looking at it, taking the sheets out of

the large envelope. “You have some information on the habitat of the eagle and a survey of the government lands indicating that eagles have been sighted in the area.”

After thumbing through the passed out material, Jones asked, “I don’t see a date on this study. Is it current?”

“The study was done by our group last month. We just got it back from the printers and didn’t have time to proof it.” Frobstein flipped through it. “You are correct. The date is missing.”

“Thank you for that clarification. I am sorry we didn’t give you more notice of this hearing.”

The environmentalist tried to explain. “Our group was rushed to put this together with the limited funds we have. We’re all volunteers and....”

Helen interrupted, “Get to the point.”

“Okay. I have a map and a picture of Bridal Falls which would be destroyed by the Possum Trot route.”

The woman attorney barked, “How can that be? The road will be five hundred feet away from the top of the cliff.”

“Well if you would read the note on the map, the drainage would be changed. That’s in your report.” He pointed to a thick report in front of Helen Winde. “The blasting would also damage the rock in that area right where the Indian paintings are. This waterfall is the tallest in the Commonwealth.”

Helen Winde retreated but the chairman took over the cause. “Who cares? No one can see it.”

The left side erupted in a chorus of “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

Junior could tell that Frobstein was frustrated and laid his prepared speech down. He gave only a few more brief statements about the adverse affects on the proposed Possum Trot route in terms of air pollution despite the fact that he had several articles about the subject that explained it in detail. After a few minutes and time for Helen to regain her composure, she interrupted. “Thank you Mr. Frobstein. I think the Commission has enough information to make a decision. Is there anyone else?”

Several people including neighbors like Ms. Krohl who were still seated on the left wanted to talk. However, they realized it would be a waste of time and did not want their tires slashed on the streets of Mulberry. As expected, Junior scribbled on his pad a vote of four to one in favor of the Possum Trot route with Jones dissenting.

Wendy rose and leaned over to Junior, both giving him her business card and revealing more of herself. “If you are ever in Riverport sometime and want to go out on the town, give me a call.”

He politely took it. “Thanks.”

The TV reporter joined her crew for an interview with Helen Winde who sought the team out. The female attorney appeared more than willing to expose her views to anyone that would listen and give her a chance to get her name and face on TV. Junior had no interest in talking to Winde; he heard enough to write a fair account of the proceedings.

Junior had mixed feelings about the vote. On one hand, the Pump Gap route would cost the county jobs, one of them being his cousin who worked at the coal operation. On the other hand, it seemed that the rejected route would be cheaper and have a less detrimental effect on the environment, especially on the eagles he had watched for years.

When the meeting ended and the crowd disbursed, he remained seated and finished the piece for his Godfather. The humorous comment made by Tingle had to be omitted because some of the Guardian’s elderly readers might be offended or might even have forgotten that event.

Chapter 10

The next morning after the road meeting, Junior had an appointment with a doctor in Riverport at nine about his Paw. He knew what the prognosis would be without even talking to the physician. Besides slurred speech and the loss of most of the movement in his legs, the first signs of dementia had appeared. Although Buddy could still recognize his two children, he now thought that his sister Henrietta was in the nursing home with him. In reality, Allison now resided there with him having been released from the mental hospital.

On the return trip to Mulberry, Junior parked his pick-up at the Pump Gap General Store for a bite to eat. He ate a hot dog special at the counter and after half an hour of malingering, he was satisfied that no one had followed or watched him. He slipped out of the back door reserved for employees and wandered over to the washing machine. All the cash remained as he had left it when the bail money was withdrawn. Matter of fact, he still had the thousand dollars in his wallet. What should he do with the bond funds and more importantly, what about this abandoned cash? He decided to leave it there. If he took it, where would he put it? It would not fit under his turtle shell in his room at home. He thought of the tree platform on Corn Still Mountain. No one besides his father even knew about it and now he couldn't tell anybody about this location. It would be a chore to lug it up the mountain past Rick and Mary's house, also by Julie's bedroom and Angus. Anyway, if he took it, his client would not be a happy camper if he returned. Instead Junior made a thousand dollar deposit to the machine and left.

Before returning to the home to cut firewood, Junior pulled over on the shoulder of Possum Trot State Highway at the intersection with Bear Lick Road. Perhaps he could see the eagles perform as Lightfeather described. He got out of the pick-up and looked ahead to the west down the watershed. In late afternoon, the landscape was different from when he had stopped there in the morning a few days before. Without the fog, the sun low in the southwest shed long shadows behind the houses built at the turn of the century. Despite a heavy frost a few days earlier, Ms. Krohl's rose garden was still in bloom and Junior caught a whiff of their fragrance. A woodpecker knocked on a hardwood tree in her yard.

The eastern boundary of the Indian Reservation lay one mile ahead over gently rolling farmland dotted with cattle and horses. Discussed last night as the east Possum Trot route, this was the area that the new road would dissect. It would destroy hundreds of acres of

prime pasture, pristine streams, and virgin forests; not only the lives of the people living here for generations here would be uprooted, but also the animal habitat between the southern boundary of the Reservation and Corn Still ridge. If he climbed the tree platform and looked toward the Balds he would see and hear traffic.

A pair of eagles first approached, flying as black dots from the west and Lightfeather's burial ground. Then the birds appeared in wing tip formation five hundred feet high over the pond although the rise of a pasture partially obscured the water. When they were close enough for Junior to see their beaks, the eagles flew in opposite directions for a few seconds, following each other in a circle the size of a merry-go-round at a county fair. They gradually tightened the loop and grabbed each other with their claws. Concerned for their safety, Junior gasped in horror. The birds tumbled out of the sky like out of control dive bombers. Within a few feet from the ground, they released each other and glided safely away. Junior resumed his normal breathing. He wished his father could be as free as an eagle instead of being chained to a wheelchair, dependent on other people for his basic necessities of life. Junior considered himself lucky; he could be outdoors to walk, smell, see and hear all of the beautiful things nature had to offer.

The eagles also reminded him of the owls and Junior needed to tend them before going home. He made a right turn on Bear Lick Road heading west for the purpose of feeding Lightfeather's birds. Two minutes later, a faded wood sign indicated that he entered the Reservation itself. The pond was now visible on the right side of the road. Below the pond on the same side of the road, there stood a spacious shed for chickens and roosters; on the side of the building hung a circular sign, similar to the one on Lightfeather's owl shed. However, a coyote figure was pictured.

Immediately he was waved down by two men standing in the center of the gravel road. His pick-up slowed to a crawl. A fat man with braided silver hair waddled to the driver's side. "Stop. I want to talk to you."

Junior complied by braking and rolling down the window. "What's the problem?"

"I'm Chief Laughing Seed," the man grunted.

Junior wanted to say, "So." But he remained polite to the elderly head of the Indians. "Good afternoon, sir."

"Turn back."

"Why?"

"You are trespassing."

Junior put his truck into park, letting the engine idle. "I've been coming up here for almost ten years."

"Well, you don't have anyone's permission anymore," the Chief retorted.

"Lightfeather was my friend."

"He's dead." The Chief had a smirk of satisfaction on his face and then asked, "Why do you need to come here?"

Junior thought that it was none of his business but continued to be civil. "I gotta look after the owls."

"Don't you worry about those damn things. Me and Rocking Horse here'll take care of them fine."

A look of determination covered Junior's face as he thought about the ring. "I have a right to go down there." He put the truck into first gear and left with a spray of stones and dust behind. In a few minutes, Junior passed the tribal council building without incident although there were several elderly men hanging around. All eyes gawked at the truck.

Another half mile into the Reservation and Junior arrived at Lightfeather's place. This time the reception was different. The owls grunted with pleasure as Junior spread a feast of freshly killed mice on the floor of the shed. He stored the rodents in cages in the privy but raised them in the basement of the barn on Corn Still. As the need arose, he held the mice by their tails, and swung them on a hard surface like a concrete block to kill them. Perhaps in the future, Julie's job description could be expanded to assist him in this chore. Lightfeather had taught Junior this skill together with basic first aid for the birds at Christmas time. The smell was not as bad when Lightfeather tended them: perhaps the reduced number of birds made a difference.

Junior then went into Lightfeather's trailer. It was just as bare as he had left it except for the trash scattered on the floor and the filth that had accumulated over the years of Lightfeather's monk-like existence. There was a gentle knock on the door. His neighbor, Hoppi, let himself in with a distraught look as the sunlight engulfed the dingy living area. "I heard your truck."

"Glad you're here. Come in and sit down." Junior realized that there was nothing to sit on except some plastic milk crates that he had brought on his trip to clean up before.

Hoppi pulled up one of the boxes from the stack near the front door and rested. "My boy told me about your welcome from the Chief."

“News travels fast.” Junior said as he moved another similar crate near his guest.

“Don’t worry, he can’t stop you from coming here.”

“He didn’t,” Junior proudly said.

“The Chief and that Rocky Horse just blow a lot of smoke.”

The Indian removed a light jacket and held it on his lap.

“It isn’t on the peace pipe.” Junior chuckled. “Seriously, what in the heck’s going on here?”

Hoppi coughed and then said, “Don’t know for sure, but he called a special tribal meeting for next week.”

“What goes on at those things?”

“They are secret. I can’t tell you.”

“Well, who gets to vote?” Junior asked a question that the Indian might be able to answer without Junior prying into private matters that outsiders shouldn’t know. It was important to respect the Native American culture and laws even if Junior didn’t agree with them or thought they made no sense.

“Each tribe has a vote. You have to sign in with the ring. You use it like a stamp on the tribal log. The book is secret too.”

“Sounds spooky to me.”

Hoppi coughed again this time more sustained.

Junior asked, “Do you want something to drink?”

“Yeah. This place’s getting to me.”

“We can go outside.” Junior went to the kitchen area and the bare cupboards foraging for a drink.

“No. That’s okay. Lightfeather has some beer underneath the sink. He had to hide it from my boy.”

“Why’s that?”

“He would come over and get drunk. Lightfeather would always let him stay here when I had to kick him out of my place.”

“That was neighborly.” Junior found a six pack of Budweiser hidden behind a case of soda.

“He always had a soft heart.”

Junior handed a can to the guest. “Sorry this is not cold. The power is off.”

“That’s okay. This is fine.” Hoppi took a sip of the warm beer. “Whoever has the ring gets to vote.” The Indian looked him in the eye. “Do you know where Lightfeather’s ring is?”

Junior tried to be evasive. “Lightfeather told me about the ring.”

“Where is it?”

“He gave it to me.”

Surprised, Hoppi asked, "Then the Chief didn't get it?"

"Is that what he was looking for?"

"Maybe. Although it could have been some one else besides the Chief. It's common knowledge about those rings on the Reservation. Anybody that has the ring, they have the right to live on the land and vote."

Junior asked, "What about if someone dies?"

"It's usually handed down to the next of kin."

"Lightfeather didn't have any?" This was an important piece of information Junior wanted to verify. Although he spent much time with Lightfeather during high school and it was unlikely that his Indian friend ever had relationships with women, they drifted apart when Junior went away to college and law school. Much could have happened during this absence that Junior did not know.

Hoppi said, "You're right."

"That's pretty sad, no one to pass it down. No kin."

"Where is it?" Hoppi whispered although no one else was present.

"Don't worry; it's in a safe place." Junior did not trust the Native American completely but felt comfortable about telling him that he had it. Hoppi would never harm anyone for it but his son was hard-headed and on occasion had too much liquor. If Junior told Hoppi the whereabouts of the ring, then it might be leaked to the Indian's son. Junior shifted the subject from his possession of the ring. "Do you think Lightfeather was killed over it?"

"Maybe. But anyone on the Reservation would know that Lightfeather would not have it lying around his trailer." Hoppi brushed a feather off his shoulder. "The owls are lonely without Lightfeather. I come out here at night to keep them company."

Junior said, "It's hard for me to come out here every day to feed them. Prepare their dinner. Clean up."

"I try to help you some."

"Thanks, my law practice has picked up."

"Soaring like an eagle?" Hoppi chuckled for a second. "Did the eagle return to the burial ground this year?"

"Yeah, there is a new nest up there now. I just saw a pair on Possum Trot. By the way, have you seen any more eagles near the bear cave?"

"There's a pair of nests up there this year. Both about a hundred feet below the cave." Hoppi pointed in the general direction to the east outside the window, the size of a wall calendar.

"I knew there was one. He's been there over ten years, but he's a greedy little cuss."

“I guess that’s the reason he’s been around so long.” Hoppi laid his drink over a torn *Field and Stream* magazine cover on the floor.

“That would be right where the new highway would go. Right in its path. I went to a meeting about it yesterday. The road issue has been in the *Guardian*.”

“Really. I don’t read the paper. But you know that surveyors have been up some this summer.”

“That’s for the new road.”

Shock covered the Indian’s face. “Junior, you have to stop that. Besides the eagles, it’ll ruin my land.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause all the runoff from the road will come right down the little gully by my house. All the mud.”

Junior thought about the wreckage below the bear cave.

“Those eagles are probably near that old plane crash.”

“Yeah.”

“What about the accident over Christmas?” Junior asked.

“They said it was engine failure. A real old plane, twenty years old.” Hoppi sipped on his beer. “One of those Piper Cubs. They found some new fancy camera equipment in it though. Some of it is still up there.”

This aroused Junior’s curiosity. “I’d like to go up there some time. Can I go on your property?”

Hoppi cleared his throat. “Anytime.”

“Maybe next month. I’ll have some time over Thanksgiving. It’s tough coming here everyday to feed the owls.”

“Why don’t you live here?” The Indian coughed as he rose and doubled over.

“Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Do you mean on the Reservation?”

After he took another swig of the drink, Hoppi said, “Yes. You could find out what happened to Lightfeather.”

“Yeah. It would certainly be easier to take care of the owls.”

“It would help me having a friendly neighbor. Since Lightfeather got killed, it’s spooky out here.” Hoppi looked Junior in the eye.

“I’ll think about it a bit. First I gotta cut some wood at Corn Still for my Godfather Rick. Get a good supply for the winter.”

“Can’t he fetch it himself?”

“He’s helpless with a chainsaw. Would probably get hurt.”

After Hoppi chuckled, he turned serious. "I really need you. At least your crops are all in."

"That's true." Junior would have to think about living on the Reservation. He could possibly find out what was happening on the Indian lands. If he did reside here, he could vote at the tribal council.

Hoppi looked around. "This is a pit."

"You should have seen it before I got the big stuff out." Junior looked around.

"Yeah, I know."

"I guess it needs a good scrubbing."

"This place smells." The Indian sniffed again. "Do you need any help in cleaning this up?"

"No, I know a nice little girl."

Chapter 11

Sneaking in the back door, Junior looked haggard as he sat down at his desk. He yelled to his secretary in the adjoining room. “Julie, could you come in now?” The young attorney picked up a file and glanced at a ten-page contract stuck in it.

There was no response so he went to her office and found her focused on the computer monitor. Without taking her eyes off the screen, she mumbled, “Be there in a sec.”

“Just got raked over the coals by Judge Pickins. I was only five minutes late for court. But Helen came waltzing in after me. He didn’t say a word.”

“You’re back early.” She glanced at her watch while she dug out a Baby Ruth candy bar from her pocket. “It’s only nine thirty. I thought they started court then.”

“Well they changed it to nine and no one told me about it. Anyway, the DA got it continued.”

“How’d he do that?” She looked up.

“Because he didn’t subpoena his prosecuting witness.” Forgetting why he wanted her in the first place, he started to meander back to his office.

Julie returned to her tasks. “You need to sign this.” She pressed a button on the keyboard and a piece of paper spit out of the printer. “We have to get this in the mail.” Julie followed him to his office and laid it before her boss.

He scribbled his signature without reading it. “Oh. Now I remember, I need you to make a copy of this contract before this man comes in.”

“Yes Sir.” She saluted. “But Mr. Hopson is here to sign the timber lease.”

“He’s early. Have him wait. I have to straighten up in here.” He started to shuffle papers around in front of him on his desk so that there was a clear space for a logger to sign the document. “Have him read it in there and I need to go over it myself.”

“I just organized your desk yesterday.” Julie left in a huff for the printer in her office. She returned with the copy made. “There’s a Wendy on the phone.”

Junior stretched his feet up on the desk. “Thanks. Could you close the door?”

“Why’s that? There shouldn’t be any secrets between us. We’re a team.” Detecting an attitude of jealousy, Junior didn’t know what to say or how to react. She retreated and slammed the door shut.

He grabbed the phone. "This is Mr. Garfield."

"I met you at the hearing last week and I need a favor." There was silence from both parties for a few seconds. "How about lunch today?"

"Well, I'm pretty busy today."

"I'll pay," the reporter offered. "I'll be at the Courthouse in Mulberry to get some of that material that was given to the Commission."

"Do you mean the stuff about the eagles?" Junior asked

"Yes. I saw that you picked up a copy from their table when they left."

"That's the stuff the Commission didn't read from the environmental people. After the meeting I examined mine very closely. I quoted a portion of it in my article." Junior tried to be helpful but not lead the woman on.

"Yeah. I read your piece in the *Guardian*. It was great. Why are you a lawyer?"

"I like it." Junior did not want to elaborate and was pleased when the woman got to the point.

"I don't have a copy of the environmental report. Must have left it there. Could I borrow yours?"

"Okay, this'll be a business lunch." Junior warned.

"Strictly professional," she blurted, not all that convincing.

"Let me check my appointment book." He put her on hold and buzzed Julie. "What do I have around one o'clock this afternoon?"

"We have a closing with Steve Fields," Julie pleaded.

"That is just a cash deal. The seller is coming in to sign the deed. We don't even have the money from the buyer."

Junior thought out loud. "I could get a bite to eat then."

"I can't handle Fields by myself." Julie reasoned.

"Yes you can. Just give him a big hug." He switched back to Wendy. "Okay."

"Great! I'll pick you up at one."

"No, I better meet you somewhere."

"What about at that new bakery on Pump Gap? It's in the General Store. They have great soups and sandwiches. I'll pay."

"That's okay, I'll pay. I've got a lot of dough up there." Junior was interrupted by Julie, who barged in. "Sorry to break this up. You have the timber man and a Ms. Good here."

He put the phone down. "She's supposed to be here tomorrow."

Julie said, “She insists on seeing you. Do you want to get rid of her?”

“No, don’t get rid of her. I’ll see her. I need to hold her hand.”

Returning to the telephone, he said, “Hello, Wendy.”

“Does someone want to get rid of me?”

“No, that was someone else,” Junior tried to explain.

“Are you going to hold my hand?” the TV reporter asked.

“I wasn’t planning on holding your hand just yet. Have to go. See you in a little bit.” Junior hung up.

Julie stared. “What was that all about?”

“Business.”

“New client?” She took a drink from her water bottle.

“Maybe.” Junior shuffled files around for no particular reason.

Julie led an elderly lady into his office. Before Junior could acknowledge the client, Julie volunteered, “Mr. Hopson signed the timber lease. He had to leave.”

“Thanks. I’ll read it over later. If there are any problems, I’ll call. He’s pretty easy to work with.”

“I proofed it. It’s okay.” Julie assured him.

“Glad to have someone to keep me straight.” He turned his attention to Ms. Good, pulling a chair around so she could be close to him.

The woman squeaked, “I know your father very well and I am sorry they had to put him in one of those nursin things.”

“Thanks. He’s doing a little better. I can understand him now. All he says is that he wants to go back home.”

“Who’s taking care of the place?” She handed him a wad of papers.

“My two uncles over on Turkey Neck are helping me. But they’re getting old and can’t do too much.” Junior glanced at the documents while talking. “You wanted to talk to me about the case?”

“Yes, the Commonwealth’s takin my land for the new road.”

“Is that where you live?”

“Yes. My house is on it. Has been there since the War.”

“The Civil War?” He put down the document and made eye contact with his client.

“Yes. But can they do that?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s not fair.” She looked dejected.

“Sorry, but they can do it.” Junior tried to be understanding.

“Why’s that?”

“If it’s for a public purpose. They discussed that point at the public hearing about the road last week. Did you go?”

“Yes, I did. I even sat with the coal people. I was for the Possum Trot route. But that was before I got these papers in the mail. Even at the hearing I felt terrible for Jennifer Krohl. She’s my neighbor up apiece. They are not doing too good. Both are good people. That Winde woman treated her real bad. I don’t know why the County puts up with her.”

Junior wanted to get this client on track. “What’s the problem with the road?”

“Well, I can’t see why they want my land. It’s next to the Indian Reservation, about one mile from where the road’s going to be.”

He listened more closely. “Yeah you’re right, but what about...”

Before he had a chance to continue, she interrupted, “Another strange thing.” She paused. “My neighbor across the way sold their property to some big wheels. Out of town people. Chinese types. I don’t even remember their names. Do you know how much they got?” Before Junior had a chance to speak, the lady said, “One million for fifty acres.”

“Did they find oil on the property?” Junior asked.

“No. They offered me the same thing and I only have forty-five acres. They showed me that in cash. They brought it in my house and dumped it on my carpet. Do you know what that looks like in hundred dollar bills?”

Junior only knew what half a million looked like so he could say honestly and from recent personal experience, “No.”

“I refused it. My family had this land forever. It is the only place I have called home. It will be almost impossible to move all my geese to another place. I don’t want to let the Commonwealth have it or some big shot people from China have it. I want my kin to have it. Those Chinese people even waited for my son to leave town to come to the house.”

“I’m proud of you.”

“Junior, could you find out what’s going on?” she pleaded.

“There’s been some strange stuff going on.”

“Yes. A lot of big cars coming in and out.”

“What’s the name of your neighbor? I’ll look at the land records.”

His client gave him the name of the property owner and others in the area who had sold out. She continued to ramble on. “Don’t remember the people who bought it. I think they are all the

same. That's what the folks say. This is bad. I hate to see things change."

"Me too." Junior nodded. "Look, you don't have to do anything about this complaint right now. Let me check this out first."

The lady rose and gave him a gentle peck on the cheek. As soon as the client left, Junior summoned his secretary. "Please call my next appointment, an emergency came up. I've gotta go to the Courthouse now."

Julie did not flinch because she was now accustomed to the radical changes in a solo law practice.

At the Register of Deeds office it took Junior less than three minutes to find out that most of the property near the eastern boundary of the Reservation was now owned by Kung Fo, Inc. The land records indicated that the deeds were sent to a Post Office in Dover, Delaware after recording. He thought it was probably a Delaware corporation, the choice of many people throughout the world. A more difficult task would be to track down the principals of the company.

Back at the office, another female client waited in the reception area for Junior. "Sorry you had to wait."

"That's okay." The middle aged woman fought back tears.

"We tried to call you. I needed to go over to the Courthouse." Junior ushered her to the office and pulled up a chair for her. His mind was still on the last client's case and tried to focus on the person before him. In a busy law practice, an attorney has many clients and deadlines looming over him at any given time. However, the person before him thinks that he or she is the only client that the lawyer represents. To keep all his clients happy and to prevent a legal malpractice suit, the attorney had to be a good juggler and prioritize his work. By glancing at his appointment book, at least Junior got her name correct. "You're Joan Lark?"

"Yes." She nodded, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

"What can I do for you?"

"My husband is having an affair."

"Sorry."

"It's been going on for some time."

Junior started to get curious. "How did you find out about it?"

"One of the county department heads saw my husband with her at a Braves baseball game in Atlanta. They weren't watching the game."

"How long have you been married?"

"Let's see I graduated from U Va in 1986." She counted her sharp fingernails, the size of bear claws. "Nine years."

“Any children?”

“Two.”

“What are their ages?”

“Six and eight. We’ve agreed about custody. He could never keep them any length of time. He said he was a long distance trucker. So I thought. Come to find out he was staying close to home.” She paused and spoke louder. “With that woman.”

“What about property?”

“We don’t have much. We’ve divided everything.”

“Is he supporting the children?”

“Yes. As much as he can. I make more money than he does.”

“Where do you work?”

“For the county here. I’m the Public Safety Officer.”

“That’s right. I read about you in the paper. You are working on the flood maps.”

“That’s me.”

“Well, since you make more than he does, you can’t get alimony.” The attorney was more inquisitive. “What is it that you want me to do for you?”

“I want to sue my husband’s lover.”

“You mean for alienation of affection?”

Her eyes lit up. “Yes sir. Punitive damages.”

“Those are tough cases to prove. You almost have to find your husband in bed with the woman.”

She interrupted, “I have proof.”

Although curious, Junior did not want to pursue this line of thought, for he had not decided to take the case. The client was anxious and wanted to discuss this, so Junior asked, “I assume it is a woman?”

The client nodded and started to ramble. “She destroyed my marriage. Everyone in county government is talking about it. I want her to pay.” This time she had dollar signs in her eyes.

Junior wanted to say that he never heard about it, but that would not help her situation. Instead, he attempted to be realistic. “Well, even if you prove your case and get a judgment against her, you still have to collect. If the woman is married, then you can’t get jointly held property. That’s the stuff titled in both names.”

“This woman’s not married.”

“Ma’am, you may win, but never get any money if she doesn’t have any property. She is entitled to certain exemptions that creditors can’t touch.”

“She has a lot of property.”

“Is it mortgaged?”

“It’s bundles of cash.”

Junior thought of the washing machine, but tried to explain again because he did have doubts about the woman’s story. “It’s like winning a battle and losing the war. I couldn’t take this on a contingency. I’d need a five thousand dollar retainer up front.”

“My family’ll get that.”

“You may never get a dime,” Junior warned.

“I want you to handle it,” she insisted.

Junior forgot all about his trip to the Courthouse and asked, “Who’s this woman?”

“Helen Winde.”

“You gotta be kidding?”

“No, I’m not. Will you take the case against her?”

“I’ll have to think about this. You know I have cases with her.”

“I understand. I may have to go to Riverport to get an attorney. No one around here wants to touch this with a ten foot pole.”

“I’m not saying I won’t take your case, but I need to think about this.” Junior could use a safety net in his trust account to keep his practice afloat during the lean months and this seemed tempting, but it would be a difficult case and cause hard feelings in the small town. “I’ll give you a call in the next few days.”

As soon as the client left, Julie bounced in, holding a full water bottle. “What did she want?”

“It’s a long story.” Junior thought that the client had probably talked to Julie in the waiting room while he was at the Courthouse. The attorney learned that clients seemed to feel better if they told their story to someone, even a secretary. “Okay, I need to call Delaware.”

“Why there?”

“I’ll explain later.” Junior made a call to the Delaware Secretary of State. They indicated the registered agent of the corporation was an attorney in Dover, the state capital. A call to him would be a waste. Junior phoned the Kent County Tax Collector’s office in Delaware. They were helpful in locating the personal property tax bill and the amount, over eleven thousand dollars. He called another office in the same building and someone located a tax listing form. That document would have to be signed by someone. “Can you fax me a copy of it? I went to law school with the son of your Governor.” That was the truth and it did the trick. Within five minutes, Junior was reading a three page form. It listed cars, trucks, boats and airplanes. Entire fleets of all types of vehicles. One entry stuck out immediately.

The serial number of the crashed airplane!

Ed Krause

He gasped loudly enough to be heard in the next room.

“What’s the matter, Junior?” Julie said from her office.

“A piece of the puzzle.”

She came into his office, not interested in an explanation.

“Can you get that book on the top shelf for me? I can’t reach it.”

Junior reached up while Julie stepped up on a stool next to him. Gently, she put her arms around him and kissed him on the lips.

He did not resist!

Chapter 12

On Sunday morning of Thanksgiving weekend, Junior listened to a sermon about the relationship of man and nature at his Fox Den church. Beside him on the hard pew sat Peggy Ellen, his only aunt living on Corn Still, and Grover Ashbrook, who was staying at the home place during his visit with the family. After the service Junior traveled to the Reservation to tend Lightfeather's birds. His aunt went back to start dinner while Grover watched the races on television alone at the home place.

Junior found the dismembered body of a baby owl in Lightfeather's shed. Only bones and bloody feathers remained on the straw floor. Some larger animal had trespassed through one hole in the chicken wire to do the killing and then escaped through another. The entry opening was two feet in diameter, the other even larger with a tear along a seam that stretched over the length of one side of the building. Fortunately, no other owls had escaped or were hurt. He gathered the remains of the bird and the soiled grass into a black trash bag for a proper burial. Before departing, he left a piece of plywood propped up in front of the hole and tied the rip with a bread tie. These temporary measures would not stop a ravenous raccoon, woodchuck or groundhog from a quick and tasty meal, but this was all he could find at that moment.

With shovel in hand, he carried the corpse slung over his shoulder all the way up to the Indian gravesite on the knoll. Due to the wet weather he was able to dig a hole in the soft ground the size of a basketball. It was five feet from that of Lightfeather; thin brown fescue and a circle two feet in diameter of round river stones covered the human grave. Junior needed to stop working several times to warm his hands since he had no gloves. It was a dreary late fall day with wet fog invading the sacred place. No color appeared other than the dull green of the lower boughs of pines in a sea of whiteness. Junior had mixed feelings for his Indian high school friend; sadness in that no other humans would join him, but happiness now he would have some animal companionship.

The custom of Lightfeather's tribe directed this ritual be done soon after one of the owls or any other animal that the Indian cared for met its demise. Junior had read this in the translation of the old manuscript found with Lightfeather's will that the Sheriff gave him. Junior had made a copy of it and posted it in the camper. The original stayed in a safe deposit box in a bank at Mulberry. Technically, Lightfeather could never have taken care of this newborn, only his

parent, so this dead young bird would not have to be buried in such a manner. Nonetheless, Junior wanted to adhere, not only to the letter of the rules, but also to the spirit of them.

According to the theory of the custom, the soul of the owl would merge with the Indian's spirit. The document also required that any dead eagle found on his property would be treated in the same fashion. If this ever happened, Lightfeather's spirit could soar away with the birds to experience freedom and majesty. To Junior, residing on the Reservation would always be a mystery.

Through the mist he admired the new eagle nest in the upper third of an oak at the edge of the burial ground. Beyond that, visibility stopped. Since it was a relatively new nest, it wasn't as large as the one he and Lightfeather had found last Christmas; hopefully, this one would become larger each year and provide a home for many offspring each season, if it survived. He wanted to wait for a resident to appear, but they were grounded in this weather. In a month they would be gone for warmer weather, although eagles were able to stay through winter provided they could find adequate food.

Junior could not linger; he had to hike down to fix the mesh so that other owls would not meet a similar fate. After an inspection down at the shed, all the birds were accounted for. He reassured them he would turn his attention to the repair work of their home. The openings were protected by propping several broken eight inch masonry blocks against the plywood. He found a piece of cotton cord to tie the tear. What he needed was a roll of wire mesh.

First, he decided to scrounge around for some spare pieces in the area. Shortly after Lightfeather's death, Junior told Hoppi that he could have all the tools and building materials around the shed, so anything of value was gone. If Junior could not find fabric to fix the holes, he would need to make a special trip to Lowe's; that would take half the day. He didn't want to make this trek, for he had plans to take Angus down to the home place to watch the car race with Grover later that afternoon. The former surveyor only had two days left before he needed to head back to Alaska. Tomorrow they would visit with Buddy in the nursing home; perhaps the last time Grover would see the elder Garfield alive.

All Junior found near the camper were scrap boards, old tires, rusted bed springs, and a cracked portable black and white television. Upon returning to the front of the vacant home, he jumped in the pickup, planning to drive to Hoppi's place. In no time he made a right turn from Bear Lick onto another gravel road, although this one had a grass center with less stone. The beginning of Hoppi's drive went through pasture and had a gradual rise. After a hundred yards, the field

turned into second growth trees and the grade increased devoid of any rock. At a point fifty feet from the house in a muddy steep section, Junior got stuck and could go no further. Rather than tear up the road and his tires, he stopped the truck and hiked the short distance through the woods.

Like the burial ground, his neighbor's place was deserted and spooky. The fog hung around the bare trees that seemed to want to grab him in their dark extending branches. The trunks cast an ominous shadowlike background and made visibility limited. The only sounds piercing through the moisture were the pack of dogs barking and pacing in their pen. No vehicles were parked around the block house. He made a cursory inspection finding no scraps of wire in the open. There was chicken wire surrounding his ginseng patch, but it would be criminal to take even a small part to create any size opening. To disturb the wire fence surrounding the dog pen could be dangerous for the animals would devour an army if they got loose. He didn't want to snoop around any more, not because Hoppi minded, but his son might drive up and be frightened by a stranger. Junior knew that the boy hung around with the Rocking Horses, who were drunks. They were unpredictable, and in an inebriated state they might shoot first and ask questions later. He had no choice but to leave.

On the trek down to his pick-up, the brightness increased as he approached the pasture, where he met two cows meandering up the muddy road. Junior wondered who the pair belonged to. He thought his neighbor didn't have cattle, and even if he did, they would be fenced to protect his vegetables and ginseng. The cows were shooed away, but eventually they would return. He would tell Hoppi about the cattle the next time he saw him, so he could deal with the problem.

Frustrated, Junior knew the shed needed immediate repair or eventually all the owls would be killed. Maybe his other neighbor Tsalli could help. Junior remembered that Hoppi saying he'd helped Lightfeather with his birds at one time. Tsalli's property lay on the other side of Bear Lick Road to the north. Junior had never been to his other neighbor's house, but he knew where his driveway turned off the road. It was twice as long as Hoppi's road and not as steep. His truck negotiated a gentle grade up an open field to a secluded wooded area close to the northern boundary of the Reservation and the southern line of the Forest Service property. To his left, Junior could barely see the outline of the pine trees bordering the burial ground against a sea of white background. To the right and to the east, lay the Chief's property although nothing could be seen of it due to the weather, not even his prominent pond.

The outside of Tsalli's home consisted of torn insulation board over peeling plywood with a rusted tin roof. The only color and neatness consisted of a yellow symbol of an eagle on the front wall, similar to the one on Lightfeather's shed. Surrounding the structure was a host of abandoned vehicles and building materials engulfed in dried weeds, bare vines and broken brush. In the summer, the trash would never be seen. Both Hoppi's and Lightfeather's places looked like palaces compared to this setting.

Junior parked behind two brand new pick-up trucks and a barking dog greeted him as he blew the horn. A plump Indian lady came from a shed around to his vehicle. Three young children followed in torn sneakers. The youngest had nothing on his bare chest. Junior waited until she was between him and the dog to roll down the window. "Can I talk to Tsalli?"

"He ain't here," the woman said as her children went to the front porch and sat on a sagging couch.

Junior looked ahead to Tsalli's red truck, a vehicle often encountered on his travels in the Reservation. "When will he be back?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm helping take care of Lightfeather's owls."

"So?" She placed her hands on her hips.

"When will he be back?"

"Don't know," the woman said, annoyed.

"Is this his place?"

"Yeah. What do you want?"

"I need some wire mesh." Junior begged. "Real bad."

"Why?"

"To fix Lightfeather's owl shed," he replied without sarcasm.

The woman turned angry. "I hate those birds. I hear um all night screamin. Wakes up the kids. We smell em all the time. Lightfeather never took care of em."

Junior did not want to debate this with her and only said, "An animal came in and killed one."

"Wish we ain't livin next to em."

Without using the latch handle on the truck's door, Junior pushed the door open and stepped on the ground, keeping a watchful eye on the dog. "It would take me a good hour to go to Mulberry or home to get some."

"Don't Hoppi gots some?"

"He's not home."

"What about that good-for-nothin kid of his?"

“Nobody’s there. It’s getting dark and this weather might turn to ice.” Junior did feel a drop in temperature.

“I reckon I got some em.” She turned back toward the shack.

“Thanks.” Junior smelled a whiff of marijuana in the woman’s black hair as he followed her. The dog calmed down and stopped barking.

“But you wait here. I’ll go back yonder.” She waddled around the side of the structure and disappeared for a minute. The children on the sofa remained staring at him like he was a man from Mars.

Returning with a coil of brown colored wire, the size and shape of a lifebuoy, she offered it to him. “Is this what you’re lookin farr?”

Junior looked at the rusted metal. “It may work.” He took it from her and threw it in the bed of the pickup. This was not exactly what Junior had in mind, but it might help shore up the holes until he could fix it properly. In any case he had to accept the women’s hospitality, although reluctant at first.

“I’ve got chores.” She shuffled toward the front door without stopping, even though one of the children following her tripped and fell on a narrow hole from a missing section of floorboard.

Obviously, her tasks did not include cleaning the house, as evidenced by a rat scurrying out when the door opened. She didn’t even flinch or change her gait. Then Junior heard voices in the wooded area to the rear of the ‘home’, but it was evident that she wanted him to leave. He felt unwelcome and was happy to sit in the safety of his truck. As he backed up, he saw her peer out of the only window to make sure he was leaving. Junior thought about reporting this situation to the Stark County Child Welfare Agency, but that would need to wait until Monday. He needed to think about it in depth; although his name would remain anonymous, Tsalli would surely make the connection. In any case, Junior felt bad for these children.

The woman’s wire would not work; when he twisted it to attach to the existing mesh, it crumbled like fresh corn flakes. He was even afraid to handle the rusted metal without some covering on his hands. After he shored the openings better with some string, Junior made one final attempt to locate what he needed to fix it correctly.

He hiked down the path along Bear Lick Creek to the Dutch Curve River. At its banks, a breeze picked up and the fog started to lift. Although he found a variety of junk on the riverbank washed up by a recent flood, nothing would be useful to him. Any piece of old screening would have worked. The wind subsided and the outline of the sun could be detected through the lingering river fog. Junior realized that he should have traveled to Lowe’s to pick up the supplies

in the first place. All for a bunch of owls, he wasted half a day and would miss the last race of the season. Grover would be wondering what happened to him.

Junior walked upstream on a path that eventually led to Mulberry. Angus would have loved the flat grade, soft path and chipmunks along the way. The river meandered through Lightfeather's gentle pastureland. He had made this journey before when he helped his Indian friend fix the fence to the burial ground. At that time, they left the river bank and made a turn into woods towards the burial ground to the east. This time he went straight up the river for a hundred yards; he always liked new territory to explore.

A putrid smell stopped him. Upstream fifty feet a small limp body lay under a log washed up on the bank. The legs were buried in mud four feet from the edge of the river. Junior had no trouble recognizing the face with a ruffled and soggy mustache. His Asian client, Wong! He never made it out of the county.

Chapter 13

The only way Julie was going to have Angus on Sunday afternoon was for her to go with Junior on a picnic. On this first weekend in December, Junior had visitation rights with the dog the entire period from seven Friday evening to seven Sunday night, a standard time for a noncustodial parent in a custody case.

Luck prevailed because it was unseasonably warm for late fall. The couple decided to dine at upper Bear Lick watershed where the creek originated from the only known hot spring pool in Southwestern Virginia. For centuries, it had been a popular destination for the nearby Indians for religious and medicinal uses. In fact, it was a part of the original Reservation up until the Civil War. Since the Indians fought for the Confederacy, the carpetbaggers from the north took this eastern portion away from them shortly after Appomattox. Now locals as well as the remnants of the tribes frequented it, despite being on posted private property. Junior's family knew the owner of the lands, the Towe family, so he ignored the no trespassing signs plastered at the beginning of the trail. The Native Americans also paid no attention to the warning.

As with most children in a fractured family, Angus loved to be with Junior and Julie; so he was excited to jump out of the pick-up parked on the side of Possum Trot Road across from the turnoff to the Reservation. Several other vehicles lined the road, the largest being a back hoe painted bright yellow. At first, Junior paid no attention to the out-of-place construction equipment due to his excitement about Angus, but as he put on his knapsack, he stared at it. "What's this doing here?"

This was new territory to be explored for both the dog and Julie. It appeared to Junior that she was game to try just about anything new. Angus was a lot happier here than being indoors with the Queens all week. He was a Terrier, the word came from Latin *terra firma*, meaning 'of the ground'. This animal stayed close to the earth with its little legs and large nose sniffing the ground all the while. Despite his old age and without fear, Angus tried to burrow and chase after animals of all sizes.

Junior turned from the backhoe and waved to Ms. Krohl across the road pruning her rose bushes. He stepped over a metal bar that served as a gate across the beginning of the trail while Julie ducked under it. Four-story hemlocks shaded the old logging road.

"Have you been up to the hot springs?" Julie asked.

“Been there with Lightfeather a time or two. It’s just up a piece. But first I’m going to take you up to Eagle Ridge.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s on the far side of the cove. We’re goin on a loop trail. The springs are on the way down.”

“Is it steep?”

“No. Only half that of Corn Still.”

“That’s good.” Julie followed him on the broad path a few paces behind. Junior had to stop every four or five steps for her to catch up, his stride being twice hers.

With Angus in the lead, the couple marched single file up the gentle slope of an old road bed following Bear Lick Creek. Junior focused on the real purpose of the trip and stopped for her to catch up; he reached down to grasp her willing hand. They strolled through a hemlock forest on both sides of the moist well-used path. Bushy rhododendron bordered the banks of the creek. In many places, the foliage hid the creek from the trail. The water flow was about the same as that of their Corn Still Creek, having the same drainage area, but with a greater abundance of plant life. Large rocks and dead tree stumps were littered over a blanket of soft green moss bordering the dark humus trail. There was a fresh aroma of pine and dampness in the air along with the gentle sound of water tumbling over rocks and logs. After a leisurely ten minute walk, the roadbed split into two paths and Junior took the less traveled one that veered sharply to the left. After they released their hands, they climbed single file steadily for a distance of three football fields curving back to the right. After an elevation gain of a hundred feet and when the trail turned south, they came to a boulder the size of a pick-up on top of the ridge. The couple waited at the base of the rock for Angus to catch up. Junior took the dog into his arms and scampered up the outcropping. “You’re getting heavy.”

She followed. “Be careful with him.”

“I do. Take care of him real good. Last month I took him to the vet about his ear infection. Now he can hear.”

Julie pointed to the west and where they had started on Possum Trot Road. “What a view.” Beyond that lay the entire Bear Lick valley including Ms. Krohl’s cottage-like home, the Good home place, the Chief’s pond, the tribal building, the Dutch Curve River, all in that order. The pine trees bordering the burial ground stood out slightly to the north. In the far distance, the grassy tops of the Balds stood out with a dusting of snow.

“Let’s look for eagles.” Junior looked in the same direction as he sat close to Julie on the rock.

“You can see them here?”

“Lightfeather said you could see them here.” Junior put his arm around her as both stared in silence with the westerly breeze beating at their faces.

After ten minutes of watching for birds, they heard voices coming up the trail they had traveled. Julie said, “Let’s go down to the springs.”

“Okay.” He climbed down the boulder helping her in one place and headed south down the ridge. After fifty feet, the path turned to the west and then descended into the cove in a northerly direction. They had come around full circle. The trail soon disappeared through locust trees, vines, brush and briars. It would be difficult to negotiate this in the summer. Julie did not complain as she dodged patches of snow on the northern slope, but asked, “Do you know where you’re going?”

“Not really.” Not many people returned this way, but Junior knew they would eventually hit the springs that lay in the middle of the cove.

Julie noted, “I guess I am stuck with you.”

“Stay close, Angus,” Junior commanded as he led the way for the group.

She lagged behind and stopped, “I smell something different.”

“I can see the springs.” He took giant steps on an open path rutted with tree roots. A layer of mist hung from a flat area the size of a badminton court.

“Wait for me.”

“Just like it was when I went up with Lightfeather.” Junior removed his back pack and laid it by the base of a birch tree.

“It’s beautiful,” Julie entered the clearing ten feet from a pool of water surrounded by exotic ferns, Spanish moss and magnolia trees; flora one would find in the low country of Georgia. Frost seldom invaded this area; in fact, the surface never iced over through the winter. The pond remained a constant one hundred degree temperature despite any weather conditions around it. The moisture mixed with the plants made an intoxicating perfume.

They were not alone; another couple in their seventies embraced, sitting on an old wooden bench, the only place to sit down and admire the natural phenomenon. Even in the late fall this was a popular lovers lane, although not private. The elderly people got up and left without a word. Junior didn’t say anything either but looked at

the departing couple in an apologetic way. Julie sat down and unlaced one of her sneakers. Junior joined her and they watched the display and breathed in the fragrances on the bench. The Westie meandered to the bank sniffing on the trail of a frog.

“Watch out, Angus, it’s slippery out there.” Junior said as he threw a stone that almost hit a turtle lying on a rock on the bank of the springs. The amphibian scurried away diving under the surface.

Angus barked a few times, and then trotted back under the bench. He slept with one eye open on the rocky ground to guard against any intruders to his space.

“How deep’s that pool?” Julie stood up taking several barefoot steps to the edge and peered at the bottom.

“Don’t know. Never been swimmin in there.”

“It looks like you could dive in on the other side.” Julie returned to him on the bench and took a drink of water from her bottle.

“To be honest with you, I can’t swim. I never learned.”

“I’ll teach you to swim.” With all the talk on this topic, Angus tried to jump up to be closer to the couple.

Junior picked him up and petted his back. “Don’t like to get in the water.”

“Really? I thought with all your fishing, you would know how.” Julie rubbed her feet.

“Where did you learn?”

“We went to a lake in New Jersey for the summer with Dad and Mom when we visited my grandparents. I swam a lot, that’s the only sport I really enjoy.” She rolled up her pants as far as she could. “It’s like walking sideways without gravity. You sorta float along.”

“Can you teach me sometime?” Junior continued to stroke Angus to reassure him that he was not going for a dip.

Julie strung her socks over a ‘No Wading and Swimming’ sign and tip-toed down some moss covered rocks towards the pool. “Sure. How about now?”

Junior tried to think of an excuse. “It’s too cold outside.”

She reached the edge of the water and stopped for a few moments putting a toe in. “The water’s warm. Perfect!”

“I want to try closer to home.” The real reason is that he wanted to be alone so no one would make fun of him; he heard voices coming up the trail.

“How about in the pond at Corn Still, does anyone swim in there?”

“Nope, my Paw says it’s polluted, because of the livestock. The goats are around. A lot of cattle above there.” Junior dug into his knapsack and retrieved a soda.

“This is nice and warm.” Julie waded taking half steps out to just below her knees. “Good for swimming. It drops off.”

Angus jumped down from the bench and barked at the girl in the water. Junior bent down and restrained the dog. “Well, don’t go any further. I can’t save you.” He saw that Julie was ready to take a dive.

“Okay. I’m coming back. Next time we need to bring some suits and towels. I’ll teach you, nobody around.”

“Nobody to laugh at me.”

“Promise I won’t.” Julie chuckled while standing still in the warm water. “This is relaxing. I need to come out here whenever my boss gives me a hard time at work.”

Junior chuckled, “I guess I’ll have to be easy on you.”

“I want to come here again.” She lingered near the shore as if she wanted to stay longer. Another couple appeared near the bench, but left, respecting their privacy.

“We’ll do it.”

“But let’s not bring Angus. He’s hyper.”

“He doesn’t like water at all.” Junior took a gulp of the soda.

“How’d you know that?” Now sitting on the bench, Julie brushed some dark humus off her feet.

“Well, I talked to his owner in Riverport way back when I got him. They had a big swimming pool and every time their grandkids got in, Angus would circle around the water real fast. Barked his head off. It drove them crazy. They couldn’t figure out what was the matter with the little mongrel.”

“You know, a lot of people around here don’t know how to swim.” Julie tied her laces to one of her sneakers and looked up. “Wonder why?”

“Yeah. Reckon I agree with you on that. They just don’t have no notion to get wet.” Junior continued to pet Angus on the bench. It was hard for Junior to keep a secret and he moved over close to her on the bench. He reached for her hand. “What I want to know.” He squeezed it gently. “Um.” He let go and put his arm around her. “Do you want to live out on the Reservation with me?”

“In a tepee?”

“No it’s Lightfeather’s trailer.” Junior thought he better not tell her that a tepee was larger than the camper.

“I thought you lived in Allison’s place.”

“Some, but I’m movin to the Reservation.”

“Specifically where on this place?”

“It’s almost to the end of the road back there. Across Possum Trot. Well, it’s to the end. Almost to the River.” Junior tried to explain the geography of the Reservation.

“Why down there?” Julie asked, standing only long enough to reach for a Baby Ruth in her pocket. “What’s wrong with your home place?”

“Do you want to live with me right down from our parents?”

“Never thought of that.” She munched on the candy for a few seconds. “How big is this trailer of yours?”

“There’s enough room for me and you.” Junior had to add to state the entire truth, “Nothing much else.”

“Can I take my stereo?”

“No.”

“Can I bring my stuffed animals?”

“No.”

“Doll collection?”

“No.”

“Then why should I move there?”

“I need help tending the owls.”

“The what?”

“I promised Lightfeather I would take care of his injured birds. People bring them from all over the state.” Junior did not want to go into details about feeding them, not just yet.

“Is that the only reason?”

Junior sensed a little teasing and took a deep breath. “I love you and I want to marry you!”

Julie slid over on the seat, spilling the open can of soda on Junior’s pants, and hugged him. After she released him, Julie asked, “What does this trailer look like?” She waited a few seconds for his reaction.

“It has two rooms. One for you and one for me.”

“That’s great.”

“Seriously, it’ll only be for a short time. That’s what Hoppi says.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s a long story. Just trust me, it’ll only be for awhile.”

Julie seemed satisfied with that explanation. “I wish we could live on Corn Still and have children.” She took the last bit of the candy bar.

“Who said anything about a family?”

“Most married people raise kids.”

“Not so soon,” Junior warned.

“Let’s start right now!”

“Right now?” Junior was unprepared for this in many different ways.

“Why not?”

“For one thing, Angus is here.” The dog barked upon hearing his name and disturbed a pair of crows in the trees beside the pool.

“Those people may come back.”

Julie did not pursue this further, but asked, “Why should I marry you?”

As he looked into the sky, Junior felt like he was being cross examined and decided to pile it on. “I can’t get along without you. I’d be lost at the office. You are the wind beneath my wings.”

“That’s more like it.”

“But will you marry me?”

“Only if there’s room for me and Angus.”

Chapter 14

During Monday's term of civil court, Junior sat next to his opposing counsel in the jury box during the morning recess. Rick and a host of press, the most flashy and conspicuous being Wendy Sniff, were seated in the audience to cover the proceedings at hand. Other attorneys were positioned at the tables ready to do battle in a pending case before the Honorable Joseph J. Pickens. The Judge returned, buttoning his robe as he assumed the bench. "Well let's see where we are here. I'll give all the lawyers five minutes each to summarize their cases. We've been here all morning on this." Junior had waited since the beginning of court at nine thirty to have his custody case heard, but this motion before the bar for an immediate order took precedence over his matter.

A white haired gentleman stood up from behind the Plaintiff's table. "Your Honor, my client will lose as much as one half of his December business if the town is allowed to close Main Street this Saturday. He cannot make his baked goods for the holiday parties. Christmas is his busiest time of the season. He can't get deliveries and the customers will not come. The town should have given my client more notice of the closure. All of his employees will have to be laid off and his customers will go elsewhere to Riverport in the future. Next year's income will drop. What the town is doing is unconstitutional. They are doing this for a private company to move a boat through our peaceful place. We have shown that the blockage will cause irreparable injury to my client's business. Thank you, Your Honor."

The Judge turned to Helen Winde, who rose behind counsel table on the other side of the courtroom and shot back. "The Mighty Moving Company is not getting any preferential treatment. The town closes Main Street for numerous parades and festivals. There are many private organizations in these things. Moreover, the loss to the bakery is minimal and he can cook the stuff somewhere else. I'm not going to rehash all the testimony. The town has a right to give my client's company a permit to do this. I trust Your Honor will do the right thing."

"Does the tribe have anything to say?"

It was Henry Winde's turn. "The purchase of the boat by Chief Laughing Seed has a lawful purpose. He wants to use it to put in one of his ponds. It'll be a tourist attraction there and draw people from all around. It is my understanding that he'll have boat rides on the Reservation." The attorney, unconvincing on this last point, droned

on, "In order to do this, it has to be moved through the streets of Mulberry."

"Anything for the town?" The Judge asked.

Henry and Helen's brother, Howard, stood up. "For public safety reasons, the town has a right to close their streets. We concur with Ms. Winde and Mr. Winde. Nothing further."

There was a faint sound of laughter in the courtroom and the Judge looked sternly at the audience. "Be quiet. Any rebuttal from the bakery?"

Junior saw that the Plaintiff's attorney was blown away by all the Windes and had nothing to say.

"All right. Thank you gentlemen and lady. I agree with the Windes that the town has the right to close the street. Plaintiff's claim is dismissed."

After all the attorneys in the boat case left, the Judge looked at the jury box. "Mr. Garfield, I'm goin to deny your motion to continue. You should have subpoenaed your witness last week. You and Mr. Smith, all of you be ready for your custody matter this afternoon." Junior was not surprised that Pickens did this. At the last minute his client had wanted a friend to testify but this witness was called out of town without notice for employment reasons. The Judge then added, "How long is this going to take, Mr. Garfield?"

Junior looked at the opposing counsel, "Your Honor, about two days."

The other attorney nodded while Pickens looked disgusted. "Just be back at two this afternoon and let's try to wrap this up today." The Judge shuffled some papers around on the bench. "That's after I appoint a lawyer for a prisoner. I'll do that right after dinner. It won't take long so counsel be back at two." He peeped down at the woman sitting at a desk below him. "Madame Clerk. Please call Bartlett in Riverport and have him over here this afternoon promptly at two."

She nodded and the proceedings were adjourned for the morning. Outside on the Courthouse steps, Junior saw Wendy, the TV anchor, get in the Judge's car with him and take off. Apparently, she was attracted to older men, which suited Junior just fine. He certainly didn't want to fight over her with the Judge. Julie had probably run her off anyway by telling her that he was Julie's property now.

On the sidewalk ready to unlock his office, Junior found a note on the door, "GONE TO LUNCH" and the lights turned off inside. He remembered that Julie had wanted to go out with some of the girls from her youth group to a new restaurant in Riverport, so she would be gone for awhile. The only problem was that he had left his keys inside as he rushed to Court in the morning. Perhaps he could enter through a

back window and no would see him crawl through. Being lost without her, he had no choice but to do this.

In an unprofessional manner, he climbed into his office landing on a bookcase. It took a few minutes to recover and straighten up all the books spread over the floor; but once he settled in, he decided to leave the message on the door. He missed her in the vacant and quiet place. A future with Julie appeared to be promising. They complemented each other as a team. A certain chemistry existed, not like a nuclear reaction, but something like cake ingredients that make something good.

His thoughts returned to reality and court this afternoon. Before opening his lunch box at his desk, Junior called his client and his witnesses to be at the Courthouse at two. He also cleared his calendar for tomorrow because he never knew how long the trial would last.

Junior represented a father who was attempting to regain custody of his three-year-old daughter from the mother who had primary physical possession of the child from birth. This past Saturday morning his client and witnesses came in to go over their testimony. Most domestic custody cases are fairly simple swearing contests. The parents want to tell their story about how bad the other person is and this case appeared to be no different. This would be a difficult case for his client. The court usually does not like to disturb the *status quo*, especially against a mother of a small child. He had tried to tell his client this so his expectations would be low. All that the father could hope for would be expanded visitation rights. Junior was beginning to realize that in order to build a successful law practice, an attorney not only had to know the law, but also had to tell clients what they could reasonably expect, the latter being the most difficult. Many times, clients did not want to hear it, and the extreme grumbling ones wanted to shoot the messenger.

Judge Pickens had an eye for the ladies, and if there was a pretty girl involved, he would hang the father out to dry. On the other hand, if the woman was elderly or unattractive, or both, he would not have any trouble and the judge would usually be sympathetic to him.

After munching on an apple, Junior phoned Hoppi at the Reservation to ask about several things: what the Chief was up to with the boat, the body found on the river and the loose cows. Junior would have liked to go to the Reservation after work, but he had to take Julie into Riverport to shop. His neighbor's answering machine picked up his call and Junior thought, "Probably feeding his dogs." It was one-thirty and he finally was able to gulp down the rest of his midday meal.

As usual, court started late with Judge Pickens strolling in at two-thirty with a satisfied grin. This turned sour when he glanced through the Courtroom from high atop the bench. “Where’s Bartlett?”

The clerk responded. “His office said he was in Federal Court this afternoon and couldn’t be here.”

“Did you remind him that he has obligations in my Court?” the Judge barked.

“Sorry sir, I only talked to his secretary.”

“These out of state lawyers should not be allowed to practice here. That Bartlett didn’t even go to law school in this state.” The Judge sneered at Junior. “Call him back and tell him to get his butt up here after his case is over. And call the Federal Court to find out when it’ll be finished.”

“Yes sir.” The clerk jumped up to do these tasks downstairs.

Junior knew this was pure harassment towards his fellow attorney and mentor. The Judge did not like outsiders, or natives who were friends with outsiders, or even locals, who strayed off attending school outside the jurisdiction of Virginia. That included both Georgetown, just over the line in DC by a few miles, and his friendship with Mr. Bartlett. This was not going to be a pleasant afternoon, but Junior had to focus on his case.

Since the mother had filed the action for divorce which contained a claim for custody of her daughter, she took the stand first. Her self-serving testimony accused the father of being drunk, not paying his child support on time, hanging out at Cowgirls and leaving the child with his parents when he had visitation.

It was Junior’s turn to cross-examine the Plaintiff, an attractive twenty-five year old blonde with smooth baby-like skin. “Ma’am, isn’t it true you that you live with your boyfriend at his trailer?”

“I live with my mother.”

Junior continued to ask leading questions. “Well, isn’t it true you live with your boyfriend also?”

“I go over there some to his trailer.”

“Do you stay overnight?”

Her attorney objected and the Judge upheld it.

Junior wanted to pursue this line of questioning but had to drop it for the moment. “Then, where does the child stay when you are over at your boyfriend’s house?”

“At my mother’s.”

“Isn’t it true that your mother’s in the nursing home in Riverport?” Junior knew this from personal knowledge because he had seen the girl there when he visited his father.

“Yes. Um. I get a sitter at my mother’s house.”

Junior had her in a trap. “Who is the babysitter?”

“I don’t remember.” She escaped the snare, for now.

“You don’t know because there is none at your mother’s house.” Before she had a chance to comment, Junior made a statement and posed a question. “So you stay with your boyfriend when you have the child?”

“Objection.”

“Overruled, that’s permissible.” The Judge turned to the witness. “Answer that question.”

“Um. Yeah, once in a while.”

“Well, do you spend the night with him?”

“Objection.”

Before the Judge had the opportunity to rule on it, Junior added, “When you have custody of the child?”

“Overruled.”

“Um. I spend some time over there.”

“So you sleep with your boyfriend while your child is there?”

The witness was forced to say, “Yeah.”

After Junior made his point, he pursued another line of questioning that he knew personally. “Ma’am, then what do you do for a living?”

“I work for a law firm.”

“What firm?”

“Winde, Winde and Winde.”

“What person in that firm?”

“Some for Henry, very little with Howie. You know he stays in Richmond a lot. I’d say Helen mostly. She’s the county attorney now. Helen has three secretaries workin for her. I supervise the others. I am pretty much responsible for what goes on in the office.”

Junior loved her rambling and telling people her importance. It was obvious that she was not coached for trial testimony. “What hours do you work?”

“It varies. She’s in a lot of things. She travels out of state. I have to make her airline reservations. Get hotels and rental cars. That sort of stuff. She changes them a lot and sometimes it is a frustrating job. It’s hard for me to keep up with her. I also do personal errands. Like this past summer, I even went up to New York City to pick up some diamond earrings for Helen. She had to replace some she lost.”

Junior’s ears perked up, but he let her ramble.

“But I like it. There’s always something different goin on. I get to see a lot of different places and meet different people. Do a lot of

fun stuff. Last year when we were in Miami doing depositions, we went motorcycling. She loves that.”

“Anything else?”

“A strip club on South Beach.”

Her attorney butted in. “Motion to strike. Her answer is unresponsive.”

The Judge agreed. “Motion granted.”

But the damage had been done. The judge was supposed to disregard that but the information was out there and could not be erased from anyone’s memory. This was just like Paul Newman’s cross examination of the nurse in the movie *The Verdict* where the judge told the jury to disregard her testimony about changing the hospital records at the direction of the doctor. Junior was surprised that she volunteered this information. He always coached his witnesses to only answer the question on cross examination and nothing more. People on the stand have a tendency to wander and say too much. This gave Junior the opportunity to pursue this although he didn’t know where it would lead. “Like what things do you find it hard for you to keep up with, Ma’am?”

Her attorney said, “Objection.”

“On what basis?” Junior asked although he knew he could not get this out just yet. He had to be patient.

The woman’s attorney rose. “Speculation and relevancy to a custody action.”

“I agree. Sustained.”

“What type of fun stuff do you do?” Junior knew he was pushing the envelope with the Judge, but he enjoyed this. Great cross examinations can never be taught in law school; it had to be acquired through years of experience. Junior was on his way to attaining this skill.

“Objection.”

“Sustained.”

Junior wanted to make a point. “Your Honor, she opened the door.”

“Sustained. Ask your next question, Mr. Garfield.”

“Do you have to go on business trips overnight together?”

Junior tried to tie it in with the care of her daughter.

“Objection.”

“Sustained. You need to focus this thing with the child. Rephrase your question.” Surprisingly, the Judge gave Junior an opening in which to get the evidence in.

“Yes. Your Honor, I’ll rephrase the question.” Junior tried to assure the judge who now was beginning to warm up to his client’s cause, “How often are you out of town when the child is with you?”

“Objection.” It was weak and barely audible by her attorney.

“Overruled.”

The witness had to answer, but she remained evasive. “Every once in awhile.”

“Well, during the time in Florida that you testified a few minutes ago, did you have custody of your child?”

“No. Not that time. The child was with him that weekend.”

“How do you know that over a year ago?”

“Not sure.”

“How long do you go for on other trips?”

“As long as necessary.” She started to squirm on the witness stand.

“How many nights are you gone?”

“Few days.”

Junior looked at the witness. “Well, how do you take care of your child while you are on these trips?” Junior knew this question was a gamble. His evidence professor at law school taught him that an attorney should never ask a question on cross-examination without knowing the answer.

The witness paused and looked at her lawyer for help, but she was all alone on the stand. Her attorney could not in good conscience object to this relevant question. The mother testified, “I can leave her at the day care.”

Junior took another chance, “What day care?”

“The one at the Jackpot casino in Vegas. I don’t know the exact name.”

Junior took another roll of the dice. “Then how can you afford that?”

“If you play there, it’s free. Helen wins a lot but I owe them a lot of money.”

This time Junior had won!

Chapter 15

After yesterday's court with his custody case, Junior was exhausted, yet satisfied with the results. He did not need to present much evidence for his side once the mother self-destructed on the stand. After giving a lecture on the vices of gambling to her, Judge Pickens awarded the father full custody. Junior could spend today at the office with no clients, attorneys or judges to deal with. He could catch up on mail, paperwork and returning of numerous phone calls. Julie could focus on past due client accounts and the regular onslaught of bills. At two in the afternoon, the attorney took a break and went over to check his box at the Courthouse for notices and court calendars.

Since the limo had tailed him, Junior always looked over his shoulder whenever he ventured outside. However, today it didn't seem to bother him too much, given that Wong had died. Perhaps the people following Junior would assume that his secret about the cache had died with him. But there was the possibility that the people responsible for his death would continue their search for the cash. There was an outside chance that his deceased client fell victim to an accident or even suicide.

Junior wanted to secure an autopsy report, a matter of public record, but he didn't want to arouse any suspicions in the procurement of the document. Criminal court records indicated that Junior was connected to Wong as his attorney. Moreover, Junior hung around at the Reservation where the body was found. If his attorney was the one who reported his death, then it might throw some suspicion on Junior by a good Sheriff's detective. No seasoned DA would even listen to that, but there was no telling what one of the more aggressive young assistants would do trying to make a name for themselves. They could make life difficult and there would be some adverse publicity for the fledgling attorney. That's why he made an anonymous call from a pay phone in Riverport that night about the discovery of the body last week. He felt it would be simpler that way; he did not have to answer any questions about his strange relationship. Anyway, he didn't have any concrete idea of how or why he died, just theories. There would be plenty of time to obtain a copy of the autopsy in a manner that would not attract attention.

Upon his return to the office Julie handed him a wad of pink message sheets. "Hoppi returned your call."

“Thanks. I’ll call him right away.” Junior closed the door to his office, but within ten minutes he came and made a suggestion to Julie at her desk. “Let’s take the rest of the afternoon off.”

With a twinkle in her eye, she asked, “What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s go to the Reservation.”

“And do what?” Julie munched on a Baby Ruth followed by a swig of water from her bottle.

“You’ve never been there. I have to warn you, it’s not much.”

“I’d live anywhere with you.” She put her candy bar back in her pocket. “As long as Angus could come.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be there.”

“What do you have in mind now?” she asked again.

“I want you to meet Hoppi.”

“Is that all?”

“Not what you’re thinking!” Junior knew exactly what she was referring to. “Later maybe.”

Julie rose from in front of her computer and hugged him.

“Why not now? You know I just turned eighteen.”

“So, I don’t have to ask our parents.” Both laughed as Junior tried to disengage from his secretary. “I need to talk to you about some things there.”

“Okay. I’m game.” She wasted no time in shutting down the computer and turning the copier off.

“You’ll like it there.”

“Let’s go.” Grabbing her coat, she followed him one step behind to his truck parked a block away.

Going up Possum Trot from town, the pick-up swerved right onto the Bear Lick Road turnoff. “You’re going too fast.” Julie scolded.

“Sorry, I have a lot on my mind.” The pick-up squealed as Junior put his foot on the brake pedal.

“You need to get this thing fixed.”

“Okay, when I can get to it.”

“What are all those red things on the side of the road?” She asked as they traveled west towards the Reservation.

Junior slowed and looked out the driver’s window. Colored stakes peppered the rolling landscape. “This is where the new highway is going to be.”

“Will there be an interchange here so I can get on it?”

“No. You have to go to Mulberry.”

“Could you stop a minute?” Julie asked.

“Sure.” Junior pulled onto the grass on top of the bank of Bear Lick Creek.

“Seems like they are using a lot of property for a road. It’s a shame to lose all this farmland. In the summer I’d like to go up on Eagle Ridge to paint.”

Junior was surprised, “Didn’t know you liked that.”

“I did some watercolors from my house. I’ll show you some time. Matter of fact, I am going to display them in the new Folk Art Center next year.”

“Where’s that?”

“It isn’t built yet.”

“Where will that be then?” Junior asked.

“Up on West Prong. Mom’s involved with fundraising for it. She wants me to join the Arts Council.”

“I keep you pretty busy now.”

Julie looked at the view to the west. “Maybe you can give me some time off to paint this summer.”

“Only if you are good.”

“Seriously, when will they start the new road? I’d like to paint from here.”

“As soon as the weather breaks in the spring, you won’t recognize this place.” Junior lamented.

“Why’s that?”

“They’ll have to make a big bridge over Bear Lick road and creek. A lot of earth’ll be moved in here. I’m sure they’ll have to relocate the creek. Tons of sediment will flow down to the Reservation to our place.”

Julie asked, “What’s this ‘our’ business?”

“You’ll like it. It’s real cozy.” Junior said as they passed the Reservation Boundary with no welcoming committee from Chief Laughing Seed. After a few hundred yards the couple saw heavy equipment making an earthen ramp down to the pond on the upstream eastern shore.

“What’s that, Junior?”

“Maybe that’s what Hoppi wants to tell me about.” Junior slowed to a crawl to get a better look. On the downstream side of the pond, front end loaders were dumping dirt on the earthen dam.

Julie pointed to the excavation project. “That’s going to be a big lake.” Below the pond, they saw the chief’s prize roosters strutting around a shed. Other chickens waddled around in the creek nearby, oblivious to all the construction activity around them.

The couple followed the road and the creek downstream while Junior explained to his fiancé the details of Lightfeather's death, and the tribal problems only in general terms. There was no reason to explain the cash in the washing machine and the Asians, perhaps later when she adjusted to life on the Reservation. She might change her mind about moving if she knew all the particulars, but Junior would need to disclose all of this at some point, even if he did not know the entire story. They saw Hoppi's truck parked beside the owl shed, but he was not in sight.

Not in livable condition for a woman, Junior tried to warn her as he climbed the broken steps to the trailer. "I guess this place needs a good cleaning."

Stepping on the threshold, Julie gasped. "I can't argue with that. Real cozy all right." She ventured inside. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Um it's outside. It's just behind the owl shed. Not far."

"That's great." She still hadn't recovered from the initial shock.

Without a knock of warning, Hoppi entered the camper and Julie acknowledged the neighbor by raising her right hand putting her palm up. "How"

"They only do that on the Lone Ranger. I'm Hoppi." The Indian laughed and extended his hand but he received a big hug.

Junior said to his fiancé, "I'm glad you're back to normal. Let him loose."

She complied but made a closer inspection of the premises. "I guess I'll have to round up my crew again."

"No pink, please." Junior warned.

Julie took three steps to the kitchen area. "Am I supposed to cook here?"

"I'll fix the propane burner."

"Just go." She waved the men off.

Junior decided to leave her in her misery and went outside to talk to his neighbor. They took refuge in the owl shed. Junior examined the repaired hole in the mesh. "Last time I was up at your place I saw some cows running loose up your road."

Hoppi said, "That's Rocking Horse's cattle. I have warned him about that. Next time that happens, just shoot them."

"I tried to run em away."

"Thanks, but he doesn't keep his fences repaired. He's not interested in his cattle. Just hangs around the Chief."

"Seems like it."

Hoppi petted one of the older owls resting on a wood shelf. "Junior, there'll be a tribal meeting soon. I think it has to do with the boats being brought in here."

"Yeah, is that something to do with him digging in the dirt?"

"He's up to something, but he only has one other vote on the council." Hoppi sighed.

"How's that?" Junior asked.

"Well he needs three votes to change the use of his piece of land. He only has Rocking Horse to count on."

"There's you and me."

"Right." Hoppi concluded

"What about the other fifth vote?"

"That's the Tsalli family. They're an independent sort." Hoppi picked up the bird by its back.

"Will the owl hurt you?"

"You need to get to know them. This one is called 'Spooky.' It takes years. I always have to pet them before I hold them."

"What about Tsalli?"

"Sometimes he goes along with Laughing Seed, matter of fact, he voted for him as Chief."

"I met the Tsalli woman. Strange up there."

"Yeah, I can never relate to those people."

"Why don't you talk to them?" Junior asked.

"Maybe, but the Chief has probably bribed him with something."

"Really?"

Hoppi shook his head. "Have you told Julie about the ring?"

"No, not really. I guess I need to tell her."

"Why?"

"We're getting married."

The Indian let go of the owl, which flew a few feet to his normal resting place on the shelf. "Wow! Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"Is she going to live here?"

"Yes."

"How long do you think she'll last?"

"Why do you say that?" Junior expressed some concern.

"There're not any women folk living on the Reservation."

"You mean there's no welcome wagon here."

"Not really, just a lot of animal signs."

Junior thought about his trip to Tsalli's property and the round sign of the eagle on it, similar to Lightfeather's. "Why do all the places around here have animals on them?"

"Indian custom."

"Like the pictures on the rock you see in the Southwest?"

"Don't know that. But we do it here to please Kawhawee."

"Is that why Lightfeather put the animals on the owl house?"

"Yeah." Spooky started to get restless so Hoppi captured the owl to calm him down. "Where is Lightfeather's ring?" Hoppi got closer to Junior with Spooky in hand and passed the bird to Junior.

Cradling it, Junior felt more comfortable with his neighbor and the owl. "It's at Corn Still in a safe place."

"Good. But now that you're living here, the Chief may come and get it."

"Wouldn't that be illegal?"

"No, some of your laws don't apply here. Possession of the ring is all-important in Indian culture. Families go to great lengths to protect it. They think of elaborate ways to hide it."

"Like king of the mountain?"

"There is an exception to the rule on stealing the ring."

"What?" Junior thought this a bit strange, but saw that Hoppi was serious and convincing, so he listened with a high degree of interest.

"It can't be taken after sundown the day before the tribal meeting."

"Good, then I can sleep with it under my pillow."

Chapter 16

Junior and Julie sat facing each other in a booth at the Wagon. They squinted at the chalk board touting the luncheon specials of the day. A young woman appeared wearing a Hooters-like tee shirt. Julie jumped out of her seat into the aisle and squeezed the girl tight.

When set free, the waitress said, "We all miss you."

Junior looked at the radical change in dress code, commenting, "Now you can get some work done without the hugging."

The girl wrangled out an order pad stuffed in her shorts pocket. The note paper was the same length as her pants. "Julie, how do you like your new job?"

"I love working for this good looking attorney."

Junior blushed, gawking at the top of the tee shirt glued onto the waitress. "To be honest, I'd be lost without her."

The skimpily clad girl smiled. "Congratulations to both of you. What can I get for the lovebirds today?"

"We'll have the club specials," Julie volunteered for both of them as the waitress collected the grease-stained menus.

"Yeah, I never get that at home." He swatted a fly that had landed on top of a pepper shaker, sending it to the floor.

The waitress asked Junior, "What do you want to drink?"

"Just water."

"Same for you, ma'am?"

"I'll take bottled water," Julie said.

"We don't have any."

"When I worked here, we always had some."

"Sorry we ran out. New management."

"I guess I'll wait until I get back to the office to get my bottled water."

"What about something else to drink?"

"I won't have anything to drink."

Junior thought this was strange and wondered what other little surprises were in store in living with Julie. He didn't want to back out for this reason, but needed an explanation. "Why don't you drink tap water?"

"My stomach gets upset with different water and certain drinks."

The waitress was not interested in this topic. "What about our desserts? They come with lunch. You have a choice."

Julie said, "Not for me; I have a Baby Ruth here in my pocket."

“Honey, you’re addicted to those things.” Junior bent down to retrieve the pepper shaker and by accident, got another view of the waitress’s bare legs and thighs.

“What are you looking at, Junior?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, get up from there.”

Junior popped up and tried to change the subject. “I guess I can put up with that candy.”

“It’s cheaper than a lot of things. I buy them by the box.

Usually keep two or three in my pocket.”

The waitress looked impatient. “How about you, young man?”

“No, I think I’ll have one of her candy bars for dessert.” Junior watched the waitress as she left to fill their order.

“What are you staring at, Junior?”

“Nothing.” Junior’s face turned red. “Actually, Helen Winde came in with a Chinese guy. That’s the one that tried to follow me to the cash.” He pointed to the short man.

“Are you being followed?”

“Sort of.” He gathered up the spilled pepper on the table. “Not now anyway.”

“Why at all then?”

“It deals with a cash transaction I’m involved in.”

“How much?”

“It’s confidential. Attorney client stuff.”

“I work for you,” she reminded him in a slightly irritated way.

While the couple waited for their meal, he explained the washing machine together with the full details of the Asian client and his suspicious death on the river. He could ethically divulge this information to his employee, but Julie would have the same duty not to disclose this knowledge as the attorney. Anyway, the relationship probably ended at his death, but he was not sure of this minor point.

Junior satisfied her curiosity, but he could tell that the explanation did not soothe her concerns about taking up residency at the Reservation. She hung her head as their food was served and after the waitress left, Julie said, “I’ll be alone out there some times.”

“You’ll have the eagles flying around.”

“Looking for dead bodies.”

“Well, you’ll have the owls next door.”

“They eat dead stuff too.” His fiancé turned toward him, keeping a low profile. “I’ve seen that short man here before. I served him.”

“Really? How would you remember?”

“There’s not many grown men my size.”

“Do you remember when?”

“It was before I started to work for you.”

“That helps a lot.” Junior’s tone was impatient as he mumbled with a mouthful of cole slaw.

“Don’t get huffy now.” Julie paused. “It was the night of that road meeting. We were pretty packed. Usually on a Wednesday it’s slow in here. Most people go to church dinners. I remember I got a good tip from him.”

“How much?”

“More than you pay me in a day.” She picked at her sandwich.

“I guess I need to give you a raise.”

“He pulled out a wad of hundreds and gave me one for their supper. He told me to keep the change.”

“Wow. You made more money than I did that night being a reporter.” Junior thought that one of the bills could have come from the washing machine, but kept this to himself. At some point he needed to retrieve the money. But whose money was it? Junior didn’t know what to do with it.

Apparently Julie didn’t make any connection. “Dad doesn’t pay very well.”

“At least he gave permission for me to marry you.”

“That’s worth a lot.”

“I should have put you up to the highest bidder.” Junior stared at the mismatched pair, the man short and Helen tall. He wished he could have been one of those flies resting at their table to listen in on their conversation. After he finished his meal, Junior suggested, “Let’s go out through the kitchen.”

“Why? Do you want to look at the girls in there?”

“I just look. Don’t touch. Let’s go.”

“I’m not finished yet.”

“We need to get out of here.”

Julie’s face twitched. “Why?”

“It’ll just be better.”

She complied without further argument, leaving a good portion of food on her plate, and guided him back to the rear entrance of the restaurant. It took awhile to negotiate the journey because she had to hug all her former co-workers along the way through the kitchen and Junior needed to check all of them out.

Walking on the sidewalk in front of the Courthouse, the pair saw a forest green van parked in front of their law office two blocks away. A rainbow of different colors of bumper stickers were plastered everywhere except on the front windshield. A thin wiry man Julie’s

height leaned on the van on the sidewalk side. He looked like a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. Several other taller people with bushy beards hung around nearby. As the couple crossed Main Street, the most visible messages appeared: *Save the Earth, Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History, Think Globally Act Locally, Ralph Nader for President* and *We Still Read*. A torn North Vietnamese flag hung by a thread from a bent antenna. Soon they saw some of the faded ones like *Impeach Nixon, Peace NOW, Make Love Not War, Save the Whales* and *McGovern/Benson*.

The small man approached the couple. "Are you Mister Garfield, the attorney at law?"

Junior shook his hand. "Yes. I remember you from the road meeting."

"I'm Aaron Froblestein and I spoke for the Environmental and Earth Organization, the EEO for short."

"I hope I got your name spelled correctly in the paper." Junior unlocked the door and led the group in. Julie rushed to her desk and guzzled the contents of a full water bottle.

Aaron said, "Your article was great. But you should have put that comment about what Tingle said about our organization."

"What was that?"

"When he woke up."

"Oh yeah. I remember now." Junior chuckled. "Sorry. That's my first one. I had to pitch hit for my Dad."

Julie rose from her desk and asked, "What did you forget to put in?"

"I'll tell you later."

Mr Froblestein grinned. "Can we see you?"

Julie went to the computer while Junior motioned the men toward the couch in the reception area. "I have to make some important calls first."

Aaron sneered at all of the *Field and Stream* and *Bow Hunting* magazines scattered on the coffee table. All of Julie's women's reading material had been secretly replaced by a selection attuned to his masculine clientele. The man looked up pleadingly. "Thanks. I know I don't have an appointment. It's urgent!"

"I'll see all of you folks in a few minutes." Junior retired to his office and remained on the phone for half an hour. Then Julie ushered the environmentalists into his office and dragged several chairs from the reception area to accommodate the men so they would have a place to sit. After everyone was settled, the attorney broke the ice, "I read your report that you handed out at the hearing."

Aaron spoke for the group. "The commissioners didn't."

"They treated you folks rude."

"Didn't do so well." The environmentalist shook his head.

"It's not your fault." Junior remained polite and attentive, but wanted him to get to the point. "What can I do for you?"

"The Commonwealth is about to award the construction contract on the new road for the Possum Trot route."

"Once they start, it's hard to put all the dirt and rock back. So you need to file an action to stop it?"

"Yes. You're pretty smart." Mr. Froblestein bent over and fished through his brief case on the floor.

"That'll be difficult." Junior thought about it for a few seconds and asked. "On what basis?"

"For one thing they didn't give us enough notice."

"They'll just go through the same charade," Junior concluded.

"True, but anything to delay it would help."

"How's that?"

"They would like to start first thing when the weather breaks in the spring." The man took a one inch stack of paper out of his luggage. "The real reason to stop it is that an adequate environmental study has not been made." He handed it to Junior and scowled. "This is pure garbage."

"What's this?"

"It's the commission's staff report. The Federal Fish and Wildlife people were not even contacted. There's nothing in this report from these folks. Not even one word from their own Commonwealth wildlife experts. We pay them big bucks. It's a waste of the taxpayer's money. Matter of fact, more important, waste of trees to print it up."

Thinking this person sounded like a Reagan conservative, Junior did not comment as he flipped through it. "Does it matter that these organizations were not contacted?"

Aaron got to the point. "It's supposed to. The bottom line is that we need an attorney to file suit." Passionately the man argued, "You'd be saving a lot of habitat. The route'll destroy several eagle nests we spotted."

"I know, I have seen them."

The environmentalist's face lit up. "They are beautiful birds."

"This seems like the lawsuit will be complicated. It must be filed in Federal District Court. Don't even know where it is in this area."

"It's in Roanoke."

“They have different rules of evidence than what I do here.” Junior failed to add that he received his highest grade in Federal Practice at Georgetown and that he clerked for a law firm engaged in foreign trade litigation before the DC District Court. Despite Judge Pickens, Junior enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of Stark County Court.

Julie came in the office to give Junior a file. He did not acknowledge her and kept on glancing at the report. “This’ll be expensive. I’d like to help, but this is a big project. I’m getting married next month. At the very least I need some money up front for expenses. I’ll need to think about it.”

Julie smiled and hung around the men. “His wife will have expensive tastes.”

“You don’t have to tell her you are doing this *pro bono*,” Mr Froblestein said in a whisper.

She laughed. “I won’t tell.”

The man asked innocently, “Is your fiancé that pretty young TV reporter you were flirting with at the road hearing? I think her name is Wendy. She interviewed me. A real knockout. Is that her?” Julie did not wait for an answer and slammed the door behind her. Aaron asked, “Did I say something wrong?”

Junior wanted to crawl under his desk and slither out a back door like the owner of a fine restaurant discovering a rat in his place in front of his guests. Every attorney needs a way of escape for a variety of reasons. It really was not this man’s fault, although he felt it odd for a man of the earth to pay attention to the pleasures of the flesh. Junior tried to focus on the task at hand wondering both how he could get back in Julie’s good graces, and how to get out of representing these people without offending them. “One other thing. My cousin works at the Coal Company and I would be going against them.”

“Not really. You’d be suing the Commonwealth of Virginia. A great service to the taxpayers would be done.”

“Why?” Like at the hearing, Junior still had mixed feelings about the road. But he was beginning to appreciate what this group was trying to accomplish, especially having seen in person the area affected and the need to preserve a national treasure. But he didn’t agree with most of the things displayed on his bumper stickers. His representation would ruffle some feathers in Stark County and not just the bird ones. Some locals could not distinguish between what the environmental group professed, and Junior’s personal beliefs. This case would consume his life. Maybe he would even have to ride in that hippy van. Some one would see him go in it with all those bumper

stickers plastered all over. He would be seen in the passenger seat with his long arms hanging out the open window. Certainly there would be no air-conditioning, for that would use more gas and would tax the earth's resources even more. His family would disown him being next to a flag of the enemy in a war over thirty years ago in Vietnam.

At least this person stood for something and was not ashamed to show it. The man tried to convince him on purely economic grounds. "The Pump Gap route is much less expensive than the one they ramrodded. It costs only half as much."

"Why's that?"

"The Commonwealth already has some of the right of way for Highway 10. And there will be less blasting through rock. That really drives the cost of road construction up."

"It seems to me that the Possum Trot way is a lot longer."

"You are absolutely correct. It is exactly five and two tenths of a mile longer than Pump Gap. Do you know how much more gasoline that'll be required per year?"

"I have no idea." Junior had never thought about it in those terms of added energy consumption but quickly realized that Aaron made a valid point.

"At least ten thousand gallons."

"Probably more air pollution."

"We have studies to show that also. They probably have studies too but someone's hiding them."

"We would need to do discovery to find this out."

The environmentalists perked up in front of Junior. "You mean that you'll take the case?"

"Let me talk it over with my fiancé." Junior handed the report back. He knew he would be tangling with big law firms with even bigger money behind them. Those people did not intimidate him, but much of his energy and his limited resources would need to be focused in fighting them. Additional staff might be needed.

"Why's that?"

"She'll do most of the work."

"Is she an attorney?"

"No. But she is as good as one."

"Time is of the essence." A surprised look turned into a worried on his face as he stuffed the papers back in his case. "Will it take long to ask her?"

"No. She's in the next room."

Chapter 17

Moving day can be a traumatic experience, especially when one must move a paddle wheel river boat over thirty miles of mountainous roads. It took a two hundred ton railroad crane designed to remove wrecked and disabled diesel engines, to lift the 'Robert E Lee', the pride of the Biloxi Mississippi harbor, from the Dutch Curve River onto the largest flat bed truck the Mighty Movers had. When the boat rested on the vehicle, it stuck out ten feet on each side. On the rear, the paddle wheel extended over by fifteen feet. It took up the entire width of the pavement on U S Highway 10 and then some, invading its shoulders as it left Riverport north to Stark County. Although the road was officially closed, pick-up trucks with flashing lights both led and followed the flat bed.

There were no problems on the flat stretch to the Cowgirls beer joint, but beyond that, the grade of the road increased with many hairpin curves. After crossing the state line, a few ice patches dotted the road and a blanket of snow covered the woods in this higher elevation. The trek up Pump Gap took four hours as the truck crawled up the incline. One mile from the top, the sides of the hull started to scrape the icicles on the rock cliff on the north margin of the road. Some of these frozen spears fell on the deck of the ship like portions of the iceberg on the Titanic; but this boat would never sink. The driver had to readjust his position on the pavement and drive on the other side for fifty yards, close to the drop off to the Dutch Curve River Valley. On several occasions the front bumper crashed into the snowbanks. The last hundred yards to the top required a tow from a team of two John Deere tractors hooked to each side on the front bumper of the cab. It rivaled a pair of horses pulling a stagecoach over Donner Pass in the high Sierras.

At the summit, the tractors were unhooked and the entire operation rested. The driver and his support staff took a much-needed pit stop at the Pump Gap General Store.

The downward journey to Mulberry posed a different problem: how to arrest all the weight of the wooden beams and structural components of the 'Lee'. Although the boat was stripped of all non-essential items like doors, shelves, drawers, cabinets and window frames, it would be a daunting task to steer the boat down the mountain in one piece. It was only a skeleton of a hull and super structure were left with only the paddle wheel in the stern. Even on the bridge, the captain's chair, steering wheel, and bell were unbolted and removed. However, on each side of the hull near the bow, the

metal band with the ship's name was left to preserve some of her dignity and past glory. It didn't matter that for the past ten years it had served as a storage space for women's lingerie made in Taiwan waiting to be shipped across the United States. Before that, it had served for a short time as a museum for rare fossils. During World War II, it serviced off duty military personnel as a brothel. Built in the roaring twenties during Prohibition, it ferried the rich and famous passengers up and down the Lower Mississippi River. After the stock market crash, it sat in the Biloxi waterfront. The ship had quite a history, and it was not finished yet.

The tractors hooked to the rear of the vehicle, now provided two additional braking mechanisms, like anchors dragging the bottom of the ocean. It started slow and the driver was able to maintain a safe speed. However with each curve, he lost his ability to control the downward movement. The tractors had to release their lines because they were not designed to travel at such a high rate of speed. Fumes of burnt rubber consumed the cab of the Mighty Movers truck. The boat swerved back and forth, sliding sideways after each turn.

The driver, the same person who had attempted to move Georgia's trailer ten years earlier, radioed to the people further down the mountain, "It's a rockin too much. Need the chains." In a wide spot half way down the grade, they were ready to drop a loop on a timber cable from a raised platform on each side of the road to the back of the truck near the stern. It served as a dock for the moving boat. The other ends of the cable were wrapped around the trunks of giant oak trees. Like a plane landing on an aircraft carrier catching wires strung across the deck, there would be only one chance.

It worked and the men lassoed posts on the rear of the truck bed. The vehicle came to a grinding halt, but the cables snapped and the truck resumed its path towards the bottom of the grade. Fortunately, it negotiated the steepest part of the mountain and slowed down to the speed limit at the coal quarry. The driver regained full control of his ship at the Lowe's shopping center. It reached the West Prong bridge outside town without incident other than the driver's being a little seasick.

The movement of the boat was covered by the local television station in Riverport with their helicopter buzzing overhead. For the people of Mulberry it was like watching O J Simpson in the white Bronco. Wendy was in town to give a live broadcast when it finally reached downtown. Her crew waited on the Courthouse lawn. Junior and Julie watched the event on a portable black and white set in their office. As they saw it cross the bridge onscreen, the couple went out to

the sidewalk to witness it in person. Being a Saturday, the streets were lined with almost all the residents of Stark County with vendors hawking souvenirs and T-shirts. Not since the last hanging at the Courthouse over fifty years ago did such an event captivate the populace.

Cheers erupted as the boat made a right turn onto Main Street next to the jail. Even the prisoners were allowed to view this bizarre sight through the windows in the booking room. For the truck to make the turn at the intersection, all of the parking meters that never worked anyway were removed, together with the stop sign that no one paid any attention to. Even then, it was a tight fit with the port side scraping the bricks on the side of Snickles Hardware.

At the Courthouse lawn, the Stark High school band whipped the crowd up with several off-key verses of 'Dixie'. The boat and truck stopped in front of the statue of Lee. If the General had been present today, he certainly would have fallen off his horse after seeing his name on a paddle wheel river boat in the center of town in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. He also would have promptly dispatched a unit to quell the people responsible for the music and put them out of their misery.

Wendy jumped aboard and stood on the deck trying to be pretty for the camera. Nevertheless, the oversized white sailor's outfit with matching cap looked ridiculous; all the brainchild of some corporate executive in Los Angeles attempting to improve ratings, her career and her shelf life.

The driver hopped out of the cab and received a hero's welcome for a job well done. On the Courthouse steps, the Tribal Chief and the owner of the Mighty Movers joined him. The Mayor gave a speech from the bench on the landing normally reserved for Hoss and his current stray dog. The town drunk and his canine companion had been escorted out of town to an undisclosed location for the day. Back on dry land on the Courthouse lawn, Wendy did an exclusive interview with the driver, who practically drooled over her for the entire region to witness. The event was like the christening of a luxury liner on the docks.

Despite being stopped for fifteen minutes, smoke steamed from the front tires and the smell of rubber permeated the air. With regained confidence, the driver mounted the cab, waved to Wendy and revved the motor like a hot-rodder trying to impress a group of teenage girls on a Saturday night. The engine roared to life and the truck inched forward. Junior and Julie walked toward the railroad down Main Street following in the wake of the boat. The band sent the

'Robert E. Lee' off to the tune of 'Anchors Aweigh'. As it sailed by the Chuck Wagon, the driver honked his horn good-bye three times as he left town.

As the truck-boat combination approached the railroad crossing and gained speed, the lights on the signal beside the tracks started flashing and the bells sounded. The State Police had shut off the roads, but no one had notified the Richmond and Norfolk Railroad of the move. The gate arm descended across the road like the clockwork of a Swiss watch. A one hundred car freight train from the north headed for town and could be observed rolling towards the grade crossing. Although the truck was not going fast, its brakes were red hot and nothing was left on the shoes except steel.

The driver could not stop!

Everyone saw that there would be a train-boat collision unless the driver acted fast. He put his truck into the next higher gear and gunned it. The boat lurched forward similar to going down after cresting a wave. The front bumper of the truck wiped out the crossing gate, pushing it aside like a snowplow. The hull heaved and bounced as it crossed each rail of the double tracks. It was like a canoe crossing the wake of an ocean liner. The port side of the boat crushed what was left of the signal arm. It fell to the ground like a tooth pick in the wind. The train was a hundred feet away with its horn crying out for help. The heart rate of the engineer must have doubled seeing the center of a boat approaching in his path. Like Casey Jones and in spite of the danger, he stayed with his train.

The boat's starboard side took out the signal and crossing gate on the other side of the tracks at one full swoop. The paddle wheel in the rear started spinning as the boat jerked across the tracks.

The boat almost made it. The cowcatcher of the engine clipped the paddle wheel, shearing it off the hull. As the Mighty Mover truck plodded forward, the back wheel rolled to the side in the direction of the train. Fortunately no one was in its spiral path to the bank of the East Prong Creek and then to the water itself. It churned the surface as it continued on turning like an out of control egg beater. Finally, it stopped spinning at the confluence marking the beginning of the Dutch Curve River. The TV camera in the helicopter focused on the wooden wheel floating down the river toward Riverport. Perhaps it could be retrieved and put back on the boat later.

The driver wanted to get out of town as fast as he could. Without stopping to survey the damage, the truck raced up Possum Trot Road. He did not want to face additional wrath of his father, the owner of the Mighty Movers. The load had to be delivered and be

ready to launch at sunset on this day, the shortest of the year, or his company would incur additional expenses and penalties.

Junior and Julie hopped in the pick-up and followed the boat, along with many other vehicles. Cars lined both sides of Possum Trot. Several jeeps and four-wheel vehicles went around the gate protecting the hot springs property. At the Bear Lick turnoff to the west, the Sheriff's department stopped the couple. Only those who lived on this side road were allowed to enter. Junior, being an attorney, made some persuasive arguments to the officer so he was able to continue to stalk the operation. Even then, people found a way to sneak around the checkpoint on foot, in other people's cars and by motorcycles across Ms. Krohl's backyard destroying some of her roses. Junior later learned that she retreated to her bedroom highly sedated during the entire operation.

The boat arrived at the Bear Lick Indian Reservation without further incident. The Chief calmed down, glad to see his precious cargo finally arrive, although not in one piece. Junior's legal mind thought that the Mighty Movers insurance might have to replace the paddle wheel, although it would be an interesting claim, and might end up in court.

Most people wondered where the final destination of the boat would be or what it would be used for. No one knew exactly what the Chief had in mind and many rumors floated around!

It took an hour and two acres of field to turn the load around so the stern faced the general direction of the water. The sun had started to set and the moving company had fulfilled their obligations. The pond was filled to capacity and its size was doubled to accommodate not only this boat but also a fleet of them to be delivered later.

The couple positioned themselves downstream on the road next to the Chief's hen house to witness the launching of its maiden voyage into the pond. Chickens and prized roosters roamed around oblivious to the activity around them. Junior wished he had brought a camera, but he was happy that Wendy was not on the scene. In fact, the Chief had banned all press coverage of the move once it entered the Reservation; even the airspace was restricted. This would turn out to be a blessing for him. The Chief never noticed Junior watching the spectacle.

After a few minutes of additional maneuvering, the driver backed the load on the ramp to the edge of the lake. Heavy timbers, twenty feet in length, were lifted by a front end loader so that they rested on the tail of the flatbed to create an incline from the end of the

flat bed to the ground. A two inch diameter cable pulled the boat from the far side of the water, downward. The once mighty craft, stern first, inched down to the pond on the lumber. The wood squeaked and bowed under the weight of the boat. It finally rested on dry land and it was a breeze to complete the final leg on the earthen ramp. Soon it floated on the surface meandering to the center of the water. Not only would a riverboat look out of place surrounded by mountains, but such a craft without its paddle wheel was truly a weird sight. It was poised to regain its former glory. But only for a moment!

Junior and Julie noticed a trickle of liquid flowing over the earthen dam. The hull of the boat displaced some of the water in the pond and it had nowhere to go except on a downward journey to the Mississippi River! The Chief or any of his underlings who worked on the project failed to compensate for this volume when they filled the water to the brim.

Soon the flow increased over the dam as the fresh dirt eroded away. Then they heard a torrent of muddy water barreling over the spillway making a crevasse for even more water to escape. It now moved the boulders in the original bank. The pond level started to drop like the lowering of the Panama Canal and so did the boat. Fifty feet downstream from the break, Junior observed the brown water rushing around the Chief's hen house and tearing fences apart. Livestock attempted to swim for their lives. The creek turned into a raging river hitting the edge of the road in several places.

Julie yelled, "Let's get out of here."

"Yeah." Junior was awestruck.

The couple took refuge in the pick-up and Junior drove downstream past parked vehicles on the side of the road. Junior knew these would be soon swept away and he hoped they could outrun the torrent. If they could cross the culvert running underneath the road, they would be safe on the other side. All sorts of debris blocked the path of the water in its inlet creating another dam. Nevertheless, this would only last seconds, just enough time for Junior to drive across Bear Lick Creek. In his rear view mirror, he saw the culvert collapse followed by water spilling over the road and tearing the thoroughfare to shreds.

Junior continued to drive downstream to outrun the wall of water. Fortunately, the road left the creek and gained ten feet in elevation approaching the vicinity of the tribal council building. They were safe. As they got out of the truck, both shook as their feet touched dry land. They looked back up the valley in the fading light, and

clearly saw that water had made a gorge where the road once was. They were trapped on the Reservation and there was no going back.

Trying to find humor in this tragic situation, Junior smiled at her. "I guess you're stuck with me tonight."

"Without anything to eat for supper too?"

"I think I have some canned beans at Lightfeather's place."

"Yuck!"

"That's it."

Julie glanced to the side in the direction of the raging water. "There's a floating hen house."

Junior also turned. "Why don't we have some chicken soup tonight?"

Chapter 18

The morning after the boat disaster revealed a mess at Lightfeather's property. Silt covered carcasses and dying bodies of goats, cows, chickens, pigs, dogs and cats littered the field across what was left of Bear Lick Road. Fractured trees, a tractor without wheels, splintered parts of lumber, twisted lawnmowers, firewood of all sizes and broken eight inch masonry blocks also peppered the area. The surging water had toppled the privy which was now probably down at Riverport together with the paddle wheel. Fortunately the flood did not reach the owl shed or the trailer. In fact, the creek bed moved fifty feet away from these structures into the pasture that now looked like a Southeast Asia mud delta after a typhoon.

Last night, Junior and Julie abandoned their pick-up truck at the tribal council. After waiting in the building for the water to subside with other stranded people, they walked the rest of the way in the dark taking higher ground across Tsalli's field. Even then the couple had to slog part of the way in the muck. They were forced to eat cold canned beans, drink warm beer and spend the night in the trailer in their filthy clothes. Julie claimed the only bed in the rear room and he suffered through the night on a couch in the front area.

At first light Junior heard a wailing sound outside the trailer. He stumbled out on the front steps and saw a family of coyotes rummaging in the field for food; the scene looked like a buffet breakfast bar at a Shoney's restaurant on Sunday morning.

"What's that?" Julie came out to join him on the concrete block steps. Their clothes were wrinkled from sleeping in them and dirty from the midnight hike; neither smelled too well. She saw the carnage and had her question answered: a cow in the new creek bed drowning in the mud before her eyes. The young woman ran back to the bedroom holding her mouth.

Junior remembered that on several occasions growing up on Corn Still, he and his father had to deal with dead or dying animals. Usually they dug a hole a few feet downhill from the body and rolled it in. It was part of farm life, but this was of a different magnitude. He needed help, lots of it and fast.

The trailer had neither phone nor power due to the flood, so Junior trudged up the valley on the high ground on the north side. On the opposite side of the newly created bank of Bear Lick Creek, he found his neighbor shoveling gravel at what was left of his driveway.

Junior said, "I'm glad to see you."

Hoppi leaned on his tool. "This is all the Chief's fault."

“I know, but I got a field of dead animals down there. I need help. Some are barely alive.”

“Yeah, I bet it’s bad down there. I guess I’m lucky not to have any of that here.” Hoppi started to shovel around a damaged pipe.

“We’re going to start smelling it pretty soon. Even where I live.”

“We need a back hoe or some type of heavy equipment.”

Junior looked at the trash spread out upstream towards the tribal council building. “Does anybody have something we can use to clean this up?”

“The Chief has plenty of equipment he was using for that fool pond. I doubt it if he would let anyone use it.”

“There’s a backhoe up at Towe’s property.”

“That belongs to him, too,” the Indian said.

“He should let us use something. Most of his animals are down here.”

“I don’t think he gives a damn about them.” Hoppi removed his cap and wiped perspiration off his brow.

“He gave us a big dam. It’s all over our property down here.”

Hoppi was in no mood for the pun. “He never took care of them anyway. He and his pal Rocking Horse.”

“Yeah, some of them looked pretty thin.”

“Can we hold him responsible for this mess?”

“Do you mean take him to court?” Junior asked.

“Yeah, I want to sue the bastard.” Hoppi appeared to be serious and then smiled. “Do you know a good lawyer?”

“At least you haven’t lost your sense of humor.” Junior chuckled. “But you told me there was supposed to be a tribal meeting about this.”

“I checked the rules and I was mistaken. He didn’t need a vote to bring in the boat.”

“I bet it did not say anything about paddle boats.” Junior looked up his neighbor’s drive to the house. “Say, where’s your boy?”

“That’s a good question. I need him here to help. For the last few nights, he hasn’t been home.” Junior was reluctant to pry further, but Hoppi volunteered, “Sometimes he hangs out with that Rocking Horse kid down at that big barn. He’s nothing but a drunk and he’ll get him in trouble.” His neighbor sighed. “He’s almost thirty years old. Hell, I can’t tell him what to do. Never could.”

Junior thought this was not the time or place to tell Hoppi about the encounter down at the River. He tried to soothe the Indian. “My Paw gave up on me a long time ago.”

“How’s Buddy doing?”

“A bit better. The physical therapy helps.” Junior didn’t want to discuss this because an emergency plan to deal with the dead animals had to be formulated. “Lightfeather’s phone’s out. Is yours working?”

“Yeah. Why do you need to use it?”

Junior could have been sarcastic to the man, but kept his comments to himself. “Maybe that environmental group in Riverport can help us.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“Some of the dogs are still alive.”

“Maybe they can bring in some heavy equipment to fix my driveway. I need a twenty foot piece of culvert.” Hoppi looked at a section of a twisted pipe in the creek bed. “Four foot in diameter.”

“That’s almost double what you have now.”

“You mean what I had there.”

“I guess you want to be prepared for the next boat.” Junior cracked a smile.

“There’s not going to be a next one,” Hoppi said. “We need to stop what’s going on here. It’s turning into a circus.”

“More like a Chinese fire drill.”

“Will you help me?” his neighbor asked.

“How can I do it?”

“You’re a lawyer, Junior.”

“Sorry, I don’t have all the answers.”

The pair turned and walked side by side up the dirt road to Hoppi’s house. The dogs in the pen barked ferociously. They could hear the moans of the dying animals in Lightfeather’s field and smell the odor. Junior backed toward the other side of the driveway, away from the dog pen.

“Don’t worry, they won’t get out.” Hoppi assured.

“I hope not.”

“They’re gentle to me.”

“Why do you have so many in there?”

“I feel safe. If any one messes with me, I can turn them loose on em.”

“How can you do that?” Junior passed the pen with all the raving dogs and then breathed easier.

“See that chain on the house?”

“Yeah.”

“All I gotta do is push on this thing like I’m ringing a door bell.”

“Yeah. What happens?”

“The chain’s hooked up to the pen and a board comes loose.”
His neighbor barely touched the apparatus on the front porch.

“Then the dogs get out?”

“Yes.” Hoppi laughed and showed Junior inside to the telephone.

Junior called Aaron Froblestein in Riverport. The environmentalist offered the assistance of his organization and promised they would be mobilized as soon as possible.

The opening of the front door aroused the dogs. Junior held back and let Hoppi lead the way around them. “Will they bother you?”

“No way. But they’ll tear you to shreds.”

“Thanks for the warning. But why won’t they mess with you?”

“I feed them.” Hoppi asserted. “They eat well.”

“I hope you don’t get any trick or treaters at Halloween.”

“Never had a one. Anyway we people don’t celebrate your holidays.”

“No door to door salesmen either?”

“After the Air Force, I was one of those people for awhile.”

Hoppi took a sniff of the decaying animals and mumbled something in his native tongue.

Junior didn’t want to know what it meant but asked, “Then you quit? What happened to you?”

“I got bit by a German Shepherd goin door to door. So I gave it up.”

“My friend Abe got bit by one of those.” Junior’s eyes watered.

“Where’s your little white dog that you had here one time?”

“You mean Angus?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad he’s on Corn Still with the Queens. He’d be a ball of mud by now.” Junior admired the home security protection device and the dog pen. “That reminds me, I have to build a little addition on the camper for Angus before I get married.”

“Why’s that?”

“Cause Julie will not live out here without him once we get married.”

“Guess you better do that.”

“First we got to get this mess cleaned up.”

“I’ll be over in an hour or so to help.” Hoppi guided Junior down to the end of the driveway and the men shook hands.

“I better get back to Julie and wait for help.”

“Sure. I understand.”

Junior started back, but stopped after a few steps. “By the way, the privy down there is gone. Can we come up and use your bathroom?”

“No problem.”

“I’m sure Julie will be up shortly.”

“Just tell her not to ring the doorbell.”

“Good idea.” After Junior maneuvered back to the trailer through the jumble, he found Julie was not a happy camper. Although it was the second day of winter, the midday sun in the cloudless sky had turned the field into a putrid smell that drifted inside the trailer. Julie retreated to the bedroom and stayed in bed with a headache. He spent the rest of the time butchering a small steer that had just expired. There was nothing else left to eat. He started a fire and within an hour, both had plenty of steaks for a meal, the first since their midnight snack of beans. Julie refused to drink the water from the tap in the camper; since there was no bottled water, she continued to drink the warm beer. In an hour, she had polished off a six pack, and the smell did not affect her in the least.

Later at three in the afternoon, after their stomachs were filled with red meat, Junior heard the rumble of diesel engines coming down the valley. A yellow bulldozer led a caravan of two front-end loaders, a dump truck, vans, cars and pickup trucks. He had no trouble recognizing the van belonging to Aaron Froblestein. A few more bumper stickers were added, reflecting the new causes he had taken up. Many of the vehicles had the same politically correct messages. This did not concern Junior in the least; he was glad to see them in spite of their ideology. All these people must have dropped whatever they were doing to help.

Aaron and the bulldozer driver, the latter almost big as his equipment, approached the owl shed. Junior shook their hands. “Thanks for coming. How did you ever get through that road up there?”

The heavy equipment driver proudly proclaimed, “I made a new one.”

Aaron looked at the field. “This is an environmental disaster.”

Junior nodded. “We need to help the injured animals. I did the best I could. All of the small ones are behind the shed. They have water.”

“We have a vet here who can look after them.” As other people joined the group, Aaron pointed to a lady gathering medical supplies from a parked car.

“I couldn’t do anything for the bigger ones.” Junior gazed toward the far end of the pasture a football field away.

The husky bulldozer operator, out of place among the thin and pale people, surveyed the muddy ground. “It’s going to be tough going in there. I can’t get in.”

Aaron asked, “Why not?”

“Well, I could get in there, but it would be this summer when I got out. Maybe Harvey can get in there with his trac.”

“We’ll have to do some of this by hand.” Aaron sighed. “We better set up camp for the night.”

The operator said, “Okay, let me talk to Harvey and get started.”

Another mentioned to the leader, “I’ll get the tents set up and the cooks in gear.”

Junior turned to Aaron. “We have plenty of juicy steaks.”

Aaron remained silent together with the others.

“Just grilled em.”

“None of us eat meat.”

“Sorry. But could I talk to you for a minute?” The others got the message and went to do their tasks.

The two men went into the owl shed and Junior sat on a bale of straw, “I can’t pay you anything at all. This is not even my property yet. It’s tied up in Lightfeather’s estate.”

“That’s fine. But you can help us.”

At that moment Junior realized what he wanted: the organization needed an attorney to file an action in Federal Court against the Commonwealth. Even before this disaster, Junior had talked it over with Julie and they agreed to help stop the highway path closest to the Reservation. Talking to Hoppi earlier today reinforced his decision to help. All of this chaos had to be connected with the road in some way. “We’ll do it.”

One of the owls made a mess over Aaron’s coat. He smiled. “Thanks.”

“Well, we both have some work to do.”

Chapter 19

Late in the afternoon Helen Winde and another woman half her age each dumped a cardboard box full of papers on Julie's desk. She tried to give the woman attorney and her secretary each a bear hug but they were out the front door before she reached them. The pile of material consumed all of her working space near the computer. "Please get this mess out of here."

Junior yelled from his office. "What is it?"

"We got the discovery in the highway case."

"Be there in a sec. After I work up the expenses on this closing statement for you." He rushed into her office and added a three inch thick loan package to the top of the stack where she placed work to be done.

"Just what I need." She smiled to try to hide the frustration that Junior observed.

"Don't want you to get bored around here." He carried a box away. "I'll be back for the other. This is heavy as a liquor still."

"Hold on. I'll have to make room in your office." She cleared a space on his desk for the legal documents on the highway case removing a stack of medical reports from an auto accident file. "Do you want me to call Mr. Froblestein?"

"Do it. He knows what we're lookin for."

"What's that?" Julie opened a candy bar and started munching.

"Don't know. That's why I want him now." Junior looked tired, having slept poorly for several days over the Christmas vacation. The temporary bed in the camper was too short for him by the distance between the top of his ankle and the end of his big toe. Since the day after the flood, Julie stayed with her parents on Corn Still. He also was concerned about what to do with the money still stashed in the washing machine. Somehow Junior thought it was all connected to the paddle boat and the new road. Therefore he felt justified that it could be used for any number of different worthwhile purposes: to reimburse the environmental group for the cost of the clean up, to finance their lawsuit and to buyout the tribes on the Reservation. Junior could see that their Federal case would take thousands of dollars for expert witness fees, depositions, printing, and long distance phone calls. If some drunk, drug addict, or redneck found a bundle of cash, it wouldn't do anyone any good, including the person who found it. To deposit the cash in his trust account in excess of ten thousand dollars would attract the attention of the IRS. Anything smaller would take

time and cause interest to the tellers, all of whom were related to Junior in some way. He considered telling Aaron where the money was and he could make the withdrawal on behalf of his group. Then it was their concern.

Julie saluted. "Yes sir. I'll get him on the line right now."

"That's better."

"You're a little testy today."

"Sorry. I better behave or I won't get any supper when we get married."

"You don't give me anytime off."

"Sorry. Can I have one of your Baby Ruths?"

"I guess. This is my last one. I better put a few more in my pocket." Julie left to make the call.

For the next hour, Junior and Julie organized the hordes of letters, memos, reports and court documents. They were all jumbled up, out of chronological order and pages in different reports mixed together. First they were interrupted by the ringing of the phone which Julie answered promptly and then said, "It's Judge Pickens."

He had to take it. "This is Junior Garfield."

"I just received your motion to continue in your personal injury case."

"Will you grant it?"

"Why?"

Judge Pickens obvious had not read his motion because the reason was clearly set out and Junior had to explain. "I'm getting married next week."

"You should have filed this earlier. The rules say you need ten days notice."

"But, Your Honor." They were interrupted by Mr. Tollman who came in holding a roll of paper, two feet long. "Could you hold, please?"

The realtor demanded. "Here's the survey for you. I want to close tomorrow."

"I can't talk to you." Junior went back to the Judge on the phone. "Sorry. But about the continuance, this is the only time my sister can come from the west coast for my wedding. And then there is the honeymoon."

"Sorry, Mr. Garfield, but I can't bend the rules." Pickens hung up.

Junior knew it would be different for any of the Windes, so he had to make an adjustment. Luckily he represented a person who was not in a rush for his money. The client received serious injuries when

his neighbor's pet tiger got loose from its cage. As the Plaintiff's attorney, he could take a voluntary dismissal without prejudice and refile the case later. Perhaps he could even do it and have it heard when Pickens would be on vacation or in an adjoining county. As an old mountain saying goes, "There's more than one way to skin a cat."

Tollman barged back in. "What time can I come tomorrow to close this thing?"

The attorney unraveled the map. "I have to do the title search on this property."

"Why haven't you already done this?"

"Because I needed to get a description to know what property is to be conveyed." Junior bent down to examine it closer and placed his finger on the map. "I see we may have to secure a right of way from this property owner. Matter of fact, the surveyor didn't put a metes and bounds description on the road on here."

"What's that?"

"It's a course in degrees and a distance in feet. It's needed to properly describe the road in case it is destroyed."

"That's absurd. Who's going to do that to a road?"

"I've seen a flood do that."

The realtor did not want to listen to reason. "My clients are leaving for California. They need this done now."

"Again? I thought they left a few months ago."

Embarrassed, Tollman asked, "When can you get this closed?"

"I have to check with the bank."

The disgruntled realtor left and Julie came in with a man that Junior was glad to see, an old family friend. "Mr. Towe."

"Greetings, Junior." The old time farmer made himself at home in front of the desk. "Can't get round too good no more."

"I went up to the springs on your property last month. Hope you don't mind."

"Anytime. But I don't own it no more." Towe held his head down in shame. "I still got a plot where the old house is."

"What's going on?"

"Hate to barge in like this but I got this here notice from the county bout rezoning my land. Well, I gave most of it to my boy. He's supposed to take care of me the rest of my days. He went off to Atlanta some where and sold the place to some big outfit out West some where. He blew all the money away. He's in some homeless shelter down thar."

"Sorry to hear about that."

"Can I get my place back?"

“Did you put that stipulation about taking care of you in your deed when you sold it to him?”

“Well, I had him sign a letter here.” The man showed a crumpled piece of paper and showed it to Junior.

The attorney read the reverse of an old telephone bill. “This will not do any good. Sorry.”

“I had it notarized.”

On the bottom of the document there was a seal and certificate. “This should have been recorded with your deed. As it stands now, this big company would not have any notice of this.”

“My boy says that he told them folks about it when he sold it.”

“It doesn’t make any difference, it’s not recorded.”

“That ain’t fair.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, Henry Winde should have told me about that when I put my name to the deed.”

“He was representing your boy and would not have said anything.”

“What can I do?” Mr Towe asked.

“You could sue your son on this note here, but I don’t think that would do any good.”

The man sighed. “You’re right.”

Junior saw his pain and frustration, and wanted to help. It was the job of a good lawyer to sort out all the extraneous details and to focus in on the relevant issue. “Can I do anything on the zoning thing?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think it will do no good. Seems like this big outfit has big plans. Makin a big road in there, tearin the place up all to pieces.”

“That’s such a beautiful spot.” Junior did not have time to explain why it was a special place for him and Julie.

“Yeah. It’s the headwaters of the crick. I get my water up there.”

Junior volunteered, “I’m living way downstream at the Reservation for awhile.”

“We drink the same water then.”

“Look, I’ll check into this zoning change with the county.”

Junior attempted to usher the client out the door. “I have some people comin in.”

“Sorry to bother you.”

“That’s okay. I’ll call you next week.” He was glad that the man got the message, for he had to turn his attention on the case for the environmentalists.

“Thanks a bushel.” Towe left.

Julie came right in. “They’re here.”

“Good.” Junior tried to straighten up his desk as best he could.

Mr. Froblestein entered with another back to the earth type. The environmental leader stared at the mountain of paper. “Looks like we have our work cut out for us.”

“It is a mess. To be honest I don’t know what to look for.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve been trying to get this for years.”

“Where do we start?” Junior asked. “I’ve sorted out all the reports by date and they’re all put together.” Julie stared at him and Junior admitted, “Actually, my secretary did most of it.”

“Let’s first start with cost projections.” Froblestein shuffled through a three inch thick wad of papers held together by a rubber band. After five minutes he found what he was looking for. “They’ll have to blast a lot of rock.”

“What’s the significance of that?”

“Not only is it expensive, there’ll always be rock slides in this area.” He pointed to the vicinity on the other side of the mountain from Corn Still.

“That’s a cave where my dog got killed when I was a boy.” Tears appeared in Junior’s eyes.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. It’s been a rough few weeks.”

“For all of us.”

“You folks did a great job out at Lightfeather’s place. You even put the creek back.” Junior wiped his eyes.

“Thanks. It worked out okay. A lot of us were off during the holidays.”

Junior thought that most of them did not have real jobs but kept this to himself. At least the environmentalists were easy to work with. He wished he had more clients like them, more paying ones anyway.

Aaron fumbled through the stack and picked out a page. “I’ll need a copy of this.”

“My secretary can make you one.”

Julie obediently followed her boss’s instructions and left.

Aaron took his glasses off. “The Commonwealth has no data on the geology of the rock near the cave. I looked at some aerials and reports we have. It’s like the Pigeon River Gorge over in North Carolina. They should have never built Interstate 40 over there.”

“Is that the place they have all the slides?” Junior asked.

“Yeah.”

“And all those big truck accidents.”

“Yeah. It’s dangerous.” Aaron raised his voice a notch to make a point. “They should have built it through the French Broad where the railroad goes.”

“Then why did they build it there in the gorge?”

“Pure politics. The State of North Carolina even had a railroad study that was done back in the late eighteen hundreds. It plainly states that the French Broad route through Madison County was geologically better.”

“I guess they didn’t have too much political clout.”

“Yeah. The governor of the state at that time came from where the gorge is in Haywood County.”

“That helps. How do you know so much about that?”

“I lived by there. With all those big rigs tearing up the road.”

Junior tried to focus Aaron back on track. “What about this discovery mess here? Is there anything useful?”

“Did you see any environmental studies?” Aaron asked.

“Not really. But I wouldn’t know what they looked like.”

The older man thumbed through the stack. “Here’s something.” His eyes opened wide for a moment and then frowned. “It is a deer study. That is worthless.”

“Why? I used to shoot em with Paw.”

“Well, they are common. Not endangered and don’t fit in the food chain. They eat plants anyway.”

“Are you lookin for meat eaters?” Junior thought it strange for Aaron to be concerned about non-vegetarians.

“Yeah, like eagles. I don’t see any studies on that at all.”

“Do you want a copy of the deer report?”

“No.” Aaron put all the animal studies in one pile and started in on another. “Let’s look at the projected traffic counts.”

“Why’s that important?”

“The number of lanes each way on the road. That could also have a bearing on pollution and build up of carbon monoxide. Especially in the river valley.”

“My friend Abe used to say we should all ride trains.”

“He’s right. They don’t use as much energy on a per person basis. But people are in love with their cars. They worship them.”

Junior thought about his father’s friend Grover Ashbrook and how he adored his pick-up like his first born. And how he loved stock car races. The attorney did not want to argue with his client. “I agree.”

Aaron continued to examine the traffic data. “That’s strange. A page is missing. Are you sure you put this all together?”

“I got good help. What’s missing?”

“Look at the westbound numbers. Really, it’s northbound. At Riverport there are twenty-five thousand five-hundred cars and at Mulberry only twenty thousand.”

Junior was confused and asked, “Where did the five-thousand five-hundred go?”

“That’s the sixty-four thousand dollar question. They could not vanish. Let’s check southbound. It’s listed as eastbound.” Froblestein looked at another report. “Wow. At Mulberry it’s thirty-one thousand and at Riverport only twenty-four.”

“Maybe there’s a monster that gobbles up cars?” Junior joked.

“I wish something would start eating them. We would be a lot better off.” Aaron examined the material again. “We need a copy of this traffic study. Could you have your girl make one so I can take it with me back to Riverport? What’s her name?”

“Julie.” Junior remembered his lady client fighting the Commonwealth. “There must be a big interchange planned at Bear Lick.”

“That’s a good explanation. For a lawyer you’re pretty smart.”

“Somebody’s hiding something.” Junior turned as Julie came in the office but continued to speak. “Why would there be an interchange out in the middle of nowhere?”

“What’s going on, fellows?” She asked.

Junior replied, “We found something that’s eating cars.”

“Both of you fellows have been around Hoss and his aliens too much.”

Aaron asked, “Who’s Hoss?”

“One of my clients.”

“We need to do some more investigation in Richmond. Someone needs to look at all the blueprints. Can you go there for a few days next week?”

Julie put her arms around Junior. “First, we need to get married.”

Chapter 20

Since the flood cleanup was completed by the first of the year, Junior had lived on a permanent basis at the camper, doing much needed renovations to make it fit for a woman. Julie insisted that a bathroom be added, even though Aaron's group had brought in a matching pair of new porta potties labeled 'His' and 'Hers,' replacing the privy that had washed away. Junior could not understand why she did not like the companionship of the owls making noises through the mesh while she did her important business.

In any case, an addition was built to accommodate indoor facilities and a corner for Angus. The dog developed a chronic ear infection and, as a result, lost his hearing and stank. Even Julie wanted him away in a segregated area for sleeping and eating.

Junior and Hoppi were barely able to squeeze a queen-size mattress into the back room. They built the box springs inside because the springs would never make it through the camper door and make the turn in one piece. The bed took three fourths of the space in the room so the couple would have to dress separately and in shifts. Julie planned to store her wardrobe in a portable plastic hanger compartment tucked in a corner next to the bed. For his clothes, Junior would have a two-foot metal rod stuck between the shower and medicine chest in the bathroom.

Cabinets were added in the front portion of the trailer to house eating and cleaning supplies. Lightfeather did not do much cooking for himself, so the kitchen facilities were sparse and meager. For cooking, Junior fixed Lightfeather's two-burner camp propane stove, although there was little heat control: either on or off, and nothing in between. There was no room for anything else in the kitchen. The only counter space for preparing meals lay across an apartment-size refrigerator. A dresser for canned goods and dry stuffs such as cereal was added next to the sink.

By the end of January, everything shaped up so that two people and a dog could live there in relative comfort. On her day off from work on the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, Julie made a final inspection and declared the place habitable with minor reservations. The nuptials could now proceed the following Saturday.

This was the first time Buddy Garfield had ventured out since his stroke close to a year ago. His only daughter, Sue Ann Garfield Jones, picked him up at the nursing home in a handicap rental van. She had flown in from California with her husband the day before and stayed the night in a nearby motel in Riverport. They and other guests

were to arrive at the tribal council hall for his son's wedding and dinner. Hoppi had signed up to use the facility over a month ago. Julie wanted the wedding to take place at her church in Mulberry, however this would upset Buddy. The Garfield clan preferred the country house of worship at Fox Den; but that did not suit the Queens. The tribal building was an acceptable compromise and since she was part Native American, Julie had a right to be there.

In the morning of his big day, Junior put a final coat of paint on the addition. The camper looked different, ready for a new existence. He missed Lightfeather, but sensed a new emotion was to replace that. His Indian friend would have been proud to see that his property came to life after years of neglect and loneliness, be it for only a short time until the tribal meeting.

Junior looked forward to companionship at the Reservation and a chance to start a new chapter in his life. Marriage would be an adjustment, especially in close quarters and the fact that they both worked together during the day. He remained optimistic because Julie was fun to be around, didn't take herself too seriously, never really complained and shared values of hard work, family and faith. Both had a mission to find out what brewed on this sacred land. It appeared that something was going to happen that would change the rural life that they cherished. Junior realized he needed to go away to school for a while to appreciate the bucolic atmosphere.

Before the wedding, Julie continued to live on Corn Still while busily planning for the ceremony, reception, honeymoon and the final move to the Reservation. Due to the size of the camper, she could bring only the bare essentials. As a present for the newlyweds, the Queens had purchased a five-day honeymoon package at Myrtle Beach. The couple arranged to leave early the next morning for the South Carolina coast.

Since space at the hall was limited, this affair was strictly by invitation. Junior wanted to invite all of the environmentalists who helped in the cleanup, but only Aaron would be there to represent the group. Junior asked him to drive another vehicle besides the van because he knew that Buddy would go ballistic if he saw all the radical political statements, especially the foreign flag. Perhaps in the summer, the couple could host the entire two hundred member group for a picnic to express their appreciation.

The event was organized by Julie's youth group at the First Baptist Church in Mulberry. They spent the entire day transforming the naked block building and bare surroundings into a palatial castle fit for royalty. Like the law office makeover, everything was perfect. On the

inside, the unpainted masonry walls were hidden with colored streamers, balloons, and banners. Carpet remnants covered the concrete floor. The exposed light bulbs had clip-on imitation chandelier fixtures. At five in the afternoon, the guests were seated and everything was ready for the wedding.

Junior was late picking Julie up on Corn Still, so they didn't arrive until five thirty. When they walked in cheers erupted in a standing ovation. Buddy received the first hug as Julie bent over his wheelchair parked near the entrance. He whispered, "I'mmm happy for for y-you S-Sue Ann."

Junior whispered. "Paw, it's Julie. Julie."

"J Jul lie."

"I'll have to call you, Dad." She smiled.

"Cal call mme PPaw." The room remained silent so that they could hear him struggle with his words. "Howw about a little bboy?"

Julie blushed. "I'll talk to Junior about that."

"He needs to to wwork on th-that." Buddy looked at his son for a long time that seemed to last an eternity.

Embarrassed, Junior could not think of an adequate response in front of the guests other than, "I'll try." He knew what his father wanted: a next of kin, a male next of kin to be exact. That was his obsession. That's what he lived for, why he hung on to life at the dreadful nursing home, someone to pass on his legacy. Everyone knew it even without him saying it, so Junior let the moment pass without further comment.

The preacher from Junior's church at Fox Den announced that everyone should proceed outside to the front of the building. Indian custom dictated that the vows be said outdoors so Kawhaweew could look down and bless the couple. Julie gave Buddy another hug and the couple and all the guests proceeded to the outside where the short ceremony was to take place under a funeral home tent. The exterior and grounds were also transformed into a lush garden spot in the middle of winter. A red carpet was rolled out from the front door to Bear Lick Road. Potted flowers on grass sod squares dotted the path. Even the dirt and patches of snow were spray painted green. The scene almost rivaled the paddleboat in the pond.

Buddy stayed inside wrapped in a blanket, but he could hear the vows made just outside the door. Junior knew that not only his father's spirit was right beside him, but also that of his Mother's in Heaven. After the Garfield family preacher was finished, everyone went back to the hall for the reception dinner.

The bride and groom proceeded to the back of the room where the head table was set up. People began to mill about waiting for the couple to work their way to their place of honor. There was no room for Buddy to be there, but Junior knew that he was just happy to witness this event. A larger space for his wheelchair was made at a table near the front door and the restroom in case he needed it. Rick and Sue Ann also had a seat next to the elder Garfield at his table to assist him. Behind them near the front entrance, a separate table was set up against the wall. Family portraits, trophies, the Garfield family Bible and memorabilia were stacked here and on the wall behind the table. The most priceless treasure included a picture of Junior's great-great-grandfather who fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War. On this table, there was space for the wedding cake to be delivered shortly. After the dinner, the couple would join Buddy in the rear for the farewell to the guests. Then they could serve cake to each other and start their new life together.

Julie sat at the head table in front of an American flag tacked on the rear wall. Hoppi and Junior found their places, each beside her.

Mary Queen, the mother of the bride, sat on the other side of Hoppi. She told him, "You know what, this is my first visit to a real Reservation and to see real Indians."

Hoppi answered. "We aren't much different than anybody else."

She was taken aback by this response. "But why's that boat sitting out there in the fields just inside the Reservation? I saw it as I came in."

"There was a pond there," he said.

"You know what, is that the boat they moved through town?"

"Yes." Hoppi scanned all the people in the overflowing room.

"What are they going to do with it?"

"The Chief's going to fill up the pond again."

"Then what?" Mary asked.

"After that, no one knows for sure." Hoppi shrugged his shoulders as the wedding cake was put on the table across the hall.

The catering people arrived and dinner would be served shortly. They delivered the exact number of meals with special attention to the dietary requirements of all the guests. For most, an entire rack of ribs with all the sides for each person was the order of the day; for non-meat-eaters, a full slab of salmon, a giant baked potato, freshly cooked vegetables were served; for strict vegetarians such as Aaron a dish of beans, organic bread, rice and a salad was provided.

Hoppi rose and tapped on a crystal water glass with a butter knife. Everyone still buzzed around and gossiped. This time Hoppi banged on a flower vase, but it was like herding cats into a cage. Mary came to the head table and used her shrill Yankee voice to restore order. Every place was filled and everyone took their seats, except one person. Rick Queen, the father of the bride, stood bewildered behind Buddy. There was no chair for the father of the bride.

From across the hall, Junior could see that Rick wanted to sit by his Paw but did not know what to do. For the first time Junior noticed Sonya Battle, the wife of the minister of Julie's church in Mulberry. She had claimed Rick's seat with his name card in front on the table next to Buddy's space. When detected, Sonya grabbed Rick's name card off the table with her pudgy hands and stuffed it into her purse.

Julie turned to her new husband. "We have a problem."

"Did you invite her?"

Befuddled, she answered, "No. I asked only my youth group."

"Are they all here?"

Julie glanced around the room. "Yes. I got a precise count."

"Why did she come?"

"I don't know. Did you say anything to her?"

"I certainly did not. Sonya's not supposed to be here!" Junior stared at the woman, hoping she would leave.

"Our Daddies need to be together." She pointed at the problem and tried to shoo her away, but Sonya would not budge.

"You're right, honey. The photographer has to get a shot of the two of them sitting side by side."

Julie's petite face tightened. "Someone needs to tell that woman to leave." She looked at him.

"Who, me?" Junior really did not know how to handle the awkward situation.

"You're the boss."

"I guess I am the boss now."

Hoppi overheard the banter between the newlyweds. "I'll do it. I am responsible for getting this place anyway."

The couple gave a sigh of relief and nodded in approval. Hoppi complied and worked his way to the front entrance. As he approached the large-framed woman, he said. "Ma'am, this party is invitation only."

Sonya bellowed, "My husband should have performed this wedding." All of a sudden the chatter in the hall stopped.

Hoppi, speechless for a few seconds, apologized and tried to explain, "Sorry, Ma'am. I had nothing to do with that."

Sonya would not listen to reason. "She's one of my flock."

"I know but we only set the tables for thirty one people and..."

Before Hoppi had a chance to explain, she yelled, "Listen, you redskin! You're not tellin me what to do!" She sprung out of the metal chair and cupped his ears with both of her hands.

Hoppi was half the size of Sonya, and he lost his balance. He fell backwards and crashed into the table with the wedding cake and family items. The glass framed photo of the great-great-grandfather tumbled to the floor and broke. It was topped by a piece of the arbor on the cake. There were gasps in the room. Junior ran through the crowd of stunned guests to the front entrance.

Buddy did not take this well at all. "You b-big f-fart." He pointed to the door. "G-get outta h-here." There was a pause and silence in the room except for Julie's sobbing. The Garfield patriarch continued, this time his speech loud and clear, "You people in town wanna make trouble."

Sonya attempted to fight back and shook her fists. "You hick. You Garfields were never good enough to go to my church. I don't know what Julie sees in him." She scowled at Junior, who now stood between the out of control woman and his father.

When Hoppi recovered from his fall, he wiped some cake icing off his forehead with a napkin. He and Rick escorted the preacher's wife out to her car before someone could do her harm. Junior embraced his wife in an attempt to console her, but she continued to weep.

When Hoppi returned, he looked at the couple. "I hope the honeymoon is better than this."

Julie cried, "I don't think it could get any worse."

"At least we're not stranded here!"

Chapter 21

“Junior, it’s Hoppi on the line.” Julie entered the attorney’s private office, carrying a water bottle. “An elderly woman is here to sign her will. She’s in the front room. Another lady is waiting, a younger one with long blond hair down to her waist.”

“What’s her name?”

“Which one?”

“What’s her name?”

Julie spoke louder and slower. “There are two women in here for you. One old and one young. Which one do you want?”

“The young one.”

“I should have guessed.”

“What’s her name?”

“Don’t know. Do you want me to ask her?”

“Does she have an appointment?”

Julie glanced on his desk. “No. But I think she’s been in here before.”

“Have her wait, Mrs. Garfield.”

“Yes sir!” She saluted and marched out of the office.

Junior reached for the phone on his desk and spoke into the receiver. “Sorry, I did not return your call.”

“That’s okay.”

“I got your message on the machine. I just got back late last night and didn’t want to call you then.”

“Was the honeymoon better than the wedding?”

“A little.” Junior didn’t want to go into personal steamy details. “How’s everything on the Reservation? Could you speak up, please?”

“There’s going to be a tribal meeting next month. Important stuff.”

“Something to do with the boat?” Junior asked.

“Maybe. I need to have you look over something for me. You being a lawyer and a smart person.”

Junior was curious. “What do you want me to look over?”

“The tribal council’s rules and charter.”

“Is that all?”

“Also, could you look at the Federal grants and legislation? I left package a for you while you were away.”

“I haven’t even had time to open some of the mail.” Junior looked on his desk at the mile high pile of letters, envelopes, packages, messages, faxes and bills that had accumulated during his absence. He

was only gone a week: he took off Friday before the wedding and Monday through Thursday after it. To Junior it felt like a Monday, but in reality it was Friday. Mr. Bartlett from Riverport had come once a day this week to sort the mail into piles of importance, retrieve messages from the answering machine, and deal with the dire emergencies. Most clients think that an attorney handles only their case and it requires immediate attention. Junior was indebted to the elder attorney for soothing the most demanding of his clientele.

“When do you think you can look at it?” The Indian pleaded.

“Later.”

“This afternoon?”

“I can’t.”

“Can I come over to Lightfeather’s place tonight?”

“I suppose.” Junior did not want to be rude, but he had more important tasks. He did, however, want to accommodate his good neighbor. “We’re pretty beat. We’re closing the office up at four this afternoon. I don’t feel so good.”

“What’s the matter?”

“I have an ear infection.”

“Did you go into the ocean?”

“Not this time of the year. The water was pretty rough and cold. It must have been caused by something else. Maybe the indoor pool. That’s the first time I tried swimming. I’d like to go back to Myrtle Beach when it is warmer.”

Julie came in the office, raising her voice so that the caller could hear. “You mean go to the Redneck Riviera.”

“I’ll see you tonight. I’m real busy.” Junior hung the phone up and yelled. “Could you get the package from Hoppi?”

“Don’t yell. I’m right here.” Julie asked, “What about your client with the will? She says she has an appointment. It’s Ms. Jones.”

Junior dug for his appointment book under the pile on his desk and opened it. “Oh, no, she’s right! Where’s her will?”

“It’s right in front of you.”

“Have Ms. Jones come in. Who’s the other woman?”

“I think she’s the one who works for the county. I’ve seen her at the Courthouse some. Wants to sue Ms. Winde.”

“I forgot to get back to her before we left for the beach.”

Junior put the book on top of the stack. “Have Joan Lark wait.”

“She wants to see you real bad.”

“I’ll see Lark shortly.”

“Okay, Junior.” Julie paused. “Mr. Garfield, I’ll tell her to wait.”

“Thanks. Have Ms. Jones come in. She has an appointment.”

Julie guided the elderly client in front of Junior’s desk.

With a gentle touch, he shook the woman’s hand. “I’m so sorry about your husband. I’m glad you’re doing this.”

The client responded, “I didn’t know if I could make it here today, with all this rain and bad weather. At least it’s not snow.”

“It’s supposed to warm up a lot later this afternoon.”

“Come to think about it, I heard we are going to have an early spring. We haven’t had too much snow. It has been a mild winter. But I have put this off long enough. Sorry I took so long in getting this done. I miss my husband. He usually did these things.”

Junior detected nervousness and tried to comfort her, but yet he needed to move her along. “You always seemed so happy. But you need to do this now.”

“Thank you, Junior.” She wiped her right eye with a Kleenex. “Do you know how long we were married?”

Junior had to ask. “How long?”

“Fifty three years. Tomorrow on Valentine’s Day. I still can remember you as a little baby. I can’t believe you are Buddy’s boy.”

“Here’s your will.” Junior handed her papers, a half inch thick.

“Thank you. I’ll just read it awhile.” She appeared to be in no hurry while fumbling for her glasses in her purse.

“Do you mind if I speak to someone else a minute?” Junior asked, knowing it would take some her time to digest twenty legal size pages. The next will he prepared, he would mail it to the client for their review before they came in the office to sign it. He had so much to learn about the practice of law. Time was the only thing that an attorney had to sell and it was difficult to request an additional fee, when Junior had quoted a certain price up front.

His elderly client put her glasses on and then took them off. “Sure, take as long as you want. I have nothing to do until this evening. I have a date with my plumber. He is so lonely. Last night I baked some cookies for him and we are going to watch some video movies at his house. Have you seen...”

Junior politely interrupted, “Ma’am, I’ll be back. Also, you need to look at this power of attorney.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll go over that later.” He closed the door to his office, leaving his client alone reading the will. He hurried to Julie’s desk.

“Could you check with Tommy about my pickup?”

“Yeah, it’s a pain taking you to work everyday.”

“It’s just been today.” He then went to the waiting room and sat down next to Joan Lark on the sofa. “Sorry, I didn’t get back to you. I got married and we just got back from our honeymoon.”

The young woman was not interested in his excuses and cut to the chase. “Will you take my case?”

“Yes, but I don’t have time to discuss it now.”

She sighed. “I have to ask you something now. Did you hear what happened at the last Supervisor’s meeting?”

“No.”

“Well, Ms. Winde made me out like a fool. What can I do?” Joan asked as she took out her checkbook from a pocket.

“I’d like to talk to you about it later.” Junior got up from the couch and headed for the secretarial area. “I have a client now in my office.”

“I’ll be brief.” She followed him a few steps. “Well, Helen fired my assistant right before the meeting last week and didn’t even tell me about it. Now I have to do all this work by myself. I’ll never get all the grants in on time.”

Junior stopped walking and turned, wanting more detailed information. “How could she do that?”

“The Supervisors let Ms. Winde do anything she wants.” From her pocket, Joan retrieved her billfold.

“Thanks for telling me this. It may be an aggravating factor if we can get to the jury on punitive damages. It’s complicated. Please ask Julie to make an appointment.”

“I can come back this afternoon.” She started to fill in a blank check.

“Don’t have time today.” Junior looked at his watch. “I’ll discuss it with you later. I need to sit down and get all the details.”

The woman would not give up. “I’ll give you every little bit of the details.” She elaborated and emphasized, “Very intimate. I have them on this.” Joan took out a plain manila envelope with no markings on the outside from a paper grocery bag. “There’s a video tape in here. You take it and look at it.”

Junior reluctantly accepted it from her. “Is it all the bare facts?”

“Right.” She cracked a smile.

“Do you want this back?” Junior unfastened the metal clips on the back of the envelope peered inside.

“No. I have the original.”

“I have to go.” He went back to his office and his first client was still reading the will. “I’m sorry I took so long. Someone dropped

in.” Junior laid the envelope containing the tape on the corner of his desk closest to her and sat down.

“That’s quite all right, Junior,” she said in a reassuring voice.

Julie joined them holding a plain envelope, similar in appearance and size to Ms. Lark’s, and gave it to him. “This came from Hoppi.”

“Thanks.” Junior put it in his briefcase. “I told Hoppi we would look at this this afternoon.” He then focused on the elderly client.

The woman client peered up from the document. “That’s an interesting name. Is that a cowboy or something?”

He put the briefcase near the door so he would not forget it. “No it’s Indian.” Junior could tell that his client was not interested in what she had in her hands.

She took off her glasses. “Like cowboys and Indians?”

“Yes.” Junior was getting impatient with her and did not know how to speed up the process. “Can I explain anything?”

“I am not finished reading just yet,” the client said.

Junior saw she was only on the second page of a twenty-page document. “Do you have any questions?”

“No, I don’t. You folks just continue what you are doing. I’ll be fine. It will take some time. I’m a slow reader. Just ignore me.”

“You sure?” Junior asked. “We can leave you alone here?”

“No. No. I insist you both stay. I love your secretary you picked out, Junior.” The client glued her eyes to the document.

Not concerned about the client’s assessment of Junior’s choice of women, Julie asked him, “What’s in the package from Hoppi?”

“Indian stuff. Probably old family pictures.” Junior did not want to discuss the problems of the Reservation in front of his client. “I’ll bring it home tonight. Why don’t you look at it for me before we leave the office? Hoppi may come over tonight.” Junior paused a second. “That reminds me, did you bring that picture from home? The one that got broken at our wedding?”

“No. I forgot.”

“We need to get it fixed. Paw’s going to ask about it next week. You need to bring it tomorrow.”

“You should know that, we go in the same car to work. You should have reminded me.” Julie fiddled with the pen that would be used for the will signing.

“Let’s remember to bring it tomorrow.” Junior stared at his client hoping she would hurry. “We need to get it fixed. That’s an heirloom.”

Julie tried to explain, "I'm sorry she was there. My youth group probably said it was all right for her to come."

"Or they invited her."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Garfield."

"Just don't let it happen again the next time we get married."

"Whatever you say, boss."

"Well, I'm going to send her a bill for the repair." Junior's face indicated that he was serious.

His wife raised her voice. "You are going to do what?"

Junior, equally loud, said, "She broke it."

"Actually, Hoppi broke it."

"Sonya was responsible. I'm sending a bill."

"Don't do that!"

"She didn't even apologize." He pounded on his desk, startling his client.

Julie warned, "Don't do it, Junior."

"Who?"

"Mr. Garfield. Sorry."

"She needs to pay!"

"That's tacky." Julie had a disgusted look.

"No, it's not." Junior forgot a client sat right next to him reading the will. "Sonya wasn't even invited. She's nothing but a party crasher."

"Let it be! Anyway, she made a fool out of herself."

"I don't care. I'm goin to bill her." Junior was defiant. "Call next door to get a witness."

Julie walked away in a huff. The client perked up again from reading the will and asked Junior, "Is that your wife?"

Forced to admit, he said, "Yes."

"Sounds like you have been married fifty years." She looked the attorney over. "How long have you been married?"

"Just a week."

"Really? Okay, I'm ready to sign the will."

"What about the power of attorney?"

"I haven't read that, but I trust you."

Junior sighed silently with relief, and asked Julie to come back in. Without further problems, the client executed all the documents. After they were witnessed, Julie went back to her desk to notarize them and make copies. She returned with two separate manila mailing envelopes. One contained the will and the other the power of attorney. The outside of the unmarked envelopes were identical to the one containing the video. Julie placed the client's material on top of

the one video tape cassette lying on his desk. Junior asked the elderly woman. "Do you want to be billed for this work?"

"No. I don't want you to send a bill out."

"I'm used to mailing them."

"I'll write out a check." She fished around in her purse and took out her wallet. "How much will it be?"

Junior knew this would be a lengthy transaction. "Please. I'll send you a bill."

"Sure? I don't like owing people money."

"I am sure. I'd rather bill you."

"If you insist." She put the wallet back in her handbag on the floor.

"I insist." Junior wanted her out and would do almost anything to do it, short of bodily harm.

"Just send me something then, Junior. I'm sorry this took so long." She stood up ready to leave. Junior could see she felt dizzy and the woman lost her balance for a second. He was there to catch her fall. "Thank you. I'm all right."

"Sure?"

"Yes." The lady started for the door.

"Don't forget your purse." Junior bent down grabbing it from the floor and handed it to her.

She fidgeted some and she held her hand bag in her right hand. With the other free hand, she picked up all the envelopes on the desk, including the one containing the video.

Junior never noticed its absence!

Chapter 22

The door squeaked as Hoppi entered the owl shed. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I got something for my ears at the drug store.” Junior laid the push broom aside and shook his hand. “You’re here just in time.”

“Do you want help?”

“Yeah. Need to finish up before it gets dark.”

“I helped Lightfeather do this many a time. It’s a lot of work.”

“Actually, this is good therapy after practicing law all day.”

Junior said as he grabbed a flat head shovel that hanging between two rusted nails on the inside of the front wall.

“I bet you got behind at the office.”

“Yeah. It’s tough to leave for a week if you are by yourself.”

Junior scraped a mixture of straw and owl droppings into a plastic garbage container. Feathers flew around the tool on the floor.

“Especially when you go with your secretary?” Hoppi snickered as he retrieved another shovel and did the same thing.

“I had a lot of clients calling today. It’s hard to satisfy all of them. At least the owls don’t complain too much once they are fed.” The bucket overflowed with manure and Junior lay the shovel aside.

“Here I’ll give you a hand with that.” Hoppi grabbed the handle on one of its sides.

“Thanks. I was going to get Julie to help, but she doesn’t like the smell in here.” Junior led the way and the pair carried the load just outside the door.

“How does she like it on the Reservation, being married and all?”

Both heard Angus bark in the trailer. “What did you say?” Junior asked.

Hoppi shouted over the dog. “How’s marriage here for Julie?”

“Actually we’ve only spent one night so far.” Junior filled a metal pail with water from a spigot attached to the shed.

“That was last night?” Hoppi grabbed a mop and both reentered the owl house.

“Yeah. But on the honeymoon she missed her youth group in town.” Junior placed the pail on the floor. “When we were gone, they went on some roller skating outing and she said I have to go to the next one.” Junior looked at a calendar hung on the wall. “Oh no! It’s tomorrow. I have my days messed up. It feels like a Monday. Don’t really want to.”

“Marriage is a big adjustment.” Hoppi started swabbing the floor.

“From experience with Mrs. Hoppi?”

“Yeah. We got divorced a long time ago. I admit, I was selfish. Didn’t pay her too much attention.”

“I guess I’ll go with her to the youth outing. Moving here is a traumatic thing for her. I need to do stuff she likes.”

“I should have done more things with my ex.” Hoppi finished mopping. “How’s Angus working out here?”

After the water was dumped outside, Junior led the way back around to the front of the shed. “Did you hear him bark last night?” Junior pointed to the place where he wanted the owl droppings dumped. Both carried the manure to a garden spot below the two porta johns.

Without requesting assistance, Hoppi helped carry a bale of straw inside. “Yeah. He stirred up my pack of dogs.”

“Sorry. Angus kept us awake all night. I think it’s these owls so close by. I’ll buy a bark collar if he does it again.”

“That’s a good neighbor.” Hoppi finally got around to the purpose of his visit. “Did you look at those papers I dropped off at your office?”

“Yeah. I reviewed them at home this afternoon.”

“So you consider this home?”

“Yes, but we need to get back on Corn Still.”

“What do you think about the stuff I brought by?”

“It’s all in the camper. Julie sorted out and typed up a summary of it.” Junior spread the last of the straw on the floor making the building a homey place.

“Amazing. She’s a jewel.”

“Could you compliment her for the good work she does?”

Junior went to the outside of the shed and turned on the spigot.

“Sure. But it’ll cost you.”

Junior chuckled as he lathered his hands. “She never gets the glory. Actually, she’s my hero. But don’t say that to her.”

“What’s all this worth to you then?” Hoppi snickered.

“You can have the birds.”

“How’s the one with the bad leg? His name is Sleepy.”

“Thanks for reminding me. I need to change the bandage.”

Junior led the way back to the shed and turned the light on. He cuddled one of the owls and removed tape wrapped around the pencil size leg.

Hoppi petted one of the other owls. “Seems like you are more comfortable in handling the birds.”

“Yeah. I think they like it too.” Junior held the bird up to the light. “That’s looks a lot better than last night.”

“When I brought him in while you were on your honeymoon, didn’t think he was going to make it. The leg was all bloodied.”

“What happened to Sleepy?” Junior sprayed antiseptic on the wound and the owl shrieked.

“He got his leg caught in an outdoor basketball net.”

“How’d he do that?”

“He made a foul shot!”

“I’m glad you were here to help.” Junior put a new bandage on the bird. “Let’s go in for some coffee and we can talk.”

They went into the trailer with Angus circling around happy to see a guest. After washing his hands, Junior opened his briefcase and spread the contents of a manila envelope were spread out on the card table, the only flat surface in the trailer where one could eat or write. He now realized that the video tape was missing. It was too late! No doubt his elderly client would be back with a thorough movie review or a tongue lashing.

As she entered from the rear bedroom, Julie hugged Hoppi and turned to her husband. “Have you finished your chore, Mr. Garfield?”

He nodded, his face pale.

“What’s the matter?”

Junior did not want to admit to anything about the video. “We’re finished.”

With a sigh of relief, she asked, “Can I get you fellows anything?”

Junior blurted. “A stiff drink.”

“Sorry dear, I’ll make you some coffee.”

Hoppi smiled, “I see that you have her trained real well.”

“She makes good coffee at the office for me. Service could be a little better.”

“He’s a lousy tipper.” Julie poured bottled water into the coffeepot and switched it on.

Junior started to sift through the papers. “I read it this afternoon while I waited at the drugstore. It’s very complicated. They didn’t teach Indian law at Georgetown.”

She asked, “What are the Hoyas on your sweatshirt then?”

Junior looked down on his school’s mascot at his stomach. “I guess I slept through freshman orientation.”

Julie added, “I bet he did a lot of sleeping around.”

“Touché. I guess I deserved that.” Junior buried his head in the papers.

“What does the charter say about the sale of tribal lands?”

Hoppi nodded to Julie, who served the men hot drinks.

“The Reservation, as a whole, can be sold by a four-fifths vote.” Junior kissed her on the cheek.

“I think I’ll read in bed awhile.” Julie hugged the guest. “Three people can’t be in this room at one time for any long periods anyway.”

“We’ll be quiet, dear.”

“Just don’t stay up too long. We have to get up early to go to the skating party.” She left to go to the bedroom.

“Don’t remind me of that. Good night, dear.”

Hoppi asked after she shut the door, “What was that about?”

“I’ll tell you later. Let’s get back to the tribal rules.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“You mean the council can sell my land?” Hoppi asked with a hint of concern in his voice.

“The sale must be approved by the holder of four rings.”

“I knew that a person could have two rings, but FOUR?”

Hoppi asked surprised.

“Yes.”

“That’s never has happened. My father told me that Tsalli’s grandpa stole a ring one time.”

“I read in the rules that the ring goes back to the lawful owner after the tribal meeting. But the results of the vote stand. It’s very complicated.”

“I know. That is why I needed you to look it over. But if the Reservation is sold, do I get any money?”

“They have to compensate you, at fair market value. It’s like a highway condemnation. You know, like when the Commonwealth builds roads through your property.”

“Lightfeather told me he wanted to give his piece to that environmental organization.”

“Yeah, the last time I saw him alive, he tried to tell me that. I have a meeting with Aaron and his people tomorrow night in Riverport. I’ll talk to him about this. I’m sure he would go for it.”

“That would suit me fine. I’d almost give it to them. All I want is some money to buy something in Riverport. It gets lonely out here.”

“Say, I have to leave Julie alone here in a few weeks. Could you make sure she’s okay?”

“Depends on how long?”

“Just a few days. I have to go to Richmond on the highway case.”

“Sure. Do you want me to tuck her in at night?”

“Just ask her.” Both men laughed and Junior said, “Let’s get back to business.”

“Well Lightfeather said he needed the approval of three rings to give it to that group.”

“You’re right. If someone wants to transfer or sell his own land to an outsider, then he only needs three-fifths to get the transfer approved.”

“Well, what about a bequest in a will?” Hoppi asked.

“That’s a little different.” Junior examined one of the papers. “One can obtain title through inheritance. But the ring has to be given to the beneficiary before the person dies. The tribal council has nothing to say about it.”

“What about a corporation or something like that? The EEO?”

“No, it must be a live person.”

“I never knew that.” Hoppi paused. “That makes sense. Usually the ring is given to the eldest male next of kin. But what about if someone does not have a will? Like my father didn’t have one and I have the ring now.”

“That’s okay. It automatically goes to the oldest next of kin.”

“But I’m not the oldest.”

“Your father must have given it to you before his death.”

Junior concluded. “It has to be given to a person of Indian descent and a next of kin.”

“I remember that part.”

“Lightfeather told me the ring in his tribe has been passed down from generation to generation that way.”

“That’s the usual way.”

“But with this land being valuable, it’s bound to change.”

Junior pointed out.

Hoppi took a sip of coffee and set the cup down without a sound. “My father gave it to me just before he died.”

“That’s legal.”

“And the tribal council can’t do anything about it.”

Junior nodded. “That’s right.”

“I’m glad you’re the lawyer. Let me tell you something.”

Hoppi paused. “In strict confidence.”

Junior promised, “I’ll never tell.”

“I don’t want to let my boy have my ring.”

“Why?”

“Well, he would get together with the Chief and Rocking Horse. They would mess this place up. I’d like to keep it the same.”

Junior felt they were going into a private area. "I noticed something real interesting in these rules." He thumbed through them and stopped at a paper that was clipped. Just then the men heard a thump on the outside of the side of the camper. "What's that?" Then the camper rocked like a boat.

Julie, dressed in her nightgown, rushed in. "Something's pounding from the outside."

Hoppi responded in a matter of fact way. "That's a friendly bear just out of hibernation."

She asked in a distraught tone, "How long will he do this?"

"Until you feed him. Lightfeather used to throw cereal out at night this time of the year. Just don't go outside."

"I won't."

Junior said, "That'll have to stop."

Hoppi nodded, "I agree. Look I'll set a trap tomorrow and we can move him."

"Take him to the Chief." Junior kissed his wife, trying to comfort her. While Julie went back to bed, the men threw out some stale bread for the bear. After gobbling the food, the animal disappeared into the darkness. The men returned to the card table and Junior breathed a sigh of relief. "Maybe that's what Angus was excited about last night."

"What were you going to say that is interesting?" Hoppi asked.

"A Federal grant in 1930 allows the tribe to operate places of gambling."

"You mean like Las Vegas?"

"Not exactly. It has to be on navigable waters."

"Is that like the Mississippi River?"

"Yes, but the term 'navigable' has been broadly construed to include almost any water that can float a log."

Hoppi stopped sipping his drink and looked at him. "Like the Dutch Curve River right down there?"

"Smaller than that."

"Even the Chief's pond?"

"Yes." Junior nodded with confidence.

"So the boat is on navigable waters?"

Junior tried to give a satisfactory explanation in layman's terms. "The Chief could say the boat could go back and forth in the pond."

"Well, it's still stuck in the mud."

"Then, it's not navigable at the moment."

“But they are starting to fill in the pond.” Hoppi pointed in the direction of the door. “The Chief brought in a huge bulldozer. It’s stored in Rocking Horse’s barn at night.”

“I guess it’ll be used to fix the pond. When they fill the pond up, it’ll be a floating casino.”

Hoppi dropped his drink on the floor, shattering the porcelain cup. “Can they do all that there?”

Before Junior had a chance to answer, Julie yelled, “What’s going on?”

His neighbor apologized, “Sorry.” He turned to Junior. “Can Laughing Seed do that?”

“The Chief doesn’t need the other family’s permission to put a boat in there.” Junior surmised. “But he has bigger plans.”

Hoppi ignored the mess on the floor. “What?”

“Don’t know exactly, but it’ll make Vegas look like a whistle stop. There’ll be a huge interchange on Interstate 26 at Bear Lick between the Reservation and Possum Trot.” Junior went to the sink to retrieve a towel to wipe up the liquid. “Probably big hotels all around. Condominiums.”

“Kawhawee will not be happy.”

“I know.”

“How do you know?”

“Lightfeather told me about your God of the Earth.”

“Did he tell you that the eagles are the messengers between Kawhawee and man?”

“No. But I can believe that.”

“What else could happen?”

“Just an airport right here on the Reservation.”

“What?”

“The tribe made an application to build an airport.”

After Hoppi regained his composure, he said, “Really, I learned how to fly when I was in the Air Force.”

“Can you still fly?”

“Don’t know if I can still do it.” Hoppi picked the broken pieces from the floor. “I would hate to have an airport by here. I’ve had enough of planes. Too noisy. How can we stop it?”

“We need to make sure the Chief doesn’t get four rings. The Reservation would be sold for sure.”

“He’ll never get mine.”

“Mine neither.” Junior felt a sense of ownership now, a duty to protect this sacred land. The Indians were right, one needed to live on the land to appreciate it.

“The Chief’s friend, Rocking Horse, will go for this though. He would follow the Chief over a cliff.” Hoppi threw the remains of the cup in the trash. “Tsalli may come around, but I need to talk to him about the eagles and our God.”

“Eagles and jet planes don’t go together. Matter of fact, their nest up at the burial ground will be gone.”

“Why?”

“Lightfeather’s burial mound will be flat as a pancake. Junior took a gulp of his coffee. “A part of the runway.”

“If he knew that, he would turn over in his grave.”

“I’m afraid Lightfeather may have to.”

Chapter 23

The day after the skating trip, Junior just wanted to rest at the camper on Sunday morning and skip church at Fox Den. To sit on a hard pew for an hour and a half would be pure torture. His bottom ached to the bone from falling on the hard rink; he couldn't remember how many times and Junior wanted to lie flat on his back all day. Not only his bones were bruised, but he suffered the public humiliation of making a fool out of himself in front of hundreds of teenagers. By far, he was the oldest, tallest and most uncoordinated person on the hard concrete surface. Even Sonya Battle sat on the sidelines and made fun of him.

However, he had promised Aaron to help his group in the afternoon at the Reservation to document eagle nests, so he could not hide and rest at the camper. The head of the environmentalists had agreed to meet him at the camper at two o'clock. The study would be presented at the Federal District Court trial in Roanoke scheduled next month, the week after Easter. Junior planned to spend the entire holiday in preparation for the case.

Junior and Julie slept soundly until dawn, when the screeching of the owls woke them. Last night he did not have the energy or ability to tend them due to his extreme physical and mental distress. He arose early, first to let Angus out and then to tend to the birds. Sleepy had fully recovered and to Junior's disappointment, Aaron would take the owl back with him and release Sleepy in the general vicinity of his accident.

After these tasks, Junior went back to sleep to attempt to recover from yesterday's ordeal, but the telephone woke the couple at ten o'clock. They could hear Hoppi's dogs in the distance as well. Junior stumbled out of bed and hobbled to the wall above the apartment size refrigerator in the adjoining room.

Hoppi answered without any pleasantries, "The cattle from the Rocking Horse place are on my property."

"Where?"

"Everywhere!"

"I thought all of them got drowned."

"Not all." Hoppi emphasized, "They are starting to eat my ginseng."

"I'll be right over. After I check on the owls. Again."

"Is anything wrong?"

"This morning one of them didn't act right."

"Was it Sleepy?"

“No, he’s fine.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you more about it later.”

“Could you bring that roll of wire mesh?”

Junior thought about it a few seconds, “Yeah, but my pickup’s not here. It’s in the shop.”

“I need something real bad to protect the ginseng.”

“I’ll ask Julie if I can use hers. I guess it’ll fit in her trunk.”

“Thanks. But hurry, one of those cows is in the ditch stuck beside my dogs.”

Junior figured this would be a good excuse to miss church: his preacher would understand because he could quote New Testament scripture to back him up, something like rescuing oxen in the ditch on the Sabbath. After he dressed again, he made a visit to the shed. A dead owl lay on the floor like someone taking a nap, although owls sleep upright. This had happened since his visit at the crack of dawn. He would need to bury it up on the hill at the burial ground later in the day. First, he drove to his neighbor’s place with the roll of wire mesh sticking out of the trunk of his wife’s car.

A herd of cattle roamed the area of Hoppi’s driveway and Bear Lick Road, halting Julie’s car. The dogs were still noisy as he parked by their pen. A cow wailed nearby in the ditch and Hoppi greeted him with a shot gun.

Junior put his hands high in the air. “Don’t shoot me!”

“Don’t worry. But I might fire at these cattle.”

“No. We would have to take them away.” Junior argued.

“Then I’ll shoot Rocking Horse.”

“No. I would have to defend you, and that would be expensive.”

Hoppi chuckled and rested the gun on a tree. “But Rocking Horse has never fixed his fence from the flood. I may have to fix it myself.”

Junior tried to offer some encouragement. “I’ll help you. I did this many times with my Paw. Where are they coming in?”

“Right by the road.” Hoppi pointed to a break in the fence near the creek. A bed of yellow daffodils were trampled on the bank.

“Is that all?”

“There’s another break up on the mountain. That’s been there for years. Not many cattle go up there.”

“Have you told him about it?”

“Been after him for years. I’d like to take you up there sometimes.”

“Have you seen any more eagle nests up there?” Junior unloaded the roll and threw it in the middle of a clump of poplar sprouts emerging from a decaying stump.

“There’s a new one. It’s time for them to come back from Florida.”

“Just like some of the people around here now.”

“At least the eagles don’t make trouble.”

Junior did not want to argue with his neighbor. “Where did you see them?”

“It’s on Forest Service property near the bear cave.”

This excited Junior. “Can we go today? I’m meeting some of those environmental people to try to find some.”

“Really?” Hoppi bent down over a fence post. “First, could you help me stretch this wire?”

“Sure.” Junior came closer. “What do you want me to do?”

“Hold one end while I lay a nail to it.”

Junior complied and one side of the ginseng bed was soon completed. “Do you need a hand to get all these cattle out of here?”

“Yeah, we need to do that right away before they get in here again. They tore up some of my plants.”

For the next hour, the men finished the repair to the fence around the valuable plants. The next job was to get the cow out of the ditch. The men had to dig and make a ramp so the animal could walk out. Then they started to herd the rest of the cattle off Hoppi’s property down to Bear Lick Road. Junior retrieved his wife’s car and with the horn blaring, he guided the animals, first down the driveway and then up the road toward the pond. The cows responded well to the sound and at the tribal building they ran in a full stampede up the road towards Rocking Horses’s place.

Aaron’s rainbow-colored van approached the cattle drive head on. The vehicle was forced to stop to let the cows pass at a point where the Chief’s henhouse used to be. Junior also met the van and had to look for a place to turn around. At the tribal building, both vehicles proceeded in the same direction to the camper.

Aaron parked the van and his body still shook as he set foot on the ground. “That was a close call with those cows.” His passenger was in the same shape as he lugged a camera and tripod from the rear door.

Junior stepped out of his vehicle. “That’s my first cattle drive.”

“I hope that was my last.” Aaron removed his wire rim glasses and wiped the perspiration off.

Junior pointed to his neighbor's land and proceeded to the owl house. "Hoppi can show us where a new nest is."

Aaron followed close behind. "Good. I'd like to get a picture of it. We can present it at trial next month."

Junior cautioned, "You know if we don't win, the preliminary injunction will be dissolved." After grabbing a canteen from the inside wall, he strapped it to his belt.

"I know. The bulldozers will be there the next day." Aaron filled a plastic bottle with water from the spigot attached to the outside of the shed.

"The Chief brought in a big one. It's stored in that big barn down there."

"Well, it's outside now. We passed it this morning."

"I may have missed it herding the cattle," Junior said.

"Anyway if the road is built, they'll be starting on the condo project on the hot springs property. All they have to do is get a zoning change from the Supervisors." Aaron took a swig of water.

Junior nodded. "That should be easy for the Chief."

"Forgot to tell you, Junior, we need you to stop that."

"You mean represent you against the zoning change?" Junior asked with an almost helpless look. This would be too much for the attorney to handle.

"Yeah."

"I'm already involved in the Federal stuff. Anyway, I may have a conflict."

"How's that?" Aaron asked as he screwed the cap on the bottle and put it in the photographer's knapsack.

"A friend of the family wants me to stop the project too."

"Couldn't you handle both?"

"I suppose. I'll have to ask him. It may be a conflict." The trio went on foot up Bear Lick Road and then turned to Hoppi's place. Fortunately the cattle stayed away, but Junior stopped. "I forgot my shotgun."

"Why do you need it?" the environmentalist asked as he removed the water from his friend's back pack.

"You never know what's up there." Junior thought about the bear attack ten years ago. "You guys go on ahead. You can't miss Hoppi's place."

"Okay, We'll meet you there." Aaron took another drink.

Junior left and went back down Bear Lick Road. After a minute of walking he heard Angus barking in Lightfeather's trailer and this reminded him of Hoppi's dogs. "Oh no! I hope they don't ring the

door bell!” He turned back and strained every muscle to reach the pair ten feet from the front door. “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

Aaron asked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Let’s find Hoppi. He’s probably in his ginseng patch.” Junior led the environmentalists to his neighbor salvaging what was left of the plants.

Hoppi looked up. “We can go up now. I’m about finished.”

“I forgot my gun. It’s back at Lightfeather’s place. I’ll have to go back.”

“I’ll take mine.”

Once past the cabin, the four people hiked single file up in a southerly direction on a footpath to the outside boundary of the Reservation. The sun came from behind a cloud and illuminated a green tinge on the bare limbs of a clump of maple trees. The group met two young men coming down, Hoppi’s and Rocking Horse’s boys.

Hoppi looked at his son, who had an axe in his hand. “What are you doing? I told you to help me mend the ginseng bed.”

“I reckon I’ll do it.”

“Never mind, Junior helped me do it. What are you doing with that?”

“Just gettin some firewood.”

Hoppi glanced at the boy’s hands. Sticky brown stuff covered them. “I suppose you didn’t find any?”

Without further comment, the young pair proceeded on their way down to Bear Lick Road. After they were gone, Aaron asked, “How far is it?”

“We’re still on my property. It’s still a distance.” Hoppi said as he resumed the lead up the slope.

Just inside a fence another herb bed lay, this one undisturbed for cattle rarely wandered up this far. The men slid under the bottom string of barb wire. Now inside the Forest Service property, the path disappeared and the terrain became steeper as the four men bushwhacked through a stand of waist high hemlocks and then taller white pines. After fifteen minutes, they came to trees lined up in a row with yellow crime scene tape around the trunks at shoulder height. As they hiked up to one of the pines, Junior turned ninety degrees, and viewed similar color markings as far as he could see through the woods, all in a perfectly straight line. He turned in the opposite direction and observed the same thing.

“That’s the new road.” Aaron had a disgusted look. “This is the lower boundary of the right of way.”

“How far will it go up?” Hoppi asked.

“It’ll take half this mountain.” Aaron pointed beyond a rock cliff and the forest which turned to a mixture of hardwoods and pines. “It’ll make a big scar in the land. This area is prone to earthquakes. If they build a road here, the next one’ll take down the whole place.”

Junior argued, “I’ve been living just over the mountain and we’ve never had one.”

“You probably never noticed it. But any minor disturbance could trigger a landslide. Especially on this northern side.”

Hoppi said, “My house’ll be right in its path.”

The group continued their upward trek. With the noonday sun in their eyes, they had to climb over a moss-covered rock the size of a house. Aaron, the last person in the party, slipped and fell five feet to the base of the boulder.

“You okay?” Junior yelled from the top.

“Yeah.”

“Sure?”

“I’ll be up.”

As Hoppi, Junior and the photographer waited for Aaron, they gazed at the Indian Reservation below in the valley. All five tribes’ properties could be seen from this vantage point. The chief’s paddle boat looked like a toy boat in a bathtub. A slew of matchbox size construction vehicles surrounded the pond, the largest being the big bulldozer removed from the barn.

After Aaron joined the pair, he rested on top. “How much farther, Hoppi?”

“It can’t be far. I saw them just above this boulder.”

When Junior looked up the north side of Corn Still Mountain, he recognized the site of the old airplane crash. Through the trees, he could see the tail section. In another month, foliage would have blocked his view. “I know where we are.”

All four men scanned the tops of the mixture of pines and hardwoods for the nest. Soon they spotted a pair of eagles circling around overhead just above the tree tops. The birds were not playing around with each other like the time Junior witnessed. He asked the environmentalist. “Why are they still goin around?”

Hoppi butted in, “Lookin for some thing to eat?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Why?” Junior continued to focus up to the eagles.

“They’ve been up there too long. The mice or something would be long gone. They are looking for their nest.”

“Let’s get closer.” As Junior whacked a briar away with his walking stick, he blazed a trail upward. After a few yards, the slope of

the forest increased to about forty-five degrees and the men had to use tree roots and branches as hand holds. The trees grew thicker and it was harder to negotiate the steep grade. The group resorted to crawling under the lower boughs. Still in the lead, Junior pointed uphill. "A big one's down."

When the men inspected an oak resting on boulders and a smaller pine tree, Aaron said, "There's been an eagle's nest up here."

"How can you tell?"

"On the ground, there's evidence of one." Aaron picked up some intertwined twigs near where the top of the tree rested on some brush.

Junior remembered that it appeared just like the time he was with Lightfeather at the graveyard over a year ago, but this was smaller and not as intact. The result was the same: another homeless family.

Hoppi mentioned. "We had a storm the other night."

The environmentalist took off his wire rim glasses and wiped the thick lenses with a handkerchief. "Could lightning have taken this down?"

"Or wind?" Hoppi asked.

Junior looked down the length of the fallen tree to its base. "This has been cut down." The group traveled to the stump still oozing with sap. It was clear that the tree had been felled by an axe, and within the past few hours.

Chapter 24

Junior had been back at his law practice for several weeks since the honeymoon, and with Julie's help, he finally was caught up at his office. However, his pickup truck was still sitting at Tommy Garfield's garage waiting to be repaired. Not only did Junior work and sleep with Julie, he had to ride with her everywhere. It was beginning to get stressful for both of them. Being only two blocks from his office up towards West Prong, the business owned and operated by a distant cousin was convenient for repair work; that is, if his relative could ever get to it. Rick had delivered the vehicle one night a few days before the wedding. Junior expected it to be finished when he returned from the honeymoon. Despite repeated phone calls, the vehicle was still not touched. Tommy found other jobs to do, those for non family members.

Even in law school, Junior found time to change his oil, do a tune up and even do a brake job; but now, keeping up a household however small, fulfilling the demands of marriage, practicing law and making almost daily visits to his father took their toll on some of things he liked and needed to do.

On a Tuesday in mid March, he didn't have much to do at the office so he decided to take matters into his own hands and walk to the garage first thing that morning. He retrieved his vehicle from the back lot of the garage and drove it a short distance into the shop so his kinfolk would be forced to make the repairs. Junior guided his pick-up onto the metal runners on one of the two service bays in the dingy auto repair shop; the other work area had a new 1995 Buick Skylark sitting on it. As he stepped on the concrete floor with black dress shoes, Junior almost fell on a blotch of oil. It reminded him of the skating rink.

Tommy greeted him with a grease-covered screwdriver in one hand and an oily rag in the other, mumbling. "Glad to see you, Junior."

"It's been awhile, Tommy."

"Been here five years." The mechanic dropped the tool under the hood of the Buick somewhere and the men shook hands.

"Time flies, but I need this fixed today." After shaking hands with his cousin, Junior felt like his whole body received a lube job. Wiping his fingers on the oily rag only made it worse.

"Sorry bout not gettin to it." Tommy retrieved a lighted cigarette from the top of his workbench and laid it on the front bumper below the right headlights of the disabled car. "Ain't had time."

"I'll stay here until it gets done."

“I was gettin to it today.”

“You haven’t changed a bit since high school.”

“Those were the good ole days. That’s when I could fix cars.”

Tommy looked at the innards of the vehicle and puffed smoke in that direction. “All I can do, is bout change the oil. Even that’s hard to do now. Sometimes you gotta have a special tool to get the damn filter out. Seems like there’s more of those big cars round. Gas guzzlers. We gotta drive less. We gotta get hooked up together.”

“Do you mean car pooling?”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what they call it. But that there railroad train’s better. Wish I could ride it into Riverport. Some day this country’s goin to run outta oil. Anyway, those A-rabs got us by the nuts. Look at all the mess over thar in the Middle East.”

Junior thought that his cousin who barely finished high school knew more about the energy problem in the country than most of the politicians in Washington. And he recognized the solutions! “Glad I kept my pick-up.”

“Bet they made fun of it up thar.”

“A bit. But I rode the train mostly.”

“They probably drove those yuppie SUV’s.” The mechanic laid his smoke down in the exact spot on the car.

“Some.”

“I hate those things. You need a computer to fix those gas hogs.”

“Don’t feel bad; I have the same problem.”

“Yeah, but you left these parts to get good schoolin,” Tommy said as he took a deep drag of the cigarette finishing it off.

“It was good to get away for awhile.” Junior leaned on the fender of the Buick that was being serviced.

“But Allison told me you returned. I went to see her in the nursin home last week or so. She said you were here lookin for a wife.”

“Yeah, I’m back.”

“How long have you been in these parts?”

“Since June of last year.”

“Didn’t see you at church.” Tommy looked at the cigarette stub to see if he could squeeze another drag, but decided to leave it smoldering on the fender. He reached in his pocket and lit a fresh one up.

“I don’t go to Fox Den too much. Too busy.”

“How’s that?”

“I’m living on the Bear Lick Reservation now.”

“Why’s that?”

“It’s a long story.”

“The mechanic stuck his head with his cigarette under the hood, mumbling, “I sure wouldn’t want to mess with those redskins.”

“Some of them are nice.”

“That Chief’s crazy.”

”Why?”

“For bringing that fool boat through town before Christmas. I couldn’t work all day.” Tommy went to a countertop a few feet from the vehicle and fumbled through a pile of tools scattered around. “Some of that Rocking Horse tribe is red trash and they sure blow a lot of hot smoke.” He stopped looking and puffed on his cigarette.

Junior did not want to go into detail about the events at the Reservation, so he changed the subject. “What else did my aunt say?”

“Who you dated at law school.” The mechanic found a socket wrench and meandered back to the front of the car. “Said that you went with some woman that messed around with Clinton. You was goin to get hitched up to the old lady. “

He had to shift the subject again. “Aunt Allison’s in bad shape now.”

“Yeah, I miss her. She always came in to get her car fixed. Stood over me right where you’re standin.”

“I did get married though.”

“That’s fast work. Didn’t know that. I keep to myself a lot.” Once again the cousin wedged his head under the hood and mumbled. “Damn this!”

“Didn’t Rick tell you that when he left it here?”

“No. He just left a note bout what you needed fixed up. Anyways, how long you know this gal?”

“Well, for ten years.” Junior peered inside to see if he could assist the mechanic. “I just didn’t know we were made for each other until a few months ago. Now she’s my secretary.”

“Wow! Is that the one who kept callin over here?”

“Afraid so.”

“How does that work out?” Tommy came closer and blew smoke within a foot of Junior’s face.

“Fine, but I never see any money.”

“Bet she has it spent before it gets to you.” Tommy motioned that he needed a wrench from the shelf.

“Actually, she has the checkbook.” Junior grabbed the tool for him. “I don’t even know how to write a check on my computer.”

Tommy popped out of the hood and shook his head. "I'll never get married again. Matter of fact, I'm still married to the last one."

"Are you still livin with her?"

"No way. I haven't seen the old lady in a year. But I still got to pay her support for the youngun. Matter of fact, I'm payin child support to three different women."

"I don't want any kids for awhile." Junior glanced at his truck. "Anyway, please do the stuff Rick told you on the note."

"Me neither. I'm payin on too many youngins."

Junior looked at his filthy hands, a combination of tobacco, grease and oil. "Can I pick this up at two this afternoon?"

"I'll try."

"I need it real bad. You've had this close to three weeks."

Junior pleaded.

"Okay, it'll be ready by two. I have to meet a ah..." The mechanic hesitated and took a short puff, "Salesman at the Wagon for dinner at twelve thirty. If I'm not back just take it. I'll leave the key in the ashtray. It'll be parked outside."

"How much will this cost?"

"Say, I need a divorce. How about a trade?" Tommy asked as he took a few steps and reached up for a piece of hose hung on the rear wall.

"A divorce will cost more than a lube job." Junior said.

"Your truck needs a good cleaning. I'll throw that in." The mechanic laid his cigarette on an oily rag on his work bench.

"It's a deal. I hope your wife didn't take you to the cleaners." Junior reached out and shook his cousin's hand without thinking of what he was getting into.

"She did, but I'm goin to be careful next time. She even got me busted for pot."

"You need to stay away from that stuff," Junior pointed to a plastic bag with chopped up brown leafy material sticking halfway out of his shirt pocket.

"Ain't smoked in a long time."

He had heard that before from his clients, but did not want to impose his moral views on his kinfolk. More important, Junior could not stand his greasy hands much longer. "Let me wash up."

"You'll have to use the women's."

"Why's that?" Junior saw that the rag started smoldering with more than cigarette smoke and started to move toward it.

Before Junior reached it, Tommy grabbed it and threw it on the floor. "The other ain't workin and I use it to store mufflers."

“Where’s the women’s then?”

“It’s in the back here, just around the corner. Before you do that, could you move your truck outside?”

“Don’t you want to do the work on it?”

“That bay you’re in, ain’t liftin.”

“Guess you can’t get too high on that.” Junior complied with his direction and then went to the closet like room stuck in the rear corner of the garage. It was barely large enough to accommodate a commode and sink. There was no door to the enclosure, just an opening facing the rear of the shop. Nobody in the front of the garage could see a person in this bathroom area.

Junior moved a tailpipe resting on the sink and turned the faucet on. He pumped on the soap dispenser but nothing came out. He settled on a sliver of the remains of a soap bar found on the floor to lather his hands. As he rinsed them, he heard the phone ring and his cousin left for his office. The mechanic was replaced by three people talking loudly in the front area of the garage. Junior recognized one of the voices as Helen Winde asking, “Do you know if the Chief got the ring?”

Another person, a man with a thick Chinese accent, said, “I talked to him yesterday and he doesn’t know where it is. He thinks that the Garfield boy has it.”

Junior’s heart raced as he dried his hands on trousers hung beside the sink. “I’ll get it back, Kung Fo,” she said with confidence. Junior had heard that name before, but couldn’t remember where.

“You need to get that cash back,” the Asian directed.

Junior stood on the commode to peer through a hole in the plaster board to look at the people. He thought they must be talking about the cash still in the washing machine that belonged to his dead client. Any doubts were now confirmed. Junior stretched to get a better look at the leader but could only hear his voice. In the process, he rubbed against a used oil filter on a shelf; his white shirt and tie were ruined.

The leader warned. “I want the ring. Or you’re in trouble.”

“What about the cash?”

“You get the ring, then the money.”

Helen responded. “Don’t worry. I know where it is. I’ll get that back.”

“Where is it?”

“It is in a safe place. I’ll get it back tomorrow.”

Confused, Junior wondered what they were talking about, the ring or the money. How would Helen know where either was located?

Was she responsible for Wong's death? Did his former client tell her where the money was? Maybe Junior needed to retrieve the money. This might even get Ms. Winde in a jam with these Asians.

Kung Fo said, "I don't like what is going on here. I think I'll bring Kim from the West Coast."

"Don't worry, I'll get it."

The man warned, "You better, if you don't"

The conversation stopped when Tommy returned, but Junior decided it was wise to stay in the restroom until the gang left. Surely he would be recognized by Helen Winde, perhaps even by one of the Asians. The group moved close enough to the bathroom area so that Junior could have reached and touched their mustaches if there had been no partition.

The Chinese spoke to his cousin, "I need to get a battery for my car out there."

"You mean the limo."

"Yeah. That one."

"We ain't got one that big."

"You hick. It takes a regular size one. Need it in an hour."

Still standing on the commode, Junior worried that Helen might recognize his vehicle. Fortunately, there were at least a thousand red pick-up trucks just like his running around the county.

Tommy pointed outside to Junior's pick-up parked by a pile of used tires, "Can't do it. Promised my cousin I'd do a brake job this morning. That's his right over thar. Wonder where he got to. Reckon back to his office."

"I'll make it worth your while. Five hundred in cash. You won't have to report it."

"Sorry, I promised him."

The Asian reached into his pocket and removed a wad of cash. Five crisp bills were separated from the bundle. "Here it is."

"Try the guy up on East Prong. I just can't do it this morning." The mechanic went to the Buick and hopped in. Junior was proud of his cousin for not taking a bribe even though he was in a desperate financial situation.

Helen said, "Come on, Kung Fo. I know that guy."

"So what?"

"I helped him get his airplane back from some creditors. He owes me a favor." The three people stormed out to their vehicle. Junior remembered now; it was the Kung Fo Company that owned the crashed plane, but he was confused about the connection with the Jackpot Casino, Helen Winde and this Kung Fo. They had to be tied in

together. Junior jumped down on the floor and peeked around the corner to the limo. It would not start. He heard the Asians shouting, probably cussing in Chinese. Then they started walking in the direction of the Courthouse. Within a few minutes, a tow truck from one of Tommy's competitors drove up to replace the battery.

Junior could see that Tommy was not happy to see that vehicle in his lot and confused about the events. There was nothing he could do but watch the work being done by his competition.

Junior breathed easier when the limo drove off. Still in the restroom, he waited until his cousin pulled his pick-up on the rack. The brakes squealed. Junior approached his cousin. "Thanks."

The startled mechanic popped up from the driver's seat. "I thought you were long gone. Back to your office."

"I'll explain later. I need to find out what's going on. I'm going to follow them." Junior hopped in his truck.

"I wouldn't drive that."

"Why?" Junior turned the key in the ignition and revved up the engine.

His cousin shouted, "Your brakes ain't no good."

Junior turned the motor off and jumped out running towards him. "Can I borrow your tow truck over there?"

"Why?"

"I need to follow them."

Tommy asked again, this time louder. "Why?"

"Can't explain."

"Are you in some kind of trouble with the law?"

"Can I use it?" Junior begged. "I'll be careful."

"I gotta be in court next week for that pot."

"I'll be there."

Chapter 25

Following a twenty-foot limousine through Stark County was as easy as tailing a riverboat on a flat bed truck, despite the fact that Junior had his cousin's tow truck to track it. The wrecker reeked of cigarette smoke and a mixture of petroleum products so strong he had to stop within a block of the repair shop. In front of the West Prong Funeral Home, Junior rolled down both side windows in the cab. Still, to avoid the stench, he stuck his head out as he crept by the benches facing Main Street at the Courthouse. Several people stared at a man with a white shirt, suit and tie driving Tommy's repair vehicle. Junior found an oily baseball cap stuffed under the front seat and put it on trying to disguise his face.

At the railroad crossing, both vehicles stopped for a fully loaded coal train traveling south to Riverport. Three passenger cars stood between them. Hoss came up from nowhere to Junior in the truck's window. "Hey, can I have a r-r-r-ride?"

"Not today."

"Say T-Tom-Tommy, what are you doin all dressed up?"

"I'm not Tommy." Junior turned on the yellow light on top of the cab, attempting to herd off the drunk.

That had no effect and Hoss persisted, "Who are y-you?"

Using his legal skills, he concocted an answer. "Sorry, gotta go. I'm bein chased by aliens."

Hoss scooted off like a fly being swatted by a cow's tail. Junior was afraid that he would be back and attract attention; so when the train passed and the gates swung up, Junior breathed easier. He continued to follow the limo out of town, but he had a good idea of where it was going when it made a right turn off Possum Trot on Bear Lick: a rendezvous with the Chief. What would be discussed would be more difficult to determine, but Junior just knew it was to finalize the plans for the casino and the transformation of the entire Reservation. Stark County would be changed forever: sprawling housing developments, fast food places sprouting up like dandelions in the spring, traffic congestion, airplane noise, and crime invading like locusts. Bland corporate people from Las Vegas would swoop down on the rural culture. High land prices would drive some of the natives away. Both people and animals would be homeless. Moral values of hard work and perseverance would be replaced by an addiction to a false sense of security of hitting a jackpot without hard labor, education, skill or intelligence. He had to stop it! Could it be done

alone against a monster? Would it endanger himself and his family? He worried about all of this as he drove.

A herd of geese bolting across Bear Lick Road brought Junior back to the present. A slight thump meant that one of the animals didn't make it. He slammed on the brakes; the tow truck skidded in the side ditch. Junior thought, "What have I done now? How can I explain this to Tommy?" Another tow truck would have to come out, probably his competitor, the ultimate humiliation for his cousin.

His client in the highway case, Ms. Good, flew out from her house screaming, "Oh my God!"

Junior dismounted the truck and put his arms around her. "Sorry."

She was understanding. "It's not your fault. That long car scared them."

Junior looked down the valley at the speeding limo kicking up dust. There was no way he could follow it. Meanwhile her beloved pets scattered in every direction from the point of impact.

"I need help with my babies," she pleaded.

"Sure thing." For the next fifteen minutes Junior assisted the woman in rounding up her remaining flock. When the last one was put in the pen, he retrieved a shovel from the rear of the truck and buried the dead goose. Junior decided to call Hoppi for help with the tow truck. With Ms. Good driving, the two men pushed the disabled vehicle out of the ditch. The only evidence of the mishap was some dirt on the side of the truck which washed off in a minute with her garden hose. She asked Junior to come in for a drink of lemonade, but he apologized, giving the excuse that he needed to leave for a pressing matter in his law practice.

Upon his return to the office, Julie handed her boss a stack of phone messages from a metal spindle. "Where have you been?"

"Worried about me?" Junior asked trying to hide a blotch of oil on his red tie and a streak of red mud on his shirt.

"Yes. Well, where have you been?"

He responded with the truth, "On a wild goose chase."

"Right." She appeared unconvinced and continued the interrogation. "What's all over your suit?"

"I talked to a grease monkey. Don't worry, I got a lot of legal work out of this." Junior thought it unwise to inform her that all of this was for barter with a relative.

But Julie was not dumb; she shook her head as if to say, what I have got into? "Okay. But we need to go to the bank." She counted a wad of bills two inches thick. "The buyer of the cabin on Turkey Neck brought the purchase price in cash."

“That closing isn’t until tomorrow.”

“Well, he came early. He said he didn’t want his wife to get a hold of it.”

“I’ll take it to the bank.” Without thinking Junior blurted, “I have to check on some other cash.”

“What other money?”

“Never mind.”

Julie did not pursue this but looked at the bank statement and held it up in his face. “This month’s pretty thin.”

“Worried about being paid?” Junior asked trying to change the subject.

“You need to collect from that young woman you did the adoption for.” She handed the client’s file to him.

Junior opened it and shuffled some papers. “Do you mean the pretty gal with the low cut dress?”

“I didn’t notice that.”

“Is that the one who works for the Massage Center in Riverport?” Junior asked, knowing the answer.

“Yes, dear.” She tossed a white Baby Ruth wrapper in the direction of the trash can but missed.

“She doesn’t have any money.” Junior bent down and picked it up. “It would be a waste of time to send her a bill.”

Julie was upset. “You need to work out a payment plan with her.”

“I’ll just ask her to get paid in private massages every week.” Junior laughed and went back to his office thinking about the cash in the washer. This might be a good time to retrieve it, with Helen busy over at the Reservation with Kung Fo and his gang of thugs. More importantly this could be the last opportunity to make a withdrawal. It wasn’t his money, but it seemed that it really wasn’t anybody’s. Anyway, if Helen or the Asians got their hands on it, it would be used for sinister purposes. If Junior controlled it, he would hold it until he knew what was going on and, in time, it might be donated to the EEO for the purchase of the Reservation. That is, if the environmental group could get four rings.

He also needed to get the autopsy report for the Asian client; perhaps the Circuit Court clerk might have it in the man’s criminal file. Whenever a criminal defendant dies in a pending case, a death certificate is put in the file. Sometimes an autopsy is attached. He called the Courthouse and had the clerk pull the file. She reported that the man had not answered in Court and Judge Pickins had issued a failure to appear. The Sheriff had an outstanding order for his arrest.

On this minor charge, no one cared and law enforcement would not go out of their way to pursue it. The only way someone would be picked up for not showing up for trial would be at a traffic stop or if the person was in court for another charge. Eventually the file would end up in the bowels in the basement of the Courthouse to be forgotten or gobbled up by the mildew and moisture. The Clerk reported no autopsy existed in the file. Perhaps Rick could get it at some point for him; that would not arouse any suspicion.

Junior went out to greet the mailman who came in with a bundle and laid it on Julie's desk. Her eyes lit up when she opened a manila envelope. "Take this to the bank, Junior."

"What is it?"

"The nice woman you did the will for paid you and gave you a bonus." She handed a check over.

"I guess I won't need any massages now." Junior sighed.

Julie smiled as she dug further in the package. "There's a video tape and a personal note in here."

"What does it say?"

She skimmed over a handwritten letter. "I'll read it to you. 'Thank you for lending me the movie. I didn't realize that it came with the will. Do you provide this service for all of your clients? When I went home that evening, I looked at it with my plumber friend. We both thoroughly enjoyed it. So much so, that we're getting married. I need to make another appointment with you to make another will. I want to leave him my claw foot bathtub. We shared precious moments together there. I will call you later.' What in the dickens is she talking about?"

Junior knew that this was the tape that Joan Lark had given him! He had to keep this secret and needed to get the tape back from Julie to keep her from watching it. "It's part of a case I'm working on."

"What's on the tape?"

"Haven't seen the tape."

"Do you know what's on it?"

"Don't know." He shook his head convincingly. "Probably some boring home video."

"Are you sure?" Julie asked

"That's the naked truth."

She took another personalized piece of mail from the stack and examined it. "This is from Sonya."

Junior took the greeting size envelope from her. "Probably a love note."

"What does it say?" She asked with heightened interest.

“She got my bill.” Junior took a minute to read the note in the card. “This is nasty. Don’t believe she is a preacher’s wife.” He gave it to his wife.

“Yeah, but she put a check in here.” Julie examined the document. “You shouldn’t have sent her a bill in the first place.”

“Here, give it to me. I’ll take it to the bank.” Junior did not have any further comment as he grabbed the check and retired to his office. He stayed in his office for about an hour returning phone calls and writing letters on a yellow legal pad that Julie would type on the computer. Taking a briefcase stuffed with hundred dollar bills, he left with the tow truck to the bank located in a double wide trailer a block down Main Street. He also needed to talk to a loan officer about a real estate closing but decided not to go in the building with his soiled clothing. It was bad enough using the drive through.

After completing his bank business, he drove the few blocks in the tow truck back to his cousin’s garage. “Thanks, Tommy.” Junior exchanged keys with his kinfolk at his workshop in the rear of the garage. “I have to be in Riverport at three to meet with a doctor.”

“You should be all set. Had to replace all the shoes. You were low on brake fluid and I put some in.”

“Thanks.”

“That will cost you a deed.”

Junior laughed. “I better get out of here before you find something else wrong.”

Tommy smiled and volunteered, “You know that limo that was here?”

“Yeah.” Junior was tempted to say that he followed it to the Reservation, but he wanted to find out first what his cousin knew. “What about it?”

“It was here again.”

“Where was it?”

“Parked just half a block from here.”

“When?”

“Just a few minutes ago. I saw it comin back from the Wagon.”

Junior peered out the dirty window. “It’s gone.”

“That Oriental fella was runnin out of my garage. I tried to catch em to ask em what in the hell he was doin. He left before I could get to em.”

“That’s strange.”

“Yeah.”

“Did you see Helen?” Junior asked.

“No. Let me get your truck down from the lift.” Tommy let the air out of the compressor, which made a hissing sound. The pickup floated down to the concrete floor like an owl feather in the shed on the Reservation.

Junior backed out of the service bay and proceeded south on Highway 10. He began to feel drowsy by the time he reached the shopping center outside of town. Stopping at the light, he opened the window. He remembered he needed to stop at Lowe’s and get a roll of chicken wire to replace the one given to Hoppi. After this purchase, he drove up the mountain but fell asleep for a few seconds just before the top of Pump Gap. As he drifted into oncoming traffic, a blaring horn woke him. Something didn’t smell right. When he stepped out in the front of the general store, the cold air refreshed him temporarily but soon he developed a headache with nausea. It took him a few minutes to remember why he was here. He bought a soft drink and lingered on the front porch next to the ice machine.

When no one was looking, he snuck around back to the used appliances scattered among bare brush. Junior opened the top of the washer. His head pounded and he could not think straight. The money was still there as he had left it. He had second thoughts, but he reached in and grabbed handfuls of hundred dollar bills at a time. He stuffed them in a duffle bag like removing laundry into a hamper. Junior staggered with the load slung over his shoulders like a sailor boarding a ship. He moved purposefully to his truck, arousing no suspicion among a group of teenagers hanging out in front of their cars.

Junior shoved the bag in a tool compartment on the bed of the pick-up and locked it up tight. Although he had to hurry down the mountain to meet with the doctor about his father’s worsening condition, he did not want to attract attention. He left the pick-up and cash unattended to buy a candy bar inside the store. He finished it and threw the wrapper in a tin can on the porch.

Before mounting the driver’s seat, he glanced around the area. Down the grade that same smell, along with his drowsiness, came back within a mile from the store. He inserted his George Jones CD into the player, but the Possum singing drinkin and cheatin songs didn’t help. A tractor trailer truck grinding up the opposite way caught his attention and he was able to focus on the highway for a few minutes. Soon he was sound asleep behind the wheel.

The sound of scraping metal on the passenger side awoke Junior. By instinct, he overcompensated and swerved into the other lane, narrowly missing a car coming toward him. He now was off the far pavement and loose gravel told him that he was out of control. The driver’s door swung open as he leaned into it, rounding a curve to the

left. The seatbelt prevented him from landing on the ground. The fresh air rushed to his brain, alerting him that his body had been deprived of oxygen. He kept the door open and stuck his head out as far as it could go as he regained control of the vehicle in his lane of travel. The pick-up continued to weave down the hill as he drove with his head out the window. There was no place to stop until after he passed a sign indicating he had crossed the state line. He stopped the truck at the entrance to 'Cowgirls.' Junior stumbled out of the truck and staggered around to the other side to survey the damage. The headlight, side mirror, and door panel were missing. A man in the parking lot of the beer joint approached Junior. "Have you been drinkin'?"

"No, but I could use one right now."

"You've come to the right place."

Chapter 26

“You look tired.” Rick sat down behind his solid oak desk.

“Couldn’t sleep a wink.” Junior collapsed in a sofa in the editor’s office. “Some one tried to kill me yesterday.”

“What?”

“Tampered with my truck.”

“Who did it?”

“Not sure. But it has something to do with the Indian Reservation.”

Rick swiveled his chair around to the back wall and returned a thick dictionary to a bookshelf. “How’s that?”

“It’s tied into a huge development there. Asians from Vegas have been hanging around there with the Chief.”

“Come to think about it, I’ve seen some in the Wagon. And at the Courthouse.” Rick bent down and opened a cabinet door to his desk and turned on the computer. “I’ve been wondering what they were doing here. Do they have something to do with the big limos running around town?”

“Yeah, that’s them.”

“I almost hit one last week. They think they own the road.”

Junior thought this might be literally true and added, “Pretty soon they’ll own half the county.”

Rick’s ears perked up. “Really? But what’s going on with your truck?”

“Don’t put this in the paper. The Sheriff’s handling this delicately for awhile.”

“Why’s that?”

Junior paused as a pair of railroad engines passed by. “Well, I don’t have all the answers just yet.”

“So you don’t want to scare them off?” As the train continued, the pictures on Rick’s wall shook and several papers fell off the top of a filing cabinet; the desk stood still like an anchor.

“Yeah.”

“What did they do to your pick-up?” Rick asked as he would interview a victim for a news story.

“Well, someone put a hose from my tailpipe into the cab of my truck.” After the freight passed, Junior then told his godfather about the ring, highway study and the foreigners with Helen Winde.

“Saw some with Ms. Winde at the County Planning Office. Going over some maps and photos.”

“Really? I’d like to see them.”

“You could look for yourself.”

“I guess it’s public information.”

“There’s plans for a new computer assembly plant over at the zoning office. They’re moving from the West Coast.” Rick fidgeted with a pencil. “The Supervisors are supposed to vote on it next month. It’s going right next door at the old mill site. The Richmond and Southern line has even built several new rail sidings.”

“That should be good for the county.” Junior thought about what Tommy and Abe said about railroads. “Good for the environment.”

“Why’s that?” Rick asked.

Junior needed to educate him on this point and brought out that there would be less heavy trucks tearing up the roads and a reduction in air pollution.

Rick laid a pencil between piles of press releases and it disappeared. “But it has to get past Helen Winde first.”

“How does she feel about it?”

“I get the impression she doesn’t want some of those computer nerds from Silicon Valley here.”

Junior laughed. “Some of them would be good for this county. Can’t be worse than the Asians.”

“Did you say anything to Julie about your truck?” Rick asked as he moved some papers to locate the pencil.

“Not really. I don’t want her to worry about this. But I do have a problem. I busted it pretty bad.” In fact, Junior was concerned about the cash still in the compartment of the beat up truck. But who would steal or mess with it? It was almost as safe as the washing machine.

“Where is it?”

“It’s back at Tommy’s.”

“That should take six months.”

“Yeah. I’ll be his lawyer for the rest of my life.” Junior cut to the chase. “Can I borrow your old Audi?” He needed transportation and he would transfer the money to the car. At least the cash would be close by.

“Actually, it’s Mary’s but we don’t use it anymore. It’s parked by the old cabin site down from the house.”

“Sorry to bring that up.”

“That’s okay. You never get over the loss of a child. I hope it never happens to you. At least we have happy memories of Abe down there. Sure, you can use it. You’ll have to fight the brush to get to it.”

“That’s no problem.”

“You’ll need to get it tuned up. It hasn’t run in years.”

“I’ll go to Riverport to have it done. I don’t think Tommy can do it.”

“What did you tell Julie about your truck then?”

“Just that I ran off the road to avoid a deer. Anyway I don’t have anything solid. I’m going to snoop around awhile.”

“Be careful. You need to push the Sheriff about this.” Rick got up from his desk to answer a knock on the door.

“Perhaps. I don’t know exactly what they are doing.”

Marlene delivered a bundle of newspapers from the reception area and put them on the floor in the office just to the side of the door. Rick waited until she left and the door shut. “And what did you find out so far?”

“There’s a connection between the new road, the condo project and casino. I need to let the people know what’s going on. Just in general terms.”

“I’ve received a lot of letters against the condos. Matter of fact, I’m going to do an editorial about it next week.

“Against it, I hope?” Junior asked.

“Yes.”

“Great!”

“There should be a lot of people at the public hearing. Even some of the natives are not for the project.”

This has to be handled delicately. We’re up against big money and power.” Junior lowered his voice. “Don’t put anything in about the involvement with the Asians and Winde just yet.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t.”

“There’s no proof of anything wrong.” Like a jury summation Junior concluded, “But a casino complex will be bad for this county.”

“I agree.”

“I believe the Possum Trot route is being built just for this and will destroy a lot of the forests in the process. I’ve hiked up there and some one is messing with the eagles.” Junior pointed to a map of Stark County hanging behind the desk.

Rick turned around to view the map. “Well, we need a new road.”

Junior countered this weak argument, “Yeah but it’s built just for private interests. This place will look like Cherokee, North Carolina and Gatlinburg, Tennessee, all put together.”

“Yeah, that’ll be a big tourist trap. I’ll look into it.”

“Another thing.” Junior appeared nervous. “Those Baptists should get off their fannies and start working with the environmental group to stop this.”

“I agree. The pastor has been tough on the back to earth crowd.” Rick used a heavy duty stapler to fasten a bunch of loose papers.

“Especially his wife.”

“What can I do?”

“You’re a deacon there.”

“Yeah, but I’m still an outsider. I tried to get rid of him for that sermon just before the road hearing.”

“They probably would need to appoint a committee and study it for about a year.”

“How would you know?” Rick asked as he put the stapler away in one of the top desk drawers.

“Julie told me.”

“I hope you can come next week to the Palm Sunday service at our church.”

“I don’t want to run into Sonya ever again.”

“Sorry about that Junior, but they’re having a special prayer for Abe then.”

“I’ll think about it, Dad.”

“If you go, you need to dress up. It’s pretty formal place.”

“Does that mean I have to wear a tie?”

Both men heard squealing metal outside the boxcar followed by a jolt felt inside, the size of a seven point earthquake. It first shook the base of the bookcase behind Rick’s chair. Then papers, files, lamps and pictures slid off the desk toward the center of the room.

Junior’s sofa tipped over in the direction of the desk and then he tumbled down on the floor with it. Rick whip-lashed back with the desk sliding to the rear, the back of his head hitting the glass covering the map which hung on the back wall. The frame fell to the carpet missing Junior’s hand by inches.

The books tumbled to the floor.

Junior sprang to his feet. “What’s goin on?”

Wedged in his chair, Rick held the back of his head. “D don’t knoww.” He tried to wiggle loose.

“Don’t move.”

“I can’t.” Still trapped between the desk and bookcase on the back wall, blood began to ooze from Rick’s head.

The office started to move in the opposite direction of the initial shock! Towards the addition part of the office, the plaster and wood tore apart, making crackling and splintering sounds.

“We’re bein pulled by a train!” Junior almost fell to the floor again.

Sure enough, in a few seconds they felt a steady forward speed with clicks of the metal wheels on the crooked tracks. The center reception area was left behind, still attached to the other box car. Now daylight entered the far end of Rick's office where there was once a partition and a door.

Rick tried to shift and pry out from behind his desk, but couldn't move an inch. "I'm stuck, Junior." The initial jolt pushed the desk skin tight against the end of the boxcar.

"Don't move."

"I can't do anything."

Junior attempted to lift it. "It's too heavy."

"Try sliding the desk out."

"Sorry. It won't budge." Junior tried to dislodge the oak desk filled with files, a computer system and supplies, but it would not separate from the back wall. He would need help.

They heard the approaching bells of the signals beside the grade crossing on Main Street. First light papers such as press releases, letters and bills floated out of the rear of the train littering the tracks and platform to the railroad station. Then books, reports, newspaper pads flew out.

Still attached to the side of the boxcar, the Guardian banner rippled with the movement of the train. The free end of this advertisement dragged along on the stone ballast.

Junior crawled on the carpet to the open end of the box car. With one hand grappling an electrical cord and, using it like a safety rope, he peered out the side of this new caboose. Abe told him that because of the high cost of labor, railroads had discontinued the red caboose. This would have never happened in the old days of railroading. He saw a line of vehicles behind the crossing gate coming towards him. He stuck his head out as far as it could go. "Help! Help!"

No one could hear him over the noise of the train, the whistle and bells on the signal. While still clinging to the cord secured to an outlet, he gestured frantically to the traffic for help. Hoss stood on the side walk and saluted back. A car load of teenage girls in a vehicle first in line behind the gate waved. A heavy bundle of newspapers dropped in the center of the road and then the string broke sending the papers in all directions. Several cars honked their horns. Hoss darted out for the free delivery.

The train gained speed and soon the road crossing was behind Rick's mobile office with traffic moving across the road in both directions as if nothing had happened. Nevertheless, letters, notes, envelopes, and press releases continued to leave a paper trail. The

banner flapped behind the boxcar like a flag in a strong wind. As the train crossed the truss bridge across the West Prong, Junior could see water between the ties. At the coal quarry, the free end of the banner wrapped around a signal pole on the side of the tracks, ripping it into shreds.

Junior had two choices: he could abandon the train and get help, or stay with Rick. Soon they would be going down the grade of the river towards Riverport picking up speed and it would be impossible to jump. Who knew when it would stop? He could not leave Rick trapped behind his desk bleeding to death, but the train had to be halted.

Junior decided to stay. He took off his shirt, climbed on the desk and wrapped the clothing around Rick's head to arrest the bleeding.

His thoughts turned to stopping the train. In his freshman year in high school, Abe told him that all the cars in a train were connected by an air hose. If he could get to the connection with the next car, he might be able to cut it and alert the engineer to the loss in pressure. But if there were no brakes, how could the train stop? He would have to wait until the train passed Lightfeather's property on the other side of the river, through the gorge, Dead Bear rapids and the tunnel. It would require much skill and endurance not only to get the other end but also to cut the line. He had only a small pocket knife.

Junior peered out the end and looked down at the rushing water of the Dutch Curve River. There was a side ladder up to the top of the boxcar. With his long arm he grabbed a rung on the ladder. For a few seconds, he dangled over the river bank and his feet hit some brush on the side of the tracks. He was able to maneuver his other hand to the rusty ladder and pull himself up. It was an easy climb once his feet were firmly attached to the side of the boxcar.

On the top of the barreling train, he crawled on all fours toward the front on the cold steel roof. Metal girders flew by him in all directions as he crossed the Dutch Curve River. He was so close he could have reached out and touched the rusted rivets. About halfway across, he saw the tunnel approaching. Lying flat as a pancake on his stomach for a time that felt like eternity, he waited. In fact, Junior was in complete darkness for only ten seconds. He began to see daylight as the train approached the end of the tunnel. Waiting for the train to clear the second bridge over the river, he resumed crawling to the ladder on the other end. The climb down was easy but it would be difficult to swing around to the end to the coupler. He couldn't see

what was there around the side of the box car. He had to take a chance that his feet would land on something solid.

There would be no turning back once he did it. Junior took a deep breath and swung around. His left foot caught a six inch ledge bolted to the end above the coupler mechanism. He let go with his left hand and found a pipe attached to the end to hold. Both feet were on the ledge one foot above the coupler. The air hose bobbed up and down. He braced himself between the two cars and bent down. With the knife, he started sawing the tough rubber with metal meshing. Developing cramps in his back, he could not work in this awkward position for more than a minute at a time. Then he lost feeling in his feet. He had to stand balanced between the two moving cars. It was like cutting a chrome bumper with a hacksaw while straddling two race cars, but eventually he heard a hissing sound over the noise of the train. The escaping air poured on his face and he had to shield his eyes with one hand while holding onto the pipe with the other. Even though they were through the gorge, it took two miles for the train to stop besides gentle farmland outside Riverport.

Without waiting for the freight to make a complete halt, Junior hopped off the coupler and tumbled to a plowed cornfield. His feet were numb. On the muddy ground, he rubbed them back to life and ran past fifty boxcars up to the front of the train. He shouted over the noise of the whining engine. "I need help."

An elderly engineer peered down from the cab looking bewildered, "What's going on here?"

"You picked up the wrong load back at Mulberry."

"Really?" He stretched out the window to look at the end of the train but it was not visible.

"Yes. There's someone hurt in the back." Junior waved the engineer and assistant out of the engine.

All of them trotted to the rear of the train. It took three people less than thirty seconds to free Rick. He had lost some blood; his head throbbed, but he was all right otherwise. "Thanks, fellows."

Junior said, "That was some ride."

As he looked at the remains of the workplace, the embarrassed engineer said, "I'm sorry." There was not a shred of paper left in the boxcar.

"How could this happen to my office?" Rick shook his head.

"The boys in division at Richmond gave me the wrong bill of lading. They changed the sidings up in Mulberry."

The train assistant also came to his defense. "I got confused too."

The engineer took off his cap and scratched the white hair on his head. “I’ll never run a train through there again. I’m going to retire.”

Junior tried to comfort the engineer. “Look, it’s not your fault.”

“Yeah, but the last time, I hit a boat.”

Chapter 27

“Julie, it’s time to leave for church.” Wearing only underwear, Junior rinsed some leftover pancakes and syrup off his plate into the sink. A smell of bacon engulfed the camper. Close by at his feet, Angus stood at attention with head and ears raised in case anything dropped to the floor.

“Still feel sick.” Looking pale, she limped out of the bedroom opening through the curtain. “Go without me.”

“You wanted me to go to that church in the first place.” Looking annoyed, Junior threw a piece of bacon to the Westie. Angus gobbled up the tasty morsel and trotted back to his crate in the bathroom like a show dog.

Julie sighed. “I really don’t want to go.” Ever since the skating party, his wife did not participate in the youth group and had severed all ties with her girlfriends there.

Junior grabbed a dress shirt and started buttoning it up. “But our parents provided the flowers. You know they’re having a special prayer for Abe at the beginning of the service.” He left the top button loose to protest wearing a tie.

“Forgot about that.” She shivered a few times.

“I told you twice about it last night.”

“I can’t think straight this morning.”

He did not argue with her on that point. “Hopefully, it’ll be better than the last time we went,” he said.

“Why?” Julie tightened the cord to the bathrobe.

“All the preacher talked about was that road.” He slipped his trousers on. “When I go to church I don’t want to hear about that.”

“Yeah, I remembered that last year. Why don’t you go by yourself?”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why’s that?” she asked.

Junior struggled to fasten his belt to the last notch. “Cause I need someone to protect me from Sonya.”

“Me? I’m about half her weight.” Julie looked at his mid section. “Having trouble, dear?”

“I guess I’ve gained a few pounds.”

Julie reached for her purse on a stack of cardboard boxes. “You must like being married.” She took out a pocket mirror and put it up to her face. “I look terrible. And in no fighting condition.”

“You look a tad better than at breakfast.”

“Those pancakes did not last long.” Julie held on to her stomach. “They left me about an hour ago.”

“You hardly touched them. I threw most of them away.”

“Well, thanks for cleaning up anyway.” She glanced at the spotless kitchen area.

“You didn’t even have your Baby Ruth this morning.”

“I ran out.” She looked around the room. “Okay, I’ll go to church. After that we need to stop by the grocery store.”

“To get more candy?”

Julie nodded. “And some Pepto Bismol.”

“Maybe you should go to the doctor.” He stuffed a stringy tie in his pants pocket in case the elders enforced the Sunday service dress code.

“If I still feel puny in the mornings, I’ll make an appointment.”

“When?”

“By the end of the week.” She looked at her husband. “I’ll go with you to church. Dad and Mom will wonder where we are.”

“Thanks.” Junior breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’ll take me a few more minutes to get ready.”

“Be outside feeding the owls.”

“Not in your good clothes. You wait until we get back.” Julie disrobed and returned to the bedroom to dress for church.

“I guess they can wait.” He fished around in an old coffee can for the keys to the Audi. “I’ll check on em right after we come back.”

“Have anymore died?” She slipped on a pair of dress slacks.

“Yes. One two days ago. We’re losing one a week since the honeymoon. I can’t figure out what’s going on out there.”

“Why don’t you have Aaron take a look at them?”

“That’s a good idea.”

“You can’t do anything now. Check on them after church.”

“Okay.”

Julie held on to her mouth. “I gotta puke again.” She rushed into the bathroom without closing the door while Junior went to the bedroom to give her some privacy. There was nothing he could do so he lay on the bed and turned his attention to his wife’s health. Was there some connection with her condition and the owls? In any case both of them needed to get off the Reservation. The tribal council meeting scheduled for next Sunday couldn’t come soon enough.

Ten minutes later, Julie joined him. “I hate having that dog in there.”

“But you wanted to live with Angus here.”

“I don’t want to be that close.” Julie hugged him lightly. “Okay I’m ready. I think I have all my liquids out of me.”

“After church we’ll stop and get plenty of your candy bars.” Junior took a musty sports jacket off a hanger over the door knob to the bathroom.

The couple was soon on their way to the First Baptist Church of Mulberry. However, in less than a mile they were waved to stop by a female Sheriff’s deputy; she stood in the middle of Bear Lick road by the chief’s pond, with several other patrol cars parked nearby. Junior saw the reason; blotches of red paint covered the Chief’s big bulldozer on the side of the road. His heart pounded faster; all the cash lay in the trunk.

Junior lowered the window and the officer stuck her head in the car. “Do you know anything about this?” She pointed to fresh dents on the side of the cab of the construction equipment and then to shattered glass carpeting the ground below the headlights.

Surprised at the vandalism and bewildered at the accusatory question, Junior stuttered, “N-no.”

She barked, “Let me see your hands.”

He complied by sticking them out the window. “I washed them after going to the bathroom.”

Julie giggled for the first time today but the officer was not amused. The cop motioned him out of the car, but he did not budge. When that didn’t work she demanded, “Get outside with your hands in the air. Spread your legs.”

He protested and remained seated, “What’s going on?”

“I need to search you.”

“You don’t have any probable cause.”

“Yes I do.”

“What is it then?”

“You hang out with that wacko group. That’s good enough for me.”

Sheriff Franks arrived on the scene from behind the bulldozer and said to his employee, “Teresa, he’s okay.”

Junior relaxed, but he knew the environmentalists were the prime suspects and that Aaron had to be contacted immediately. It would have to wait until after church; they were already late for the eleven o’clock service.

As their car left the Reservation on Bear Lick Road, Julie proclaimed, “I’m moving back home this afternoon.”

“Please don’t.” Junior turned to her leaving his eyes off the road for a second.

“I don’t feel safe on the Reservation.”

“Why?”

“While you were gone the other night, the Chief visited me.”

“What! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t want to upset you. He didn’t hurt me this time.”

“What has he done to you?”

“He tried to mess with me when I was a little girl.”

“I’m so sorry. You’re still a little girl.”

“When I was a child he tried. Right before I started school. Before the Queens adopted me. After my real parents died. Grandma couldn’t do anything about it. She did the best she could.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this before?”

“I just want to forget it, Junior.”

This seemed to satisfy him but he had to ask, “Why didn’t you report this?”

“I was only six. And the Chief’s my grandfather!”

“You’re kiddin.”

“He is. I’m the sole survivor. His next of kin.”

“I remember looking at the chart Lightfeather had and it stated that the Chief had a granddaughter named Sprout.”

“That’s my Indian name.”

Before Junior had a chance to query about this, they arrived in Mulberry, and she said, “Let’s discuss this some other time.”

Mary greeted them in the church parking lot. After making the necessary hug, Julie apologized, “Sorry we’re late. I think I’m getting the flu.”

With a handkerchief, Mary brushed her cheek. “You know what, you need to cut down on the physical contact.”

“Sorry. Where’s Dad?”

“He’s working on a special edition for that condo hearing coming up this week. I guess he’s at his office then.”

Junior quipped, “What part?”

“I really don’t know. The one in Riverport I guess. He told me this morning he had to get out of Stark County.” Mary smirked, “I don’t think he wants to get out in public for awhile.”

Junior said, “I really don’t want to be in public either.”

Julie looked at him, “You stay right here.”

“We both got railroaded out of town!”

Julie grabbed her husband’s hand and pulled him up the steps to the front door. A man with a plastic smile stamped on his face gave them each a bulletin. With Junior in the lead, they tried to weave through the crowd in the foyer to the entrance of the worship hall, but

everyone was pressed together like sardines in a can. Sonya, the preacher's wife, took up most of the space between the opening in the double doors as she gabbed to a young couple. She was the cause of the blockage. Her voice carried over the throng in the foyer to the far end where they entered. Junior stood still, waiting for her to move into the church proper.

Mary turned to Julie. "You look terrible. It has to be something more than the flu. Is there anything the matter?"

"I'll be okay."

"You know what, I don't know how you can live in that awful thing," Mary said disapprovingly.

"I really wanted to stay in bed this morning."

Junior said, "You look better."

"Yeah. It was good to get out and get some fresh air today."

Again Mary butted in, "You know what I need to ask, does Junior keep you locked in that hole on the weekends?"

He felt that his mother-in-law didn't need to discuss this personal matter. Junior knew it was difficult for Julie, their only child, to live with a six foot two inch man in an eight foot by eight foot bedroom. The county jail provided more space than that for one person. He attempted to change the subject, mocking her. "You know what?"

"What?"

"If it wasn't for that old door, I never would have made it here."

Mary asked, "What door?"

"The door to my pick-up. The latch was busted." Junior saw that Sonya had cleared the door and was in the church.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Julie interrupted. "Mom, I'll tell you about this when we get home."

Mary asked, "Junior, I thought you had to go back to clean up your Dad's office."

Still in the foyer, he pointed out, "Not yet. The railroad can't deliver another boxcar until next month."

"You know what, I bet they don't do that for people very often. I told Rick not to put his office in a bunch of boxcars."

Julie asked, "Will he be able to get a paper out this week?"

"I think so. Fortunately the computer was saved." Junior said as his family meandered in the worship hall. "Anyway, I have to go back to my office to call Aaron."

Mary motioned to the couple to be quiet, but there was a buzz in the sanctuary. The most prominent voice was that of the preacher's wife, strutting down the aisle with her three small children in tow. Sonya plopped in the first row directly in front of the lectern that faced the congregation. Several of her groupies sat close to her.

An usher greeted Junior with a disapproving look at his shirt with no tie, but pointed the family to their assigned seats up front, right next to Sonya. The usher led the way down the aisle. However, Junior halted in front of his family and slipped into a pew a third of the way down, with Julie and Mary following him. The usher kept going, unaware of the deception until he reached the altar and turned with an outstretched hand to show them their seats.

Sonya yelled, "Lose somebody?"

The bewildered usher bowed his head and received several snickers from the congregation. Julie giggled.

Fortunately an elder of the church, and not the minister, led a special prayer for Abe and recognized the Queen family, asking them to stand.

At the appropriate time for the sermon, Reverend Battle assumed the space behind the pulpit. After a short announcement, the preacher delivered the main course. "The book of Genesis allows man to have full domination over the animals of the earth. Please turn in your Bible to the first chapter of Genesis, verse twenty six." He stopped and there was a rustling of pages in the congregation. Junior felt self conscious without the Good Book, but he knew what was to follow. Anyway, he leaned over to an elderly lady, glancing at hers.

The preacher looked around and then focused on Junior. "You will see that God specifically spells out the birds of the air. Yet there are some who would allow these creatures to roam the world at will. These people would have you believe that the animals are to be worshiped." Junior thought of Lightfeather's creatures, but he listened with respect. "They go to all lengths to protect and preserve these soulless things. What good are the animals when it impedes the progress of mankind?" The man of the cloth waited until several *amens* were heard, the first from the preacher's wife.

He plodded forward. "There are some people in Stark County, very few, I may add. These people are not native to these parts. People who don't even live here. Well, these people are in favor of a lawsuit that would halt the construction of the new road through the approved route." To Junior, it sounded like Helen Winde talking. The preacher went on, "They are concerned over a few eagle nests. Why, these birds are now plentiful all around us."

Several people gazed around to see if anyone else had seen these rare birds. Junior doubted that people living in town had ever seen one. Undaunted, without any *amens* to stroke his ego, the minister continued, "To oppose this road now is sinful. Our jobs at the quarry would be in jeopardy for a bunch of birds." This time the *amens* were spontaneous and louder.

"I can't say and I won't say that the people who are against this road are sinners. I won't remind you that these people live together without being married. Some of them even fornicate with people of their own sex. They don't go to church on Sunday. Do not attend Wednesday night prayers. Look at all the pagan messages on their vans." Several *amens* followed this statement. "I am not going to say that these people are sinners. I won't go that far. That is for God to judge. He's the person on the throne. But these people will have to answer for their actions. They'll have to stand before the Almighty at Judgment Day." The preacher was now wound up like a Swiss clock. "The Almighty will look close at their heathen lifestyle. God knows what they have done. They're not of His flock. I repeat. His flock."

Junior squirmed, along with his kinfolks. Mary started to cry. Even Julie was embarrassed, and slid down in the pew almost to the floor.

The preacher started shouting and waving his finger aimlessly at the congregation. "They can never be saved. They don't have Jesus as Lord and Savior. We are the chosen ones, the elect who are predestined to enter the gates of Heaven."

The sermon last year about the road meeting was bad enough. It encouraged the church to attend and to speak in favor of the Possum Trot route, but this was over the top for Junior.

He glanced to his family in a way that said it was time to leave. They all nodded in approval, and rose from their seats, sliding past several people in the same pew who tried to impede their escape by remaining seated with their legs crossed. Julie could squeeze through, but Junior had to push his way to the aisle. As they filed to the rear in front of many staring eyes, the preacher screamed and pointed directly at the staying flock. "There goes some sinners now. On the path to destruction."

Chapter 28

Junior lugged a ten-pound book around to the copier by the front counter in the Stark County Registry of Land Records; then Julie took the bound leather volume apart and fed three individual pages through the machine. They returned to a vault-like room tucked in the back where all the other thousands of documents were stored. A heavy metal door separated the two sections of the office. At closing time, the entrance was shut tight, but during business hours, it remained open. As old as the Courthouse itself, rust streaked through a thick coat of black paint along the hinges and bolts on one side.

He was doing title research for Ms. Good, the client Junior represented on the highway condemnation. After Junior had run over one of her geese last week, he promised to attend to her case the first thing Monday morning. In order to prepare an answer to the Commonwealth's complaint, the young lawyer needed to find out how much land remained in her family's estate. She had no idea as to the extent of her property and it was the attorney's job to determine this for her.

To begin this task he examined all the deeds that the woman and her late husband received during their lifetimes and then Junior checked for any property conveyed out by them. This was not an entirely accurate way to determine what she owned because her land could have been inherited either through her parents or from his side, and hence the transfer would not be shown on the public records in the Land Registry. For that possibility, Junior would need to check for the administration of an estate in the Probate records across the hall in the lobby. However, many people in Stark County including his great-grandfather and grandfather did not have wills. Similarly many times their spouses or children never bothered to even bring the will to be probated, or if no will, did not take the time to administer the estate. In these situations, their home place was passed down by operation of law to the next of kin. For this, a title searcher would reach a dead end and need to start asking people about their family history.

Junior thought of his own family on Corn Still. The valley cove was deeded to his great-great-grandfather just after the Civil War. It would be passed down to him through his father one day in the near future. This might take place sooner than later due to his father's declining health. Since Junior did not have any lineal issue, his interest in the land might go outside of the Garfield family. This could happen if Junior inherited the property and then died; in that event, Julie would get the entire share. He loved her but wanted the land

passed down to his kin. Perhaps this would be a reason to have children. His Paw's voice at the wedding echoed in his brain. Junior kept this to himself, for he had more pressing issues to deal with.

He had Julie phone Ms. Good, asking her the full name of her father and her husband's father. There were hundreds of Goods. Then he checked the Grantee books to determine what property was deeded to him, but the attorney still found nothing. Maybe the land was inherited through her mother or her grandparents? Julie refused to call her again. Junior felt foolish, but swallowed his pride and placed the call. This time he received the entire family tree.

For now, both Junior and Julie were stuck in the back office poring over ancient documents generated in the nineteenth century. Out in the front room where documents were brought in to record, Junior heard Helen Winde's secretary storm in. "I have this lease to be filed."

The Registrar shuffled it and asked in a routine manner, "Where do you want me to send this after it's recorded?"

The secretary directed, "Mail it here." She pointed to an envelope.

"It's supposed to be on the front page of the document to be recorded."

"I didn't know that."

The Registrar raised her voice a notch. "Well, you need to print the full address of this Jackpot Company on it."

Junior's ears perked up; he wanted to examine this public document right away but he continued to plod along looking in the year 1890 Grantee index. The lease also could provide a clue to the connection between Kung Fo and his company with Jackpot. Why tip anyone off to his interest in this obscure paper, even to the Registrar? He whispered to his wife, "We need a copy of that."

"Why?"

"It has something to do with the Reservation."

Julie nodded. "I'll get it."

This time Junior was confused. "How?"

"Just be patient."

In the front, the young girl said, "Helen wants this indexed in the name of this Jackpot Company when you do it in the Grantee book."

The Registrar snapped back, "I know how to do it. I've been doing this for forty five years."

"Sorry, I'm new."

In the back room, Junior and Julie strained to hear the conversation, but Julie whispered into her husband's ear. "That's their third one in two weeks. They go through secretaries over there fast as Hoss runs through a bottle of liquor."

"Not like our office." Junior smiled.

"We better not."

The Winde secretary asked, "How much will this be to record?"

After the Registrar finished counting the pages aloud, she said, "That'll be thirty three dollars and fifty cents."

"Can you change a hundred dollar bill?"

"Your office usually brings in a check."

"This was different. The client wanted to pay in cash. Sorry, this is what they gave me. Can you change it?"

"Wait. I'll have to go over to the tax office to get it. We don't keep much cash in this office."

The secretary argued, "That's stupid."

"That's a new rule by the Supervisors." The Registrar responded in a pleasant but firm voice.

"What idiot thought of that?"

The elderly woman said, "Your boss." Junior wished he could have seen the face of the county attorney's secretary. He only heard the Registrar stomp out as if she was perturbed. Upon returning to her office, she said, "Here's your change." A loud click of the electric filing stamp sounded as the document was fed into the machine.

When Winde's girl left, the couple meandered to the front counter. Julie asked the Registrar, "The copier here's running low on toner. The last one we made was bad. Could you put another cartridge in for us?"

"Sure. I meant to do that this morning. I'll have to go upstairs to the supply room in the attic."

"Why's it way up there?" Julie asked.

"Cause she took the supply room down here for her office."

The Deed lady pointed to the newly recorded lease.

"You mean the county attorney?"

She nodded and looked around for help. "My girl didn't come in today. Can you wait a bit?"

Turning to his wife, Junior volunteered, "Sure."

Julie said, "We'll answer the phones for you."

"Thanks." The Registrar started toward the door and looked back. "But Junior, could you help me? I can't reach on the top shelf up there. It'll only take a few minutes."

“No problem.” Junior knew that his wife would make a copy of the document lying in the wire mesh box waiting to be indexed. Despite its length, there would be ample time for this task. There was nothing illegal because it was clocked in and a public document. Anyone could look at it and make a copy if they wanted.

The Registrar’s wrinkles turned into smiles as she led Junior out the door. He knew both that she was glad to get out of the office with him and that it would be longer than the time allotted. Junior was curious to explore the upper reaches of the historic building. Abe would have loved it.

At the outset of their journey, they were cornered by a group of genealogists who congregated in the lobby. The Registrar assured them that she would return in a few minutes to assist them. Junior also had to answer some of their legal questions about the laws of intestate succession and directed them to the Probate Office to do research there first. As they climbed the steps, the Deed lady thanked him because they would not invade her office until after the noonday meal.

Junior not only had to retrieve the cartridge but also carried down two packages of copy paper for the office. As expected, it took longer than a few minutes. He decided to stop at the restroom to wash his hands from handling the dusty, ancient records.

After the copier was serviced in the office, the lady resumed her duties at the front desk. Julie appeared from the back room and hugged her husband, “Let’s get some lunch at the Wagon.”

“Won’t do that, but I’ll have some dinner over there.” Junior gathered the files scattered over the office and stuffed them in his briefcase. “I have to meet Hoppi over there.”

As the couple passed through the front door, the Register had a puzzled look, “Don’t you want to use the copier?”

“We’ll be back.” Julie hugged the lady.

Junior said, “Turn her loose.”

Julie complied with her husband’s request.

The Registrar looked pleased to be able to breathe again. “I’ll be here. I can’t leave for dinner.”

He volunteered, “Can we get you something from the Wagon?”

“Well, thank you. I wonder what kinda special they have today?”

“Monday, it’s meatloaf,” Julie said without hesitation.

“I should’ve known. That’ll be just dandy.” She took a five dollar bill out of her purse. “That is so kind of you. Junior Garfield. You are so lucky to have this woman.”

“I guess I’ll keep her awhile.”

The couple went next door to the Wagon which was practically deserted with less than a third of the tables occupied. As Junior looked down toward the rest rooms in the rear, he noticed the video machine had been removed. The wall where it once proudly stood was dotted with broken plaster and holes left open from the electrical connections. Smudge marks blackened the ceiling as evidence of the cause of the machine's demise. A broken stool lay on the floor and trash littered the area. Hoppi was not there, but they sat in the front so he would not have any problem in finding them.

After they seated themselves, Julie volunteered, "When you were doing that errand for the Deed lady, I read over the lease."

Junior asked, "What does it say?"

She took a copy of the recorded document out of her purse and unfolded the wad of paper. "The Chief signed a fifty year lease to the Jackpot Corp for all of his lands. Although it never mentioned casino gambling by name, the lease payments are based on gross receipts from any business operation on the lands. It provides that additional land could be added to the original tract."

"I don't know what I would do without you."

She smiled. "May have to go to law school some day."

"What would I do without a secretary then?"

"Then you would be in bad shape."

"Let me see the lease."

Julie handed it to him.

He flipped to the next to the last page. "It has to be approved by the tribal council before it takes effect."

"Why did they record this now?" Julie asked.

"This Jackpot Company wants priority over any other offers."

Junior shoved the lease into his briefcase. "Was Kung Fo mentioned in any way?"

"No"

"I'll look at this in detail back at the office."

"Dad should be interested in this," Julie pointed out.

"The Baptists should also." He glanced around the empty tables looking for his Indian friend. "There'll be enough sin around to keep them busy for a long time."

"Look, I am sorry to give you a hard time yesterday about church. Now I know why it was special for you." She removed her water bottle from her purse.

"It was real special all right."

"I'll never set foot in that place again."

The door squeaked as Hoppi came in and sat at the couple's table. Julie rose and gave him a hug. She excused herself and went to

the restroom, but Junior remained and quipped, "I see they let you off the Reservation."

"Had to do some errands. I needed to talk to you away from there."

Junior fidgeted with the menu and remained silent about the specifics of the latest discovery.

"You know the tribal meeting is this Sunday. It's usually around Easter. I'm going out of town for a few days, but I'll be back." Hoppi paused.

Junior wanted to know where, but let his neighbor ramble on just like an opposing party on the witness stand on cross examination.

"Watch out for the Chief. He wants your ring and he will do anything to get it."

"Don't worry; it's still in a safe place." Junior assured him.

"That's partly the reason I'm going away. I'll be back this weekend for the vote."

"You'll miss the big Supervisor's meeting this Thursday night. I'm trying to stop the condo project."

"Yeah I know. You'll do a good job. I read about it in the paper today."

"Thought you didn't take the *Guardian*?"

"I decided I needed to know what's going on. Besides, I like how Queen is handling that issue. There should be a lot of people against it there." Hoppi scratched his head.

"How do you know?"

"I've been getting around more and people are starting to realize that all this progress isn't good." Hoppi scratched his head again. "But getting back to the vote, I'm worried about Tsalli."

"Why's that?"

"The Chief has been over to his house a lot."

"How will he vote?" Junior asked.

"Well, Tsalli works at the Quarry. I guess he would rather eat than have eagles around. Anyway, he wants to move into those new condominiums on Upper Bear Lick."

"That would be a change in lifestyle."

Hoppi nodded in agreement. "I don't see how that'll work out."

"I bet he'll get a lot for the land."

"How will the Chief pay him?" Hoppi moved restlessly in the booth.

"The Chief probably has a loan from the Jackpot Company. They have an unlimited supply of money. After the Chief gets title to

the whole land, the loan will be forgiven. The Company will pay lease payments to him for the rest of his life.”

“What does the Company get out of it?”

“They have a sweetheart lease and will make millions.” Junior thought it would be similar to the document that was just recorded. He figured the Chief didn’t have a clue how much the Company was going to make. “They own a lot of land around the Reservation where the new road is going.”

“I bet you won’t recognize the place after they get through with it.” Hoppi turned his head, searching for a waitress.

“You’re right.”

“I hope Tsalli doesn’t vote for that.”

“It’s a tough choice between jobs and the environment.”

Twirling a spoon on the table, Junior sensed something was different about the restaurant despite the fact that no one was available to serve them.

“I’ll work on the family,” Hoppi said.

“Good.”

“One other thing. The Chief is hopping mad about the bulldozer. It’s going to delay the new road up to Eagle’s Ridge.”

“Right by the hot springs?”

“Yeah.”

Hoppi explained, “He thinks that one of the EEO people sabotaged it.”

Junior thought that this was not beyond the realm of possibility. He should have cautioned the environmentalists about resorting to violence in the beginning of his representation. “I’ll talk to Aaron about this.” Junior scanned for Julie and sensed something odd about the place. They were the only ones left. “Did somebody die in here?”

Hoppi looked around. “Today’s the grand opening of the brand new Burger King in Mulberry.”

“Looks like the Wagon got the royal shaft.”

Chapter 29

This would be the most memorable Supervisor's meeting in the history of Stark County for many different reasons. A rezoning request by the Jackpot Company to change the upper Bear Lick Cove from Rural Residential to Multi-density Residential topped the agenda. The planning board recommended the action so condominiums could be built in three stages, but it needed the final approval of the Supervisors.

At seven p.m., all the players took their places in the packed Courthouse. The five-man board, sitting behind the tables normally reserved for the attorneys and clients, faced the restless audience. County attorney Helen Winde sat on one end and the county manager on the other end. Each person had a name placard set up before them, but shared a microphone with the person next to them. Rick for the *Guardian*, several other print reporters, Junior representing the various groups opposed to the project, Wendy looking pretty for the cameras and a Mr. Kim for the Jackpot Company were seated on the front row. They were among the hundreds in the audience waiting for the proceedings to begin, almost all opposed to the project. Unlike the road hearing, the hard core natives of Stark County stayed home for this fight.

For years the political make up of the Board remained the same: all Democrats. But this was the first board to have split representation of both Democrats and Republicans, although the Democrats still had a three two advantage. As usual, the majority could hire and fire at will any County employee which included the county manager, department heads, staff and the county attorney. This was also the first meeting when a woman held the position of the Board's counsel and attended a public hearing as its lawyer. In the past, Howard Winde had a lock on that job, but he ascended to bigger and better things at the State Capital in Richmond. However he had trained his sister well in the art of power, arrogance and control.

After a moment of silence led by the Chairman Tommy Snickle, things were underway. He took up the first matter which was supposed to be routine, the approval of a report concerning an inventory of all buildings in the County's flood plain. Junior knew the person to rise from the back of the crowd to address the Board, Ms. Joan Lark, the client who had given Junior the video. She lugged a cardboard box filled with documents. This time she handed a copy of a two-inch thick report to each Supervisor.

Felcie Smith, a long-time member of the Board who had switched his allegiance to the Republican Party after being beaten in the Democratic Primary a year ago, sat at one end of the table next to Helen Winde. He spoke into the microphone, making a statement and then asking a question, "On page two hundred and nine, it lists the high school in the flood plain. Isn't this facility on Bright Knob Hill?"

Lark fumbled with the document as she flipped through it as a multitude of eyes stared at her. "Sorry, I just got this report yesterday." She repeated, "Yesterday."

"Really?"

Snickle grabbed the mike and growled, "Didn't you read this here thing before comin here?"

"I did the best I could. It's over five hundred pages."

The Chairman continued to badger her. "This is dated 1990. Don't you know this here thing is five years old?"

Junior was proud of Snickle that he could count, that's about the only thing he was qualified to do. That is, if it did not exceed the number of fingers attached to both hands.

"You're right," she admitted.

"Who gave this here thing to you then?"

"The County Manager." She pointed a finger at him and then almost in tears, she took out a tissue.

All eyes turned to the far end of the table to the administrative boss. "I got it two weeks ago."

Felcie asked, "Who did you get it from?"

"From Helen Winde." The manager pointed to the far end of the table.

"Do you mean to tell me that Winde had this report for that long?" Felcie spoke directly into the microphone.

"Yeah."

Helen had to defend herself. "My brother had it for awhile."

Junior turned to Aaron and whispered, "There's a whole lot of finger pointing going on here."

Snickle continued his tirade against the Public Safety Officer, "Why didn't you ask for this here thing from Helen?"

"You don't understand," she cried. "You just don't understand."

Junior knew the reason; her husband was having an affair with the County Attorney. At some point this would be public information but she knew the press, namely Wendy Sniff, would devour this like a pack of vultures over freshly killed meat. Ms. Lark couldn't disclose this relationship very well to the crowd in the Courtroom.

Snickle was relentless. “The next time you come back in these parts, I want you to be prepared.”

“There will not be a next time.” She stared at Helen with piercing eyes for a few seconds. “I quit.” Joan stormed up of the aisle and weaved her way out the through people standing in the rear.

Ms. Lark’s actions and the scattered cheers for her in the crowd didn’t faze the Chairman in the least. “What do you have for us next, Helen?”

“Next is the rezoning request.” She dictated the rules for the main event. “Each side takes a half an hour. The petitioners need to go first. They can reserve time for rebuttal if they choose. Mr. Kim. I’ll keep time.”

The Chinese man rose from the front row aisle seat with an assistant carrying a three foot square map. “This project is in three phases. The first is the building containing the dining hall, gift shop, meeting rooms, administration, gym, swimming pool, and health club. The two other buildings are the residential units on each side.”

Moving closer to his microphone set up on the table, Felcie asked, “How many are in each residential building?”

“Five hundred.”

“That’s a lot.”

“The main building can handle even more.” Kim pointed to the map to make his point. The configuration looked like a ring space station with the center being the first stage and the living areas strung out on the circle. “We’d like to expand on this ridge.”

“I’m thinking of the traffic on Possum Trot Road.” Felcie replied probably not knowing that there would be a cloverleaf interchange that could handle the traffic. Junior knew that both Kim and Helen Winde had knowledge of the access, but they would not disclose this to the public. Junior had mixed feelings about unloading this bombshell now. If he did, then that fact would expose the interchange plan in the open and he would lose the element of surprise in his case for Ms. Good and for the environmentalists. He hadn’t made up his mind how to handle it. He could leak it to the press to influence the jury at some opportune time for both cases. It would be unethical for him directly to do this, but the EEO could do it. He could even manipulate the timing of the State trial to coincide with the Federal case. Mr. Bartlett could easily handle Ms. Good’s case with all of this ammunition while he could represent the environmentalists. If he didn’t reveal the interchange now, then he could argue that the project would clog the already busy road. Junior decided to keep this

knowledge under wraps. Anyway, the project would be approved regardless of what he said.

The other Republican on the board posed a pointed question to Kim. "There are rumors about Helen Winde's involvement in this project. Did she represent you before the planning board at any time?"

"Um. No."

Junior thought a better question would be whether the attorney was connected at all. It was a matter of public record that Helen did the deed for the land when Jackpot purchased the property from the Towe boy. He had the recorded document in his brief case and should have given it to this progressive Republican Supervisor before the meeting.

It was Felcie's turn to grill the petitioner. "Isn't true that you have been cited by the mud police for your roads?"

The Asian looked confused. "Who are the mudie cops?"

There was laughter in the crowd and the Supervisor clarified his leading question. "The Commonwealth soil and erosion people?"

He hemmed and hawed. "Well, we have corrected the problem."

Helen Winde looked at her watch. "Time's up. Mr. Garfield, it's your turn."

The stage now belonged to Junior and he took the microphone in front of the lectern. "If you approve this project, the rural life of this place will be threatened. It'll open the floodgates to haphazard development throughout the county. There's already a large high density community up the road at Egg Gap. We don't need another bigger one close by. These high rise residential buildings will destroy the ridge tops on top of the Bear Lick watershed. This phase one where all the main stuff is, that's right where the hot springs are. Nothing will be left of it. We need county wide planning and a professional planner before we delve into this project." Junior observed a blank stare from the Democrats on the Board.

Junior thought that this was a good time for other people to make his case. "There are several folks who would be adversely affected by this project that would like to address the board."

Helen directed as if she was the judge, "Call your first witness."

"Mr. Towe."

The elderly man hobbled up, his face tanned and wrinkled from a lifetime of farming and smoking. He began in a squeaky voice. "I grew up on this here cove at the head of Bear Lick. Then I fought the Japs across the big pond. Got shot in the leg a lick or two." He took out several metals and held them high in the air. "Served my

country. Came back and worked it all my life. I deeded this here part to Roscoe. That was my boy until this here thing. Don't claim him no more. He's the one that sold it to these Orientals. The people I fought against." Junior knew that he strayed off the subject and that he was not entirely correct; the developers were Chinese, not Japanese, but Junior let him ramble. "I still live on the home place. I'll have to look at these things. The road with all those trucks pass by stirrin up all that dust. All I do is eat dirt. My water ain't the same. They'll destroy the hot springs. I had to give it away to Roscoe. Couldn't afford the taxes. Told him to keep the land in the family."

The man started crying and when he stopped, a pin drop could have been heard in the packed room. He concluded in a high pitch. "My boy betrayed me."

The next witness was the President of the Egg Gap Homeowners Association, a middle-aged woman with too much make-up on her face for Stark County. After giving her name, she said, "We live just above this thing on Possum Trot. We all love our little gated community. My husband died in Fort Lauderdale last year and I wanted to get away from the noise and traffic. I'm sick of Florida people. That's why I moved away. I don't want any more people moving in after I'm here." The spectators cheered on both sides of the aisle. She was not finished. "Another thing, I want you to change the name of the road. I hate telling my friends in my bridge club that I live off of Chicken Creek."

Helen interrupted her. "The County changed it five years ago. You must have looked at an old map. It's now called Possum Trot." Junior cringed and was glad that Helen said, "Ma'am, your side has ten minutes left."

The lady took her seat and Junior saved the best for last. Aaron Froblestein came to the front; however, before he had a chance to speak, Snickle butted in, "Why do you people destroy property?"

The environmentalist looked confused. "What?"

"You busted up the chief's bulldozer."

This time Junior rose and went on the offensive. "Mr. Chairman. I object to this slanderous statement. It's totally irrelevant to the issue before you. You shouldn't have said that." A round of applause erupted in the Courtroom.

Snickle looked for guidance to Ms. Winde who whispered something into his ear. Some one in the audience shouted, "Speak into the mike, Helen. We can't hear you."

She turned to the audience and raised her nose, "I'm talking to the Supervisors. It's none of your goddamn business."

Another yelled from the crowd. “Yes, it is. I’m paying your salary.”

The county attorney could not let anyone have the last word and turned to the audience. “How long have you been in Stark County?”

This was answered by several catcalls and booing directed at Helen. The Chairman had to take control. “Everyone quiet.” Several Sheriff’s deputies came to the front and confronted the crowd. It quieted down, but tension still filled the room. Aaron was then allowed to finish his speech, but no one paid attention. Most people stared at Helen in rage. After he was finished, Snickle asked for a vote on phase one of the project.

Bumpers, a Democrat, spoke for the first time tonight in the meeting. “I make the motion.”

It passed three-two on a strict party line vote. There were shouts of “Listen to the people.” The other Democrat, made the other two motions with the same results. The Chairman quickly declared the meeting adjourned without a vote. People started filing downstairs. Junior lingered upstairs to talk to his supporters.

Politics makes strange bedfellows; the two Republicans supported a progressive environmental position while the Democrats backed big money and development interests. One hippie dippy looking girl said, “I may have to hold my nose and vote for those Republicans this fall.”

The three majority Supervisors, County Manager and Helen retreated to the back room to allow the crowd to disburse from the Courtroom. The two Republican members stayed to answer questions from the press and audience. The remaining audience drifted downstairs and outside of the Courthouse.

As Junior came out of the front door onto the Courthouse landing, he was greeted by a thunderous round of applause from the throng still gathered outside. Despite a personal request from the Sheriff, the crowd had stayed to give a sendoff to the powers responsible for the approval of the project. There was only one way out of the building: down the steps to the center sidewalk running to Main Street. On each side of the walkway, a three-foot high pipe fence ran from the steps to the sidewalk. The fence consisted of four cast iron tubes laid horizontal to one another and looked like a railing on an ocean liner. A similar fence also bordered the sidewalk running down Main Street in both directions and making a square on each side of the Courthouse. In one square, the statue of Robert E. Lee on his horse stood guard. Only well manicured grass was in the other square, which

looked like a ring used for a boxing match. Several street lights illuminated the area.

Half an hour after the end of the meeting, Junior saw the Supervisors walk out in the night air to face the mob which overflowed onto the pavement of Main Street halting traffic. But nobody wanted to travel anywhere else. Helen Winde stayed close to Snickle. No one in attendance at the meeting had left as the Democratic Supervisors had hoped. In fact, more people kept on coming. Word spread throughout the county that Helen and her gang needed to be thwarted in some manner. Soon, people from all parts of the county began to descend on Mulberry.

The crowd covered the entire center walkway and they opened up reluctantly for the departing dignitaries who could only walk single file through the mob.

Joan Lark rushed out from Main Street up to the Courthouse confronting Helen Winde, "You bitch!" Without any advance notice, she shoved the county attorney over the top rail of the fence into the empty square, the one without the statue. Joan tumbled over with her, both landing in an embrace on the soft carpet of grass. The horde swarmed around the enclosure to see a once in a lifetime event. All of the spectators prevented the Sheriff's deputies from entering the ring. The two women rose like a pair of prizefighters stalking each other as they circled each other. Junior knew that Helen was still stunned, so Joan had the edge as well as the sentiment of the crowd.

With a scream, Joan charged towards Helen. The attorney retreated a step but at least three of Joan's sharp fingernails snagged on Helen's long hair. To the utter astonishment of all, a wig came off, revealing a Marine type crew cut on the top of her head. The mob gasped once in unison. Law enforcement even froze in shock.

Someone in the crowd broke the silence and yelled, "She's a man."

The county attorney dived to the grass and tried to cover her fuzzy blond head. Then she crawled on the grass, attempting to reach for the headpiece to put it back on. Joan thwarted this plan by grabbing it and throwing it to the crowd. Several people on the railing stretched and reached for it like baseball fans retrieving Roger Maris' record home run ball at Yankee Stadium. What a souvenir over a fireplace!

This was not enough for Joan Lark. She joined Helen on the ground and directed her sharp claws at the county attorney's face to leave another lasting impression. Winde tried to fight back, but Joan sought revenge for destroying her marriage and for the public

humiliation just hours before. The catfight lasted another five minutes before a pair of deputies vaulted over the fence to make a halfhearted rescue of Helen.

Before the law intervened, Joan got one last lick; she caused a major wardrobe malfunction with her nails. Helen either was all woman or 'he' had a good plastic surgeon. That debate should rage on for a long time. To preserve this memorable moment in Stark County's history, Rick snapped a picture for the *Guardian*.

Chapter 30

“I’m glad you’re finally back.”

Junior’s hair was covered in owl feathers and he left a trail of them into the bedroom. “Sorry I’m late.”

“This place’s spooky at night.” Julie muttered as she lay under the covers, only the top of her head showing.

“I’ll turn in after a shower.”

“That would be good.”

“I’m sure you don’t want to sleep with me smelling like a bird.” He grabbed his pajamas which lay folded on his side of the bed.

She grunted, “Yeah.”

“You okay?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Do you mind if I have a bite to eat?”

“It’s late, Junior.”

“Sorry the Supervisor’s meeting was so long.”

Julie sat up in bed. “What happened?”

“Nothing much.”

“You said there would be fireworks.” She popped an aspirin in her mouth and took a sip from her bottled water.

“I’ll tell you about it in the morning. I’m starved.”

“All right, go ahead and get something.” She rolled back under the quilt and disappeared.

“I’ll take a shower first.”

Julie mumbled as her head remained buried under a pillow, “Make it quick. I gotta get up early. “

“Okay.” Junior undressed and proceeded to the bathroom. Naked with Angus looking on from his crate, he turned the faucet in the flimsy metal stall and only a trickle of water flowed out. “Darn it.”

“What’s the problem?”

“The pipe from the reservoir clogged again.”

“You don’t have time to fix the damn thing tonight.”

“Okay, I’ll do the best I can in here then.” He settled wiping his armpits, feet and other smelly places with a damp washcloth. After cleaning up this way and putting his socks on, Junior walked to the kitchen sink. He fumbled in the dresser beside it. “Julie. I don’t have any clean underpants for tomorrow.”

“You’ll have to use the ones you had on.”

“That’s great.” He put popcorn in the microwave and waited to fill up a small pot from the tap by the drip method. When the machine gun sound stopped in the popcorn bag, he had enough water to boil on

the propane camping stove. Junior poured a packet of powdery hot chocolate into a tin cup, followed by the hot liquid. He plopped into a familiar chair brought over from his home place on Corn Still. This was the first time today he could sit down and relax.

His thoughts drifted back to the events of the day. What would happen to this place that Lightfeather had loved and respected? All around the Reservation things started to reflect change: the gated community on Egg Gap, the Lowe's shopping center south of Mulberry, chain restaurants serving the same salty food that could be found throughout the country. Soon there would be a dramatic transformation that would destroy the bucolic life he knew. The approval of the condominiums was the first step toward irreversible change. The casino and all its gaudy trappings would follow. The eagles might relocate, but many of his friends and relatives could not. There would be no escape from the noise, crime and pollution. Change was inevitable, but it could be done in a way that would not destroy the fabric of Stark County. Junior thought of the proposed folk arts center, the computer assembly plant and even the prison. Living here could still be different from anywhere else in the United States. Between college and law school, Junior had taken the summer off and traveled out West. Santa Fe in northern New Mexico stuck out in his mind. He admired how the town fathers had handled growth. There was minimal suburban sprawl, a vibrant downtown and strict architectural standards for all buildings. Even the fast food chains had to adhere to an earthen adobe color with small corporate logos; no tall golden arches or buckets of Kentucky Fried chicken fit for Paul Bunyan, or giant numbers touting cheap motels, all competing with mountain vistas. He also remembered traveling through the Shenandoah Valley on Interstate 81 on his way to and from law school. The counties there had enough foresight to control growth. He had to find a way to retain the character of the way of life he knew.

"Junior! Come to bed!"

"Be right there in a few minutes," he promised.

"Please. We have a busy day. The closing with Ms. Bartlett."

"That isn't until the afternoon." He sighed, rising from his chair.

"I will not be in until about eleven and I need to do the closing statement over again. Do all the checks for it. I have to pay all the bills and we gotta get paid this week."

"Forgot about that."

"You know the office will be closed next week."

“I know.” After moving back to Corn Still, Junior had planned to prepare for the Federal lawsuit away from the daily grind at the office.

“You need to concentrate on more than that environmental stuff.”

“Okay, but I promised Aaron.” Junior retrieved several pairs of underpants from the hamper.

“We need you to do moneymaking work.”

He smelled all of the clothing and picked the one with the least obnoxious odor. “You’re right, dear.”

“Well, come to bed.”

“Haven’t finished yet.” Junior polished off the last kernel of popcorn.

“I have to leave early tomorrow. For some tests. You know what that means.” Julie pleaded.

His mind turned to his wife and both of their needs for intimacy. Still naked except for the socks on his feet and carrying a pair of underpants, he ditched the clothing in the direction of the bathroom where his dungarees hung on the door knob. They landed on top of Angus’ crate. The dog lifted his head two inches and went back to a sound sleep. The telephone rang, interrupting his path to closeness. Junior recognized the caller as Aaron. “What can I do for you?”

The environmentalist talked rapidly. “We have the results back on the owls.”

Junior had other things on his mind. “So. I just saw you tonight.”

“I stopped at the office and picked up a fax. I need to discuss this problem with you right away.”

“Now?”

“Yes, I need to come over and show them to you now.”

Aaron’s raised voice had a sense of urgency.

Junior liked owls but not enough to postpone some private time with his wife. “Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“There’s evidence of mercury poisoning.”

“Where can it come from?” Junior asked now concerned about the creatures.

“Do you feed them fish?”

“No. We raise some mice at our parents’ house.”

“Then, it’s probably in your water supply.” Aaron paused to catch his breath. “I need to take samples right away.”

“Why?”

“Owls are very sensitive to trace amounts.”

“Like a canary in a mine?”

“Yeah.”

“I found one dead tonight after the meeting.” Junior threw the popcorn bag in the trash. “Seems like they go berserk. Feathers all over the place.”

“Mercury does damage to the nervous system. Humans too. Do you drink from the same water source?”

“Yeah.” About to take the last gulp of hot chocolate, Junior dumped the remainder in the sink. “I get the water from the tap. We have a spring outside. It feeds into a reservoir.”

“I wouldn’t drink from it.”

“My wife has been sick for awhile. Nausea.”

“No, that’s something else. If she acts strange and has spasms, then I would worry.”

“She has always acted a little strange.” Junior grabbed a jug of milk from the refrigerator. “Hugs everyone. Even strangers.” Junior paused. “Julie rarely drinks the water here anyway.”

“You need to be checked out.”

“Now?”

“I don’t think you have ingested enough to make a difference.”

“How would you know?” Junior asked as he poured a glass.

Aaron explained, “I’m a biologist. I even went to vet school awhile. Look, just don’t drink the water. I’ll be over first thing in the morning.”

Junior shared his thoughts about this situation. “I just got an autopsy report on the person who was found dead in the river awhile back. He died of the same thing.”

“Really? Another thing. Tonight after the meeting, the Sheriff stopped my van as I was going out of town back to Riverport.”

It was late, but Junior was curious. That van stood out like a sore thumb and some of the bumper stickers probably infuriated Sheriff Franks. “What for? Speeding?”

“Destruction of property.”

“Really. What specifically for?” Junior asked and then took a drink of milk.

“A dozer.”

It was late, but Junior made the connection and asked, “The Chief’s one on the Reservation?”

“Wait I second, I’ll get the papers.” Aaron paused. “Yeah, it’s a Federal warrant. Can you help?”

“This can wait.”

“You’re right. The court date isn’t until two months.”

“Thanks for calling.” Relieved that Aaron had postponed his visit, but Junior was now concerned not only for his safety, but for that of his wife. He hung up the phone and went to the adjoining room to comfort her.

Julie sat up in bed with two pillows propped up behind her head. “What was that all about?”

“Somebody’s just trying to poison us.”

She gasped. “Junior, I want to move back home right now. Tonight! I’ve had enough of this place.”

“The kitchen renovations aren’t finished yet on Corn Still.” He gazed at her bare chest for the first time today. “It’ll be done this weekend.”

“You sure? You’ll be tied up Sunday with Easter church and the tribal meeting.”

“I have Monday to finish it up. The office is closed.”

“That’s right, but I don’t want to spend another night in this place. I’ll move in tomorrow after work. At least I can move around there. That will please your Paw.”

“This’ll be just for the weekend.” Junior sat on the bed and removed his socks. “Until the Tribal council meets. We have to stay here. Anyway, I can’t move some of the owls until Monday.”

“I’ll be glad when this thing’s over.”

Junior crawled over to embrace her for a few seconds. “I will too. Is tomorrow when you go to the doctor in Riverport?”

“Yes. First thing.”

“I better check out the water first thing tomorrow. Unclog the pipe.”

“Thanks.”

“I would like to take a shower before I go.” She pecked him on his check and lay flat on her back.

“I forgot. Before I go to the office, I need to stop at Lowe’s to pick up a kitchen sink and other stuff for Corn Still.”

“You need to go to the office first and answer the phone. I won’t be there in the morning.”

“Okay. I guess that can wait until tomorrow afternoon.”

“Also, you have to prepare the custody complaint.”

“Okay, boss.” Turning off the light on the nightstand, he then stretched out on his back on the bed, wanting closeness.

They felt a gentle chilly breeze passing through the open window and across their nude bodies. A faint smell of hardwood burned in stoves and fireplaces on the Reservation drifted into the tiny room. Their eyes adjusted to the light of a full moon illuminating the

intimate room. Each lay motionless, listening to the sounds of an early spring evening and Angus snoring until they found each other. The events of the day and their problems seemed to disappear into the far corners of the universe. Their lives were now cemented together with a common bond propelling them to greatness and purpose. It reached a peak for the couple at the same instant. The intense feeling was transitory, like standing together on Everest, but the mountaintop experience would last a lifetime. Both drifted into sleep and bliss.

Two shotgun blasts in the distance interrupted the peace.

Julie sprang up from bed. "What's that?"

"Don't know."

"Is it hunters?"

"No. Not at this time of the night." He rose grabbing the shotgun from under the bed and stood on the front step of Lightfeather's trailer stark naked. He heard screams of little children in the direction of Tsalli's shack!

Chapter 31

At first light, Junior dressed, left his wife in bed and proceeded by foot to Tsalli's place. This neighbor's pie-shaped property lay to the east and north of Lightfeather's place. He thought that the area would be swarming with law enforcement with no place for the Audi. The foreign made vehicle would also attract undue attention among the trash there.

A Sheriff's car claimed the space next to the shack where he had parked his truck on his last visit to fix the owl shed. Two more patrol cars, a Commonwealth lab truck and an animal control vehicle lined the driveway. Smoke poured from a place up in a field a hundred yards behind the shack, with several uniformed officers watching the blaze in a circle; one of the persons was Sheriff Franks. Junior recognized the smell and the burning plants as marijuana. The young female officer who had stopped him on his way to church at the pond stood guard at the front door. She confronted Junior. "You can't come in just yet."

"Why not?" Junior wanted to know what had happened to his neighbor, close in distance, but distant in any type of relationship.

"This is a crime scene."

"I reported this last night." Junior took one of his wife's candy bars from his dungarees pocket. This would be breakfast.

"You still can't come in, Mr. Garfield." The deputy recognized the attorney despite his casual attire. She warmed up some, yet kept the conversation on a professional level. "Someone shot the couple."

Junior thought this was obvious, but remained polite asking, "What about the little children?"

"Apparently they were sleeping in a back room. The child welfare people took them away late last night."

"Who did this?"

"I was going to ask you the same thing." The officer put her hands on her hips in a slightly accusatory way.

He hoped that she would not search him for a variety of reasons. For one thing, he had not taken a shower and still wore yesterday's dirty underwear. He could not rely on Sheriff Franks for help in case she exceeded her authority. Her boss was far away out of earshot. Wanting to appear cooperative, Junior volunteered, "There's a big tribal council meeting this weekend."

The deputy remained uninterested and didn't make any connection. "Did you observe anybody comin up here before the shootin'?"

“No. We live over the hill. I can’t see anything from there.” Junior pointed in the direction of the burial ground. He wanted to say that was a stupid question, but he continued to be civil to the officer. She could make life difficult for him in many different ways.

“Did you hear anything?”

“Just what I reported last night.” Junior remembered about his deceased neighbor’s ring. “Was anything taken in there?”

“It was torn apart.”

Although Junior never went in Tsalli’s house, he thought that the place was a wreck even before the crimes and it would be difficult to tell if anything was stolen. “Well, do you have any theories about who did this?”

“The kids told us there there was a small man with a mask. That’s about all.”

“Are the children okay?”

“Nothing physical, but they kept screaming. We can’t even tell whose kids they are. Do you know their names?”

“Don’t know too much. Hoppi says the couple was not married.” He remembered the woman saying that Tsalli was not her husband. Junior still had a nagging question. “Was anything stolen?”

“Can’t tell if anything is missing.”

“Did the children say anything about it?” Junior realized that he should not have asked this.

The officer was getting suspicious. “Why do you want to know?”

He didn’t have a satisfactory answer, but made up one anyway. “Um. I live over yonder. Don’t want any of my stuff stolen.” In fact, the Garfield couple had nothing worth stealing in the camper except his shotgun. When his truck was operational, Junior kept the weapon with him in the rear window rack while driving in the daylight. It now stayed in the trunk of the Audi with the cash during the day and lay under the bed at night. He even took the weapon into his office through the back door and stuck it under his desk. He figured he might need it for a pushy realtor or an irate client. If someone tried to steal it, they would be hurting. Nothing else could be gleaned from the female officer or by hanging around, so Junior left.

During the short hike back to Lightfeather’s place, Junior’s first impression was that if the Chief’s thugs got Tsalli’s ring, they would not bother him anymore. Chief Laughing Seed would have three votes; he could sell or lease not only his land but that of the other two tribes of Rocking Horse and Tsalli. The more Junior analyzed the situation, he realized that if the Chief’s plans included a total sale of

the Reservation, then he would need four rings; Junior's would be one of them. Tsalli's would not be enough. It would be difficult to tell what his motives were and this Sunday could not come any sooner.

His wife's car was gone from the front of the owl shed, so he assumed she had left for her doctor's appointment. Not having time to eat breakfast, he unclogged the pipe from the reservoir and took a quick shower. He also postponed his chores on Corn Still and barely made it back to his office at ten to greet a client. Since Julie had not returned, he had to answer the phones while in conference with a young kid who "stole" his father's car. Junior surmised that the charges would be dropped after things settled down in the family. In any case, he had to listen to the boy's story and a complete history of the clan with all their problems. Tollman called and asked about the closing later that afternoon. Junior assured the realtor that everything would be ready.

The mail brought one surprise. An envelope addressed from Winde, Winde and Winde contained additional discovery about the road case, aerial pictures of the Indian Reservation and the surrounding area. Some of them were over twenty years old taken from a Cessna. This confirmed Junior's belief that the Jackpot Company had wanted to build a world class casino for many years. They needed a relatively flat area, a legal place to do business and good access to the eastern and southern markets of the United States. In between two of the photos was an eagle feather! Was this put there on purpose or was it a mistake? In any case, the Windes were among the last people to possess this material.

If Junior could prove that the land taken for the interchange was for private purposes, then that could be a defense for Ms. Good's highway case. The Commonwealth's plans would be thwarted and a full scale casino complex would not be built. Moreover, if the casino was stopped by a tribal vote, there would be no need for the interchange and the Possum Trot route. There would be no market for the condominium project. The hot springs land would be worthless to the Asians.

Just as he was going out the front door heading to the Wagon, the telephone rang. In a frantic voice Aaron yelled, "I'm in jail!"

"What for?" Junior asked in a confused way.

"Two murders! I'm innocent! Get me out!"

Stunned, Junior directed. "Don't say anything."

"I won't."

"What's this about?"

"They say I went to the Reservation and killed an Indian couple."

Now Junior made the connection with what had happened at his neighbor's place. "You mean Tsalli?"

"Never heard of him."

Although Junior had never doubted Aaron's innocence, this confirmed that he was telling the truth. "That's good. Look, I need something to eat. I missed breakfast."

"Okay. I guess I can wait."

Junior wanted to appear concerned, yet he was starved. "Where did they arrest you?"

"They barged right in my house last night."

"Didn't we talk on the phone last night?"

"Yeah, but they came right after I hung up."

"Just don't say anything." Junior always had to repeat this warning to his clients in custody.

"Don't worry. But how about bringing something to eat?"

"I'll try."

"They only fed me sausage and gravy biscuits for breakfast. Steak for lunch. Couldn't eat a bite."

Junior chuckled to himself, although his friend's plight was not amusing. He faced the death penalty before a hostile jury pool in Stark County. "I'll try to be there later this afternoon. I don't know if I can get you anything at the Wagon."

"See about a salad and spaghetti. Make sure it's plain sauce."

"I'll try." Junior promised

"Please, no cheese." Aaron begged.

"Okay."

"Thank you."

"Don't worry about it." Junior said and then hung up the phone. Still in a daze, Junior locked the office and started to walk over to the Wagon. All he could do was to put one foot in front of the other. He didn't even notice it had started to drizzle. On his way to the restaurant, he saw one of Rick's teenage boys delivering the latest *Guardian* to the rack in front of the Courthouse. A line of people greeted the paperboy. Junior was curious, so he crossed Main Street and waited. Maybe Rick knew about the breaking news of the double murders and printed a special edition. At least once a year something came up that required such a paper. Junior remembered the flash flood up on the Balds that had buried fifteen people in their mobile homes the summer he graduated from high school.

The last time the county had two killings on the same day was ten years ago at the cabin on Corn Still. And those were not murders, but self defense. Both his Paw and Rick were not charged with

anything, even involuntary manslaughter. No local jury would ever convict the killers of the scum from New York who invaded their peaceful community. Anyway, there was a tremendous outpouring of sympathy for the Queen family and the DA would have been crazy to arraign Rick with anything. They were instant natives and received all the benefits that went along with this favored status. Acceptance that took generations to obtain, Rick and Mary inherited overnight.

Junior knew that Rick had burned the midnight oil to put out a special edition; the headline read: "COUNTY EMPLOYEES FIGHT." Plastered underneath was a picture of both women on the ground, Helen, wigless but fully clothed, and Joan with her fingernails outstretched. The account of the Supervisor's meeting was buried on page five. Apparently Rick was unaware of the double homicides.

After browsing the paper he continued to the Wagon. A sign on the door, 'CLOSED' greeted him and he peered inside. All of the tables and chairs were gone in the darkened building. No indication of any activity. A part of Stark County's history vanished in the blink of an eye. Another bombshell exploded in his face. Things were happening too fast, but his concern returned to Aaron sitting in a lonely jail cell accused of something he did not do.

He was hungry, but didn't have the will to support an impersonal corporation like Burger King, or the time to wait in line at a 'fast food' place. There would be nothing for Aaron anyway. He would go back to his office for a bite to eat and then to the jail. Junior settled on a can of spaghetti and meatballs, carton of milk and a candy bar purchased at Snickle's grocery. Since the spaghetti contained meat and cheese, Aaron would not touch it. Junior picked up a can of tuna, but that would not work either. He decided on a jar of peanut butter, a dusty jar of jam and pita bread that had an expiration date of two weeks earlier. This was the best he could do. Mrs. Snickle put all the groceries in a bag and Junior carried it back to the office to be eaten there. Hopefully Julie would be back from Riverport with better news and she could stay in the office while he spent Friday afternoon in jail. The office would be closed next week after Easter and there was much to do before the long holiday.

It would be a long weekend indeed, and a sense of apprehension set in. What surprises did the DA have against Aaron? Would there be more violence on the Reservation? What would happen at the tribal meeting? Should he go to a doctor and check for poisoning? What was wrong with Julie?

There was much to talk about with Aaron over the murder charges but the court proceedings could take years. He wouldn't know the full story until he received the discovery from the state.

As he unlocked his office ready to have a bite to eat, he found a computer generated note slipped under the door. The bold threatening words read:

I HAVE YOUR WIFE AND WILL TRADE HER FOR
THE RING. IF YOU CONTACT THE POLICE, YOU
WONT SEE HER ALIVE. I WILL CALL YOU
TOMORROW WITH FURTHUR INSTRUCTIONS.
GET THE RING NOW.

Chapter 32

Junior tore the note to shreds and threw it down on the floor. He stormed out his door and ran towards the office of the Winde law firm two blocks away. They were the ones responsible for this in some way. Halfway there, the pouring rain and a collision with a 'NO PARKING' sign returned him to his senses. After he regained his composure and footing, Junior hobbled back to his building. He couldn't prove a thing; maybe this was just a scare tactic. He retrieved the wad off the carpet and scotch taped the paper back together.

Calls to the doctor in Riverport, Mary at her home on Corn Still, the Office of Land Records at the Courthouse, the First Baptist Church of Mulberry, and to Rick at the *Guardian's* temporary office in Riverport were not helpful in locating his wife. At all of these places contacted, Junior did not disclose the threat in the note, just that he needed her at his law practice for a rush job. Perhaps this was a hoax or a practical joke. Only the receptionist at the medical clinic revealed that she had left without incident at ten thirty in the morning. The woman on the phone remembered Julie among the hundred people this morning as the only patient to give her a hug. The doctor's office also told Junior that Julie's destination included the pharmacy to fill a prescription. He called the CVS in Riverport and they reported that medicine was filled but it wasn't picked up. Still dazed, he forgot to ask what was wrong with her, or what drug was needed. He could not think clearly.

There was no answer at the Garfield home place. However, she could be working upstairs doing cleaning for the move and may not have heard the phone. He called Aunt Peggy Ellen to have her look out her trailer for Julie's car up there. She reported no vehicle parked by the house. Now, he was getting more concerned after all these inquiries.

Hesitant to involve the Sheriff just yet, he had to go to the jail. He had promised to visit Aaron in custody, although there was nothing he could do right now for his trusted client. For a less serious charge, he could have gone before Judge Pickins to make a motion to reduce his bond. Even then, it would be difficult because Pickins would be reluctant to give an outsider a break. But there was no chance in a first degree double murder.

At the jail later that afternoon, Junior could not concentrate all through the conference with Aaron. He assured the accused that he would file a discovery request to obtain any evidence that the Commonwealth had in its files and that he would snoop around at

Tsalli's property once things settled down, although none of these held much promise of releasing the environmentalist soon. Aaron moaned that he had been set up by someone responsible for the crimes. Explaining the entire criminal procedure including the appellate process took at least an hour. Aaron was grateful for the company and the snack although it did not strictly adhere to his dietary rules. According to the labels on the jars, the food was not completely organic.

After his meeting at the jail, Junior thought about riding around Riverport to look for Julie, but decided to check back at his office for her. Upon his return to the empty office, he decided there was nothing else to do but wait until tomorrow to report the crime. Perhaps the note was just a bluff and Julie would be returning home from a day of shopping. Maybe someone wanted to follow him to the ring and steal it. For now, it would stay under his turtle shell on Corn Still.

Tollman and his client from California came, surprising Junior. He completely forgot about the real estate closing scheduled this afternoon. Julie had planned to redo the settlement statement reflecting a change in the realtor's commission and to print out the checks. He had to cross out the figure on the old form and pen the change; the checks were handwritten. The sellers and Tollman didn't care, they were happy to receive their money after many months of waiting. Before leaving for home, he ran down to the Courthouse to record the deed and to hunt for Julie throughout the entire building.

Maybe Hoppi knew something. Perhaps Julie was taken to the Reservation against her will by the Chief or his friends. Junior headed there to find out. The sun appeared out of the remnants of the storm cloud and blinded him as he turned west on Bear Lick road. The moisture invigorated Ms. Krohl's blooming flowers on the bank and they reached out to him with their fragrances. But Junior's senses were numb. Down the road a piece, he even didn't notice the paddle boat or a pair of eagles circling the pond. Only his wife was in his mind. Junior could not concentrate and almost hit a dump truck blocking over half the road by the new dam. No other vehicles were at Lightfeather's place except the rusted jeep with fresh weeds starting to capture it, so he did not stop. He wheeled around in the field to return to Hoppi's drive and heard the dogs barking out of control. This reminded him of Angus who had not been out all day so he turned around again and took care of the dog's needs. Like his vehicle, Junior's mind was going around in circles. Within ten minutes, he was back at Hoppi's house and knocked on the door. "It's Junior."

His neighbor yelled from the inside. "Come on in."

"Thanks." Junior entered and saw that Hoppi was about to have dinner. "Sorry to bother you."

"That's okay." Hoppi got up from the table. "I'm glad you didn't use the bell."

"I remembered." Junior said, but forgot why he came here. He only smelled cooked venison complemented with dishes of corn bread, red potatoes, corn, and cabbage scattered around the stove. Nothing was left of either the candy bar in the morning or Mrs Snickle's snack. "I hope you don't have company comin."

"No. I'm all alone. I just got back from an Air Force reunion in New York. I had to listen to a bunch of war stories."

"I bet they didn't feed you right up there." Junior could only feel Hoppi's loneliness and still didn't know why he was here.

"Yeah. Couldn't eat too much up there." At the stove Hoppi piled food on his plate. "That's why I'm putting on a good spread."

Junior felt sorry for the man without any companionship at this feast. His son was probably out causing trouble; it would not surprise him if the boy was even involved with Julie's kidnapping. Sitting down with him, Junior knew the purpose of the visit.

Hoppi walked to a card table and sat on a folding chair. "Have you had supper?"

"Can't eat. Julie's missing, maybe kidnapped."

Hoppi put a forkful of meat down. "What?"

"Have you seen her?"

"No. But I just came back."

"I've looked everywhere for her."

"Did you call the Sheriff?"

"No. But I'm going to do that when I go back to Lightfeather's place. Another thing. Aaron's in jail charged with the murders right here on the Reservation."

"Does it have to do with the Sheriff's car at Tsalli's driveway?"

"Yeah. Tsalli's dead. And his woman over there."

"When did that happen?"

"Last night."

"What about the kids?"

"They're okay. But they may question you about it once they figure out Aaron had nothing to do with it."

"I have a four star general as an alibi."

Junior showed Hoppi the computer note about Julie and explained all that he knew about the killings while Hoppi listened with a high degree of interest to the events of the day.

After five minutes Hoppi volunteered, “My boy told me that a limo came on the Reservation about dinner time today. He was at the tribal building just hangin around.”

“Did he see anything?” Junior asked as he pulled up a folding chair.

“He would not tell me anything more. Anyway those cars have those Mafia-type colored windows.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“The car may be still here. They keep it near the big barn. I’ve seen them go up there before.”

“What barn?”

“The one with the horse painted on it.”

“Would it fit in that barn?”

“They put the dozer in there. That’s the only building here they could put it in.”

“That’s owned by Rocking Horse,” Junior surmised as his stomach growled.

“One of the Chief’s buddies.”

“Maybe Julie’s there. Can we go there to check it out?”

“Well, let’s give Mr. Horse a visit tonight. I’ll help you look around. I know the place pretty good. I played up there as a kid. Did some odd jobs for Horse until he would let his cattle roam around.”

The aroma from the table was too great. “I guess I’ll have a bit to eat.”

Hoppi went to a shelf and handed his guest a plate. “We need to wait until dark. I’ll get some flashlights after supper.”

“There’s a full moon first thing tonight.” Junior remembered the intimate events of last night, but did not share those precious moments with his host.

“I guess we need to wait some until the moon goes down. We can both take a little nap here.”

“I can’t sleep.” Junior looked out the window at the setting sun.

“You don’t look too good. You need to get some rest. It may be a long night.”

“I couldn’t get to sleep.”

Hoppi went to a cabinet above the sink and took out two pills from a medicine bottle. “Take these. In a half an hour, you won’t have any trouble.”

“No.”

“Look, there’s nothing we can do now. We have to wait. Let me finish dinner.”

“I guess you’re right.” Junior took the pills and washed it down with some water. “Thanks. I guess you get lonely out here?”

“Yes. I need to move to a place where I can be with good people. Since Lightfeather got killed, things are not the same. You’re a good neighbor, but you’ll be leaving soon. I can’t stand all the politics around here. And that Winde woman.”

“I don’t think she’ll ever show her face again.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you later. I don’t care about Helen now.” Junior yawned. “I have to get Julie back.” Junior dozed off for a few seconds. “Then try to stop the casino.”

Hoppi looked at the only piece of Indian art in the drab room, a pictorial map of the Reservation. “I’d like to see the land preserved forever just like it is now.”

“Yeah, but you want to move.”

“I still want it preserved.”

“Not with that boat down there.” Junior smiled.

“That would be the first thing to go. If I had my way, the Reservation needs to be deeded to the environmental group. I was impressed with them when we looked for eagle’s nests. The way they helped clean-up. They would see that the land is protected forever.” Hoppi wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. “Let’s rest up some before we go.”

“After that spread, I can’t move.” Junior seemed to relax some. There was nothing to do but to wait. As soon as he lay down on the sofa, he drifted off.

The two men slept a few hours. An alarm woke them up and Hoppi went over to a light switch beside the door flipping it on. A bare bulb next to the doorbell illuminated a portion of the outside darkness. “Well, let’s go.”

Junior followed Hoppi into the abyss. With flashlights, the pair walked down the driveway. His wife, whom he had not seen in over twelve hours, was out in the darkness, perhaps in need of medical attention. No telling who was with her and what they were doing to her. If it came down to a trade between her and Lightfeather’s ring, he would have to go to Corn Still and give up the piece of stone.

When they got to Bear Lick Road, Hoppi broke the silence. “How long do you think they will keep her?”

Junior tried to find some humor in his quandary. “Until they get tired of her hugs.”

Chapter 33

In the foggy night, Hoppi and Junior turned up Rocking Horse's dirt driveway. The beam of Junior's flash light hit a white object on the ground. "A Baby Ruth wrapper."

"Be quiet." Hoppi snapped. "So?"

Junior whispered, "Julie's favorite."

"Really?"

They walked fifty feet up the road and Junior found another wrapper. "Julie's been here."

Hoppi stopped for a minute. "This is like Hansel and Gretel."

"Right."

"Let's kill the lights. The barn's up ahead." The fog began to thin out at the higher elevation.

"Good idea." Junior switched his flashlight off and stuffed it in his jacket pocket.

Although it was dark, they could distinguish the outline of the three story building sinister against a backdrop of stars in the moonless sky. It loomed like a monster ready to devour them.

The pair inched up towards the structure and felt two sliding doors with a padlock strapped in the middle where they joined. Junior yanked the lock. "It won't open."

"Let's try the window in the back." Hoppi whispered.

"Why?"

"I helped build this. It would never close."

Junior quipped, "I'll never hire you then."

They felt their way around the silent barn. In the lead, Hoppi stopped at a pile of lumber and climbed on the boards. "Yep, it's open." He slid through a four by four foot opening to gain access to the building and landed on the top of a workbench. Hoppi spilled a metal can lying on the surface. It tumbled to the concrete floor making a racket that echoed in the immense barn.

From the inside, a cat leaped through the window, missing Junior by inches. He jumped back. "What's going on?"

"It's okay to come in."

Junior regained his composure and crawled in. Since there were no windows or open spaces to the front and two sides, they turned their flashlights on; the light could not be detected from the outside. Only through the back window could they be seen and the chances were nil that anyone would be back there.

Junior looked around. "You spilled some paint."

"Just like the color splattered on the chief's bulldozer."

“Now we know who’s responsible for the damage.”

“Yeah.” Hoppi found a rag and wiped it off his pants.

“They made it look like Aaron did it.”

When the men went to the front of the barn, they made a bigger discovery with their flashlights. A white limo nestled beside the sliding doors glowed in the dark, but there was no sign of Julie or anyone else. The driver’s door barely made a sound as Hoppi opened it. An array of overhead and dashboard lights came on. The Indian slid behind the steering wheel and whispered. “The keys are right here.”

“Let’s take it for a spin.” Junior said half seriously and then went around to the passenger side.

“We’ll have to bust down those doors with the limo.”

Junior thought it would take his cousin Tommy over a year to fix the limo. “Let’s not do that then.”

After an inspection of the front seats, Junior opened the glove compartment and another light came on. Inside, he found a stack of brochures stuffed in the space the size of a dresser drawer. Everything was big in the vehicle.

The slick pamphlets contained a narrative, a map and color pictures. The entire Reservation and its surroundings were changed into a casino complex; its centerpiece, where the tribal building stood, was a palace like castle dwarfing the one at Disney World. The map showed several man-made lakes with a fleet of paddle wheel boats and an airstrip. A water park lay spread out on the eastern bank of the Dutch Curve River on most of Lightfeather’s property. The course of the river was even altered from its present location. In addition to moving mountains, this company could change rivers. Junior thought they had enough clout so they could get the Army Corps of Engineers to do it for them, probably at taxpayer’s expense. A four-lane road replaced the gravel Bear Lick Road and the creek. Just outside the Indian property near the cloverleaf road interchange, an eighteen-hole golf course was carved out of Ms. Good’s family farm. Surrounding that stood a convention center, a shopping mall, restaurants and hotels. Junior could only recognize the condominium complex near Eagle’s Ridge with its access road devouring the hot springs. To join everything together, a railroad circled the area with passenger stations dotted along the way, just like the Magic Kingdom! But Stark County was not like flat central Florida; this main line had several tunnels and twin suspension bridges crossing and re-crossing the Dutch Curve River. There was even a siding which served as a connection with the Richmond and Southern Railroad on the west bank. There would be excursion trains carting thousands of people into the Reservation every

year on top of the millions traveling by the interstate. In small print on the bottom of the brochure, it read ‘This project is a joint venture between Jackpot Company and Kung Fo Inc.’ Junior had the connection in black and white.

After studying the literature and catching his breath, Junior stuffed a brochure in his pants pocket and another one under his belt. He figured if he got killed and someone found the body, then at least the project would be exposed before the trials in Roanoke and for Ms. Good got underway. At least he could get a continuance from Judge Pickens in the later case, his funeral being good cause for His Honor.

The pair then climbed in the back of the limo on a soft couch, the size of a queen bed. It was about the same size as Lightfeather’s bedroom. A counter bar and an entertainment system stood in the mid section of the limo. A cursory search of the vehicle revealed no clues as to Julie’s whereabouts except Junior found another piece of a Baby Ruth candy bar wrapper wedged under the far rear seat. He thought that at least she was kidnapped in style but hoped that nothing sinister happened to her in this playboy setting.

Suddenly the garage door opened and the insides of the car were illuminated by searchlights. Junior and Hoppi ducked below the top of the plush rear seat. The pair could not be detected through the tinted windows, but who knows until when. They heard two men climb in the front seats and the car doors closing with a gentle sound unlike the metallic bang on Junior’s pick-up. Within seconds, the car engine started up. Like the purr of a house cat, the noise was barely detectable. Trapped on the floor, they felt the car backing out of the barn and onto the dirt road. A faint whiff of exhaust entered the rear area. Speechless and defenseless, the two prisoners could do nothing.

The driver said, “If that Indian Chief doesn’t get the ring, he’s a dead redskin.”

“So is that big wheel woman lawyer.” Junior recognized this man as the older Asian, the ringleader in the garage, but the driver was new to him.

“Just like the messenger awhile back,” the driver said as the limo’s tires made a crunching sound as the vehicle hit Bear Creek Road.

“The one you bailed out?” the boss asked.

“Yeah. You make me do all the dirty jobs.”

“Don’t bitch. You get paid well.”

“I can’t complain. But he thought he could get away with the money.”

“Yeah, the cash that Wong had is chicken feed compared to what the casino’ll bring in.” There was a pause. “Slow down, this is a narrow road.”

“But we never got the cash back,” the driver said.

“That’s not important now.”

“Why?”

“We have to get the ring from that hick lawyer, that Junior fellow.” He laughed. “Who would name their boy that?”

“Don’t know.”

“But we gotta get the ring.”

“I don’t understand.” The driver blew the horn for no apparent reason. “We got the ring from that couple I shot.”

Junior peered out the rear window. Another car followed close behind.

“That’s not enough. We need four rings,” the boss said.

“This whole place spooks me.”

“Can’t wait to go back to Vegas and civilization.” Another pause by the elderly man. “Turn left here.”

The car hit pavement and sped up. Junior knew they were on Possum Trot Road heading to town. He was afraid that he would never see his wife alive, or even the light of day for himself. The captives in the back seat bounced as the limo rumbled over the railroad tracks at Mulberry. Junior had to get out soon.

The limo strained as it went up to Pump Gap, and then it rocked from side to side going down the grade. It was not designed to negotiate mountain roads. After half an hour from the barn, the car rolled to a stop.

The engine hummed for ten minutes, but it seemed like hours for Junior. Finally the driver turned the motor off. “I hope we don’t have to wait long.”

“Yeah, the last time we were here, we had to sit in this crummy place for an hour.”

“This time Kung Fo wants us to lug in the weapons.”

“We can put them back there.” The man in the passenger seat glanced back but Junior and Hoppi remained out of sight. A faint sound of an engine outside of the car pierced the silence. When they heard the whine of a jet get louder, the men in the front finally got out. Junior peered out the tinted window. They were at the Riverport airport!

After waiting five minutes, Junior slowly opened the middle door away from the noise and then the pair in the rear slid out onto a concrete surface. In the semi-darkness, they crawled toward the rear

bumper hugging the sides of the vehicle. A floodlight revealed that they were parked by a state-of-the-art private jet, but no one was around outside. Another empty white limo stood parked side by side three feet away.

Junior said, "We could hitch another ride."

"There's no telling where we would end up."

A jeep appeared out of nowhere and they scooted around to the front of the two vehicles. Junior rested his head on the bumper and dozed off for a minute and Hoppi had to nudge him. They had some protection, but they were still exposed on the tarmac. Three people piled out of the jeep and marched single file towards the noisy plane ready to take off.

Julie was in the middle!

Chapter 34

Junior thought that the two men escorting his wife could be overpowered by Hoppi and himself, but changed his mind when three men appeared from out of the plane to greet them. It would not be a fair contest.

He sighed when all of the people were aboard the aircraft. Soon two men filed down the steps to the tarmac and went around to the cargo hold, normally reserved for luggage. They came back carrying a wooden crate the size of an upright vacuum cleaner package. Another pair of yellow thugs doing the same thing followed them. Now all the men approached the limo. Junior and Hoppi ducked under the front bumper. The boxes were loaded on the floor where the pair had hidden on their unexpected ride.

Junior heard one say they were going to breakfast.

Another person he recognized as Kung Fo, approached from another limousine, "You stay with that little broad on the plane."

The first person whined, "Do I have to? I'm starved. I want to get something to eat."

"She's all alone in that plane."

"She's all tied up."

"I want someone with her."

Another Asian, apparently the pilot, volunteered, "I'll be in there. I gotta work up a flight plan for Bogotá anyway."

"Good." Kung Fo directed, "We'll get the other stuff later."

"We'll need another man to get it out of the passenger compartment."

"We have to be careful of that."

"We can't damage it under any circumstances."

"Why's that?"

"It has to provide security at that Indian place."

In the dawn light, the five walked single file in the direction of the terminal building. Junior knew that when the group left, there would be only two people in the aircraft, presumably the pilot and Julie. She was probably tied down to a seat. This would be the last and only chance to rescue her. What the plane contained was of little importance to Junior, who now suggested, "Let's storm the plane."

"With what?" Hoppi asked.

"I have a pocket knife."

"I've got one too, but they probably have guns."

"There's only one of them in there." Junior pointed to the motionless plane and the silhouette of a man in the pilot's seat.

“That’s enough.”

“He’s a small guy.”

“We’re still outgunned.” Hoppi tried to argue against taking any action. “Anyway those boys will be back from breakfast soon.”

“We gotta take control of the plane now!”

“Then what?”

“You were in the Air Force.”

“So?”

“Can you fly?” Junior asked.

“Yes, but I flew a lot bigger plane than this one.”

“Then you should have no problem with this.” Junior assured his friend.

Hoppi hesitated. “Where would we go?”

“Just anywhere besides South America.”

“What about using the radio in the plane to contact the control tower?” Hoppi appeared to be more receptive to doing something other than waiting.

“Probably no one’s in there at this time. Anyway, these Asians don’t want anyone snooping around.” Junior looked in both directions of the airstrip and then to the terminal building, the size of two Mulberry train stations lined up together. The sun was about to come up over the distant foot hills. “This place is deserted.” He paused. “Except for those men having breakfast.” He looked near the gate. “They are all hanging around the other limos.”

Hoppi turned to glance at the opening in the chain link fence. “It looks like an army’s here.”

“The Chinese army!”

“What now?”

“There’s only one way out of here!” Junior pointed to the plane.

“But where will we go?”

“We’ll decide when we get in it.”

“What do you mean ‘we’? I haven’t flown in years.” Hoppi gazed intently at the plane parked twenty feet away. “Okay. Let’s go.” He motioned Junior forward.

“I’ll choke the pilot with my jacket.” Junior said as he looked at Hoppi’s flashlight sticking out of his pocket. “You use that too. Follow me.”

“Good idea.”

Both bent down as they approached the jet with the sunrise at their backs. The man in the pilot’s seat would be blinded by the low sun in his eyes. Junior, in the lead, took off his jacket as he climbed the steps to the aircraft. One step behind, Hoppi held his flashlight in a

tight grip to be used as a club. Within a few feet of the open door of the plane, Hoppi tapped him on the shoulder with it and whispered, "Wait."

Junior turned, "Why?"

"I need to remove the blocks under the wheels." Hoppi disappeared for a minute but Junior felt assured that the former Air Force pilot knew what he was doing and that his heart was in the plan.

The guard was absorbed in a Martial Arts magazine when Junior boarded the plane. Using the jacket like a rope, Junior snuck up behind the man in his front seat, wrapped it around his neck like a noose and applied just enough pressure to make him uncomfortable. Hoppi followed with a non-lethal bang on his head with the flashlight. The new prisoner squirmed some but he soon gave up and raised his hands in defeat. Junior continued to restrain him in a choke hold.

They heard a mumbling sound from the rear of the plane. Hoppi turned around. "Julie."

Junior looked also but still kept a tight reign on the captive. "Get her untied, Hoppi."

With a pocket knife, Hoppi cut the duct tape around her hands. Then he ripped the tape off her mouth.

She yelled, "That hurt!"

"Are you okay?" Junior panted while he maintained a hold on the pilot.

"Yeah. I can't get out of here."

Hoppi looked at her midsection. "The seat belt's still on her."

"It's stuck!" Julie tried to yank it.

Hoppi reached over. "Hold on, I'll get it."

Junior shouted to him, "I'll help her. You take this guy."

The Indian came to the cockpit and took hold of the jacket still around the pilot's neck. Then Junior released his grip and leaped back to aid his wife. "Did they hurt you?"

"Not really."

As Junior unfastened the seatbelt, he asked, "What's going on?"

"Don't know for sure." Julie grabbed her husband for a hug. "But they were going to throw me out."

"Out of the plane in the air?"

"Yeah. They are mad as hornets about the ring."

The couple embraced again, this time in a romantic way but Hoppi interrupted them. "Junior, try to find a weapon. I can't hold this guy forever."

Junior searched the plane and found a plastic tube six feet long laid down the entire length of the aisle of the plane. “I found a rocket launcher.” Besides the Reservation being an entertainment and amusement complex, it would be an armed fort.

“That’s a little overkill,” Julie smirked.

Hoppi looked back. “It’s a real fancy one to shoot down planes. It’s top secret.”

She asked, “How do you know?”

“I worked with one in the Air Force.”

Julie came up front and looked under the pilot seat. “This’ll help.” She retrieved a pistol and handed it to her husband.

“That’s a lot better.” Hoppi loosened his grip on the pilot. “You get out of here. Right now.”

The pilot complied. Hoppi dragged him down the aisle and pushed him in the seat formerly reserved for Julie. As Hoppi restrained him with the seat belt and duct tape, he asked Junior, “What now?”

Junior bent down to peer out pilot’s window. “Here comes company.”

“We better get out of here!” Hoppi shouted.

“Yeah.” Junior observed three thugs coming back from breakfast and walking toward the plane. There was another larger group still congregating around two black limos at the gate a hundred yards away.

“Let me fly this thing.” Hoppi assumed the pilot’s seat with determination. He cranked the starter and the jet engine roared to life.

Chapter 35

The black limo parked by the gate sped toward the plane, followed by another similar gas guzzler. The first vehicle stopped fifty feet in front of the plane and the second behind the plane. The occupants dashed out with M-16 rifles in their hands ready to do battle. The first person on the pavement fired a single shot across the windshield of the plane. Another little man sprayed bullets under the belly near the wheels of the landing gear.

Junior could barely hear the gunfire over the noise of the engine and vibration of the plane, but clearly felt one side of the aircraft drop. He saw other people run up to the jeep to man a machine gun mounted on the back. It was fruitless and dangerous to fly.

Hoppi shouted, "One of the tires is shot."

Junior looked desperate as he slumped in the back seat between Julie and his prisoner. Hoppi had no choice but to ease the throttle back and shut off the engine. The aircraft never moved an inch. When the turbines stopped spinning, everyone piled out of the aircraft onto the tarmac. Despite the fresh air and the morning sun, Julie looked pale and puny. Junior embraced her, but Kung Fo broke them up. Another guard handcuffed Junior and Hoppi. The pair of short-lived liberators was now captive once more.

One of the Asians pointed in the direction of the terminal door. "We need to get out of here." The gunfire had attracted the attention of a security guard in the building who started running to investigate.

Another asked, "What we do, Kung Fo?"

The leader of the nine person commando team responded to them, "Everyone in the limos."

Three people automatically assumed positions inside the cars parked by the planes. Kung Fo stood all alone with Junior, Julie and Hoppi. The Chinese leader went to the nearest limousine and motioned the men out. "Help me with these people."

"What we do?" One man asked.

"Move these people in the cars and watch them."

One of the underlings kicked Hoppi in the shin. "All of you get in. The broad in the front." Another Chinese opened the door of the black limo for them. Hoppi limped in first, but Junior said in a prim and proper British accent, "Thank you, James."

The Asian did not have any sense of humor, in English or any other language, and Junior received the butt of a machine gun in his ribs as he stepped inside. Julie was grabbed by the arm and thrown to the front while Junior was pushed to the rear. The limo's engine revved

up and lunged forward startling all the passengers. Junior thought about overpowering the Chinese next to him, but the opportunity passed quickly once they re-gained their equilibrium. Unfortunately for the prisoners, the limo sped off by the time the security guard reached the plane. The white limo that Junior and Hoppi first took a ride in followed close behind. The jeep lingered for a few seconds to provide cover and then joined in the rear of the procession of the three limousines. To a spectator on the side of the road, it must have looked like a motorcade for a Central American dictator on the run as they sped through the open gate.

On the back seat, Kung Fo grabbed Junior's arm. "Where's the ring?"

Junior wanted some answers. "Why do you want it?"

"You shut up! Because of you, my project has been delayed. I gotta get out of the country for awhile. We'll do it some day." Kung Fo's wrath continued. "I've been planning this for years. Where's the ring?"

"You promise not to hurt Julie?"

"Look, we'll let her go if you give it to us."

"What about me and Hoppi?"

"Give me both of your rings. I'll let all of you go."

"I can't trust you." Junior saw that they were racing out of the perimeter of the airport onto Highway 10 turning south away from both Stark County and home. He had to think of a way to get back to familiar territory so he could escape.

"All we want is the rings."

"You were going to kill her anyway?"

The Asian did not respond or contest the leading question by the attorney. Just outside Riverport, the limo took the entrance ramp to the beginning of Interstate 26 and headed due south as the crow flies or, east according to the signs. Junior thought his destination would be Charleston, South Carolina to catch a freighter to South America or to the bottom of the sea.

During a boring ride for a couple of hours, Junior concocted a plan and proposed, "Look, I'll give you my ring only under my conditions."

Still silence on the part of the tiny man, his wife and Hoppi.

"I'll go with the Chief and get it."

"That's back in that hick place."

"With the Chief only."

"No way." Kung Fo did not sound that sincere.

“I want Julie along.” Junior turned and saw the second limo and third tai gating with the jeep in the rear. “And Hoppi goes along too. Matter of fact, we can have something to eat at his house first. We’re all hungry.”

“I just cooked some venison.” Hoppi knew part of the plan without being told.

Kung Fo asked, “Are you going to have a damn picnic?” Before Junior had time to respond, he continued. “That is crazy.”

“Those are my terms. You won’t get the ring and your project won’t happen.”

The Asian leader warmed up to the proposal, “I want Hoppi’s ring too.”

Hoppi pleaded. “I’ll give it to you. Just let us all go.”

“The Chief’ll be heavily armed, so I want no funny business.”

“The rings for our safety,” Junior said as he looked out the window and saw the welcome center in South Carolina.

“How do I know you’ll not turn us in once I release you?”

Junior needed to give a convincing answer and fast. “I want one hundred thousand dollars a year for the rest of my life. As long as you give it to me, I’ll be quiet. I don’t care about the stupid eagles.” Junior sounded as persuasive as F. Lee Bailey’s final arguments to the jury in the OJ Simpson double murder trial.

“Okay. But where do we go?”

“The Reservation.”

The leader instructed the driver to pull off the road. “I want all this in writing.”

Junior looked surprised as the entire procession ground to a halt. “Okay.”

The bodyguard riding shotgun opened the glove compartment and retrieved a notebook under the stack of brochures. He got out of the car to deliver it to his boss in the backseat.

Junior wrote a simple promissory note and agreement knowing it wasn’t worth the paper it was printed on. He probably could have asked for more money, but at least he didn’t insult them with a lesser amount. Be careful of what you ask for. But if this agreement would satisfy the Asians for a short period of time, that would be all he needed.

The bodyguard returned to the front seat, and soon they were underway. He told the driver to turn around at the next exit. There was another boring ride back home for Junior until they descended down the mountain to Erwin, Tennessee. Julie doubled over in the front seat. “I gotta puke now.”

Sitting next to her, Kung Fo warned, “You better not.”

She gagged. “Can’t help it.” Julie opened the glove compartment and the slick brochures tumbled out. Soon barf covered most of the material and the front seat, including the two people besides her.

The driver yelled. “We gotta stop.”

“You keep on driving,” Kung Fo said but it was not a pleasant experience traveling back to Stark County. Soon they crawled through the familiar sights on Main Street in Mulberry and past the Courthouse.

For a moment, even though being handcuffed, Junior felt like a king through the bustle in town. He made some adjustments to his plan, but would it work? The timing had to be perfect!

Chapter 36

As they left Mulberry on the way to the Reservation, Junior saw Mr. Towe, Ms. Krohl, and Ms. Good out of the tinted glass. These people had placed their trust in him. Their property and way of life were in his hands. Many times in his law practice, he felt helpless just pushing around papers, responding to deadlines, putting up with arrogant judges and meeting the demands of clients that kept changing their minds. Now his hands were literally tied up, but he had an important mission.

The vehicle stopped at the Chief's house on the Reservation. The Chinese directed Julie out of the car, but Junior and Hoppi were guarded by two goons in the vehicle while the leader and Julie left.

After Junior was convinced that the bodyguards could not understand English, he whispered the plan to Hoppi. Within ten minutes, the Chief peered inside the car. "Okay, Junior time to take a trip. Where's the ring?"

"Lightfeather's place." Junior insisted. "Where's Julie?"

"She stays here."

"No deal." Junior said. "She needs her medicine back at Lightfeather's place." In fact Junior had no idea what was wrong with Julie. This was part of his scheme.

The Chief relented, "Okay, she can come." He left for a few minutes and Julie returned to the limo. They all rode the short distance down Bear Lick Road and the other vehicles followed close behind. The parade kicked up a cloud of dust and the entourage got out to a cry of hungry owls.

"Okay, I'll get the ring." Junior breathed easier, but he had no way of communicating the plan to Julie. Junior motioned up the hill towards the burial ground with his face for his hands were still restrained behind him.

"What about Hoppi's ring?" Kung Fo asked.

Hoppi said, "I need to get it."

"Where is it?"

"I'll get it and meet you up there." Also handcuffed, Hoppi suggested.

"This is a trick."

The Chief interrupted. "I'll go up with Junior and Julie. If Hoppi doesn't come with the ring, they'll be history."

Hoppi volunteered. "Look, I'll go up and give you my ring. All I want is to get out of this Reservation and retire in peace."

"Okay, that sounds good." Kung Fo smiled.

The Chief added, "You'll get a fair price."

Junior warned in a lawyerlike voice, "You better get that in writing."

Hoppi turned to his friend. "I'm glad I have my attorney along."

The others were not amused.

Nonetheless, Hoppi continued, "When I go back to the house, we can write up something. I want it mailed to Indian Affairs. We can stop at the tribal office to post it. Then I'll get the ring."

The Chief glanced at the Asians for their approval.

"Have him write it up here." Kung Fo took a piece of paper out of the glove compartment of the limo.

The Chief scribbled something on it and signed it.

Junior looked at it. "That'll work."

Kung Fo said, "I'll go with him to get the ring."

"First you take me to the mailbox." Hoppi insisted. "Then we can go to my place and have that venison. Then I'll get the ring."

Chief Laughing Seed said, "Watch out for him."

Kung Fo looked at the Chief. "You worry about getting Lightfeather's ring."

"All right."

"I think I'll go with my boys and get Hoppi's ring first." Kung Fo told the Chief. "You stay here with these love birds." All of the Asians and Hoppi piled in one limo and created a second cloud of dust up Bear Lick Road. The other vehicles remained parked in front of the owl shed.

Now alone with the Chief and Julie at his side, Junior said, "I'll get the ring for you."

Laughing Seed pointed at the couple. "Let's wait for them to come back."

"I can't wait. Julie needs her medicine now."

"Where is it?"

"Back at Corn Still." Junior saw that Julie looked confused but fortunately she did not say anything.

For the first time, the Chief expressed some concern for his granddaughter, "All right, let's get the ring first and then you can get it."

"Thanks."

"Okay, where's the ring?"

"We need a shovel."

"Get one."

"I can't with these things on my hands."

“Then, where is one?”

“In the shed.” Junior was hoping he could be alone with Julie to tell her what to do.

Instead, the Chief looked at her, “Julie, you get it.”

She complied and when Julie returned with the tool in hand, ferocious barking came from Hoppi’s place, the sounds Junior had never heard before. The Chief didn’t know it, but the Asians were a feast for Hoppi’s dogs. The first stage of the plan had worked.

Junior confronted the Chief. “You’ll never get away with this. Killing Lightfeather, Tsalli and that woman.”

“I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Well, who murdered Lightfeather?”

“Tsalli did it!”

Junior gasped. “Why?”

“He wanted his property.”

“Why’s that?”

“At first, he couldn’t stand the owls and those back-to-earth people comin up here all the time. Then, your friend reported him to the Sheriff about his pot. That did it. Also, Helen Winde encouraged him. She promised a bunch of stuff once the casino project got underway. She waited until Lightfeather was killed, and that morning she went over to his camper and tried to get it. I told her that she would never find it there.”

“The ring?”

“Yeah. Now, where’s Lightfeather’s ring? I know you have it.”

“Why do you think I have it?” Junior continued to dig for information.

“Lightfeather was your best friend.”

“How did you know it wasn’t at the camper?” Junior asked.

“We Indians know that we don’t keep it around where we live.”

“Well then, who killed Tsalli?”

“Those Chinese did that to them. Tsalli couldn’t keep his mouth shut about all of it. They don’t have too much sense either.”

“Why’s that?”

“They tried to blame it on those back to nature freaks.”

“How?”

“Kung Fo had me plant a ski mask in that hippy van in Riverport.”

“That evidence’s not even enough for a probable cause against Aaron.” Junior knew that this was not true, but to a layman to the law, it sounded convincing.

The Chief continued to ramble on, trying to shift the blame. “Those damn Chinese. They forced me to tell the Sheriff I saw that hippy van coming from Tsalli’s place the night of the murders.”

“Why Aaron?”

“All they wanted is to put that Froblestein guy out of commission until the Federal court hearing is over.”

Junior wanted more answers to tie things up. “Did you try to poison me?”

“Tsalli did that to scare you and destroy the birds. He thought that you would leave and give up. I would never do that. I just shot a few arrows at you. I’m not like those slanted eye pigs. I can’t stand them. But they presented me with a good business deal. If you cooperate, I can cut you in on this. There’ll be plenty of money to go around. I’ll talk to them about it when they come back.”

Junior smirked while he listened to the Chief babble. Now he made no sense.

“What’s so funny?”

“I don’t believe you would destroy this place.” Junior gazed at the deceptively peaceful setting. The sun’s golden rays low in the sky lit up the bright green of new leaves up the valley. In another hour the sun would set. He didn’t have much time.

“This’ll be great for Stark County.”

Junior could not persuade him. “And for you.”

“I don’t know why I am talking to you two.”

But Junior knew why. People want to tell their story to anyone who will listen. Junior and Julie had no choice but to take note. But he needed concrete answers that would explain these nagging questions.

“Let’s get moving. You go first. I’ll follow with this.” The Chief brandished his pistol and then glanced at Julie. “I’m going to tie you up too.” Laughing Seed put duct tape around her hands. “Okay, Junior, you lead the way.”

The trio marched up the path to the burial ground with the Chief in the rear. He gripped the weapon in his right hand pointed at the couple and carried the shovel in his left.

Junior quickened his pace once they lost sight of the trailer. Julie kept up, but the Chief lagged behind with his hands full. Junior whispered to his wife one pace behind. “Follow my steps exactly.”

“Why?” Julie looked confused.

“You be quiet and wait up for me,” the Chief barked ten feet down the path.

“Just do it. Exactly.” Junior looked up ahead and then to the northern sky. A family of eagles dominated the vast space above the oak trees.

The couple remained still until the Chief caught up. At the oak tree in the clearing, Junior deviated two feet to the side of the trail and Julie did the same thing, but Laughing Seed followed the path in the center.

The Chief stepped in the disguised rope coil. He triggered the trap! Within a split second his feet went flying in the air. He was upside down with his head three feet from the ground. Not only did he drop the gun and shovel, but three emerald rings fell to the earth from his shirt pocket.

Now, all five rings belonged to the eagles forever!

Kawhaweé smiled down on the land.

Julie ran up to Junior with her hands still restrained and attempted to hug him. “The doctor told me I’m pregnant. And it’s a boy!”