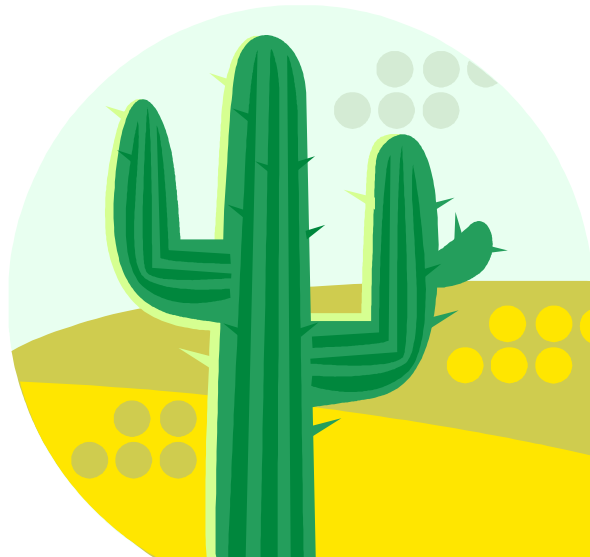


North of Roswell



By

DICK HARVEY

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By *Dick Harvey*

I dedicate this book to

Red

Prologue

On a starlit night in July of 1947, something occurred in the desert between Corona and Roswell New Mexico that came to be known as the Roswell Incident. An object fell from the sky onto the Foster Ranch and was subsequently discovered by the ranch foreman, William "Mac" Brazel. Mac reported his discovery to Sheriff Wilcox who called the near by Army Air Field and reported the incident.

On July 8, The RAAF issued a news release that they had recovered a flying disc that had crashed on a ranch near Roswell New Mexico. Within a matter of hours, it was all over the country that the Air Force had captured a flying saucer. The word was that they also had recovered alien bodies. A few days later The RAAF retracted their statement and The Eighth Air Force in Fort Worth issued a subsequent news release stating that there was no flying disc and that the recovered material was from a top-secret weather balloon. Mac Brazel in turn gave the press a statement that dismissed the weather balloon theory, stating that he had retrieved many weather balloons from the ranch in the past. He was quoted in the Roswell Daily Record as saying "I am sure what I found was not any weather observation balloon"

A flurry of newspaper articles followed from around the country. The Sacramento Bee ran the headline, "Army reveals it has flying disc found on ranch in New Mexico."

"Experts" and locals alike were interviewed at length, each with conflicting opinions. There were also numerous reports of military cover ups with accusations as far reaching as the white house. There are many that believe a space ship was indeed recovered along with the bodies of aliens and taken to a top-secret location known as "Area 57".

In the 1990's the air force issued reports that they claimed accounted for the debris found and for the reports of recovered alien bodies. The reports identified the debris as coming from a top-secret government experiment called Project Mogul, which involved balloons carrying microphones and radio transmitters. The supposed purpose of this equipment was to monitor nuclear tests by the Russians. They claimed that some of the reports of recovered aliens resulted from misidentified military experiments using anthropomorphic dummies. Others were reportedly misidentified human bodies from military accidents.

The first book on the subject "The Roswell Incident" by Charles Berlitz and William L. Moore was published in 1980. Since then there have been articles, books and television specials too numerous to mention. Many of these publications and programs allude to a government cover-up.

During the time leading up to the incident and for a period after, there were numerous reports of lights in the skies over the desert. Some of these sightings appeared to be from credible sources, while others were obvious hokum.

Even among UFO proponents, the Roswell incident stirs controversy. Theories about the

incident range from belief that alien bodies were recovered along with an alien spacecraft to the whole incident being a giant hoax. Some researchers believe that the crash occurred closer to Corona than Roswell, while others think that there wasn't any crash. Even others believe that this was only a single incident among many crashes in the area.

There are almost as many theories about the Roswell incident as there are people that have heard of it. The incident has become a popular subject for novels, movies and television shows. The town of Roswell New Mexico has become a tourist attraction, catering to UFO seekers. In addition to the "believers" that descend on Roswell are the merely curious and the ones who think of it as a joke. Regardless of why they come to this little desert town, they do come, and they come in large numbers. The result being that a sizable contingent of Roswell's commercial livelihood derives from the UFO incident of 1947.

Controversy has raged, died out and rekindled anew for over six decades. As time passes, it seems less and less likely that the debate will ever be resolved. Of course, there are many on both sides that claim that it has already been resolved, and that the evidence is irrefutable.

Regardless of what took place that night in the dessert of New Mexico, the incident remains as a part of our western lore, if not history.

The Curse

Chapter One

That morning when Matt Macklin awoke his life was much the same as always. Matt was a 79-year-old rancher. Although he no longer ranched, he was the epitome of most folk's notion of a cowboy. He was six foot two slim and muscular for his age. He wore cowboy boots, jeans and a western hat that had seen better days. He favored long sleeved cowboy shirts year round, even during the hottest days of summer. Although his body had softened somewhat in his old age and had even developed a slight paunch, he still stood straight and walked with a purpose. Matt's hair, although almost pure white now, was mostly still there. He kept it short on the sides and combed straight back. Most people couldn't have said whether he had hair or not since he was rarely seen without his hat.

Matt's wife, Jeanie, had died ten years ago and even though they had not seen eye to eye through most of their marriage, he still missed her. His ranch was thirty miles north of Roswell New Mexico, it being the nearest town. Since his wife's death he had lived a solitary life save for an ancient lab mix by the name of Toby.

His ranch was adjacent to the fabled Foster ranch known for the UFO incident in 1947. Matt didn't believe in UFO's and felt that his hometown had turned into a cartoon caricature. He was old enough to remember when the incident happened and being a teenager, he was excited about it at the time. The whole thing died out quickly though and no one thought much about it after awhile, except for a few kooks. Then suddenly, he thought it was sometime in the sixties or maybe seventies, it all started up again and this time it just wouldn't die out.

He had never cared for the crowds of tourists and the silly little shops strung up and down the main drag of Roswell peddling their ludicrous trinkets. What he disliked the most though was the UFO seeking tourists creating traffic on the state road that bisected his ranch. When he was a boy, you could have stood by the mailbox for two hours without ever seeing a car. He thanked his lucky stars that you could not see the highway from the house. His great grand father, Colin Macklin, had enough sense, or foresight, to build almost a mile from the highway even though it had been only a trail when he built the ranch house and a small one at that. When he was a child he could occasionally see the dust cloud from passing cars, however, since the road had been paved traffic passed unnoticed.

Matt knew his great grandfather only as a legend imparted to him by his father. To Matt he was larger than life ramrod straight and tougher than barbed wire. He had come to New Mexico from Scotland via Canada. He carved his ranch out of wilderness while fighting off Indians, banditos and cattle rustlers in addition to battling the elements.

Colin had a mail-order bride from Virginia named Maude that he had ordered sight unseen from an ad in a newspaper. She was twenty years his junior and thin to the point of frailty. When Colin saw her step off the stagecoach, his first thought was that she wouldn't live out the year, as it turned out she out lived her husband by thirty years. Their only issue was Matt's grandfather Jacob. Colin died from injuries that were the result of trying to break a mustang at the age of seventy-two. His son Jacob was fifteen years old when Colin died.

Jacob took over the running of the ranch and head of household immediately following the funeral. He ordered his mother much as his father had, and without any sign of resistance. He also showed the ranch hands that he would tolerate no slackening of output because of his youth.

Soon after his father died, Jacob knocked one of the hands unconscious with an axe handle for his reference to working on a ranch ran by women and children. When the man came to Jacob gave him a months pay, thirty dollars, and sent him packing.

Jacob was as tough as his father and tried to temper his son, John, with the same hardness with less than perfect results. Although Matt's father was stern and resolute, his hardness was softened somewhat with a kindness toward man and critter alike. A segment of his make up that had been severely limited in his ancestors. John was an only child, born late in his parents lives. By the time Matt came along his mother and father were his only living relatives. Although Jacob did his best to raise Matt to be as tough as the land he was to inherit, he also taught him kindness and humility.

On a shopping trip to Roswell, when Matt was ten years old, a drunken man in front of a saloon accosted his father. The man had once worked for his father and was angry over some long past opprobrium. The man ranted at John calling him an uppity rich bastard among other things. Without any acknowledgement John simply stepped aside, walked around him, got in his pickup and drove away. On the way home Matt was quiet for a long time. When he finally spoke, it was with the trepidation of a boy not in the habit of questioning his elders.

"What should I have done Son?"

"You should have said something to defend yourself Sir."

"Mathew only a fool would attempt to argue with a drunk."

"Then you should have hit him Father. He insulted you."

Jacob spoke in a stern voice.

"Three things Mathew. First, he was considerably smaller than me, two he was too drunk to defend himself and three, there is no insult in being cussed by a drunk. If you beat another man just because of pride, or just because you can you, become less of a man."

Jacob continued in a softer tone of voice.

"Sont, we are better off than many of the folk in these parts. There are those that are going to dislike you for no other reason than that. Others will respect you for the same reason. They are both wrong. It is how a man lives his life and how he treats his fellow man that deserves either respect or disdain."

"Why does that man hate you so much Sir?"

"He used to work for us and I fired him."

"Was he the one you fired for beating a horse?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why did he beat the horse?"

"The horse was startled and threw him. The worse part for him was that another cowboy saw him get thrown and laughed at him. He was too much of a coward to fight the other man and too small to let it pass, so he took it out on the animal."

Although the thought occurred to neither of them, Matt's great grandfather Colin would have shot the drunkard on the spot and Jacob would have beaten him within an inch of his life. The third generation Macklin, however, just let it pass. Had Matt thought about that he may have thought that people were getting more civilized, where as Colin would have definitely thought they were going soft.

Matt had been thinking about his life growing up on the ranch a lot lately. It was as if he was trying to commit to memory the events of his life before it ended. He thought I sure am getting maudlin in my old age. I had better stop wool gathering and finish getting ready to go. The day is wasting away. It was Monday and Matt always went to Cholla on Monday morning. Cholla was

a small town about sixty miles northwest of Roswell near Corona.

When Jeanie was alive, they drove to Roswell. Jeanie liked the bigger town with its abundance of shopping. Jeanie had lived in town as a girl and had never got over missing it. She didn't like the solitary life of the ranch. When she and Matt married, she had thought the respect of being a rancher's wife would make up for the solitude, but it hadn't. Moreover, as the years passed even the pride and gratification of being married to a large landowner dwindled. She had come to think of the land as a pariah rather than an asset. Matt though, was oblivious to the depth of Jeanie's despair. He was aware only of the fact that she wasn't very happy and would rather live in town. Leaving the ranch was of course out of the question as far as Matt was concerned. He would be buried in this ground like his ancestors before him.

What Matt never knew was that Jeanie had seen him as a stepping-stone to wealth and respect more than as a love interest. Jeanie although not exactly poor was of very modest means and viewed the heir of the Macklin ranch as wealthy. In their small town, the ranch owners were considered the elite and beside Matt was a good-looking boy. She pursued him with success and they were married shortly after graduating from high school. As it turned out it was, as the adage says, "Be careful what you wish for."

The Monday morning timeframe for shopping was Jeanie's concession to Matt because of his dislike for the traffic and crowds. On Monday mornings before the tourists were out, if you ignored the billboards and shop windows you could almost believe that Roswell was a typical small town.

Now Matt went to Cholla, but he still went on Monday. Old habits are hard to break. Although Cholla was a bit, further this town with a population of under 200 suited his taste much better.

Matt fed his dog Toby Let him out in the yard, got in his old pickup truck and started for Cholla.

As He pulled off the dirt ranch road on to the blacktop highway he thought thank God for air conditioning, it must already be eighty-five out. He couldn't help but think about the days when there were very few air-conditioned pickup trucks, even years after air conditioning became common in cars. Now even this old pickup had air, although it took awhile to get the cab cooled down after setting out in the sun. Matt had been considering getting a new truck for years, but somehow never got around to it. They had put air conditioning in the ranch house shortly after his dad died, at Jeanie's insistence. However, now that she was gone Matt went back to opening the house up during the cool desert nights and keeping it closed during the day to keep the heat out as folks had done for generations.

As Matt drove along the desert highway, his musings turned to Etty. Since Jeanie died, he had made a habit of going to Etty's Diner for bacon, eggs and coffee every Monday morning. After breakfast, he would shop for the few provisions he would need for the following week and drive back home. It took up the better part of Monday and got him off the ranch for a while. Matt thought that a weekly trip to town was a frivolous waste of time, but since he no longer ranched he had little enough to occupy his time. In the old days his father would go to town once a month if then. He always took Matt, his mother and the ranch foreman. They would buy provisions for at least a month. In the winter Jacob made sure there was adequate stores to last until the next thaw even if it didn't come until spring.

Etty was around forty and a handsome woman with a very pleasant demeanor. She was five foot five, had blue green eyes and hair that had once been strawberry blond, but was now somewhat faded by the desert sun and starting to show a little gray. Although she had gained a

little extra weight in the last few years, she still had a very nice figure and like most good-looking women was aware that men liked looking at her. Matt enjoyed talking to her on his weekly visits. Of course talking with just about anyone was a respite from his almost solitary existence. Not that Matt minded being alone. When you grew up on a ranch that was fifteen miles from its nearest neighbor you learned to entertain yourself.

Even after he married Jeanie, they had never visited or entertained much. Matt had sometimes wondered why she was so set on moving to town since she didn't seem much interested in making friends. When his mother had been alive, women often stopped at the ranch to visit. This never was the case with Jeanie.

Of course, the fact that Etty was female and easy to look at didn't hurt. She was a widow woman with a son to rear. Her husband had left her very little besides the diner and that heavily mortgaged. Matt was sure that her life wasn't easy but he never heard her complain. He was fond of her and often thought that if he were thirty years younger he might make a stab at getting in her pants. He admitted to himself that at least a part of the reason for going to the diner on Monday was that it was a slow day and Etty had time to visit.

Etty's son, John, although too young for a driver's license, would occasionally drive to Matt's and fish the pond behind his house. He never took more than enough for a meal and always dropped off one cleaned and ready to cook. John was a strapping six foot three and looked every bit the quarterback that he was. He took after his mother with curly red hair and a fair complexion. Matt liked the boy and would usually allow him a beer while they chatted on the front porch. He never felt that Etty needed to know about that.

The sudden tug on the steering wheel jolted him from his reverie and was answered with a muttered complaint. He steered off the road, parked on the hard packed desert clay, got out and walked around to the passenger side. He stood looking at the flat and thinking about what a chore it would be to change it. The sweat was already starting to form under his shirt and at seventy-nine, it was no small feat to heft a fifty-pound tire and align it with the wheel studs.

By the time he had the tire changed his shirt was soaked through. He stepped across the ditch and sat down on a rock to catch his breath before putting the flat in bed of the pickup. He sat looking at the ditch that was normally two feet deep and thinking that there must have been a hell of a gully washer recently. The ditch was nearly filled level with dirt and debris. Just as he was about ready to get up something caught his eye. In the space between his feet was something shiny half buried in the dirt.

He dug it out with his fingers and examined it in the palm of his hand. It was a ball about the size of a nickel. Although it appeared to be made of some sort of metal, it wasn't the color of any metal he'd ever seen. Moreover, although not exactly translucent, it seemed that you could see into the surface. The odd thing was that holding it made him feel good, almost happy, no more like content. He also had the impression that just holding the ball had cooled him somewhat. He pondered this for a short while but decided he had an overactive imagination and it was getting past breakfast time.

He went back to the truck, rolled the flat around to the tailgate, he hoisted it into the bed and continued the drive to Cholla. Matt loved the desert and always enjoyed his Monday ride. Back when he had kept horses, he had gone riding in the desert at least once a week. He no longer had horses and most of his land was now leased to one of the large conglomerate ranches that were taking over the west. He no longer knew who his neighbors were and figured he'd probably be shot if he rode over their property. He was aware that many considered the desert dreary and unattractive. Matt thought there's no accounting for taste. Even this year with it's less than

normal rainfall, Matt saw beauty in this vast dry expanse and on a wet year such as the el Niño in 99, the desert truly bloomed.

Just outside of Cholla, four pronghorn antelope crossed the highway about a thousand feet in front of his pickup, The flash of sun off of their snow white rumps brought a sudden flash of memory, of days hunting with his father. He missed those days, and he missed his father. Truth be told, he missed his father more than he did his wife and missed his mother most of all.

Matt pulled up in front of Cholla's only diner, parked his battered pickup and stepped out into the hot desert air. It was already ninety degrees and small dust devils played across the desert behind the few clustered buildings.

Chapter two

As Matt pushed his way through the doors of the diner, he noticed that his coffee was already on the counter. Etty gave him her familiar smile and said, "I seen you pull up."

He weaved his way through tables that seemed to be scattered about the room without any particular thought to arrangement and sat down at the counter.

Etty spoke with her usual good humor, "You're a little late today Matt. I told Chuck you were here so your breakfast should be up shortly."

"Thanks Etty, I sure can use the coffee. Had to change a flat on the way here. They're sure not making tires as light as they used to."

"I know what you mean. Things do seem to put on weight over the years, kind of like me."

"Etty, you're still just a girl. I bet those young boys that come in here are always pestering you for a date."

Although obviously pleased by the compliment Etty answered, "You've got to stop all that flattery. You're going to get me thinking about jumping your bones."

They bantered back and forth until his breakfast came. Their talk was that of two people well acquainted, but not on an intimate basis. Matt enjoyed his time with Etty. She was an intelligent woman that shared many of the same views as he did. She often asked his advice and Matt got the idea she sort of thought of him as a surrogate father or older brother. It was at times like this he wished was younger. Matt couldn't understand how she had stayed single so long since her husband's death. He figured that half the men in the county were in love with her or at least had the hots for her.

"Here's your breakfast Matt."

She slid the plate across the counter and picked up the coffee pot and another cup. She walked around the counter and sat down beside him. She refreshed his cup and poured one for herself.

"I think I'll sit and have a coffee while you eat. As you can see I'm not exactly overrun with customers anyway."

Mat enjoyed having her next to him. Had he been taken to daydreaming, he may have

convinced himself that they were together. She filled him in on the latest news and town gossip while he finished eating. He had had three cups of coffee and was about to get up when he remembered the doodad in his pocket. He pulled it out and handed it to her.

“What do you make of that Etty? I found it out on the road.”

“Damned if I’ve ever seen anything like it. I wonder if it’s valuable.”

“Doubt it. Anyway, I think I’ll hang on to it for awhile. It’s kind of interesting. I’ve got an old acquaintance at the university up in Albuquerque. I get a chance I might ask him what he thinks of it.”

She rolled the ball in her fingers for a while seeming almost reluctant return it. She was somewhat pensive for a moment and then said, “It seems like holding it makes you feel sorta comfy. That’s a silly notion isn’t it?”

Etties face blushed and she seemed about to say something but the moment passed. She dropped her eyes, almost as if she was embarrassed, and handed matt back the ball.

“I don’t know. I rather got the same feeling. Well Etty, I guess I best be on my way. I’ve got to get that tire fixed. I wouldn’t want to get caught on the road without a spare, not in this heat.”

Matt got up, dropped enough money on the table for his meal plus a generous tip and walked toward the door.

“See you next week Matt and don’t let that boy of mine pester you too much.”

“That’s a good boy Etty. It’s nice having him come around. See you next Monday.”

As Etty turned back to the counter a broad smile played across face, brought on in part by Matt’s comment about her son. John was the light of her life. There simply wasn’t enough adjectives in the English language to describe how much she loved him. Etty’s greatest fear in life was that she would not be able to provide for him or furnish him wiyh a proper springboard for life. In the back of her mind she was aware that if she never did another single thing in his behalf that she had done a multitude more than her mother ever had for her. Still she worried.

Matt pulled up to the pumps at Jake’s Conoco Station, and was pumping gas when Jake walked out to say hi.

Jake was wearing a pair of bib overalls that were so dirty and worn that they had developed a shine. Matt wondered fleetingly if Jake ever washed his clothes or just wore them until he wore them out and then bought new ones. He had a rag hanging through the hammer loop that used to be red. Matt couldn’t imagine anything being cleaner for being wiped with that.

“Hi Jake. I’ve got a tire in the back that needs fixing. Think you could take care of it while I get a few things over at Hazels?”

“Hazels home today. Dropped a can of beans on her toe day fore yesterday. I think it was those Mex refried beans in the jumbo size. Turns out, she broke the dang thing. Doc up in Albuquerque told her to stay off it for a few days. Looks like you’re in for a bit of a drive.”

“That’s okay. It’s nothing that can’t wait till next week. You may as well go ahead and fix that tire. I’ll just have a soda and wait for it. I was just over at Etty’s. She didn’t mention anything to me about Hazel’s toe.”

“That’s odd. Etty keeps everyone in town up on the latest. When I go over for lunch I’ll tell her she’s not keeping up with her job.”

“Now don’t you go getting me in trouble with Etty.” Mat said with a smile. “She’s got the only diner in these parts.”

Jake Laughed and walked to the back of Matt’s truck. He took one look at the tire and allowed as how Matt would be better off just wrapping tape around the rim.

“I know she’s pretty bad Jake but just go ahead and fix her. I intend on getting a new set before winter.”

“Okay Matt, but I’d be afraid to use that even for a spare.”

Jake broke down the tire and took it off the rim. He called Matt over to have a look at it.

“I don’t know what you ran over but that tire is beyond fixin. Look Matt I got a used one back there that’s purty good. I’ll sell it to you for twenty bucks includin the mounting.”

“That’s a deal Jake. Don’t look like I’ve got much choice anyway.”

About half way home, Matt’s eyes began to blur. His first thought was that he was out in the middle of nowhere and having a stroke. He pulled off the road and contemplated his position for a while. Although his vision was getting even worse, he felt fine and he didn’t have any pain or numbness.

He decided that he better keep going and attempt to get home before dark. He didn’t own one of those new fangled cell phones and he reasoned that if he made it home he would at least have a phone. A little ways down the road, he reached up and removed his glasses. He was so shocked he almost ran off the road. He had perfect vision. In fact, he couldn’t remember ever having vision this good. Not even as a child. He pulled off the road again, got out of the truck and just stood there looking around. Everything was crystal clear. The colors were vibrant and he couldn’t believe how sharp the lines were. It was like the difference between early sixties television and the new high definition. He stood beside the road for over a half hour somewhat dumbfounded. He wasn’t sure what was happening to him, but he was almost certain that it had something to do with the little ball in his pocket.

The following morning Matt awoke with an erection, something that hadn’t happened for at least five years. While he was contemplating this situation, and thinking maybe, he should take advantage of it, he had another surprise. He had something in his mouth that felt kind of like gravel only sharper. He reached for his glasses on the nightstand and for a moment was confused that they were not where they he always left them when he went to bed. Then he remembered that he no longer needed glasses. He processed that for a bit and then returned to the problem of having gravel in his mouth. He spit the material into his palm and immediately realized that it was fillings. He

ran his tongue over his teeth but couldn’t detect any holes. He did, however, feel small bumps in the gaps where he had missing teeth.

He almost leaped from the bed, ran to the bathroom and looked at his mouth in the mirror. All of his teeth were completely intact. He knew the fillings in his hand wouldn’t account for all the ones missing. He figured he must have swallowed some during the night. On further examination, he found that all the gaps in his teeth had new teeth emerging.

He kept examining himself in the mirror. He though he looked younger. Then he realized that all of his tiny hairline wrinkles had disappeared. The loose skin around his neck appeared much tighter and his hair was thicker and darker. He went back to the bedroom and got dressed in a cowboy shirt and jeans. He thought as he buckled his belt that he was losing weight. He returned to the bathroom, stepped on the scale and found that he had actually gained a little. He, however felt that he was definitely thinner. He stayed in the bathroom for quite a while; he just couldn’t stop looking at himself in the mirror.

After awhile he kind of shook himself and walked out to the kitchen. Even after ten years, he still thought of it as Jeanie’s kitchen. Old Toby was lying on a rug in front of the sink. Toby was a lab shepherd mix that Jeanie had found out at the end of the ranch road by the mailbox when he was just a pup. She had allowed as how someone had just dumped the poor thing there and that

the coyotes would have eaten him if she hadn't come along. She carried on about that for quite some time, but the upshot was that they had a new dog. Toby was almost thirteen years old now and had cataracts to the point that all he could see was shadows, but he still looked up when Matt came in the kitchen. He got to his feet and walked over to Matt who reached down and scratched behind his ears.

"You want to go outside old boy?"

Toby looked toward the door and Matt started in that direction. It took Toby awhile and Matt slowed down to wait for him. He let him through the door, helped him down off the porch and went back inside to fix breakfast. In the years since Jeanie's death he'd gotten in the habit of making the same meals for himself and Toby

Glancing upward he said, "Jeanie, I know it's not good for him but it makes him happy and he hasn't long to go anyway."

That's when the thought struck him. He reached in his pocket, got the ball and returned to the porch. He called Toby over and knelt down beside him. He rubbed the ball over his head and along his back under the fur. Toby wagged his tail harder than he had for quite some time. Matt couldn't help but think about how good it made him feel to hold the ball. Matt patted Toby on the head, went back in and finished breakfast. When breakfast was ready, he went out and helped Toby up the steps.

After breakfast, He cleaned up the dishes and went out to take care of his few chores. He no longer kept animals except for a few chickens, for the eggs. He had sold the last of his horses the year before. He didn't ride anymore and he couldn't stand the thought of them starving to death if he was to die. He worried about Toby also, he thought if I was to die out here, it could be weeks before anyone knew about it. It seemed that maybe now he wouldn't have that worry. It was starting to look like he might have a few years left in him after all.

He did keep a small garden, mostly to putter. He had given up on canning the year after Jeanie died. He still had the old Farmall he used for turning the garden and he still kept it in good running condition. It, along with it's attachments, and an ancient jeep was about all the rolling stock that he kept when he auctioned off the ranch equipment. He went to the garden and walked through the rows picking any weeds that he noticed. He figured it would be at least a month before anything was ready for harvest. He walked over to the spigot and turned on the dribbler system. He looked at his watch and decided to let it run for a few hours. He did that every other day for an hour or more depending on how hot it had been. The thought crossed his mind that everything was much easier now. He didn't tire as easy and felt more enthusiastic about doing chores that had began to wear on him over the last few years.

He had about given up on Jeanie's flowerbeds, but the next day he spent a couple of hours weeding, cultivating and pruning them. He watered the beds and stood for sometime looking them over. He thought a couple more weeks of attention and they would look as good as ever.

For the rest of the week it went like this. He continued to get stronger and more youthful. He had all of his teeth now including his wisdoms that he'd had pulled in the Army when he was twenty-two. They were white and straight, even more so than when he was young. His jaw line was firm and straight. His hair was the dark shiny brown of his youth. Not only had his short-term memory improved, but he seemed able to recall everything he had ever read, seen or heard. He took to watching Jeopardy and some of the other game shows on television and it was getting to be rare that he didn't know the answers.

By the end of the week, he felt that he was about the equivalent of thirty and still getting younger. His energy level may have been this high in his youth but it was all new to him now.

That morning he had run out to the mailbox and back just for fun.

On Tuesday, the day after he had rubbed Toby with the ball, Toby had put his front paws up on the bed in the morning and looked at him with clear eyes. Moreover, although he could hardly walk a week ago, Toby had run to the mailbox and back with him that morning.

When Monday came, He decided to go to Roswell for supplies. There was no way he could go to Cholla. He figured no one in Roswell would recognize him especially now. He had been trying for the last few days to figure out what to do. It was obvious to him that he couldn't stay where he was. Since he quit working the ranch his only income was from the lease and social security. The income from leasing provided a small income and paid the taxes. Along with social security it was enough to live on since his needs at this time were minor. He had figured there was plenty enough to last the rest of his life but things had suddenly changed. He did have investments but wasn't sure how much of that he could liquidate over the phone or internet. He was sure he could sell his stocks and mutual funds since he had done business with his broker over the phone for years, but his other holdings were likely lost for practical purposes.

He wasn't destitute by any means and well off by most folks meaning of the words, but it was obvious that he was going to have to get a job before long. The problem was that the only thing he knew how to do was cowboy and there wasn't much call for cowboys anymore. He obviously couldn't continue drawing social security, in fact, he didn't know how he would explain who he was and why he was living on the Macklin ranch if any one he knew showed up at the door. Unless, that is he wanted to spend the rest of his life in the booby hatch.

He gave some thought to turning the ball over to people at the university and letting them figure it out. The trouble was with something of this potential, he didn't trust anyone to do the right thing and on top of that, he didn't want to part with it.

On the way back from Roswell, he looked over at the passenger seat and said, "Toby, what if we get stopped? I can't show them my driver's license I'll go straight to jail and when they can't find me I'll likely be brought up on murder charges. There's no possible way for me to prove who I am. I've never been finger printed nor had my DNA taken. I'm in deep trouble."

Toby cocked his head and listened, but he had no answer. Matt spent the rest of the day pondering what to do about his situation. He thought about the ranch and knew he was about to lose something very dear. Something that had been in his family for so long that it was almost like the air he breathed. As hard as he tried, he couldn't think of a way to keep it or even sell it. That again raised the question of how he was going to make a living. He had been on the ranch his entire life and had never held a job for pay.

Matt stopped ranching about five years after Jeanie died. He had been aware for some time that that his mind was not what it had once been. Although his mental acuity was diminished, he was aware that the ranch was going down hill. Then one sunny afternoon while Matt relaxed on the front porch with an iced tea he had a visitor.

He had watched the dust trail of the car coming up the ranch road with curiosity and watched as the car pulled into the yard and stopped. When the dust had settled his friend John Thomas with whom he had banked for years stepped from the car. Matt walked out to greet him, made small talk as they walked backed to the porch and then said; "have a seat. I'll get you a cold tea."

As John sat drinking his tea, Matt spoke.

"You look like a man with something on his mind John. What's up?"

"Matt, I don't know any easy way to say this so I'll just spit it out. Tony's been robbing you blind."

Matt felt as if he had been sucker punched. Tony Barnes was Matt's ranch manager. He had

started on the ranch as a cowboy, had been top hand, foreman and had been the ranch manager for the past two years.

“I’ve been suspicious for some time, but I didn’t want to say anything until I was sure.”

“And now you’re sure?”

“Yes I am. I’ve been auditing your accounts for the last few months and your income is nowhere near what it should be for the cattle sales you’ve had. Moreover, your bank withdrawals are much larger than normal for ranch expenses, and I’m seeing paychecks cashed for people I’ve never heard of.”

Shaken, Matt asked John if there could be some explanation other than what he had concluded, but knew the answer even before it came. He was at an utter loss for words. He felt almost like he had gotten word that a close friend or family member had died. He sat for a long time mulling it over in his mind and finally confessed to his friend his misgiving about his abilities.

“What would you like me to do Matt? I will do anything I can to help.”

“Well I guess the first order of business is to fire Tony.”

“Fire him hell! You need to have him arrested and see how much of your money can be retrieved.”

“No John, I’m an old man, I guess I won’t miss the money all that much.”

Matt was stunned as much by his inability to recognize what was happening as he was by his manager’s duplicity. He fired Tony that day. A week later he had his foreman round up the cattle and sell them. He then contacted his friend John and had him arrange for an auction to sell the ranch equipment. After the auction, he paid his foreman two years pay, the rest of his hands a years pay and he was out of the ranching business.

The irony was that although his mind was now sharper than it had ever been, and he could easily go back to ranching, now there was no way for him to keep the ranch.

On Tuesday morning, while he was making breakfast, he heard steps on the porch and froze.

“It’s me, Etty. You didn’t come for breakfast yesterday.”

He thought she knows I’m here my pickups in the yard and the doors standing wide open. Besides Toby was standing at the screen looking up at her wagging his tail, he had to answer the door.

“Just a minute.”

He turned the heat off under the eggs, walked to the front door, and got another shock. Etty’s clothes hung loose on her and she looked about twenty years old. He had always thought of Etty as good looking but now she was beautiful.

“You to?”

“Yeah. Me too.”

Etty looked Mat up and down and then said, “My God, look at you. You’re really handsome.”

“Thank you.”

He would have returned the compliment, but he was too discombobulated to think straight.

“What are we going to do Matt?”

He pushed the screen door open and said, “Come in, I’m in such a state I’ve forgotten my manners. I was just fixing breakfast. Would you like some?”

“No thanks I’ve already ate. I was up early trying to figure out what to do. Matt We have got to explain to people about the ball. I thought we should do it together.”

“Etty we can’t let anyone find out about this. Does anyone else know?”

“No, soon as people started noticing the change in me I faked the flu and stayed home. It took me awhile to figure out what was going on but then I remembered that gismo of yours and figured that had to be it. Yesterday morning I drove out to the edge of town and waited for you to come by. I guess it didn’t occur to me that you would be in the same shape as me. Matt I’m beside myself. I sure can’t keep this secret very long and if I tell anyone what happened they’d put me in the funny farm for sure. I thought if we told people together and showed them the ball we could make it okay.”

“Etty we can’t tell anyone about this. If this gets out our life will be over.”

“But Matt, They are going to find out whether we tell them or not, besides we could cash in on this thing. Matt, before I’ve had a meager existence at best, but at least it was an existence. Now I have nothing unless we capitalize on this. With what it can do, we’d never have to work another day of our lives.

This was a side he’d never seen of Etty, it struck him that she might never have been happy in Cholla and was now thinking she had found a way out. He realized now that he had been blind to her situation. Somehow he had to make her understand the danger in this situation in which they now found themselves. Etty sounded dejected, “Matt, what can we do if we keep it a secret? You might be able to get by but I have no resources and I have a son that looks about four years younger than me.”

“Etty, I’ve spent the last week thinking this over from every angle. If this gets out, I’m sure I won’t live out the year. There are people that would kill me for ten bucks. What do you think they would do to get their hands on this thing? At the very least, I’d have a crowd of screaming people from my front porch all the way to the highway wanting to be healed or made young again. I couldn’t get to my truck without being trampled to death.”

“But the authorities could protect us. God Matt, this isn’t the “Wild West”.”

“No Etty, it’s not the “Wild West”, but there is not enough police in the world to protect us if this gets out. The only way we could be protected is if they locked us up. Even then, I’m not sure. Beside all that, I don’t trust the cops much more than I do the crooks. We’ve got to figure out a way to keep this thing secret. Before you showed up, my plan was to sell what stocks I have, clean out my bank accounts and just drive away. I could empty my bank accounts with my ATM card in less than three months and I think I can sell my stocks over the phone. The hardest part would be figuring out how to get a new identity. But, that was before you showed up.”

“You could just walk away from your ranch?”

“Actually it’s your ranch. I put it in trust for you two years ago.”

Seeing the surprised look on her face, Matt said, “Don’t start in. I have no kin and for the last six years, you’ve been the closest thing I have to a friend. Besides I thought John would take care of Toby.”

Etty had an incredulous look on her face and when she spoke, her voice had a slight tremble.

“I don’t know what to say Matt.”

“Then say nothing. That’s usually best anyway. However, none of that is relevant anymore. Right now, we have to figure a way out of the mess we’re in. Maybe it’s not that bad for you. Your not that old, you could lay low for awhile and then tell everyone that you went to a spa got in shape, maybe had a face lift.”

“Yeah, right. They’ll buy that.”

“Do you have any money that you can get your hands on?”

Etty looked startled, “Money? Not a dime, we live week to week and if we have a slack week I can’t even pay the bills. I’ve been thinking of turning the place into a coffee shop. It seems

most days I throw out more food than I sell. I guess it doesn't matter now, I can't go back there anyway."

"Etty, What are we going to do about John, does he know?"

"No. Luckily he and his buddy Sean went over to The Valley of Fire for a week of camping."

"I don't know Sean."

"Sean Proudfoot, He's an Indian Boy that John's friends with, they're on the football team at school."

"Etty, as much as I hate letting anyone more in on this, I guess John has to be told. I just can't see anyway around that but you know how hard it is for a teenager to keep a secret.

They sat at the kitchen table and talked for some time. Finally Matt said, "Etty, here's what I propose. You go back home and wait for John. When he gets back, you tell him what's happened and bring him back here. Don't say anything to anyone, just take what you want, close up the house and drive away."

"Trailer."

"What?"

"Trailer, we live in a trailer."

"Same thing."

"What if someone comes looking for me or, for that matter, just shows up here?"

Matt took so long to answer that Etty was starting to think he hadn't heard her, but then he said, "Some people in Cholla know where I live but I can't imagine them thinking you would come here. When you get back here put your car in the barn and if anyone comes while I'm not here just don't answer the door. In the meantime, I'm going to call my broker, have him sell everything and deposit the cash in my checking account. Today I'll start drawing six hundred dollars a day with my ATM card. That's the most I can get a day from the ATM and I sure can't walk into the bank and make a withdrawal. Within a week, we will have some working capital and in the meantime, we can try to figure out what we are going to do.

"Matt I'm just beside myself. You can't possibly understand this, but I thought I had finally made a life for myself and now I don't know what I'm going to do."

Matt could see how agitated she was and thought for some time before answering.

"I don't want you fretting yourself Etty. I don't quite know how I'm going to handle this yet, but you can rest assured that I won't abandon you. I feel responsible for what's happened to you and I'm going to do my best to make it right. No matter what answer I come up with it will include you and John being taken care of."

A week after Matt started withdrawing from his checking account, the bank called. They wanted to know if he was Mathew Macklin. When he said he was, they asked for his social security number and his checking account number. The upshot was that they were worried about the unusual withdrawals. He said, "I'm not giving you that information over the phone. How do I know you're who you say you are?"

He was certain that the person he was talking with was with his bank, but he thought it best to answer as he normally would. He finally spoke with his friend John, the president of the bank. He recognized Matt's voice and Matt convinced him that there was nothing wrong.

Early the following Friday morning, Matt gave Etty most of the money he'd taken out of his account and packed a suitcase. Matt and Etty had discussed him going until late the night before. She was against it but Matt saw no way around it.

He was saying goodbye on the front porch when she suddenly threw her arms around his neck, pressed her body against his and kissed him. Her tongue darted between his lips and

fluttered over the tip of his tongue. He was immediately hard but she turned and ran in the house closing the door behind her.

He stood there stunned for a minute then said, “Damn”, turned and walked out to his truck. Thinking about it as he drove along the deserted highway, he thought that it was the sexiest kiss he had ever had. He would be the first to admit that he didn’t have a lot of experience when it came to kisses but he figured that would be a damn fine kiss in anybody’s book.

Chapter Three

After Matt left, Etty was beside herself. She paced the floor first thinking about the kiss and wondering if she should have. Would he think she was easy? From their talks at the diner, she thought of Matt as a very moral person. She was aware that he grew up in a different era and under very different circumstances than she did. She thought that maybe he would think of her as brazen for being so forward. She was starting to fall for Matt and wasn’t sure how he felt, but she didn’t want to do anything to scare him off.

Then she started thinking about her situation, and what would happen to her if she didn’t get together with Matt. She didn’t have much before but now she had nothing. She would have had this ranch in a few years, but that wasn’t going to happen. What kind of luck is that, losing the best thing you ever had before you even knew you had it?

She knew that she couldn’t go back to the diner. Her cook would probably keep it going for a while but he was a drifter and when she didn’t come back soon he’d most likely just empty the cash register and move on, or maybe not. He seemed to be honest enough. He might even try to find out what happened to her and maybe keep the diner going for a while, but in the end, he would walk away. The bank would take back the diner and that would be the end of it. People would talk and the County Sheriff would nose around for awhile but not too long.

She kept racking her brain about how she could convince Matt that they could use this to their advantage. She didn’t understand his fear of people finding out but he was so adamant that he imbued in her a small share of his trepidation. Etty’s main fear though, was of what the future held for herself and her child. Etty knew all too well the rigors of life without assets and she had just lost her only one.

She’d liked Matt ever since he’d started coming in the diner around nine years ago. She was hoping that he wouldn’t let her down. She always thought that he was the nicest guy she had ever met. Of course that was when he was an old man and now he was a young man. Etty had not had the best of luck with any men in her life young or old,

still, she had a good feeling about Matt. She decided she was glad she had kissed him. Men sometimes needed a little push to know what they wanted in the first place.

Right now however, the main problem was her son. She didn't know how he was going to take this, but she couldn't imagine that it would be good. Matt had been gone for two hours. She figured John would be home sometime that afternoon. She planned to get to the trailer after dark, just in case Sean stuck around for the afternoon.

From the ranch to her trailer was about an hour and a half so she started out a little before dusk. Although Etty was a little apprehensive of driving in the desert at night, she wanted to be sure it was dark when she drove through Cholla. She used to love driving in the desert at night and on a clear moonlit night like this, would often drive with her lights off. Driving in the desert night, with its multitude of stars and a full moon was similar to driving during the day with an overcast sky only prettier. The moon seemed to bathe the entire landscape with a shimmering silver patina that collected on the roadway and desert plants. The stark black shadows of the arroyos and plant life created a contrasting scene that reminded her of old cowboy movies. The ones from the forties and fifties that were filmed in full sunlight, but with filters that created the allusion of night. She far preferred that scene to the tunnel created by headlights. Driving with headlights left nothing visible beyond the pool of artificial light racing along the black strip of roadway.

Her uneasiness of driving at night came from an incident about eight years ago. She had been on her way to the diner in the early morning dark and come upon an accident. A pickup had hit a wild mustang, apparently at very high speed. The truck had continued on its path until it came to rest in a ditch and for lack of pressure on the gas pedal could proceed no further. The driver had gone partially through the windshield and had severed his left carotid artery. He was lying halfway over the steering wheel with his head on the hood. Under his head was gooey black mass of blood that had ran down the fender and pooled on the running board. There was already a black cloud of flies buzzing around his head and settling on the blood.

The horse was lying in the middle of the road with its head at an unnatural angle and had collected its own cloud of flies. Even though it appeared that, the accident had taken place a good while earlier, the engine of the truck was still running. The engine-cooling fan was clattering against the radiator and a plume of steam was rising from the hood. There was also an unidentified screeching sound coming from under the hood. With the cacophony of noise being emitted from the engine compartment, Etty was afraid of a gasoline fire.

She went to turn off the ignition through the broken driver's window but couldn't bring herself to lean across the body. She went to the other side of the truck and tried to open the door but it was jammed. She picked shards of glass from around the window and leaned in through the opening. Reaching the ignition switch required her wriggling almost halfway into the truck. After shutting off the ignition, she thought about moving the horse out of the road but knew she couldn't do it. She opened her trunk, found a flare, lit it and left it in the middle of the road. This being before cell phones were common, she'd had to drive the rest of the way to Cholla to report it. Even had cell phones been common Etty couldn't have afforded one on her income. It really didn't matter since the man was dead anyway, but it still shook her up quite a bit. She was very thankful that she hadn't known him.

Ever since that morning, driving in the dark bothered her. Consequently, she tended to drive slower at night and always with her lights on. She reasoned that with her lights on at least the critters could see her coming.

She was brought back to the present by the faint lights of Cholla twinkling in the distance.

She also noticed the gas gauge and realized she needed gas. It then came to her that she couldn't stop at Jake's and his was the only station for sixty miles. Of course, there was gas at the ranch, but being unused to having gas at home she had forgotten to fill up. The only thing she could do now was hope she could make it to the trailer and back to Jake's. The other problem was that she didn't have much time. Jake, like most businesses in Cholla closed early.

She was approaching her trailer when she saw the pickup sitting in the drive. She kept on driving for about a quarter mile, made a U-turn, pulled off the road and killed the lights. It was Sean's ragged pickup in the drive and if he was still there, it could only mean one thing, he intended to spend the night.

Etty sat on the shoulder of the road contemplating this unforeseen development and trying to figure out how to handle it. She couldn't just spend the night in the car. To start with, the first car that came along would surely stop and offer help. Secondly, there was a good chance that anyone passing by would recognize her car. She thought she could go back to town and spend the night in the diner, but she was afraid that she might not have enough gas to get to town, back here and back to town again. Moreover, there was no telling how long Sean would stick around tomorrow.

Etty finally decided on the direct approach. Jake's would close in less than an hour and then she would be stuck for the night. She started the car, drove up the road to the trailer and pulled in. She blew the horn until John came to the door and called him out to the car. She kept her head averted while he approached and when he was close, she told him to get in the car.

"What's going on?"

"John, just get in the car. Now!"

John barely had the door closed when Etty looked back over her shoulder and started backing out of the drive.

"Mom Sean's in the house!"

"I know."

As she turned the wheel and started toward Cholla, she turned her head forward and for the first time John got a look at her face.

"What the hell's going on here and who the hell are you? Where is my mom?"

"John watch your language! I am your mother. Calm down and I'll explain."

"You're not my mom. What do you think I'm stupid?"

"John just settle down and take a close look at me."

John looked at his mother and thought, she looks kind of like mom, she sure sounds like mom, but she has to be at least twenty years younger than my mom. She's driving our car and she seems to be wearing mom's clothes. He didn't believe for a minute that this woman was his mother but there was something very familiar about her. He couldn't fathom what was happening but he was sure this woman was nuts. He was starting to worry that she may have done something to his mom. On the other hand, he didn't feel in any danger at the moment. He thought it best to just stay calm and try to figure out what she was up to.

"John, think of something no one but your mother would know and ask me."

He pondered for a moment and then said, "I have a birthmark. Where is it?"

"It's a strawberry birthmark in the shape of a horse's head on your butt. The left cheek, to be exact."

"OK, but there are probably other people that know that."

"John, when you were twelve years old you were in love with Annie Dunn. When you were seven you fell into a cactus and I spent an hour pulling stickers out of you. When you were six I backed the car over your puppy. His name was Trailer. When your father died, you were eight

years old. You wouldn't speak to me for a week."

"Lots of people probably know those things."

"OK, you asked for it! When you were fourteen I walked in you're bedroom and caught you masturbating."

"Mom!"

"See. And besides that you have girly magazines under your mattress"

Although John wasn't completely convinced, that last one about him masturbating really got to him. He sure never told anyone and he sure would hope that his mother wouldn't share that kind of information with anyone. He had thought that even his mother didn't know about the magazines. He figured his buddy Sean was the only one with that information. God, he wanted to sink through the floor.

By now, they were approaching Cholla. Etty pulled off the road and told John to take the wheel. She gave him a twenty and told him to stop at Jake's for gas. John got out of the car and walked around to the driver's side. Etty just slid across to the passenger side. When he pulled up to the pumps she slouched down and pulled her hat down over her face. John pumped ten bucks worth and walked in to pay.

"Evening John, I see your Mom's letting you drive tonight."

"She's not feeling very good. I'm gonna run her over to Albuquerque to see a doctor in the morning so I figured I best get gas tonight."

"Peoples been wondering why she hasn't been at the diner. Sorry to hear she's sick, everybody sure misses her. When you spouse she'll be back?"

"It's hard to say right now Jake. It may be a while."

"Well, it's a good thing you got here when you did. I was just about to lock up."

John went to a rack and got a bag of chips and a candy bar. He had missed supper and hunger was setting in. John paid for the gas and food. When he got his change, he thanked Jake and said, "Gotta run Jake."

"Tell your mom we been thinking of her and hope she gets well real soon."

When John got back in the car he said, "Gees, I wish that man would take a bath."

"Now John, Jake's a good man. He just doesn't know any better."

"I'm starting to think you really are my mother."

By the time they got back to the ranch, he was convinced. If he needed any further proof, he got it in the person of Toby bounding out to meet their car. John's mind was racing a hundred miles an hour. John couldn't wait to talk to Matt about this thing. His mom interrupted his thoughts.

"You've got to call the trailer and explain to Sean why we took off and left him there that way. Tell him I was really sick and had to get to a doctor immediately. Tell him we won't be home for awhile and just lock up when he leaves in the morning."

After the call John sat thinking about what his mother told him about Matt's fear of people willing to do anything to get their hands on this thing, but there had to be a way around that, there just had to be. He and his mother talked about the pitfalls and the wonders of this long into the night without resolving anything. He hoped that Matt would contact them soon or better yet, come back. The one thing they had resolved was to wait two days and then return to the trailer for the things that they didn't want to leave behind. Tomorrow they would go in to Roswell for supplies and clothes for Etty.

Two weeks later John was down at the ranch pond fishing. Mostly he was just killing time until Matt got back. A thought occurred to him and he laid down his pole and went looking for a frog. When he found one, he put it in his tackle box, picked up his pole and headed back to the

house. There he cut the frog's hind leg off at the knee. He took the frog in to his Mom and with a grin on his face asked her to hold it.

Noting his grin, Etty cocked her head and said, "Why."

"It's an experiment."

She took the frog and commented that it was missing a leg. He said he knew. With a sudden look of understanding Etty said, "You're trying to find out if the power of the ball was passed on to me?"

"Yep." He replied.

"Well, I guess that would be a good thing to know. It's something I never considered."

John took the frog out by the barn and put him in an empty horse trough. He put enough water in the trough to keep him from dehydrating and checked him every day for a week. The last day he checked the frog was dead with no sign of regrowing his limb.

Three weeks later John did what he had promised not to do. He confided in his best friend Sean. John talked his mother into letting him go back to the trailer to get some things he'd left behind.

"You go after Cholla's shut down for the night. You don't talk to anyone and come straight back here."

"Don't worry Mom. I know what I'm doing."

Chapter four

As luck would have it, while he was in the trailer his friend Sean showed up. The first words out of his mouth were, "what the hell are you and your mom up to and don't give me that shit about going to the doctor? Where the hell have you been anyway? Christ John, the sheriffs been around asking all kinds of questions. Hell, I think he suspects me of something." He sure don't act like he believes my story about the night you guys left me at the trailer."

When Sean slowed down enough for John to speak, he said, "I can't tell you where we are Sean, and please don't tell anyone you saw me, especially the sheriff."

"John, you have to tell me what's going on. After I told the sheriff I was at your house, he made me go out there with him. He questioned me about what was missing and acted as if he thought I took your stuff. Look John, I've had a couple run-ins with the sheriff that I never told you about. If I can't explain myself I could be in trouble here."

After drinking three of Sean's beers and a lot of yelling on both sides, John said he would explain if Sean promised never to tell. After all Sean and him had been best friends since the first

grade. If he couldn't trust Sean, who could he trust? Besides, he was sure if the roles were reversed that Sean would confide in him.

At first Sean thought John was just making up a ridiculous story to avoid the truth, but after awhile John hatched a plot to prove it. He told Sean that the next day his mom and he were going to Roswell shopping.

"You go to Roswell early and park in McDonald's lot. When we come by follow us. When you get a look at my Mom you'll know I'm telling the truth."

"Why can't I just drive out to the ranch and knock on the door?"

"Are you kidding? If my Mom finds out I told you she'll kill me."

The following day, when Sean returned from Roswell, he walked into his sister's room and said I'm going to make you walk again. She looked up from her wheel chair and said, "Yeah sure and pigs will fly, right?"

"I'm going to do it you just wait and see."

"Sean, I wish you wouldn't even joke about that."

"I'm not joking, you just wait and see."

Sean's sister had been in a wheelchair since she was ten years old and Sean blamed himself. Although he was in fact responsible, it had been an accident and he had been a child himself when the accident occurred. That fact did nothing to allay his guilt. Sean had been riding since he was eight and considered himself an excellent horseman. He was thirteen when he decided to take his little sister for a ride. They were racing across the desert with Molly begging him to slow down when the horse stepped in a squirrel hole. Sean was unhurt but his sister Molly had landed on her head. She broke her neck and the doctors said she would never walk again.

Sean had to leave his sister in the desert while he went for help. The horse had broken his leg and lay kicking and screaming a short way off. Sean had not brought a rifle with him so there was nothing he could do about the horse. When he discovered that Molly couldn't move her legs he was beside himself. He knew that he shouldn't move his sister but that was a moot point anyway, they were at least a mile from home. Sean couldn't have carried her that far under the best of circumstances. He was distraught about leaving her in the desert alone, but had no choice. He ran all the way home. When he had finished telling his dad, he had taken a canteen, a rifle and ran all the way back to his sister. He was soaked in sweat when he got there. He shot the horse and sat down by his sister to wait. She was lying on the ground quietly sobbing with her eyes closed. She may have only been ten years old, but she was well aware that life as she had known it, was over.

After awhile Sean got up and went over to the horse. He needed to do something, so he unbuckled the girth and removed the saddle. The task of getting the saddle off a dead horse wasn't easy, especially in midday heat, but he was determined and finally succeeded. He took the bridle off and laid it on top of the saddle. He then went back to wait by his sister.

They didn't have a phone so his father would have to drive to Roswell since that was the nearest place with a hospital or rescue squad. It was over an hour before the ambulance arrived. Molly was very thirsty and Sean had tried to give her some water, but she had started to choke, and it scared him half to death so he quit. It was in the nineties and Sean was scared that dehydration would make her condition even worse. He tore the sleeve off his shirt, soaked it in water and had her suck on it while he stood over her to create shade. When the ambulance arrived, they could see the dust cloud for ten minutes before it got too them. It seemed like forever.

Sean had nightmares for months about the accident. Night after night, his subconscious

played back the horrific scene at the hospital when they told his parents that Molly would never walk again. His mother wailed and carried on until they had to sedate her. For a long time after she was sedated, she sat by Molly's bed and quietly wept. That was when Sean had promised his parents that no matter what, he would see to it that Molly was taken care of for the rest of her life.

Sean Wayne Proudfoot was brought screaming into this world by a midwife, at home, on the Indian reservation. His mother who could neither read nor write named him Sean because she thought it sounded modern. The irony of the name being extremely old, and foreign to boot, was completely lost on her. All she was aware of was that the name was popular on the television. John's father hated the name because he considered it not only a white man's name, but also an eastern "citified" white man's name. He called him Wayne because it at least sounded to him like a western name. Sean had been a thin sickly baby, to the point his parents hadn't expected him to survive his first year, but survive he did and by two was a robust child.

Molly, in contrast to her brother, had come silently into the world and had been chubby and healthy from the onset. She was a quiet child that rarely cried and never complained. After the accident, she seemed to accept it as her lot in life and took it in stride.

Sean's father disliked all white men, but detested eastern "citified" white men the most. Due to some twisted thought process, he blamed the easterners for the Indians' loss of dignity. Even more so than ones that had flooded onto Indian land. This could be because the cowboy movies of which he was fond. The cowboy was often depicted as sympathetic to the Indians plight. Moreover, the plot often showed the powerful easterners in cahoots with the government to eradicate the Indians.

At any rate, he had raised his son with an attitude of distrust for white people. He believed that although it was at times necessary to work with whites, it wasn't wise to mingle with them on a social basis. He was unhappy that his son chose to be friends with a white boy. A fact of which he was aware even though Sean never brought him too their house or mentioned him, for that matter.

Although Sean chose to be friends with John, he never trusted him as much as he did his Indian friends. He was at first unaware of this difference of how he related to people, but was increasingly aware as he grew older. All that aside, he was now so angry with John that he could hardly contain himself. All he could think of was that although John held the power to heal his sister, he had failed to offer. He was certain that had they all been white John wouldn't have hesitated to help.

There were quite a few things that Sean had wrong about his friend John. He had never talked much about girls with John and assumed that John would be upset if he saw him with a white girl. The truth of the matter was that Sean was imbuing John with his own prejudices. Although John was well aware that his friend was an Indian, he no more thought of him as Indian than he thought of his mother as Swedish. Sean however, would never believe that, nor would he have understood even if he had known.

Sean had vowed that whatever else he did in life; he would always take care of Molly. Now he had found a way and nothing would stop him. If he had to hold Matt at gunpoint to get what he wanted he was going to see to it that Molly walked again. He wasn't about to let his friendship with John, or anything else for that matter, stand in the way of his goal.

Chapter Five

Matt checked into the Road Runner Motel, off I-10, on the outskirts of Albuquerque. He assumed the clerk was the owner. He could see living quarters through the open door behind her and hear the muffled sounds of a game show coming from a TV.

She was a plump woman who appeared to be in her late fifties or early sixties. He gave her a credit card and said he wasn't quite sure how long he would be staying. She swiped the card, handed it back to him.

"No problem, just come by when you're ready to check out. If there is anything you need, stop by or give me a ring. I close the office at eleven. Earlier if I fill up."

Matt was thankful for the terseness of city folk. He thought that had he been checking into a small town motel that he would have had to concoct some plausible scenario for being there. It never failed to surprise him how little interest city people showed in each other.

He bought a newspaper from the machine outside the office, drove over and parked in front of number nine. He took his suitcase out of the truck bed, and went inside. He looked over the room and then checked the john. The place wasn't much but it appeared to be clean. He pulled the sheet back and checked the mattress. He had seen a show on TV about bedbugs making a comeback in the US. The show said to check the mattress for little brown spots as a telltale sign. He didn't find any sign of spots on the mattress, and assumed he was safe from the little bloodsuckers. Matt had only ever been in three motels in his entire life and was somewhat paranoid about sleeping in a bed that numerous strangers had used before him.

The next day he went to the library and asked to see the last two years of the Albuquerque Tribune. A young man with orange hair and a ponytail took him to the archives section and got him started in the right place.

"You need anything else you let me know. Copier is up front. Copies are ten cents apiece. Just leave everything you take out on the table and I will put it back."

Matt thanked him then sat down and got to work. Matt was no great shakes as a speed-reader, but he tried to skim over the articles as quickly as possible. He figured you only had to read the first few words to get the gist of the article. He hit on what he was looking for two hours later. The headlines read,

**Motorcyclist killed in head on
crash with truck.**

James Boyd of Placitas was traveling west on I-10 when he lost control of his motorcycle, crossed the centerline and collided head on with a semi driven by Earl Conner. It does not appear that alcohol was a factor. It is unknown what caused him to lose control of...

Matt skipped ahead to the following day. In the obit's he found that James was to be buried among family in Placitas New Mexico. James's date of birth wasn't listed but his age was. Matt went to the computer section of the library, logged on to Yahoo, typed in "date of birth" and hit search. The screen filled with sites for birth date searches. Most were pay sites but he found one that was free. He figured what the heck; I'll try the freebee first. The site asked for first and last name and approximate age. Matt typed in the information and hit search. In a matter of seconds, ten names, along with birth dates popped up on the screen. The one he was looking for, in Placitas New Mexico was on the list.

He then went to "telephonedirectory.com" and typed James's name and hometown. Within seconds, James Boyd popped up with his phone number and his address. On the way out, he thanked the young man with the ponytail. He then drove to a Kmart and bought an Exacto knife, bleach, white out, a glue stick, extra fine sandpaper and a box of toothpicks.

Back at the motel, he used the Exacto knife to remove the covering on his license. Using bleach and a toothpick, he removed his name and birth date. He then printed James Boyd and changed his birth date to match James. It wasn't perfect but he thought it would fool a bored clerk. He still had the problem with his picture. He resealed the license using the glue stick. He then took sandpaper to both sides of the doctored license. He rubbed it until the picture was hard to see which also blurred the printed changes he had made. He looked over his handiwork, decided it was as good as he could do and headed for Placitas. It was only a twenty-minute drive and he thought he might get everything done today.

When he got to Placitas, he had no trouble locating the city hall. His only worry was that in a town this size the clerk might know James Boyd. She didn't. He told her his name and asked for a copy of his birth certificate. She said she needed photo I.D. He handed her his driver's license and sweated bullets while she looked it over. She made a few notes on a pad. She looked at the license, shook her head and with a skeptical look said, "That's the worst license I've ever seen."

He told her that he worked concrete for a living and that the dust gets into everything. She handed it back to him and walked back among the files. She returned and said if you need it today, it will be Fifteen dollars. If you can wait, we can mail it to you for four dollars plus postage. He said I'll take it today and laid a Twenty on the counter. The clerk made change out of a tin box and told him it would take about fifteen minutes. "There's a coffee room just around the corner if you'd like". By the time he got back to Albuquerque, it was getting late. He stopped, picked up a six-pack of Coors and settled in for a night of TV and planning.

Matt awoke at Six thirty as usual. He showered, shaved and walked over to the Denny's next door to the motel. After breakfast, he drove to the nearest police station. He walked up to the empty counter and waited for the girl talking on the phone to notice him. After a bit, she gave him a nod and held up a finger. A few minutes later, she walked over and asked if she could help.

I lost my drivers license.

“Name?”

“James Boyd.”

“Address?”

Matt gave her the Placitas address.

“Any I.D.?”

Matt produced the birth certificate and handed it across the counter. The girl tapped on a keyboard.

“Are you still at the same address James?”

“No I just moved. That’s probably how I lost my license.” He gave her the address of the Road Runner Motel. She asked him to step in front of the camera, snapped his picture and waved him back to the counter. When the computer finished feeding out the form, she laid it in front of him and had him sign it. When the next printout was finished she handed it to him.

“This is your temporary license. Your new license will be in the mail in about two weeks. That will be twelve dollars.”

Matt Handed her fifteen, took his change, thanked her and left. He thought, I have at least two more weeks in that dinky little room. Might as well make the best of it.

Chapter six

He got in his truck and drove around looking for a used car lot. Before long, he spotted a sign

with a cowboy on a bucking bronco. The sign read “Cowboy Bob’s Used Cars. Best deal in Albuquerque!”

Matt drove past to the first corner, turned on the side street and parked by the curb about a halfway down the block. He left the keys in the ignition, took everything out of the glove box that had his name on it, got out removed the license plates and walked back toward Cowboy Bob’s. At the corner, he dropped the papers and plates in a trash can, and continued on to the car lot.

Matt was looking over the cars when a huge man in a ten-gallon hat and a belt buckle the size of a saucer emerged from a trailer. The trailer apparently served as the office since it was the only structure on the lot. The man was also wearing a cowboy shirt and fancy snakeskin cowboy boots.

“What can I do for you young man?” he said in a booming voice with a western drawl.

It took Matt a moment to process that comment. He still hadn’t gotten used to the way people perceived him.

“Come on young feller. The cat got your tongue?”

“Nope. I’m looking for some cheap transportation. Something that’s not too hard on gas and will start when I’m ready to go in the morning.”

“I’ve got a lot full of just that. Anything catch your eye?”

They settled on a ten-year-old Toyota. They went inside and Matt paid in cash. Bob was a little taken aback but allowed as how cash was still good in New Mexico. Bob said “Your registration and plates will be ready in about a week if you want to stop back for them, or I can have them mailed to you.”

Bob allowed as how the title would likely take a month and be mailed to him. Matt said he’d stop back. He thought to himself; I can do without a title. He shook hands with Bob. Matt was surprised how soft a grip he had for a man of his size. He got in his new car and waved out the window as he drove away.

Matt drove to the Social Security office and got a copy of Boyd’s Social Security card. He then drove back to the library and checked out every thing he could find on playing Black Jack. He had heard that you could beat the system by counting cards and figured if that were true, with his memory it should be a snap. On the way back to the motel he stopped at a 7- Eleven. He bought six decks of cards, a six-pack of Coors and drove back to the motel. He went to the office and told the chubby lady behind the counter that he was expecting some mail in the name of James Boyd. She raised an eyebrow but didn’t say anything. He then went to his room and settled down for a week or two of study.

Within a week, Matt was able to deal out three hands from a six-deck stack, play all three hands and consistently win all three positions. The web site he had gone to said that casinos use two, four, six and eight deck shoes. It also said that some casinos are going to continuous shuffle shoes. Matt figured his best bet might be to stick with the small casinos. He was leery about gambling as a way to make money, but hoped it would at least get him a grubstake. Perhaps get him enough to get by until he could figure how to make a real living.

He now had a cell phone, one of those where you buy the phone in a discount department store and buy your minutes, as you need them without a contract. He bought 200 minutes to start. He allowed as how he had not used up 200 minutes of phone time in the last ten years.

The night he got the phone, he had called Etty. She wanted to know when he was coming back. He said, “It wont be any time real soon Etty. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“Couldn’t you come back and pick us up, or we could come to where you are. I miss you a

lot and I'm getting pretty bored just sitting here."

"Etty it would be even worse if you were here. You and John would be stuck in this dinky motel room for hours on end while I try to work us up a grubstake. Beside that, right now we need to conserve our resources. It would just cost a lot more to have the three of us living on the road. I've got a plan to make some money and hopefully in a month or so we will have enough to make a start. I've tried every way I can to figure a way to sell the ranch. If I could do that, we wouldn't have any money worries what so ever. I just can't see anyway to do it. For that matter I'd be even happier if I could figure out a way to keep it, but that isn't going to happen either."

"You still want to ranch Matt?"

"Etty, I've never wanted to do another thing in my whole life. Beside there's not another thing I know how to do. However, it appears that I had better learn."

Within a week he had used up a third of his allotted minutes talking to Etty. Matt was now a young man with the wants and needs of a young man and he could hardly wait to get back to the ranch. At night when he was waiting for sleep to come, he spent a lot of time thinking about that kiss and about Etty pressed up against him. Those thoughts were not very conducive to dropping off to sleep. He often lay awake for a good portion of the night before finally falling into a fitful sleep.

Two weeks after getting to Albuquerque, Matt awoke at three in the morning with an awful feeling of loneliness that he couldn't understand. He had spent the majority of his life alone for long stretches and the last ten years completely alone except for his weekly trips to town. He decided that it had to be the city. He was never lonely on the ranch although his life on the ranch was pretty much a textbook example of the word. He now lay on the rumpled bed thinking of his way of life slipping through his fingers and it filled him with a terrible feeling of remorse. He got up and sat in the one chair in the room watching the flickering light on the wall caused by a defective neon sign and wondered about this feeling that was very new to him.

He thought of the ball, reached over to the bed and retrieved his jeans. He reached in the pocket, removed the ball and a feeling of well-being washed over him like a cool evening breeze. His first thought was he needed to keep the ball close by at all times so that he could touch it whenever he felt the need. He sat in the chair pondering this most of the night and came to the decision that what he really needed to do, was to cover the ball so that he wouldn't touch it by accident. He also decided that he should wear gloves whenever he handled it.

He had concluded that the ball was addictive like a drug. He had not ever before in his life felt as morose or as euphoric as he had this night. Even though the ball had made him feel good when he first handled it, the feeling was nowhere near as intense as this experience had been. It also occurred to him that if he continued to touch the ball he would never age. If he were to establish any sort of life for himself he would to continue to age. He fleetingly wondered if he would indeed age once he stopped touching the ball. He also wondered how long his fantastic memory would last without contact with the ball. He decided, however, to avoid contact with the ball unless absolutely necessary. He wrapped the ball in a handkerchief and made a mental note to get some kind of box or pouch to keep it in.

When he got out of bed the next day, he caught a look at himself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. He thought that although the ball may be a problem in some ways, it sure had given him a great body. When he got out of basic, he was in good shape. When he was herding cattle, stringing fence and bulldogging steers he was in good shape, but he thought I've never been in this good of shape. He looked like someone that spent all of their time bodybuilding only leaner. He shaved, showered, got dressed and then decided it was time to see

if he could play blackjack. Both the sadness and euphoria had left him for now.

He went next door to Denny's and had breakfast. The waitresses were getting to know him pretty well. One of them, Sally (if you could believe her nametag) now called him by name. She actually flirted with him, at least he thought she did. It was so long since that had happened he wasn't sure he could tell. Some girls have a habit of flirting with old men too, but it's a different kind of flirting. He decided that he was right. She was flirting with him. That morning it was even more blatant. Before his breakfast was over, he half expected her to come right out and ask him for a date. This was something new to him and he couldn't help but wonder if it was partly due to the ball.

He walked back to his car got in and headed out of town. He drove west on I-40 about fifty miles to the turn off for Acoma. He drove south on the county road. Just before the blacktop ended, he turned into the parking lot of the Sky City Casino. He ignored the valet parking and picked a spot in the massive parking lot. On his way to the front entry way he began to wonder if the valet parking might be worth it. The blacktop was so hot that he could feel it burning through the soles of his boots. He was already wet with sweat when he walked into the overly air conditioned casino it was like stepping into a walk in freezer. He had never been in a casino before and the opulence amazed him. The flashing lights, the clatter of coins, the plush carpets all combined to create an atmosphere unlike any he had ever experienced. He walked though the casino in awe of everything he saw. He had seen all this in movies and on television but that was nothing like what he was experiencing now. He decided that although exciting, he didn't care for it much.

He finally decided on a spot at the bar where he could keep an eye on the blackjack tables. He ordered a Coors and watched the tables. While sipping his beer at the bar it occurred to him that there were no windows or clocks. He was fairly sure that he had never been in a bar without a clock and certain that he had never been in a building of this size without windows. After about a half hour, the table nearest him changed dealers. She brought trays of chips and a new shoe with her. There was an empty seat at the table. He got up from the bar, walked over and sat down. He said to the dealer, "I'm new at this. Do I buy my chips from you?"

She looked him over, and with a skeptical look said, "This is a fifty dollar minimum table. Are you sure this is where you want to learn the game?"

"You have to learn somewhere."

"Suit yourself cowboy. How many chips do you want?"

He said, "Give me a thousand in fifty's, a thousand in hundreds and a thousand in twenties" He laid his money on the table and watched it disappear down a slot in the table. Before he had finished counting his chips a girl dressed in the shortest skirt and lowest cut blouse he had ever seen asked him what he wanted to drink. He nodded at the Coors and said, "I'm still nursing this one."

She turned and sashayed away as if she knew he was watching and of course, she was right. In fact, all but the most habitual gamblers at the table watched her walk away, including the dealer.

The dealer asked for bets and it started.

Matt played eight hours. With the fifty-dollar minimum, he was down four hundred before he won his first hand, but by the end of six hours, he was up about twenty thousand. After he got to fifteen thousand the casino began changing dealers on him about every half hour. When he got to twenty five thousand or so, he noticed a mountain of a man in a dark suit standing behind him. After about twenty minutes Matt looked over his shoulder and asked him if would mind moving.

“You’re making me nervous.”

The big guy stepped back about four inches. Matt had been at the table for nine straight hours. He had only got up once to go to the john while the mountain watched his chips for him. Matt decided it was time to cash out. He figured he was up approximately forty two thousand. He had been increasing his bet for the last two hours. He tossed the dealer a hundred dollar chip and started picking up his trays of chips when a little Indian girl materialized out of nowhere and started loading the trays on a cart. This girl was wearing a normal amount of clothing. He thought I have to change my way of thinking. The Indian wasn’t a little girl, she was probably older than he was now. This age thing was going to take a lot of getting used to.

The mountain followed him and the girl to the cashier’s window. When he cashed out, the clerk asked for his I.D., social security number and had him fill out IRS forms. This was a glitch that Matt hadn’t thought of. It wasn’t that he minded paying his taxes, it was just that he was afraid that the IRS might know that he was dead. That being the case they might wonder at a dead man gambling, let alone declaring taxes. However, at this point he didn’t see much choice. The only I.D. he had was Boyd’s.

After he had cashed out the mountain asked him if he would like an escort to his car. Matt allowed as how he would. When they got to the car, the mountain looked over the Toyota and said, “If you’re a scam artist you’re the best I’ve ever seen and I’ve seen a lot. If you feel like coming back you’ll be welcome.”

Matt thanked him and took the proffered hand, and almost had his own crushed in the bargain. Matt got in his car thinking I don’t think I’ll be back here very soon. From what he had read, casinos tended to share information. If one banned you, you would be banned from all of them. He didn’t know if that was true outside of Vegas but figured why take a chance. Thanks to the proliferation of Indian casinos over the last several years, there was no shortage of places to gamble. He was thinking he may have to change his ID again before tax time. By the end of the month, Matt was up almost \$200,000 and his paper work had all arrived. He figured it was time to go home. The next day Matt went back to Cowboy Bob’s. When he pulled on to the lot, Bob walked out of his office and when Matt stepped out of his car, Bob lost his smile.

“I hope there’s no problem with the car.”

“Nope. I just wondered if you knew someone that could do some custom bodywork for me on a rush basis.”

“I might. What do you need?”

“I need a small lock box installed where it’s not likely to be found.”

“I see. Come on inside.”

They went inside; Bob picked up the phone, dialed, talked for a minute and hung up. He scribbled on a piece of paper and handed it to Matt.

“Here you go James. Go to this address and tell them I sent you. They’ll have it done today.”

He dropped five twenties on Bob’s desk, asked for directions, said thanks and walked out. There was no name on the garage, just an address. The service door was locked. He knocked and explained who he was. The guy let him in, got his keys, opened the overhead door and drove the Toyota into the garage. There were three other guys in the garage busily dismantling a BMW. The one that let him in had to have been six-foot-six. He wore black jeans with a leather vest and every inch of exposed skin was covered with tattoos. He had a heavy black beard and exuded aura that would have caused most people to cross the street to avoid him.

Four hours later he had what he wanted. The big guy that did the work had not offered a name and Matt didn’t ask. However, he did turn out to be friendlier than his appearance would

have led him to believe. About a half hour into the job, he had gone to a cooler and returned with two Budweiser's. He handed one to Jim saying, "It's God awful hot in here. All during the job he chatted away in a friendly manner albeit one that offered no personal information nor asked any. When he was done, he showed Jim how it worked and said, "It won't hold up to a full-blown border crossing inspection. Anything short of that she ought to be okay. Of course, if you get stopped with drugs and they got a dog you're up shit creek. Other than that, it's not likely to be detected."

He handed Matt a key and added, "Even if someone finds it, it won't be easy to get into. That'll be a thousand."

Mat paid cash and went back to the motel. As soon as he got there, he opened the box, put all but eight hundred dollars in it plus the ball, locked the box and put the key on his key ring. The key looked like a safety deposit box key.

The next morning he left his room, put his suitcase in the trunk of the Toyota, walked over to the office and helped himself to a cup of coffee. Hearing a television playing somewhere behind the office, he walked to the desk and rang the bell on the counter. The chubby lady came from the back and said, "What can I do for you Mister Macklin?"

"I'll be checking out now ma'am, but I may be back."

"It would be nice to have you back any time. Do you want to put it on the card?"

"No ma'am, I think I'll pay cash."

He walked out of the office, got in his car and headed for the ranch. He was anxious to get back for more than one reason. This was one of only a half dozen times in his life that he had been away from the ranch this long and then there was Ety.

Chapter Seven

The day after Sean had told his sister that she would walk again, he showed up at the ranch. John was out by the barn and saw the dust trail coming up the ranch road. He ran to the house and told his mom someone was coming. She closed the front door and locked it. Then she went to the kitchen, turned the radio off, got John and went to her bedroom. A short time later, they heard an engine. The engine coughed to a stop, they heard a door slam and then footsteps on the porch. Someone pounded on the screen door and then to John's dismay, Sean called, "John, come on out. I know you're in there."

Etty looked accusingly at John. John looked down at the floor and said, "He knows Mom."

"How could you John? You promised."

"I know Mom but he's my best friend and, and I trusted him. I guess I made a mistake."

"What does he want, he sounds angry"

"I don't know Mom. I haven't done anything to make him mad that I know of."

The pounding became more intense and Sean yelled again. Etty was furious with her son, but only said, "We may as well let him in. It's probably better if we talk to him at this point."

John went to the door unlocked and opened it. Sean was standing there holding his hunting rifle. As soon as the door opened, he pushed past John into the living room. Etty's hand flew to her mouth and she backed away from Sean. John said, "What the hell's with the gun, are you planning on robbing us?"

"I've come to talk to you. If you won't listen to reason, I may need the gun. You are going to make my sister walk again."

"Oh Jesus Sean, I'd forgot about your sister!"

"Bullshit! No one could forget something like that."

"I forgot, so shoot me. For Christ sake Sean, I haven't even seen your sister in a year. Look you don't need that gun, when Matt gets back I'll talk to him. Matt is a good guy. He's not going to be very happy about me spilling the beans, but I know he'll help you."

Etty said in an angry voice, "Sean what has got into you? John's been your friend your whole life practically. You've stayed at our house and you've ate at my table. I've always treated you like you were my own son and now you come in here with a gun threatening us. We do not deserve this."

"I'm sorry Mrs. Hanson but nothing is going to stop me from helping my sister walk again. I know you've been good to me but nothings going to get in the way of what I have to do. Besides, if you people were the friends you claim to be you would have offered without this. Now here's

what I want. You get on the phone and tell Mr. Macklin that he has to get back here right away. I don't care how you do it but you get him back here."

"I don't know where Matt is or how to get in touch with him and I wouldn't even if I could."

Sean pointed the rifle at John's head and said, "I'm not fooling around here. You call him and call now."

Etty dropped to her knees.

"Please! Oh God please! I don't know where he is! Don't hurt John, I beg you."

"Mom, he's not going to hurt anyone. Sean we don't know where Matt is. I'm sure that when he gets back he'll be glad to help your sister but we have no idea when that might be."

"I don't believe you. I don't think he would walk off, leave you in his house and not even tell you where he was going."

"Well it's the truth Sean. If you don't believe me I guess you'll just have to shoot me but that won't make your sister walk. It'll just put you in prison, or you can explain to the cops how Matt can make the lame walk and the old young. Then maybe you can spend the rest of your life in the booby hatch instead of prison."

"I wouldn't be so fuckin flip if I was you asshole. I'm just about pissed off enough to shoot your ass."

"Watch your mouth Sean. I won't tolerate that kind of language!

"Fuck you both. I want that old man back here and I mean now."

John looked at Sean like he didn't know him.

"I told you I don't know where he is. Christ Sean, I thought you were my friend. After all it's not my ball and I've barely had time to think since this happened."

"Whatever. I guess we'll just have to wait for him."

"And what if he doesn't come back for a month? How are you going to hold us at gunpoint for a month? Maybe you could just shoot us and throw us in a gully. Then when Matt gets back you can shoot him too and steal the ball for yourself."

"Don't give him any ideas. He just might do it. Matt was right about what would happen, if we told anyone. Sean's been your best friend for most of his life and here is threatening you with a gun. God only knows what he's willing to do. We may both wind up dead."

"Shut up! No ones getting hurt as long as you do exactly what I tell you to. Just shut up and let me think."

Sean looked like he was at his wits end, and about ready to explode. John had never seen him like this and it made him nervous. John's mind was racing trying to think of a way to get a hold of Sean's gun without putting his mom in jeopardy.

Chapter Eight

Matt was about a quarter of a mile from the house on the ranch road when he topped a little rise and spotted the strange pickup sitting in the yard. As soon as he dropped off the rise, he stopped the car and sat there thinking. In a short time he started out again, slowly so as not to raise dust. About a hundred yards along the road was an arroyo. When it rained up in the hills this arroyo would contain a raging current of water, mud and debris that would pick up and carry with it anything it encountered along its way. Three quarters of a mile more of twists and turns and it would dump its sweepings into the Pecos. The river's usual green hue and lazy current would become a muddy boiling cauldron. However, right now, the arroyo was dry and the flat bed made it almost as good as the ranch road that is except for the rocks and washouts. Matt would have been a lot happier with his old four-wheel drive pickup or even the tractor.

He pulled the Toyota into the arroyo. Driving very slow to avoid raising dust and to avoid the deep ruts and rocks scattered along the bottom of the arroyo. Matt followed it around to where it passed behind the barn. When he had the barn between him and the house, he got out, closed the door as quiet as possible and carefully crawled up the steep clay bank. Just as he reached flat land, Toby came around the barn, happy to see him and barking a greeting. Matt grabbed him, got him quiet and headed for the barn holding on to his collar.

“What was that?”

“How am I supposed to know? Sounds like Toby found a jackrabbit.

Matt peeked around the corner of the house just as someone stepped out on the porch carrying a rifle and looked around the yard. Matt ducked back behind the barn and said, “Shit!” under his breath. It was obvious that someone had found out about the ball and was there to get it. He waited a bit and then took another peek. Whoever it was had gone back inside. There was a service door on the other side of the barn that couldn't be seen from the house. Matt went around the barn, opened the door and put Toby inside. He admonished him to be quiet and closed the door.

Matt carefully looked around the corner of the barn. He thought if the gunman's not in the living room I might be in trouble. He took a breath and sprinted for the back porch. He didn't bother with stealth since there was no cover between the barn and the house. He just concentrated on speed. When he got to the porch he waited a moment, not hearing anything he sat down on steps and took off his boots. He crept up the steps and looked through the window of the kitchen door. There was no one in sight so he carefully opened the screen door. It squeaked slightly causing Matt to hold his breath. When nothing happened, he turned the doorknob and pushed the inner door open. Once inside he let the screen close softly, but didn't bother closing the inside door. He could hear angry voices coming from the living room as he crossed the kitchen. He stopped by the living room door and peeked into the room. The gunman wasn't looking his way but he was all the way across the room by the front door. There was no way he could get anywhere near him before being seen. He had to get him to come in the kitchen.

Matt flattened himself against the wall by the door, picked up a glass from the counter and threw it across the room into the sink. It had the desired effect. The gunman came through the door rifle first. When the rifle came through the door, Matt grabbed it with both hands and yanked as hard as he could. The result was that the rifle went off sending a bullet through the wall of the kitchen next to the back door. Sean flew across the room legs wind milling, trying to catch his balance and slammed head first into the opposite wall. Sean sprawled on the floor with blood running from his nose and dripping off his chin. While Sean was trying to get his bearings, Matt

turned the rifle around and pointed it at him. Sean struggled to his feet and glared at Matt. In addition to a bloody nose, he had two-inch gash in his forehead where he had made contact with the wainscoting on the kitchen wall. As he stood glaring at Matt and trying to stop the blood from running in his eyes, Matt realized that he was dealing with a young boy.

Matt looked at Etty and John, they both started talking at the same time. Matt said, "Just a minute! Etty what's going on?"

"I think we better go in and sit down. This is going to take awhile."

"Fine, John there's a ball of twine in that cupboard over the kitchen sink. Get it and tie this idiot's hands behind his back. Make sure it's tight."

Matt went outside, retrieved his boots and then made sure John did a good job of tying Sean. When they finished that, they all went back in the living room. Matt tied Sean to a kitchen chair and Etty started explaining what happened. Sean started to say something but Matt told him that if he knew what was good for him he would keep his mouth shut. Sean took one look at him and decided he might be right.

When Etty was done she said, "I can't believe this. I've known this boy most of his life. If you hadn't got here I don't know what he'd have done."

Matt looked at John and said, "I'm deeply disappointed in you John. I thought you had more sense."

John looked at his feet and said nothing. Matt said, "John let's you and me go get Toby out of the barn and go for a ride. Etty, if you feel like it you can wipe the blood off that jerk and bandage his forehead, but only if you feel like it."

Toby bounded out of the barn and followed Matt and John toward the arroyo.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

When they got to the arroyo, Matt told John how had seen the truck and followed the arroyo here. They all got in the car and started up the arroyo Matt explained, "We'll have to go till we find a spot wide enough to turn around."

On the way to getting this done Matt explained to John the predicament he had them in.

"We have to leave here, very soon and we can't ever come back. There's no way to keep Sean from talking short of killing him and I don't quite have the stomach for that."

"What about your ranch?"

"The ranch is gone. There's nothing I can do about that."

"I'm sorry."

"You're not half as sorry as I am. But it's done and no way to change it."

Matt knew he would have lost the ranch regardless. This had only sped things up a little, but he wasn't about to let John in on that. He figured if he let John stew over his folly, that he might be a little more cautious in the future.

On the way back to the ranch, John explained the situation with Sean. He told Matt about the riding accident and how Sean felt responsible.

"Matt if we have to leave here anyway couldn't we use the ball to help Molly before we go?"

Matt said, "John if we just turn Sean loose and disappear it's just a mystery, a mystery that will eventually be forgotten. The reason it will be forgotten is that very few people, if any will believe him. If we heal his sister people just might believe him, especially with his sister to back him up. The ones that do believe him may come looking for us and they may not be as inept as your friend. You saw what happened when you told Sean and he's you're best friend. There are some very wealthy people in the world that would spend every penny they have to get their

hands on this thing. It is very seldom that people manage to disappear for any length of time if someone with resources really wants to find them, but we are going to have to try.”

By the time they got back to the house John was feeling bluer than blue. He felt like sitting down and bawling. He felt that he had let his best friend down; he had lost Matt his ranch and forced his mother into exile. He went inside and straight to his room. Matt went to Sean’s pickup and looked inside. The keys were there. Matt started it up and drove out to the barn. He backed Etty’s car out, put Sean’s pickup in and put Etty’s car in behind it.

When Matt got back inside, Etty was fixing supper. It was very quiet at the supper table that night and after dinner, Matt went out to sit on the porch. When he finally came in, Etty said, “I’m afraid that John’s in your bed, but I’m willing to share.” She looked at him shyly and said, “I really don’t want to be alone.”

Matt pulled Sean up out of the kitchen chair. He asked him if he needed to use the bathroom and he said he did. Matt untied him and told him to use the bathroom but to hurry it up. When he got out Matt took him to the living room. He retied his hands put him on the couch and tied his legs. He told him he was a light sleeper and went to the bathroom himself.

When he walked in the bedroom, Etty was lying on the bed with a sheet up to her chin. The sheet was old, and thin from numerous washings over many years. It not only molded itself to her body but also was transparent enough that Matt could see the darkness of the mound at the base of her stomach. It was obvious that she was aroused by the way her erect nipples pressed against the fabric of the sheet. Matt walked around to her side of the bed and stood for a moment looking down at her. He then reached down and pulled back the sheet. She didn’t object. While Matt was trying to get his shirt unbuttoned, Etty sat up and unbuckled his belt, unzipped his jeans and pulled both his jeans and his jockeys down at the same time. She watched his erection leap free and while matt was trying to get his pants the rest of the way off she leaned over and took him in her mouth. Matt let out a groan, tripped over his tangled pants and fell on top of her.

They were finally tired enough to go to sleep around three in the morning.

Matt awoke an hour later than normal and only then because Etty was cradling his testicles in her hand while kissing the head of his very hard erection. It started all over.

Chapter nine

Matt stepped out of the bathroom an hour later, shaved, showered and feeling just about as good as he ever had, at least in recent memory. The first thing he noticed was that Sean wasn't on the couch. He did a quick search of the house without finding either Sean or John. He then went out on the porch and scanned the yard. He walked around the house and went to the barn. Sean's pickup was in the barn but Etty's car was gone.

When he came through the back door Etty, who was clearly agitated said, "Where are the boys?"

"I don't know, but your car is gone."

"What about Sean's pickup?"

"No, his pickups there, I have the keys in my pocket."

"Where do you think they went Matt?"

"I don't know but John must have gone willingly. Sean's rifle is locked in his truck."

"What do we do now?"

Matt walked over, bent down, kissed her on the forehead and said, "I'm going to make breakfast."

While Matt was making breakfast his mind was running in circles like a dog chasing his tail, and with about the same results. Although he certainly didn't wish he hadn't found the ball, he was getting more and more worried about the future. His thought was that prior to this he led a relatively carefree existence. His only real worry had been the increasing frailty of his deteriorating body and the inevitable outcome. That however was the normal flow of life and

there had been damn little that could be considered normal since his discovery. Then on a happier note, he thought, “my sex life sure has improved though.”

While they were eating breakfast, they talked about the boys, and tried to figure out what they were plotting. Both Matt and Etty agreed that the most likely thing was they had gone to get Sean’s sister. It seemed to make the most sense since both boys were adamant about Matt using the ball to heal her. After much discussion, Matt allowed as how he would heal her if they were right about what the boys were up to this morning. Matt said, “We have to leave here anyway, there’s no way around that, and maybe we can concoct a story that Sean can sell. Almost anything would be as plausible as the truth.”

They carried the dirty dishes to the sink and Etty began filling it with soapy water. Matt went to the bedroom and came back with a rifle and a handgun. Etty asked, “What are those for?”

“Just in case.”

Matt would have been the first to admit that he was becoming paranoid, but felt he had sufficient cause. He recalled a quip that he had heard while in the army, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean the bastards aren’t out to get you.” It brought a smile to his face and lightened his mood.

He helped Etty with the dishes and then said, “Let’s go out and sit on the porch. That way we can see if anyone comes.”

He leaned the rifle against the wall by the swing. He shoved the pistol down in the waistband of his pants at the small of his back and settled down on the swing. Etty sat down beside him, gazed out across the vast expanse, and said, “It must have been really pleasant growing up here on the ranch.”

“I guess it was. I never gave it a lot of thought. It was just always home.”

“Matt I can’t imagine what you think of me after the way I acted last night.”

“I think I love you Etty.”

This brought a wide grin to Etty’s face.

“I’ll confess something to you Etty. I’m aware that men like to think of themselves as being sophisticated when it comes to women, but the truth is I’ve only been with one woman in my life, until last night that is. Jeanie and I married very young. Shortly after we were married, I was drafted. She lived here on the ranch with my Dad while I was gone.”

“What about your mom?”

“My Mom died when I was young.”

“That must have been awful. I remember how hard it was on John when his father died.”

“It was one of the saddest times of my life, but at least I had my Dad. It was very hard on him, too. It seemed like there would be whole days when neither of us spoke.”

“Anyway, I stayed true to Jeanie while in the army. I was young and in love. When I came home from the service, I settled down to ranching with my Dad. She didn’t care much for the ranch but I convinced her it would be a great place to raise kids. The kids never came and when it became obvious that there wouldn’t be any, she pretty much lost interest in sex. I don’t think she ever cared much for that part of marriage anyway.”

“I can’t imagine anyone being uninterested in having sex with you.”

“Thank you, but the truth is, I was likely as much at fault as her. I had no experience and she may have just been too bashful to tell me what I needed to know.”

“I doubt that it was your fault Matt. You’re the most loving person I’ve ever known.”

“What I’m trying to say in my long winded inept way is that you make me happier than I’ve

ever been.”

Etty put her arms around Matt’s neck, kissed him passionately, and said, “No one on this planet is happier than me right now.”

“Matt, If you don’t mind, why did you stay with her all those years?”

“I’m ashamed to say that I was afraid a divorce would cost me the ranch and I would have put up with just about anything to keep this ranch. Beside I still loved her I guess. You know how it is, you keep going along thinking it will get better and after awhile you get used to things the way they are and just accept it. Besides I was naive enough to think that most, if not all women were like that. When Dad died, she expected me to sell the ranch and move to town. For a while, she showed a renewed interest in our love life, but only as a ploy to get me to sell. Even as naïve as I was I could see through that. When it didn’t work her passion soon dried up. Enough of whining about poor old me. Etty, tell me about you.”

The change in Etty’s expression and body language was so sudden and severe that Matt was certain he had said or done something very wrong.

“What did I do?”

“You didn’t do anything Matt.”

Etty thought about how different her life and his was. She was certain that she could never make him understand and she wasn’t about to try. She was almost certain it would result in her losing him and she wasn’t going to take that chance. The thought of losing Matt was the most frightening thing she could imagine. After a long pause, she spoke in almost a whisper.

“Matt, I can’t talk about my life before I knew you. I didn’t have the kind of childhood you did and I’m afraid that if you knew the way I lived you might lose respect for me and I couldn’t stand that.”

“Etty, I can’t imagine anything that would affect the way I feel about you. I know I’ve led a fairly sheltered life but you may find me more understanding than you think.”

“Matt please don’t ask me. I promise I’ll never lie to you, but there are things I just can’t share. Maybe some day, maybe when were old again,”

A slight smile appeared and she brushed away a tear.

“I didn’t mean to spoil the mood. Do you still think you love me?”

“Yes. I’m certain.”

“Good, because I think I am truly in love for the first time in my life. I will tell you one secret. John’s dad and I were not married. I would have married him but he never asked. John doesn’t know that and I’d appreciate if he never found out.”

“He’ll never hear it from me, you have my word.”

After a long silence he said, “Etty I won’t try to push you into anything, but I want you to know that I would like to share your life, both the good and the bad, whenever you’re ready.”

They sat on the porch, drinking coffee and talking the entire morning. They were just about to go inside to get out of the heat when Matt saw dust on the ranch road. About the same time Etty looked up and said, “Matt.”

“I see it.”

He glanced at the rifle, but left it where it was. When the car got within sight, Etty said, “That’s my car.”

When it pulled into the yard and stopped, a thick cloud of dust enveloped the car. When the dust cleared, they could see that John was in the driver’s seat. There was a young girl in the front passenger seat, and Sean was in the back. Matt assumed that the girl was Molly. The boys got out, went around to the trunk and got out a wheelchair. They put Molly in the chair and pushed it

to the porch. They lifted the chair along with Molly, carried it up the steps and sat it on the porch.

Matt scowled at the boys, picked up the rifle and went inside to put it away. Etty said, "I'll go fix lunch."

Molly said, "I'd like to help" and followed her to the kitchen. Matt walked back out on the porch, looked at the boys and said, "You boys have brought a world of hurt on both of our families as sure as I'm standing on this porch."

"Matt I think you're blowing this all out of proportion."

"You're an idiot John. Your mother and I are leaving here first thing in the morning, and you will be with us."

"Mister Macklin, I swear I won't tell a soul."

"Sean you're an idiot too. How are you going to explain Molly walking? A sudden miracle?"

"That's a good idea Mister Macklin. It's at least as believable as the truth."

"It might work if you could keep your mouth shut, but I don't believe you will. I trusted John and look where that got me."

"You can trust me."

"Not enough to risk my life on. I'll do what you want... not for you, but because it is what Etty wants, and because I figure it's the right thing to do. You guys go on in the house now. I'll be in shortly."

Mat went to the Toyota and opened the front passenger door. He reached in and pushed down on the bar that is normally lifted to adjust the seat forward and backward. When he pushed down on it, the seat unlocked in the front and flipped back on a hinge. Matt lifted a flap of carpet inserted his key and unlocked the box. He took out the little leather pouch containing the ball and put it in his pocket. He also took a surgical glove out of the box and shoved that down in his back pocket. He then took the gun out of his waistband, put it in the safe, relocked it and locked the seat back in position.

No one had much to say during lunch. They were all lost in their own thoughts. Sean was thinking about what Matt had said and was trying to concoct a story about Molly walking that would be believable. Molly was thinking about what Sean had told her. That Matt could make her walk. It sounded so impossible yet she really wanted to believe. He had told her that Matt was seventy-nine years old, but that too seemed impossible.

John was thinking about how his whole world had turned upside down, but mostly he was thinking about the fact that Matt was sleeping with his mother. She had always been a stickler for morals, but now that she had her youth back, she was jumping in bed with the first guy that came along. It never occurred to him that he was jealous of Matt.

Matt was thinking of how to start their life over in a way they could never be found. In the back of his mind was the nagging thought that no matter how well they hid, they would still have John with them and that he couldn't be trusted to keep quiet.

Etty was just thinking about how much in love she was and that Matt had said he loved her. She was a little reluctant to put her future in the hands of another man, but she told herself that this man was not like Bobby. She absolutely could not imagine him asking her to do what Bobby had, no matter how bad things got.

After lunch Matt told Molly, he wanted to see her in private. He pushed her wheelchair out to the front porch and locked it in place beside the swing. He put on the glove, took the ball out of its pouch and sat down on the swing. If Molly saw anything strange in this ritual, she kept it to herself. Matt pressed the ball against the back of her neck, and a feeling of well being engulfed

her. Matt held the ball there for about fifteen minutes while he explained the danger to him and his family if anyone learned of his ability. Before removing his hand, he asked Molly how she felt.

“I feel...This is really embarrassing Mister Macklin, but I feel...I feel like I want to have sex with you.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry but you asked. Mister Macklin. I don’t understand it myself, I did not even realize what the feeling was at first. I have never had a feeling like this in my life.”

“Don’t worry about it Molly. It’s just how it affects people. How old are you Molly?”

“I’m thirteen Mr. Macklin. I didn’t mean anything, I mean I wasn’t coming on to you or anything...I don’t know what to say.”

At first, Matt couldn’t imagine why it affected Molly the way it did but then realized he had never touched anyone while holding the ball, and thought maybe it effected everyone of the opposite sex that way. Matt thought that the powers of this object may be even greater than he had so far realized.

“Don’t be embarrassed Molly. It’s just a natural reaction to the process. It will pass quickly.”

That night Molly slept on the couch, and Sean and John slept in Matt’s room. Matt and Etty went to their room like a couple of kids in love, albeit with more knowledge.

The next morning Molly was acting as if it was Christmas morning. She said her legs . started tingling during the night and this morning she could move her feet,

After breakfast, Matt sat down with Sean on the front porch.

“Sean this is what I came up with, you tell your Dad that you met an itinerant preacher in Roswell yesterday and he claimed he could heal Molly.”

“A what kind of preacher?”

“Never mind, Just say a wandering preacher. Say that he laid his hand on Molly’s head and prayed but nothing happened. You figured he was some sort of nut and went on your way. John had told you that he would be here at the ranch so you stopped on the way home. Time got away from you and we offered to have you stay over night. This morning Molly had feeling in her legs so you headed for home with the good news. Keep the story simple. Don’t embellish it. The simpler it is the easier it will be to keep from being tripped up.”

Although he further admonished Sean to keep his secret, he had no faith what so ever that he would. Matt figured his only hope was that when Sean changed his story that no one would believe him or that if they did that no one could find them.

After his talk with Sean, he went in the house and packed what things of his mothers and fathers that he didn’t want to leave behind. There wasn’t a great many things to pack. There were two picture albums, his mother’s jewelry, his father’s coin collection, and his grandfathers gold watch. The coins weren’t really a collection, just a dozen or so gold coins that his grandfather put aside when the treasury switched over to silver. He also took a dozen framed pictures and some silver knick-knacks that had been dear to his mother. The whole of his past life fit into one large suitcase.

Before going to bed, Matt and Etty sat at the kitchen table and drafted a will, since the ranch was in trust for Etty the will was in her name. She left the restaurant to her cook and portions of the ranch to friends. Five thousand acres along with the house and out buildings were left to Matt’s friend John Thomas. Neither of them was sure that it would stand up in court, but they did the best they could and both signed it. Matt drove to the mail box and posted it.

In the morning Matt packed the car, gave Sean back his keys, put Toby in the back seat of the Toyota and gathered up John and Etty. Everyone said his or her goodbyes and the four of them headed for the highway. Matt tried to see the ranch house in his rearview mirrors, but all he could see was the dust cloud that followed them. He was overcome with a feeling of loss, the likes of which he hadn't felt since his mother died.

He recalled how he had felt when he rode down this same road with his father on his way to the bus station, when leaving for the service. This, however, was much worse, because he knew he would never be back.

Matt had never given much thought to his life growing up on the ranch, but if he had, he would have just considered it normal. As a child, he spent most of his time playing in the barn, hunting frogs and pollywogs around the pond or riding his bike up and down the ranch road. When he was a little older, he would sometimes swim in the Pecos. Sometimes on a Sunday afternoon, his father and he would spend a couple hours fishing the Pecos. They fished the Pecos for fun, but if they wanted fish to eat, they took them from the pond.

He had been expected to work for as long as he could remember. At first, he helped his mother with the housework. He would sweep the front porch, weed the vegetable garden and flower beds. As he grew older he spent less and less time with his mother and more with his father, but he still worked. His father was as stern as his mother was soft and loving. He always called his father Sir or Father, as did his mother.

He always knew that his father loved him although he couldn't remember him ever saying so. He could tell by the tone in his voice when teaching him or explaining how things were to be done on the ranch. It was the same tone he had used with his mother or when talking about the ranch or the country. When Matt went in the service, he said goodbye to his wife at the ranch and rode to the bus station with his father. On the trip to town, they talked of the weather and ranching as always. Just before Matt boarded the bus however, his father took his hand and laid the other hand on Matt's shoulder.

"Son make your country proud of you and make sure that everyone you meet knows that folks from New Mexico are decent people. Bring yourself home to your wife in one piece."

Matt sighed as he turned the car on to the highway. He knew that a way of life had ended, a way of life that he was going to miss perhaps more than he could fathom.

Chapter Ten

When Matt, Etty and John left the ranch, Matt had no idea where he was going. The car was silent with everyone lost in his or her own thoughts. Even Etty, who was usually talkative, was quiet. Matt was glad for the silence. He was used to having solitude and with all he had on his

mind he welcomed the time to think. He wondered how Toby was going to take the change. He had had the run of the ranch for most of his life and had never been on a chain. Matt figured that maybe Toby would adapt better than he would.

From the ranch, he drove south toward Roswell. He turned onto SR 70 just north of Roswell and drove northeast toward Farwell. When they got to I-27, he took it north to I-40 then headed east. They drove through the Texas panhandle and into Oklahoma. When they got to Oklahoma City, John found his voice and marveled at the fact that people had oil wells in their front yards right in the city. In Oklahoma City, they turned toward Missouri on I-40. By the time they had reached Missouri they were all taken with how green everything was. Matt, except for his stint in the service, had spent his whole life in the desert and John was just a child when he moved to Cholla.

Matt almost asked Etty where she grew up but thought better of it. He had decided that if she wanted him to know about her past she would bring it up herself.

They skirted the Ozarks and John found them to be amazing. He had certainly seen mountains in New Mexico but never anything that green. He had also seen rivers and streams in New Mexico but nothing like the sparkling clear water that rushed and leapt along the side of the road now.

Matt stopped the car at a roadside park and they all got out and stood looking at a mountain stream. Matt and Etty shared a beer from the cooler in the trunk. Although Matt and John seemed awe struck by the stream, Etty had seen many like it and many that were much more magnificent. She said nothing, but it brought a sadness to her that she wasn't able to share her memories with the one she loved. She knew, however, that if she mentioned anything of her past it would only fuel Matt's curiosity.

Matt and John threw a few rocks just to see them splash. Etty thought it must be a man thing, it seemed every time she had ever been near water with a man he'd thrown something in it. After a while, they rounded up Toby and got back on the road.

Just outside of Rolla, they stopped for the night at a nondescript highway motel. Matt rented two rooms. He gave John his key and said he needed to use the rest room and Etty would most likely want to freshen up. He said he would call him on his room phone when they were ready to go to supper.

Matt carried the bags into the room and before he could set them down Etty was all over him. He said, "It looks like John is going to go hungry for awhile."

Afterward, Etty said, "I don't know what's come over me Matt, I've never been so horny in my life. Even when I was a teenager I never felt like this."

"Well whatever it is I hope it never stops. I think I better call John, he's probably starving."

They drove up the main drag into Rolla. Although it had no doubt been lined by farmland before the expressway bypassed Rolla, Commerce designed to attract travelers now dotted both sides of this wide road. There was no shortage of restaurants and John voiced a preference for Kentucky fried chicken. On the way back to the motel, Matt stopped at a Wal-Mart and bought a road atlas.

When they got back to the rooms Etty went next door to talk to her son. The first thing John said was are you and Matt going to get married?"

"John you've got to start calling him Jim. He told you how important that is."

"Yeah, what ever."

"John I don't like your attitude. You act like we concocted this whole thing just to make your life miserable."

“Mom what do you expect from me? You and Matt,, Jim, have each other and you for one act as if you just won the lottery. I’ve lost all my friends, I’ve had to leave my home, I have no idea where we’re going or what we’ll do once we get there. I’m going to have to start over in a new school where I won’t know a soul. With Matt, Jim’s ungodly paranoia over this ball I’ll probably be starting a new school every three weeks. I’m sorry Mom, I mean Etty but you and Jim don’t understand what it’s like for me.”

“I’m sure we don’t, but it’s going to be alright. I promise. However, young man, you could exhibit a little understanding yourself. Once we are settled somewhere it’ll get better. Matt, I’m sorry; Jim said he’s going to try to get you an identity that makes you old enough to drive. I know you’ve been driving since you were twelve, but the rest of the world’s not like Cholla.”

“Well that would be good. Do you think I might be able to get a car?”

“I don’t know. That’s something we need to talk over with Jim once we settle down. What kind would you like?”

“A 1965 Mustang convertible.”

Etty looked at him incredulously and said, “You don’t want much do you?”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“He hasn’t asked me.”

“If he asked, would you?”

“In a heartbeat.”

They talked for over an hour, Etty trying to reassure her son that everything would be all right. In reality, she was likely trying to convince herself as well. Her and her son had always been very close but she could feel him pulling away and it saddened her. She wondered if this altitude change was the result of her relationship with Jim. John had always liked Jim, but on the other hand, he had never had to share her with anyone else since his dad died.

When she got back to the room, Jim was laying face down across the bed with his head over the edge looking at the atlas that was lying on the floor. He looked up and said, “How’s it going with the kid?”

“He’s not too happy Jim.” She smiled and said, “he wants a 65 Mustang convertible.”

“Is that all?”

She smiled again and said, “No, but that would be a start,”

Jim said, “Well, At least the kid has good taste.”

“Of course, he is my son even if he is almost as old as I am.”

“Etty I’ve been looking at the map and I’ve decided on Peoria Illinois. It’s about the right size for what we need. We can get new identities there, get married and move on before it’s time to register John in school.”

“What!”

“What, what?”

“You said married!”

“What’s the problem? You don’t like the idea?”

“I love the idea, but a girl likes to be asked.”

“Okay. Will you marry me?”

“It’s too late now. You apparently made up your mind without consulting me. I guess I really have no choice anyway, you’ve already taken liberties.”

She went over and jumped up on the bed and stood straddling him.

He rolled over, looked up at her and said; “Did you remember that you’re wearing a skirt?”

“Yes.”

“Did you remember that your panties are almost transparent?”

“Yes.”

He ran his hand up the inside of her leg and felt dampness as he ran his fingers over the crotch of her panties.

The map, Peoria and everything else was forgotten except for the dampness between her legs.

Later that night as they lay in bed, Jim said, “I used to think about what it would be like to be young again, you know, after I started getting older. This is nothing at all what I imagined it would be like. I guess I thought everything would be the same except that I would be young. I thought that I would still think and act the same but I was wrong.”

“I know what you mean. Although it’s hard to put my finger on, I definitely feel different about things than I used to.”

“One thing I noticed is I’m not nearly as mellow as I was a short time ago. I no longer think of issues in shades of gray but more as black and white. I tend to be more positive of right and wrong, much as I was when I was young. I feel much more liberal than I was, not so much in politics but toward life in general. Most people my age would likely think of me as prudish, but I guess that can be attributed to the fact that although I am young now I’m still from a different era.”

“Well I find that I seem to be in a hurry all the time”

“I understand that. It seems funny that when you’re young and have all the time in the world you’re always in a hurry, but when you’re old and have very little time left to you, you’re never in a hurry.”

“That seems to be true. I also find that I am interested in things that I have not cared about for years.”

“Like”

“Like cars, clothes. The latest gadgets. That kind of stuff.”

“Well I guess I can’t really relate to that. I never got over wanting things. I never had anything very nice but that didn’t stop me from wanting them.”

“I don’t necessarily mean nice things, just stuff. I have been thinking about getting a cell phone. I have no idea what I would need a cell phone for but I have been thinking of getting one. And by the way Etty this time around you are going to have some very nice things.”

“I wasn’t hinting Jim. I don’t want you to think I’m some kind of gold digger. Just having you would be enough for any girl.”

“I know what you meant Etty, but I really want you to have the best.”

“Etty dropped her eyes and hesitantly murmured “Matt.”

“Yes.”

“Have you thought about having children?”

“I have thought about it, but it seems like it would cause a lot of additional problems.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve thought all along that one of the up sides of this situation was that neither of us had any family. Think about it. If we had elderly parents or even brothers or sisters how would we handle it. Could we let them age and die? If not how many people could we involve in this. A secret is not a secret if more than one person knows it, and the more people that know about it the less likely it is to remain a secret.”

“But We would not have to worry about our children dieing of old age.”

“No, but we would have to grow old to raise kids. There is no Point in time when we could

revert to youth while we have children without messing up our lives and theirs. Even when they're adults. What about if either one of us comes down with a serious illness, like cancer? There is no way we can cure ourselves without becoming young again. How do we explain to your fifteen year old how their mom suddenly became twenty years old, and how would we explain it to the neighbors? We would likely wind up constantly on the move. Moreover, we would live in constant fear that our kids would let the cat out of the bag."

"I don't know Jim, I don't have any answers, all I know is we are going to be starting a new life and I would like it include a family."

"I think we would have to live like nomads. Think about it, even when we are eighty, our kids would be sixty. Rather than die of old age, do we just disappear or do we fill them in on our secret and maybe restore their youth too? By and by we will have a couple dozen offspring, all the same age as us. One day we can start our own town where everyone's related and all the same age."

"Jim, you're trying to be way too rational about this, or your teasing me. Sometimes I can't tell the difference. You can't go about having children like a scientific project. If people did that civilization would soon die out."

"I was kind of kidding with you Etty. Maybe someday we can figure it out and possibly start a family, but for now, I think we best concentrate on getting our new life put together."

"Okay but you know I'm not going to stop thinking about this."

To lighten the mood Jim said, "I bet you never thought you would be having sex with a seventy eight year old man, did you?"

"Hah, I bet you never thought you'd be in bed with a twenty year old girl again."

"Touché. I admit I pretty much thought sex of any kind was a thing of the past. I will tell you a secret though, when I used to come into the diner you were the reason I came. I was well aware that I was way to old for you, but I still thought about you a lot."

"That is so sweet. I'm glad you did, and to be honest there were times when I wished you were younger. I always thought you were one of the nicest men I had known."

That night Jim laid awake for some time. He started out thinking about what Etty had said about wanting a family but soon segued into thinking of their love life. It seemed that since finding the ball sex had occupied an inordinate amount of his thoughts.

Although he had been married for fifty years, and he and Etty had only been together for a few weeks, they were doing things in bed that he had only dreamed of. He had attempted some of these things with Jeanie but she had reacted as though he was a pervert and he had let it go. The truth, if he admitted to it, was that he had never had a real strong sex drive anyway. It was probably just as well since it would have been just one more matter of contention between him and Jeanie. .

When they got to Peoria, they rented a small apartment in a nice neighborhood. During the day, Jim worked on new identities and at night, he hit the casinos. He took Etty and John with him when he worked on their identities so that they would learn how it was done just in case. When he went to the casinos, he went alone. He was no longer worried about the IRS because he planned on having a different identity before they left Peoria.

Chapter Eleven

They stayed in Peoria for two months. By the time they left Peoria Etty had made quite a few friends and was reluctant to go. Matt was soon to find that Etty made friends no matter where she was, and was always reluctant to leave them behind. When they left Peoria, they were almost a quarter of a million dollars richer.

He and Etty were now Richard and Sarah Moore. Sarah's maiden name was Preston. John was John Martin. He liked it that he was able to keep the same first name. Rick, as he liked to be called, looked up his college records before he left Peoria. He had four semesters at Peoria community college with a 3.0 grade point average. He thought he might do better than that if he went to school in Tallahassee, which is where he had decided on. He was thinking that although he wouldn't have to work, he'd rather do something to keep busy. He couldn't see being a gambler for the rest of his life. The fact that Tallahassee had a university had factored into his choice of locating there.

Although Etty would have liked to stay in Peoria, Matt was reluctant to stay in the place that their identities originated. He felt that there was always a chance of meeting someone that had known the people whose identities had been usurped. There was always a chance, albeit slim that suspicions would be raised and Matt didn't want anyone poking around their past.

He also had John's scholastic records copied before leaving Peoria. He didn't want the school in Tallahassee contacting the one in Peoria. They might wonder why a dead kid was going back to high school.

When they were settled in Tallahassee, they registered John in high school. He was a month late registering and due to his new age, he skipped ahead a grade and was already a month behind in this semester. Rick had him handle the ball. He figured that if it worked anything like it had for him and Sarah, he wouldn't have any problem catching up. They explained to him that his fillings were going to fall out and he would lose all his scars. Sarah said he might even lose his birthmark. He did.

John's new birth date was the day before he was to start school. Rick bought him a bright red 65 Mustang convertible to celebrate. John thought he had died and gone to heaven. He was sure he would have the best set of wheels in his school and could hardly wait to show them off. John was thinking like a kid from Cholla. When he pulled into the parking lot at school, he couldn't believe his eyes. The lot was full of Mercedes, BMW's, Hummers and high-end cars of every kind. There wasn't a beat up pickup in the whole lot. When he approached the front entry, he couldn't believe the crowd. Never in his life had he been in a crowd of this size and at first, he found it frightening. It seemed to him that everyone was jostling for position and were all talking at the same time. He finally found his way to the office and was assigned classes. The counselor gave him a map with the layout of the school and said, "Don't lose that. You are going to need it for a while. Do you play sports?"

"I was quarterback of my football team at my last school."

"Well, I'll put you down for football, but I wouldn't expect to make quarterback real soon. We have one of the best in the state, you will be lucky to make the team. I'm not trying to discourage you, but we have a very good football team."

The next day, when John showed up for practice, the coach's first question was if he had played before. When he said he had the coach said, "What position?"

"Quarterback."

"Yeah sure, everyone's a quarterback."

He handed him a football and asked him if he could hit the goal post. John looked down field at the goal post and thought that has to be fifty yards. He didn't think anyone could throw a ball that far and hit an object as small as a goal post. He figured the coach didn't expect him to hit it he probably just wanted to see how good he could throw. He thought what the hell, I'll do my best. He set and threw a spiraling pass that to his surprise, hit the goal post at about head high.

"Holy shit!" I was just kidding, I didn't think you could throw a ball that far let alone hit anything. Where did you say you played?"

"I didn't, but it was in Illinois, Peoria Illinois."

He handed John another ball and told him to try again. John hit the post with three out of five throws, grazed it with one and was only off by inches with fifth. The current quarterback was watching and was afraid he was finished as quarterback. He had never seen anyone throw like that. As it turned out John not only could throw the ball and hit a target from a set position, but also running, off balance and even while falling. He could also run like the wind and catch anything that came close to him. The coach started setting up plays to determine just how talented this kid was.

By the end of practice, he was convinced that they were going to win the state championship this year. He had never seen a kid like this; he didn't think anyone had ever seen a kid like this. The coach's only regret was that he got him in his senior year. He was certain that this kid could have made the varsity team in the eighth grade.

John was just as surprised as the coach was. Back in Cholla he had been good, maybe even the best on his team, but he hadn't fooled himself. That was a small school, and he hadn't been even close to this good. As it turned out the quarterback had nothing to fear. The coach considered John way to good at running and catching to be wasted as a quarterback. It seemed that John had the ability to be going full speed in one direction and without hesitation be going just as fast in the opposite direction, making him nearly impossible to tackle.

Rick bought bought a two thousand square foot pastel green, stucco house with a two-car garage in a very nice neighborhood with a stream running through the back yard. He made a

security deposit contingent on Sarah's okay and got the keys. He drove her to the house and when he pulled into the drive, Sarah said, "What a beautiful house. Who lives here?"

Rick said, "You do if you want to."

Sarah let out a squeal, jumped from the car, ran up on the porch and tried to open the door.

"Rick, the door is locked."

"You live in the city now kid."

He unlocked the door and pushed it open. Sarah ran inside and ran from room to room like a kid in a candy store.

"Is it really ours Rick?!"

"Well we have to sign the papers but if you want it, it's yours."

She threw her arms around his neck and said, "I love it. I love you. It's perfect."

She ran back through the house opening cupboards and closets and then looked out the back sliders on to the lanai.

"Oh Matt, I mean Rick it's got a pool.

"I know and when John's in school, guess what were going to do in there?"

"I can hardly wait. Oh my God, look there are oranges in the back yard!"

"How about that?"

They were living in a rented apartment at the time and Rick said they could move in as soon as she picked out the furniture. Sarah said she wanted to move in immediately and worry about furniture later. Rick said they should at least have a bed. She pulled him to the master bedroom and made love to him on the light cream plush carpet. Afterward she said, "What do we need a bed for?"

"Sleeping."

Awhile later Rick said, "I think it's about time to eat."

"Order us a pizza please. I want to keep you naked."

"Have you no shame? We don't even own the place yet. Besides that, I couldn't get the pizza without opening the door and I draw the line at answering the door naked. I think I will just take you out."

Rick and Sarah were both the happiest they had ever been. The only fly-in-the-ointment was that Rick missed the ranch terribly and that he didn't much care for living in the city.

Rick was taking a few classes at The University of Florida and he occasionally went to a casino. Sarah had kept busy decorating the house and fixing the yard the way they wanted it. Sarah had asked if they could afford a yard man to help her with the heavy stuff and of course Rick told her they could afford anything she wanted.

She just looked in the want ads and called the first one she came to. He showed up in the worst pickup truck either one of them had ever seen. It had a sign hand painted on the door that said **Best Lawn Care**. Rick had his doubts. The little guy that got out of the truck wasn't much over five feet tall and skinny as a rail. Rick wondered if he could push an empty wheel barrow let alone a loaded one. He walked up to Sarah and asked, "You are to be señora Moore maybe yes? I am going to be José. I can do for you the work maybe yes."

"Yes."

Luckily, Rick, like a lot of people from the western states spoke some Spanish. Rick determined that he could start today and that his price was five dollars an hour plus material, but Sara insisted that they pay him ten dollars an hour. Rick said, "Uno memento por favor señor." and took Sarah aside.

He tried to explain that you usually had a person work for a while before you gave them a

raise, but she was adamant.

“Rick he can’t even eat on five dollars an hour just look at him.”

“I just thought that maybe we should find out if he’s even worth the five he’s asking, before we doubled his wage.”

Of course, Sarah won out and as it turned out he was a very hard worker and more adept than he appeared. Within a week, Sarah tried to raise his wage to fifteen per hour, but this time he refused.

“Señora es muy generoso, pero tú ya paga y tanto dinero.”

Sarah gave him a blank stare and he said, “Yo try again. Senora paga... pay José much money...too more, much.

Sarah went and got Rick to translate. She argued for some time but this time José couldn’t be swayed. Rick at last, told her that she was causing José a great deal of stress, and she finally gave up the argument. Sarah was very fond of José and she was still sure that he was barely scraping by. She figured that if he wouldn’t take more per hour she would just give him more hours. She kept him busy doing the essential and non-essential alike. Their house was soon the showplace of the neighborhood.

Sarah and Rick were early risers. They both enjoyed the cool mornings and soon were in the habit of walking around the neighborhood every morning with their coffee. Sometimes if they awoke extra early, they would jump in the car and drive to the gulf, about twenty-five miles away, and walk on the beach. Sarah would gather shells, and small pieces of driftwood, that she later scattered in her flowerbeds. Sometimes Sarah got the idea that things were too good to be true. She had trouble believing any one could be this happy for long.

One morning on the way back from their walk, she said, “I was born in Waco Texas.” but immediately regretted saying it.

“That’s nice.”

“No it’s not. It’s really not.”

After about ten minutes had passed, and they were almost back to the house Rick said, “Would you like to tell me about Waco?”

“No.” she replied to quickly and to harshly. She immediately regretted her response but said nothing

When she walked in the house, she had tears in her eyes. She turned her face from Rick and disappeared into the bathroom. Rick felt sorry for her, he knew she was hurting and like most men his first inclination was to fix it, but he had no idea what to do. That night in bed, just as Sarah was about to doze off she heard him whisper. “If you ever want to talk about your life before us I promise to be understanding.” She pretended to be asleep.

Sarah had lain awake for a very long time. She kept replaying the tape of her life repeatedly, like a broken record. Even after the rhythmic breathing beside her signaled Rick’s ascension into sleep, she continued to dredge up memories. Memories that she truly wanted to forget, but insured the exact opposite by constant review.

In the wee hours, she finally fell into a troubled sleep. She whimpered, muttered and at times, her extremities trembled as if she feared for her very life. She suddenly screamed and flailed her arm. Rick awoke as much from the blow to his chest as from the scream. He laid his hand on her stomach, and said, “It’s okay Sarah, it’s just a dream.”

He left his hand on her stomach and after a time she stopped trembling and returned to an uneasy sleep. Rick lay awake for some time wondering what sort of demons haunted his wife. Sarah awoke in the morning at her normal time. She was not refreshed and was nagged by

thoughts of unpleasant things and unhappy places.

Chapter Twelve

Sarah had been born Etty May Johansson. Both of her given names were due to her mother's inability to spell. Etty was supposed to be named for a famous singer of her mothers era. The women had not only misspelled the name, but mispronounced it so badly that no one

could have possibly made the connection. Etty's mother had been born to parents that saw no value in education and she had gone to school only when forced to by the authorities. She was the daughter of a Swedish father and an Irish mother. Etty favored her grandmother, a woman that she had never known. She had the red hair and green eyes associated with the Irish, and the fair complexion associated with the Swedish. She was a very pretty girl.

Until she was Thirteen Etty May lived in a trailer park in one of the very worst areas of Waco. The name park applied only to the fact that there were trailer homes parked in it. There was no flora save for a few scraggly weeds, and even they had to struggle for survival.

When it was dry dust covered everything, and when it rained the entire park became a quagmire. If it rained heavy for any length of time residents had to park along the bordering street and walk in. The kids playing in the park were always either covered with dust or mud depending on the weather.

Among a group of trailers that most people would have considered uninhabitable, theirs was the worst. The harsh Texas sandstorms had long ago removed most of the paint turning the trailer a motley combination of pastels with dull aluminum showing through. Where there had once been a porch, there was now only a precariously leaning stack of cinder block. Although seemingly impossible, the interior was even worse than the exterior. There was not a single clean dish in the kitchen where most of the space was taken up by empty beer cans, whisky bottles and pizza boxes. The meager furniture was vermin infested to the point that the only solution would be to burn it.

Having lived in squalor from birth, Etty was unaware of how dismal their living conditions were. She possessed a sunny disposition and was a happy child. As she grew older, she became aware that even in her destitute world most of the homes were better than hers. The other kids in the park dressed better than her and certainly had more playthings than she had. They were encouraged by their parents to shun her and took that as permission to be mean as only children can. She tired of attempting friendship and kept to herself. Having no outside influences to counter the lessons learned at home she lacked even a modicum of social graces.

Once she started school, her lack of upbringing soon got her in trouble. The first week of school, she was sent home for cussing. Her mother's boyfriend assured the principle that he would take care of the problem. His solution was to beat her with his belt all the while cussing her out. "What the fuck's wrong with you? Don't you know schools don't allow that kinda shit from little girls? What are you, stupid?"

Etty May was not stupid, and soon after starting school she came to understand that her life was far from normal. One of the first things she learned was that most people did not talk like her mother and her boyfriend, but unlike her mother she wanted to improve. She strived to do well in school and tried to model her speech after that of her teachers.

Near the end of the sixth grade Etty had her first period while in gym class. She was being jeered by some of her class mates when the gym teacher intervened. With a scathing scowl at Etty's antagonists, the teacher took her hand, and led Etty to her office

Etty, although frightened, and mortified nearly to tears, tried not to let it show. She hated to show weakness, especially in front of this teacher that she admired. It did not take the teacher long to realize that Etty had no idea what was happening to her. This teacher had been aware for some time that Etty needed advice on taking care of her self, but had been reluctant to broach the subject for fear of creating a wall between them. She now felt that she had no choice.

After explaining what was happening and providing her with a tampon, the teacher asked Etty to come back to her office after class. That afternoon, and over the next few weeks, she

taught Etty about personal hygiene. She showed Etty how to take care of her hair, gave her a hairbrush and other personal hygiene items that she paid for out of her on pocket.

Etty, although ignorant was far from stupid. She had been aware for some time that the rest of the world took more pride in their appearance than her family. She just had not quite known how to go about changing and up until now had known no one she could confide in.

Under this teacher's tutelage she was transformed into, if not a fashion plate, at least someone that was presentable.

Clean clothes was something that Etty had to attend to herself since the concept of personal hygiene was as foreign to her mother and her mother's boyfriend as were the concept of work for pay. Etty managed to improve her wardrobe somewhat by baby sitting, but more by theft. She kept what she had clean by washing them in the sink and hang them to dry in her room.

The theft bothered Etty somewhat, but she carried a chip on her shoulder and felt that the world owed her for the way it treated her.

She learned at a very young age to stay clear of her mother's boyfriend when he was drinking, which was most of the time. He was always mean but even more so when drunk. His name was Jack and if they had any money he and her mother would spend their time in the bars and Etty May would be free to do as she pleased. Unknown to Etty May, most of their small income came from Jack peddling her mother for what ever he could get, and when desperate he would sell her for booze. Although she did very little to take care of herself Etty's mother was basically a pretty woman.

Etty May didn't know who her father was and by the time she was ten she was pretty sure that her mother didn't know either. The strange thing was that years later she was trying to remember her mother's given name and couldn't. It occurred to her that her mother and Jack had no friends and she didn't remember anyone ever calling her mother by her given name. None of the neighbors visited as they did in the other trailers. Etty May could not remember having seen anyone in their trailer, ever. Moreover, she couldn't recall any of the neighbors speaking to her mother. She didn't even recall Jack calling her by her given name. He just called her bitch when he was mad and Baby when he wasn't. Etty May thought she must have known her name at one time, but for the life of her she couldn't remember.

When Etty May was twelve years old her breasts began to develop and like most young girls she was quite taken with them. She was in the bathroom one afternoon admiring herself in the mirror when the door opened, and Jack stood there leering at her. She covered her chest with her arms and told him to get out. He said, "Don't be bashful. Let me have a look."

He stepped forward, grabbed her arms and yanked them down to her sides. When she screamed, he let go of one arm and hit her so hard that her legs went weak. He picked her up by the waist and sat her on the sink. He put a massive hand over one small breast and covered the other with his mouth. Etty had never been so frightened in her life. She felt bile rising in her throat and fought the impulse to puke. Just then, they heard car tires crunching the gravel in the drive. Jack straightened up and said, "If you know what's good for you, you'll keep you're fuckin mouth shut."

He walked out and closed the door behind him.

After Jack left the room she jumped off the counter, leaned over the toilette and vomited until there was nothing left in her stomach. She sat on the floor quietly sobbing for a long time. When she finally came out of the bathroom her mother looked at her and said, "What happened to you?"

Etty answered, "I fell down. I'm fine. I don't feel well. I'm going too my room."

Her mother looked at her funny, but didn't say anything. After that, Etty made sure she was never in the trailer with Jack alone. If her mother went out, she would leave immediately and make sure her mom was back before she returned. In the end, it didn't matter. A year and a half later, he came into her room at four thirty in the morning and raped her. It was a hot Texas night and air conditioning was one of the many conveniences their trailer lacked. Her room didn't even have a fan. She had the lone window open, but there wasn't the slightest hint of a breeze, so she slept in the nude and without covers.

She awoke to the stench of the alcohol on his breath and his weight heavy on her body. She tried to scream but he clamped his hand over her mouth until she couldn't breathe. She was sure she would suffocate. In desperation, she bit down hard on his hand and tasted blood in her mouth. He rose up and hit her in the face as hard as he could. When she came to he was gone. She went to the bathroom, got in the shower and in spite of the heat turned the water to as hot as it would go. She collapsed on the floor of the shower and stayed there until the water turned cold. Her mother could hear the shower and was sure she knew why, but couldn't bring herself to go to her daughter. The shower finally stopped and there was only the sound of Jack's snoring.

When Etty May could finally bring herself to get out of bed the following morning, it was almost noon and her mother was sitting at the kitchen table drinking whisky straight from the bottle. Etty May stood there looking at her with tears running down her face. Her mother finally looked up at her and said, "There's nothing I can do."

Etty May went back in her room. She threw what few clothes she had in a paper bag and walked out. On her way through the kitchen, her mother stopped her and handed her a wad of bills. It amounted to less than fifty dollars.

Etty May had no idea what to do or where to go. She walked around for over an hour and then at her wits end went to see June, one of her few friends. June had no more of an idea than Etty what she should do.

"You can't stay here. My Dad would never stand for it. He told me to stay away from you. He said your mom's a...never mind. Look I have this friend, my dad doesn't know about him, anyways he's got his own place. He might let you crash there for a few days until you figure out what to do."

June's friend lived in an apartment over a garage. The garage faced on an alley behind the house of the widow lady that rented it out. The widows husband had died years ago and the garage was her only source of income other than social security. In addition to the apartment, she rented the parking space underneath to a neighbor that tinkered with cars. She was a crotchety old woman, but paid little attention to her renters as long as she got her rent on time.

The place amounted to a bedroom with a kitchenette in one corner and a small bath with a shower. It wasn't much, but it was nicer than the trailer. June's friend, Bobby Hanson, looked her over and asked how old she was. She lied and said sixteen.

"Christ, I could go to jail. You look about thirteen. What the hell happened to your face?"

With tears running down her face, she told him. Bobby was far from well off and had never been accused of being generous but non-the-less he felt sorry for this pretty little girl.

"Okay you can stay a few days, but you'll have to find something else soon."

Within a week, they were sleeping together and June was no longer speaking to her. Bobby was twenty-five, good looking and had a nice sense of humor. For the first three months, things went fairly well. Bobby had a job as a dishwasher at a small diner within walking distance of the apartment. In spite of being drunk most of the time, he treated Etty fairly well. His drinking didn't concern Etty much since she grew up in a house where that was the norm and she didn't

spend much time contemplating her lot in life.

She spent most of her time while Bobby was at work reading movie star magazines and romance novels. Cleaning the house didn't take up a lot of time and she wasn't much of a housekeeper anyway. Although she had begun washing occasionally, at the prodding of her gym teacher, Bobby had to point out to her that most people bathed daily. Once she learned the joy of being clean, she became almost fanatic about it. Although during the first thirteen years of life she had taken an all over bath maybe once a month, she now found herself bathing twice a day and even more on hot days.

Things were as good for her as they had ever been and if she had taken time to think about the future, she probably would have thought they were as good as they ever would be. However, things were about to get a whole lot worse.

It started when Bobby dropped a tray of dishes at work. He had taken a pint of gin to work with him and consumed most of it within the first hour of his shift. The boss would probably have let the broken dishes go if he hadn't smelled the booze on his breath. He may have let him off even then, if this had been the first time. However, he'd caught him drinking on the job before and by this point he had just about all he wanted of Bobby.

The first week after getting fired Bobby sat at home drinking and watching television. Etty didn't find this strange since that was how things had been all of her life. However, when the money ran out and Bobby couldn't find work he started getting mean. The first thing he did was start complaining about the way she kept house and then went on to telling her how inadequate she was in bed.

Two months after he was fired, the landlady came to the door while Bobby was out and told Etty that if she didn't get the rent by the end of the week they would be evicted. When Bobby came home, she told him what the landlady had said. After ten minutes of ranting and cussing, he left the apartment and slammed the door behind him. He came back drunk two hours later and told her that there was a man on the porch that he wanted her to be nice to. She said, "I'm always nice to your friends Bobby. Why is he on the porch?"

"He's a john you dumb bitch. He paid me to go to bed with you."

"I can't do that Bobby!"

"Then get your ass out and go back home."

"Please Bobby, you know I can't do that. Please don't make me do this."

"I don't have any choice and neither do you. It's this or we are going to be on the street."

"Please Bobby, I'll do anything. Just please don't make me do this."

"Fuck! You lay on your ass around here all day while I bust my ass to make us a livin, and the first fuckin thing I ask you to do to help out, you start bitchin."

"I'll do anything, anything Bobby. Maybe I could get a job. I beg you don't make me do this."

"Shut up and get in the bed room, and wipe your face. No one wants some weepy bitch."

It may have been him using the term for her that Jack had always used when referring to her mother, or maybe she just saw the handwriting on the wall. Whatever it was all the fight went out of her. She turned, walked into the bedroom and started to undress.

Bobby sat on the front step drinking beer and smoking while she was with the john. The next day Bobby was apologetic, but it didn't matter. Nothing he said could ever make Etty feel again like she did before he'd come home with that john. Although Bobby was apologetic, he continued to bring home johns. So, like mother like daughter, she went to doing what desperate women have done since time began.

However, within a few months the old woman that owned the garage caught on to what they were doing and once again showed up while Bobby was out. She told Etty that she wasn't renting her garage out as a warehouse.

"You've got three days before the rent is due, if you're not out by then I'm calling the police."

When she told Bobby, he raved and ranted but eventually decided he'd had enough of Waco anyway and they hit the road. Etty May begged him to let her stop turning tricks and much to her surprise he agreed. While she was turning tricks their sex life was almost nonexistent, but after she quit it picked back up. Etty didn't know if his lack of interest in her was because he was ashamed of what he was making her do or because he found her disgusting because of it.

For the first two weeks after they left Waco, they hitchhiked and slept in fields at night. Bobby picked up bottles for the deposit and managed to steal enough food to keep them alive until he got his first job. That job didn't last long and neither did the subsequent ones. After they left Waco, they traveled all over the country doing everything from washing dishes to picking crops. Etty May even worked as a roofer once for about a year. They lived pretty well that year and would have lived better if not for Bobby's drinking habit. That year they were able to buy a car and although it was Thirteen years old, it was transportation.

It had been twelve years since they left Waco when she realized she was pregnant. Etty had long ago decided that she was incapable of having children. She and Bobby had been together for many years and she had never used birth control nor, to her knowledge, had Bobby. However, the fact remained, she was pregnant and while Bobby seemed to take it in stride Etty was scared to death.

Etty and Bobby had lived in almost every state in the country and Bobby had had too many jobs to keep track of. They had even tried prospecting in the Yukon for a time. They lived in a tent until it got too cold for them to take it anymore and then hitchhiked back down to the lower forty eight. They hadn't made enough money panning to buy a bus ticket and they had long ago lost their car to Bobby's need for drinking money. Bobby had a couple pretty good jobs over the years but something always went wrong, usually something related to his drinking.

For all those years, although Bobby drank when ever they had money and Etty had grown up in a house where drinking was an every day occurrence, Etty didn't drink. Contrary to her Iris roots, she never developed a habit. She would have an occasional beer and she liked beer but she never became addicted.

After the baby came, Bobby really tried to do better but he couldn't seem to get over the need for alcohol. The truth was he didn't believe that things would ever be any better no matter how hard he tried. His self-esteem had hit rock bottom the night he brought the first john home to Etty and it hadn't improved much since. He really did love Etty, but feared things would never be the same between them again. He thought that she would leave him if she could see anyway out. However, if she hadn't been able to make it on her own before the baby, she had no chance now. What neither of them grasped was that without Bobby's habit to support, she could have easily done better by her self.

They were in Maine when Bobby saw an ad in a paper he'd picked up in a truck stop. The ad was for a ranch hand on a spread near Cholla, New Mexico. He called the number listed and was promised the job. Bobby sold his gun, the only thing of value he had in the world to get the money to go. He had bought the pistol in Alaska for what reason Etty could never understand. She accused him of being afraid of claim jumpers, in a joking way, but was more upset about it than she let on. Why a man would spend their last red cent on something they had absolutely no

use for was beyond her.

The sale of the gun and what they had in their pockets, got them a two hundred dollar car and enough gas to get to Cholla. When they got there, the job had been filled. The rancher was totally indifferent to Bobby's complaint of traipsing over half the country on his promise. The rancher said he had got tired of waiting for him to show up, although it had only been five days. Bobby pointed out that he had told him that it would take them a few days to get there. The rancher was unimpressed. Bobby figured one of the locals answered the ad after him, and the rancher decided to take the local talent instead.

There was a small restaurant for sale in Cholla that Bobby had noticed on the way through town and he figured nothing ventured nothing gained. They found out from the guy at the Conoco station that a bank in Albuquerque held the paper on the restaurant. They called and then drove over and talked to them. The bank had held the paper on restaurant for over a year and they were desperate to unload it. They had just about made up their mind that they would have to write it off when Bobby came along. So, Bobby and Etty May were in the restaurant business. Their son John had just turned five.

For the first two months, the three of them slept on the floor in the storage room, but Bobby was determined to make it work this time. He stopped drinking and saved as much over expenses as he possibly could. As soon as Bobby had enough saved, he rented the trailer out on SR 247. They settled down and for awhile they were happy, at least happier than they had been up to then. Their son started school and made friends that he brought around to the restaurant. Etty would give them sodas and occasionally ice cream.

Etty and Bobby knew everyone in town and were respected by the few other business people. They had made a few friends around their age and Etty started thinking that her life was going to work out okay after all, but as usual in her life, it just wasn't to be.

Two years after opening the restaurant Bobby was diagnosed with colon cancer and her small world once again got hard.

Bobby was sick for six months before he died, and for the last month, he was either in the hospital, or at home in bed. Etty had hired a drifter to cook and handle the diner when she couldn't be there. She was desperate to keep the restaurant going. It was the only thing she had going for her, and her only way of supporting herself and John. It was all she could do to keep the bank at bay and the food service had cut her off completely. She was forced to go to Albuquerque and buy food at Costco to keep the restaurant open. She was certain that if the bank thought they could find another buyer they would have foreclosed.

Chapter Thirteen

She would have lost the business despite her best efforts had it not been for the town's people. It was a small town and everyone was well aware of her circumstances. Every business in town had a donation jar near the cash register. Friends and acquaintances alike responded with various fund drives. However, even with this kindness, by the time Bobby died she was destitute and deeply in debt.

Once Bobby was gone, Etty soon discovered that married women didn't care to be friends with single women. They especially didn't care to socialize with single women that their husbands found attractive. Since the majority of friends they had made since moving to Cholla were married couples, Etty no longer had what she would consider friends. She had many acquaintances and the people that came in the diner treated her well, but she no longer had what she would consider girl friends.

Moreover, after Bobby died some of the men that had been their friends seemed to want to be more than friends, but after she reminded them that they still had wives they backed off. Although she tended to flirt with the customers, she had no boyfriends in the traditional sense and she just considered the flirting good business. A while after Bobby died, she tried dating but it never worked out. Etty was looking for a husband and father for her son, but it seemed the men she met were looking for a one-night stand. She couldn't stand the thought of becoming known as the town trollop so she just stopped dating. Truth is there were very few eligible men of her age in the tiny town of Cholla anyway.

She had settled into working at the restaurant and raising her son who was the apple of her eye. She helped with his homework, attended all school functions and when he started playing football she never missed a game. She was determined that her son would get an education and have a better life than she had. However, after Bobby died she couldn't see, for the life of her, how she was going to manage that.

Etty could never tell Rick about her former life. She thought she may someday be able to tell him about portions of it, but she wasn't sure she could tell him about the rape and knew for certain she could never tell him that she had been a prostitute. Etty had once thought how wonderful it would be if you could just delete parts of your life. Sort of like with a memory chip, just delete files in the middle and gain additional room at the end for new information. She hoped that maybe it had happened now. She had more room for memory space at the end, thanks to the ball, but what she couldn't figure out was how to erase the files she no longer wanted.

She knew Rick loved her and she was sure that he would forgive her past, but she was afraid of what it would never be the same again. Rick had grown up on the ranch with two parents that loved him and had everything a person needs for a good life. To Etty it was as if he had led the American dream. He had never been far from the ranch except for the two years he spent in the army, and life on the ranch to her way of thinking, must have been idyllic. She was sure that nothing bad had happened to him in his entire life. There was no way he could comprehend what it was like growing up in her situation or what it did to you.

Another part of her not wanting him to know about her former life was that she was sure it would hurt him. She knew him well enough to know that he would spend a lot of time thinking about what she had been through and fretting over it. He would want to do something to make it all better and knowing that there was nothing he could do, would eat at him. The last thing in the world Sarah wanted was to hurt Rick.

Chapter fourteen

Although Sarah was very happy In Tallahassee, Rick was increasingly restless. The city and its closeness wore on him. He had spent his life in wide-open spaces where you couldn't see the road let alone your neighbor. The main thing however, that bothered him about Tallahassee was the traffic. He was not used to driving constantly surrounded by traffic and it irritated him. He didn't have the patience for sitting idle in a line of cars, and was finding it increasingly difficult to tolerate the rudeness of many drivers. It was getting to where, if possible, he timed his travels

to coincide with times when traffic was lighter.

Another thing was the air. Although the air quality in Tallahassee was good compared with many cities, it certainly didn't compare with the air quality experienced when you lived fifteen miles from your nearest neighbor, and a hundred miles or better from industry of any size. He was young again and the air didn't exactly bother him so much as it annoyed him. He was used to the fact that in the desert if you detected an odor, you usually could identify it. Here his nostrils were constantly assailed by odors that he could no more identify that he could have read the Koran in its original inscription.

Rick had become aware that Florida was a major grower of livestock, both cattle and horses. He had spent time on the internet and found that a great deal of cattle ranching took place just to the south of Tallahassee and that Marian county was renowned for its horse ranches. To satisfy his desire for open spaces and ranching genre Rick had taken to going for long rides that invariably wound up in that area. He soon found though, that Florida horse ranches had about as much resemblance to a New Mexico ranch as a zoo did to the African savanna.

They had made a few friends in the neighborhood and Rick had gone golfing a few times with Bob from across the street. Golfing was something he had never done in his life, but he seemed to have knack. He enjoyed the sport somewhat, but would have rather been horseback riding.

One day in May when they had been in their neighborhood for almost a year, Sarah was giving a cookout on a Saturday afternoon. Rick had gone to the bathroom and Sarah was in the kitchen getting another round of drinks. She was standing near the open window between the kitchen and the lanai when she heard her neighbor Sandra, from across the street say, "Something needs to be done about that wetback parking that piece of crap he calls a pickup in front of our houses."

Emily, Sarah's friend from next door said, "Shh, Sarah will hear you. Besides I don't see what's to be done, she thinks the world of that Mexican."

"I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to call immigration. I'm sure he doesn't have a green card. Christ he doesn't even speak English."

Rick was on his way back from the bathroom and just stepping into the lanai when Etty said to Sandra, "Get out of my house and don't come back."

Emily said, "Sarah you can't mean that, Sandra's one of your best friends."

"I'm not friends with bigots especially mean bigots. If you agree with her you can leave too."

"Bob said, "For God's sake Rick do something. Talk to your wife."

"Well Bob I'm not sure what you expect me to say to her, I wasn't here when this fracas started and I have no idea what's going on. However, I can assure you of one thing, if there are sides to be taken I'm on her side. This is her house if she wants your wife to leave I would suggest she go."

"Well! If you two think more of that ratty little spic than you do us then I guess we better leave."

"Careful Bob, up to now you were being asked to leave, one more remark like that and I will drag you're unconscious fanny out of here and dump you on the curb."

Bob's face reddened and he opened his mouth to speak, but after a look into Rick's eyes, he changed his mind. He instead turned to Sandra and said, "Let's go." As they walked out the muscles in Rick's arms and shoulders relaxed and his adrenaline level began to drop.

After everyone had gone, Rick opened a cold beer and said, "What was that all about?"

After Sarah filled him in, he said, "I was pretty sure Bob was a bigot. He never said anything

blatant but every now and then one of his remarks struck me as a bit wrong. I just put it off as his trying to be macho. Well I guess we're better off knowing."

Sarah said, "We've got to find out if José has a green card. That bigoted little bleached-blond snob will call immigration now for sure."

Rick went in and called José's number. He talked in broken Spanish for quite awhile. When he hung up Sarah said, "What?"

"He doesn't have a green card."

"What are we going to do?"

"In the morning we are going to pick him up and go to the immigration office. He said he would need someone to sign papers guaranteeing responsibility for him in order to get a green card. He didn't want us to do that but I convinced him it would be all right."

After that incident, Rick and Sarah started spending time driving through Florida getting a feel for the state. Rick felt that much of Florida was like Roswell, only with water but he was taken with the Crystal River area, its beautiful bay and its relatively vacant surrounding countryside. Etty fell in love with the old downtown area that partly reminded her of a small southwestern town while other parts seemed almost Cajon with their clapboard fronts and second story porches.

She also loved King's Bay with its surrounding eclectic mix of mansions, quaint little shops and rustic boat piers. They were out on the deck of one of the bayside restaurants, having lunch when a salty looking crabbing boat with rust running down its sides docked, and unload its catch. Sarah watched fascinated as the crew sorted the crabs and stacked the pots. This was hard and dirty work, but it, like everything about the sea, struck her as romantic and exciting. As they were finishing lunch, she looked at Rick and asked, "Would you like to live here?"

"It sure beats Tallahassee."

"I'm kind of getting down on Tallahassee myself these days."

John was in college in Ann Arbor Michigan studying structural engineering. He had gotten a full Football scholarship to the University of Michigan. Rick had rented a U-Haul to take him and his belongings to Ann Arbor. He was living on campus for now, but was hoping to pledge a fraternity. He called home as often as could be expected and seemed to be happy.

Rick and Sarah decided that they would put their house for sale and start looking for a house on King's Bay.

Rick thought that once they were moved he would open a real estate office and start looking for some land near by. Rick had gone to school in Tallahassee. He was now licensed by the state of Florida as a realtor and as a financial advisor. He figured what with the real estate market in Florida, having a real estate office would give them some income or in the vernacular of his current profession, "cash flow" and also give him something to do.

Although he had no intention of living on a ranch, since Etty loved having neighbors, he thought it would be nice to own some land again. He really missed riding and having acreage would give him a way to get off by himself occasionally and do something on land that he owned. He also liked the idea of living on the water and owning a boat. He had never been on a boat let alone owned one.

"Have you ever been on a boat Sarah?"

"I worked as a maid on a river boat, a paddle wheeler, on the Mississippi river one summer.

"That sounds like fun."

"It wasn't really. A lot of the rich people treated me like dirt and some of the men thought maid meant slut."

“I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago and doesn’t much matter anymore.... Rick, are we rich?”

“I guess by most folks’ standards we are.”

“If I ever start acting like I think I’m better than someone just because I’m better off than them will you smack me?”

“Well Sarah, I’m not exactly sure I could smack you. Would it be okay if I just scolded you a little?”

“Rick I love you so much.”

“Me you too Sarah, me you too.”

“Rick, do you mind my asking what your ranch was worth?”

“No, I don’t mind, it was your ranch anyway. I would guess more-or-less five million.”

“Wow. You have got to be kidding and you were just going to give it to me.?”

“It wasn’t going to be any use to me dead.”

“And we just walked away from five million dollars?”

“I didn’t see any choice at the time, besides, I never thought of the ranch in terms of money. It was just the land, and I never even thought of it as my land, it was our land. Mine, my fathers and all the Macklin’s before him. It was a part of us, how we thought and who we were, however, you can bet I racked my brain for a long time trying to figure out how to get the money out of it.

“I guess this is the first that I have realized the extent of what you gave up. It was so easy for me. I didn’t have anything to give up; I’ve never had anything to give up.”

“Everyone has something to give up and I’m sure you gave up quite a bit.”

“I’m so sorry Rick.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for Sarah...Sarah, I am happier than I have ever been in my life. If this hadn’t happened, I could very well be dead by now so I didn’t really lose anything. I gained a life with the most beautiful, kindest, gentlest, most giving, smartest, sexiest.....

“Keep going, don’t quit now. It was just getting interesting.”

That night, lying in bed Sarah said, “I know how you can make money with the ball.”

“Oh yeah, how’s that?”

“Sex therapy. You could advertise to help people whose libido has gone south, or for those that never had much of a sex drive to start with, but want one. That thing has got to be the best aphrodisiac ever known to man.”

“Won’t they wonder why their all of a sudden young again?”

“You could take only patients between eighteen and twenty-five.”

“That might kind of upset some of the old folks that want to be horny again and won’t the young ones be a tad suspicious when their teeth come back and they get a build like a model. They might even grow missing digits or get their eyesight back.”

“Rick, you’re impossible. I’m beginning to think you don’t want to get rich from this thing.”

“I think I’ve already gotten rich from it. In fact I think I may be the richest man alive.”

“I hope you understand that I was just kidding. I feel the same way as you. I don’t see how I could possibly be any better off than I am right now.”

“I’m glad that you feel that way. As far as the sex therapy goes, I’m not sure the world is ready for a whole population that is as preoccupied as we are with sex.”

“I guess yo might be right, besides there could be a baby boom the like of which has never been seen.”

Rick and Etty had into the habit of having long talks before they went to sleep at night. For

one thing they very much enjoyed talking to each other and secondly they did not seem to require nearly as much sleep as they had before the ball.

They stayed at a small motel in the old section of Crystal River while they looked for a house. They would get up early and walk down to the docks with their coffee, and watch the sea birds. Occasionally they would be rewarded with the sighting of a manatee or dolphin. They spent some time driving around the countryside looking at vacant land. Before they bought a house, they found an eight hundred plus acre tract of land just north of Crystal River for sale. About one hundred acres was what they would consider jungle. The rest was pastureland and up to the time the owner died, that's how it had been used.

The son, and only heir, lived in New York City, worked for an ad agency making a six-figure salary and had no desire to return to cracker Florida. He came back and buried his father next to his mother. Immediately following the funeral, he sold off the stock to a cattle company and went back to New York. He let his broker sell the house along with ten acres to a couple from Connecticut for a winter home. The realtor told Rick that he had been trying to move the acreage for over a year and was ready to deal. They made an offer and although the realtor said, it was ridiculously low, it was accepted without even a counter offer. Rick paid cash and took possession in thirty-six days. They knew that a portion of the land fronted The Gulf of Mexico but they had not seen all of the property since a portion of it was so thickly overgrown that it was difficult to penetrate.

Chapter fifteen

Shortly after buying this acreage, they had bought a house on the Crystal River. They had not closed on the house on the river when they decided to do some exploring. They hadn't seen what was in the jungle area of their property and were getting curious.

One morning while having their usual coffee down by the docks, Rick said, "Let's put on our boots and jeans and go hiking in the jungle."

"I don't know Rick, I've never been in a large woods, let alone a jungle and I hear they have poisonous snakes in Florida."

"Well that settles it, were going. This is the first thing I've known of that you haven't already done."

"What about the snakes?"

"As far as I know, they have snakes everywhere, besides we'll wear our boots, and I'll take my pistol."

They called this part of their property the jungle, only because it looked to them like something out of a Tarzan movie. Although they didn't know it, many of the Tarzan movies had been filmed a short distance from their property at Silver Springs, near Ocala.

They had been fighting their way through brush and vines for an hour when they came to a clearing and sat down to rest. They were soaking wet with sweat and Rick was starting to rethink the wisdom of this trek. The vines were so thick and tangled in places that you had to backtrack to find an alternate route. Even the palms were often growing so close together that all you could do is go around them.

After they caught their breath and started looking around Rick said, "This isn't a clearing, it's a road."

"It doesn't look like any road I've ever seen."

"I grant you it hasn't been used in a long time, but it's a road. I doubt if it has been used in twenty years, but it is a road and roads always lead to something so lets see where it goes, at least the walking will be easier."

Rick's misunderstanding of how fast things grow in Florida led him to miss how recently the road had been used by a good ten years.

They followed the path and came to a small one-bedroom house set beside a very large spring or series of springs that fed a small river. The cottage wasn't locked, and they figured it was theirs

anyway so they went inside. The interior was a disaster. It looked like teenagers had used it for many years as a combination party house and love nest.

It consisted of a medium sized living area with a large opening on one side to a kitchen. On the backside of the living room was a door that led to a large bedroom. One side of the bedroom consisted of glass sliders that opened on to a veranda over looking the spring. There was a wide covered porch across the front of what they soon came to think of as the cabin. The porch faced the gulf about a thousand feet to the west. Due to the jungle however, the only view from the porch was trees and a portion of the river. The entire interior was strewn with trash including numerous condoms. Rick said, "It's nice to see the kids are practicing safe sex."

Sarah said, "Yuck." Then she said, "Rick it's perfect."

"Well, I don't think I'd go that far. It needs a lot of work and all of the furniture needs to be burned. God only knows what's living in it and I wouldn't let Toby sleep on that bed. The house is wood frame. It might have termites."

"Rick stop being such a killjoy, I love it. Look at the view of the spring and river. If they knew this was here they would have charged you another hundred thousand."

"You may be right. I would certainly think the man that sold it would have known. I wonder how the kids got in here. They sure didn't come in the way we did. Let's go look around."

They followed the stream to the gulf about a thousand feet from the cottage. It wasn't easy walking as the jungle grew up to the edge of the river and was extremely over grown. It took them an hour to get to the gulf and back.

"Well this is how they got in. It looks like you could run a small boat up to the cottage without any trouble at all. Were going to have to post the property and I'll see if I can rig some kind of barrier across the river with a lock on it."

The original rancher had built the cabin for his wife as a birthday gift. She had discovered the spring on one of her nature hikes, and had fallen in love with it. The cabin had been built forty years ago, but hadn't been used since before the rancher's wife died ten years ago. The rancher's wife had been an amateur artist and love painting the spring and surrounding area. About a year after the woman died, a curious teenager ran his boat up the river and he too fell in love with it albeit for a different reason. It was evident even then that the cabin wasn't in use, of course that soon changed once the young explorer spread the word.

The teen population couldn't have dreamed of a better place to party. It was so isolated that they could not possibly make enough noise to give themselves away. It soon became not only the favorite party spot, but also the preferred lover's lane. When the young man discovered the cabin, the road from the cabin to the ranch house was already becoming overgrown and it wasn't long before it would be unusable.

Palms and citrus trees surrounded the cottage. Even with the beer cans, bottles, assorted snack wrappers and unidentifiable trash, it was obvious that this had once been a well-landscaped yard. It was only a little over three two hundred feet into the jungle from the cleared pasture land but was completely hidden until you were right on top of it. The spring was about thirty feet wide and the stream it fed was only slightly narrower.

Once they got back to the cabin, they were even more soaked with sweat than they had been, if that's possible. They stripped down to take a dip in the spring to wash off the sweat. They hung up their sweaty clothes to dry while they cooled off in the spring.

They walked over to the spring and Sarah let out a whoop. There were four manatees swimming in the pool.

The spring and stream were so clear that the stream appeared to be about two feet deep but in

reality was more than ten feet deep. The pool around the spring sloped off fast from a few inches at the edge. Although the pool surrounding spring also appeared very shallow, it was in excess of forty feet deep and the crevice that the flow spang from was much deeper than that. There was a limestone ledge about four feet wide on one side approximately three feet under the surface. They later discovered that this made a perfect spot for bathing, or just wading and watching the manatee. They soon learned that manatees are not afraid of people. Having no natural enemies has made them seem almost tame and Sarah soon discovered the joy of swimming with them and feeding them lettuce.

Neither of them had seen anything like this and considered it unique although in reality the area surrounding Kings Bay had many such springs. The crystal river was fed by springs much like this one, as were many of the canals in the area. It was the reason for the wintertime manatee population that brought most of the tourist trade to the area.

“Rick if we hadn’t already bought the place on the river I would say we should move in here.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Maybe some day we will, but for right now we have a very nice place and it would take a lot of time and money to make this spot habitable.

I think for now I would like to keep this place our little secret. If we use the stream as our main access to the cabin so that we don’t create a road, it’s unlikely that anyone would stumble across it. I am going to post the entire property for hunting and trespassing as soon as I can. That should keep most honest people out.”

The first thing Rick did was build a floating gate across the stream, about a hundred feet from the gulf with a padlock and a no trespassing signs to keep out the kids. He also posted no trespassing signs across the portion of their property that fronted on the gulf. He then set about cleaning up the yard and flowerbeds but soon decided it would take more time and work than he wanted to expend.

The yard alone must have contained hundreds of discarded beer cans and bottles, besides other trash. He discussed it with Sarah and then called José and talked to him about the problem. José felt so indebted to them that he put his business in Tallahassee on hold and dropped everything to come and help them. He wound up moving into the cabin for over a month. In that time, he not only painted the cabin inside and out, but also got the yard looking good and cleaned out the flower and shrubbery beds. He also built a nice little dock on the edge of the spring.

While José was working on the cabin and grounds, Rick and Sarah cleaned out the spring. Over the years, the kids had thrown so much trash in the spring that the bottom resembled a farm dump. Sarah and Rick took lessons from one of the many dive shops in Crystal River, bought equipment and spent hours diving e spring until it was pristine.

José had no sooner finished the painting than Sarah started moving furniture in. They floated many things in on their deck boat, but most of the building supplies, furniture and larger items were trucked in by José. Rick seemed almost paranoid about not creating a discernable drive to the cottage. He had instructed José to use a different route across the pasture every time he came to the cabin to avoid creating a road.

Chapter sixteen

The day José finished work on the cabin Rick presented him with a new ford pickup as a

bonus. Although José protested vehemently Rick stood his ground and eventually José capitulated. He explained to José about not wanting strangers on the property and how much both he and Sara appreciated him dropping everything and putting his life on hold to help them out. By the time he finished work on the cottage, José had fallen in love the crystal river area. He decided to move his lawn service business there. By that time, Rick had opened his real estate office and with his recommendations and word of mouth, José's business was soon doing very well. He in fact was doing better than he ever had in Tallahassee although Chrystal River had a much smaller population. José expanded his business to include light construction and added two employees. He also made friends with other Spanish-speaking people in the area and found that he was much happier here than he had ever been in Tallahassee. Of course, to José, the major draw in Crystal River was that Rick and Sara were there.

As work on the cottage progressed they closed on the river house and prepared to move in. Sarah had fallen in love with the area surrounding the house on the river even before they had seen the house. The route the realtor chose in taking them to look at the property was along a curved street lined by giant Live Oak trees dripping with Spanish moss. Sarah oohed and aahed all the way to the house, and when they turned in the drive Rick thought she was going to pee her pants. He leaned over and whispered in her ear, "Every time you say ooh you add a thousand dollars to the price."

"Oops. Sorry."

They sat in front of a beautiful wrought iron gate festooned with enameled Great Snowy Egrets in full mating plumage. The agent got out and walked to the gate. He took out a sheet of paper, consulted it and punched a number into a key pad mounted beside the gate latch and the gate swung open. There was a stucco wall across the front yard and along the sides. The drive was made of multi colored pastel bricks and the front yard was filled with palms and live oak trees. There were azalea bushes along both sides of the yard and a plethora of multi colored bougainvillea covering the front wall.

The house was low and long made of stucco and painted a very pale peach with coins and shutters in coral. The roof was red tile and it was obvious that this was an older house even though the surrounding homes were fairly new. Beside the driveway gate was a smaller gate that accessed a walk made of the same pastel brick. They drove to the house, got out and walked up an enclosed entryway that was floored with the same pastel bricks as the drive and walkway. The realtor took the key out of a key box and opened the front door that was solid polished cypress approximately five feet wide and curved across the top. The large entry way was floored with the same polished cypress that the door was constructed of.

Sarah managed to hold her tongue as they were shown the rest of the house until they came to the lanai with its enclosed pool and patio area overlooking a magnificent dock. She let out a little scream and ran to the dock to look at the river. As a realtor himself, Rick was well aware of the bartering position his wife's reaction to the house had put him in. He was also aware though that the price of houses in Florida had sky rocketed over the past five years and rightly figured that the present owners had paid only a smidgen of their asking price. Rick thought it possible that although the owner may be aware of what the market value was, he may also consider it ridiculously inflated and therefore may be in a little open to haggling. Rick was also aware that property wasn't selling all that well right now and felt for that reason he may have some bargaining power regardless of Sarah's reaction to the place. He also knew of course, that he was going to pay whatever he had to, to get it.

Not being on King's Bay undoubtedly shaved at least a hundred thousand off the price

although they were only about ten minutes from the bay by boat and that was a plus. They had sold the house in Tallahassee for twice what they paid for it but it still didn't come near what this one cost.

The house had come with a boat and they could have bought the furnishings for a song. The woman's husband had died and she was moving back north to be near her children. Sarah however, preferred her furniture so the woman had an estate sale. They did buy all of her appliances however. It seemed silly to pay to have the appliances in Tallahassee moved and they figured the house would sell better with them included.

The day they moved in, within minutes of the moving van leaving an alarm went off somewhere in the house. The alarm only sounded for a few seconds and within minutes there was a knock at the door. When Sarah opened the door there was a nice looking lady that appeared about fifty standing there holding a cake.

"I won't keep you, I know you're busy. I live next door and just wanted to welcome you to the neighborhood."

"Nonsense come in. We were just taking a break."

As they walked in the kitchen Sarah said, "This is my husband Rick, and I'm Sarah."

"My, what a handsome one he is."

"Don't I know it?"

"My name is Dolly, like the singer but without the boobs."

Sarah liked her immediately. Rick said, "Would you like a drink, if it's not too early?"

"I've never been a clock watcher. I'd love a beer if you have one."

Dolly was five feet three and slightly over weight. She had been a very pretty woman in her youth and though no longer a girl, retained her good looks.

Dolly spent the next hour drinking their beer and filling them in on all the neighborhood gossip. She also told them that her husband and her were retired and were snowbirds. They also had a house in London, Ontario. They had decided on Crystal River because her husband liked to fish. Rick said, "You must have retired early. You don't look a day over forty."

"Well aint you the one? Sarah you're going to have to watch out for me. I think I've fallen in love with your husband."

"That's easy to do."

Well I know a lady isn't supposed to divulge her age, but I never been accused of being a lady. I'm sixty-five years old and my hubby Oliver, is seventy. We're the Hearst's, not the ones with all those piles of money I'm afraid."

Just then, that alarm sounded again and shortly after the doorbell rang. Sarah said, "Must be the day for company," And went to the door.

"Do you have my wife? Beautiful girl about this high and will talk your arm off."

"Guilty. Come on in we have her out in the kitchen. You must be Oliver."

"Please call me Ollie every one does."

Oliver was Five foot ten and still fairly fit for a man in his seventies. Although youngish looking for his age his hair was almost totally gone. He only had a slight fringe over his ears and on the nape of his neck which he kept trimmed very short.

Rick commented on the alarm and asked if they knew anything about it.

"The gates have an alarm that sounds for five seconds any time they're opened. The side gate and the front gate don't lock, unlike the driveway gate, but whenever they are opened, it sounds the alarm. It is a good system at that, if they had locks the crooks would just go over the wall and you wouldn't have a clue. This way they go through the gate and let you know they're coming.

Besides, you'll know when we're coming and have time to get decent. We came in through the side gate."

"That's great, thanks for the info. We're just starting to get acquainted with the place."

"I think you're going to really like it, it's a beautiful home. We have always been somewhat jealous of it."

Around seven, they ordered in pizza and Ollie insisted on paying. The party broke up around eleven with promises to get back together soon and an invitation to Rick to go fishing. On the way to the front door Rick said, "Ollie, about this fishing, this place came with a really nice deck boat, but none of us have ever driven a boat. Do you think you could give us some lessons?"

"Piloted."

"Huh."

"You pilot a boat. You drive a car. I'd be more than happy to and I'll show you how to use those boatlifts too. That boat of yours has a head so I will also show you where to empty your holding tanks. How about tomorrow?"

"That would be great. Our nephew John is home from college for the summer. I'm sure he would like to go along."

"Good. We'll take some fishing gear and make a day of it. You bring the beer."

"Deal."

Sarah said, "I'll beg off this time. I have got shopping to do. Besides, you boys will have more fun by yourselves."

Dolly said, "How about me going shopping with you? I can show you where everything is."

"Great. See you tomorrow."

The next day Ollie was there early and ready to go. Rick was ready but John was still in bed. Rick said, "Help yourself to a cup of coffee while I roust John out of bed."

When he got back he said, "Sorry about that. You know how kids are."

By the time they had finished their coffee and loaded a cooler with beer and ice John was ready to go. John took the wheel first. Rick and Ollie cast off the lines and John gave it some throttle and headed for the bay.

"The first thing John, the river and bay are no wake areas. That means you boat at idle speed slow enough that you don't create a wake. You have a two hundred and twenty-five-horse engine on this boat and twin hulls. It wouldn't be any trick at all to plane this baby out; however, this area is all Manatee winter habitat and breeding area. You can't really get up speed until you're in the gulf. This boat has enough power to water ski but of course wasn't made for that, and like I said you can't do that here anyway."

He showed them roped off areas around springs that were manatee habitat and off limits to all watercraft. He explained the rules of the road, the buoy system, the boat lights and what the colors meant. He showed them how to raise and lower the prop and how to use the gears. By the end of the day, both John and Rick were competent at the controls and they had gotten in some fishing. Ollie said that the next time they took the boat out they would go out in the gulf for some real fish.

"Isn't that a little dangerous with a boat like this? This boat doesn't exactly strike me as an ocean going ship."

"The ocean deepens very slowly in this area, about a foot per mile. You would have to go out a long way to get in very deep water. That's not to say that you don't get weather here. It behooves you to watch the weather very closely when you're out in the gulf. You have a marine radio and a GPS device on this boat, so you shouldn't get in any trouble, if you pay attention."

Ocean travel isn't nearly as dangerous as landlubbers imagine it to be, especially if you remain within a safe distance of land. You need to be able to get back in case of weather. Believe me, you don't want to be out on the gulf on this boat in heavy weather."

Ollie explained that there were boating classes put on by the coast guard if they were interested. He told them that the course wasn't mandatory but was worth the time. Like most people, Ollie loved to tell a willing audience what he knew. He started explaining nautical terms to them and they were both amazed to find that they understood most of them, although they didn't say so. It was sort of like the Jeopardy show, when you gain an almost perfect memory it is amazing what you find tucked away in your brain. Rick knew more than John did, apparently, due to being around for an extra sixty some years.

John was kind of bummed out he had hoped to do some water skiing, maybe even get a ski boat, but with all the no wake rules that was out of the question. He had met some kids at the mall that talked about skiing and he later found that the inland lakes were open to speed boats and water skiing. John and his friends also used the deck boat on the gulf. He had also made friends with a girl that lived on Apopka Lake near Hernando so he wound up spending most of his time on the water. John had soon decided that he was going to spend his life in Florida.

Rick and Sarah spent most of their spare time outdoors, either at the cabin or on the dock in Crystal River. If they were not at one of those places, they were likely to be found on the river or bay in their boat. They both had been nature lovers all their lives, but even more so since coming to Crystal River. They had furnished the dock in Crystal River with some fairly comfortable outdoor furniture. One of their favorite pastimes was sitting on the dock watching the pelicans skim over the surface of the river. They had never seen such an abundance or variety of critters as they had there. Rick had even seen a twelve-foot alligator in the Crystal River. He decided right then that he wouldn't spend much time swimming in the river.

In addition to the wild life, Sarah enjoyed cruising along the river just to see the mansions and the shanties scattered along the shoreline. Rick saw the eclectic mix of housing as the passing of an era. Rising land prices, along with the accompanying taxes would soon make it impossible for the smaller homes to survive. They would be razed and mansions would take their place, to the detriment of the river, Rick felt.

One day Rick was sitting in the lanai reading the paper when Sarah came around the house shouting for him. At first, he thought something was wrong, but as it turned out, she had discovered a turtle in the front yard.

"What kind is it?"

"I don't know. It's huge. Come and see."

Rick put down the paper and Sarah literally dragged him around to the front yard. There was a nondescript turtle about twenty inches in diameter with a flat spot in the top of his shell. He was grazing on the front yard grass.

"What kind of turtle is it Rick?"

"I have no idea. I suspect it might be a tortoise. I've never seen a turtle eat grass.

Later that evening, over cocktails, they mentioned it to Ollie and Dolly. They knew all about it.

"It's a gofer tortoise. They are considered endangered here because of all the construction. They live in burrows that can be up to thirty feet long. Yours has his burrow beside that big fuchsia bougainvillea next to your front gate. They usually come out to graze in the afternoon. The lady that sold you the house called him Quincy."

"Quincy it is then. I wouldn't want to confuse him Sarah said."

Rick said, "Ollie, since you know so much about Florida's flora and fauna, what's with these fish we see jumping by the hundreds in the gulf?"

"Mullet."

"Okay, what's a mullet?"

"It's a fish. They're mostly about a foot long, maybe a little more and they jump out of the water around one to two feet. I have no idea why but like you said, when they're jumping it seems like there's hundreds of them. The natives swear by them, they used to have big fish boils, and people would come from miles around. Of course that was before all us snowbirds descended on them."

"I Think I'll have another beer."

"Make it two."

"Make it three."

"Might as well make it four."

When Rick returned with the beer he said, "I'm not much on fish. It's just not something we had growing up, we mostly ate cows..." Then he caught himself and dropped the subject.

Chapter Seventeen

Five years had passed since he had stood in the ranch yard and watched the trail of dust fade away. It had not been a good five years for Sean Proudfoot.

Before he had left the ranch, he went inside and emptied out the gun case. There had been two hunting rifles, two shotguns and a twenty-two. He had seen Matt with a handgun but he must have taken it with him. When he walked out of the house, Molly said, "Those don't belong to you."

"So what? They've abandoned the place. If I don't take them someone else will and I can sure as hell use the money."

"It just don't seem right, especially after what he did for me."

"He wouldn't have done it if I hadn't come out here with a gun. The only reason they did it then was that they didn't have the balls to kill me and they knew I'd talk. Ain't no white man giving an Indian anything for free."

"I think Mr. Macklin is very nice and this don't seem to me like the way to repay him. It just don't seem right."

"You have a lot to learn about the world Sis, and about white people in particular."

The next day Sean came back with a buddy and cleaned the place out. They took everything that wasn't nailed down. Anything that they thought they could sell and would fit in the back of Sean's pickup. Sean's buddy, Eugene Redfeather, was more than a little shady and this wasn't the first time he had stolen goods to unload. Although Eugene had never had this amount of property to fence he knew someone that he was sure could handle it. When Sean found out what they were going to get for the truckload he was extremely disappointed. He said, "This is bullshit. This stuff is worth ten times what your giving us."

The fence was not impressed.

"take it or leave it. Bring me something I can peddle easy and you can make more."

Sean sold him the guns for almost as much as the rest all put together.

"Would you have any use for farm equipment, you know, a tractor, that kinda shit."

"Hell yes. I can always sell that kinda stuff. What have you got?"

They took him out to the ranch for a look, after assuring him there was no one around the place. By the time they finished there wasn't a single item of value left on the ranch. Eugene decided to keep Ety's car and that proved their undoing.

Late one night, in a drunken stupor, Eugene managed to drive the car into one of the very few trees of any size in Guadalupe County. To make things worse the Guadalupe County Sheriff was returning from a late night poker game along the same county road. The sheriff's name was Randy Post, but everyone that knew him called him "D" although not one of them could have told you why.

D got his nickname in grade school. "D" was pretty much his normal grade and once while a

friend and he were comparing report cards, the friend said to him, "Man you get so many dees we oughta just call you d." There were a bunch of other kids around when it was said and he was D from then on.

D had won quite a bit of money at the poker game and was in a good mood. His wife, Ann, was always happy when he came home with money in his pockets and D liked it when his wife was happy. When Ann was happy, she was in the mood for sex. To tell the truth she was in the mood for sex most of the time but money made her really horny. Ann was as good looking as she was greedy. She had been home coming queen in high school and he had been star quarterback of the state champion football team. They made a striking couple. Ann had waited for him to come home from the marines although she didn't exactly stay celibate. Randy heard the rumors when he got home but it didn't really bother him all that much, he hadn't exactly been a saint for the last four years himself. Besides Ann was by far the best-looking girl in the county and her skills in the sack had improved substantially while he was gone. D figured the plusses far out weighed the minuses.

D was an easygoing sort without an ambitious bone in his body, but with Ann's urging he had run for county sheriff. Having been a local football hero and having served in the marines as an MP, he was a shoo-in. Now Ann was after him to run for County Prosecutor and he expected he probably would. There was very little that Ann asked of him that he did not try to give her. D didn't figure it would be too hard to be elected. He knew just about everyone in the county, knew where all the bones were buried so to speak, and was owed favors by most of those in power.

He executed the duties of sheriff honestly. He had never taken a bribe nor made a dishonest dollar in all his time as sheriff. He was however lenient in applying the law for minor infractions, especially when it came to folks he knew. Even a lot of people he didn't know on a personal basis had benefited from his attitude toward law enforcement. For one thing, he tended to look the other way when their teenagers were drinking beer, racing cars, pulling pranks and in general being teenagers. If it got to the point that he felt he had to do something he was more likely to take them home than to throw them in a cell. More over, if he thought the parents were the type to react in a way he considered inappropriate he would probably just talk to the kid himself. Most of the teenagers in the county knew and liked D.

However, it didn't behoove people to think that because he was easy going that he was soft. There were a few who had made that mistake, but were not likely to make it again. Although there was a great deal that D would tolerate there were others that he would not. He might look the other way if you were having a beer on the drive home from town, but if you didn't treat your family and critters kind when you got there, you best hope D never found out about it. D did not tolerate drunks, thieves or drug users. The ones he reviled most however, were drug dealers. Since he considered the law overly lenient with them, they would frequently find their selves dumped on the county line with bruises, contusions and on occasion with broken bones.

Eugene was not one of the county residents for which D felt benevolence. D was certain that Eugene regularly helped himself to others' possessions, although he had never managed to prove it. Eugene was more drunk than hurt so D radioed for a wrecker for the car, took him to the jail and put him in a cell to sleep it off. D considered this a lucky day, on top of having a good night at poker he now had Eugene in a cell where he had hoped to have him for some time.

The next morning after breakfast D ran the plates. When they came back registered to an Ettie Hanson in Cholla he called the Torrance County Sheriff and asked what he knew about an Etty Hanson. The sheriff told D that that was strange story, "Etty lived in Cholla for over ten years, ran a business there the entire time and buried a husband there. The husband turned out

not to be a husband but nobody around here cares about that. You couldn't find a person in the whole county that would say a bad word about Etty. Then one day, around three months ago her son, that wasn't old enough to drive, drives her over to Albuquerque supposedly to see a doctor and she nor her son are ever heard from again. There never was a clue. I got a few tips, but nothing came of it. I had two suspects but I was never able to prove anything. One was her cook but only because he was a kind of a seedy character. He kept her diner going for a while after she died, but there was no way he did it. I never turned up a single thread of evidence against him. The other was an Indian kid that hung with her son, I kind of liked him for it but I never managed to get anything on him either. Why do you ask?"

D told him about the kid that ran Etty's car into a tree.

"D, it looks to me like you got yourself a truly bad person there. Maybe you'll manage to close this case out for me. If I can be of any help let me know."

D thanked him for his help, hung up the phone and walked back to Eugene's cell. D leaned on the cell bars and said, "Eugene it looks like you done stepped in a whole pile of shit this time."

"I want a lawyer D."

"Only my friends call me D and you don't fall into that category. You call me sheriff, Mister Boyd or sir."

"I want a lawyer "SIR."

"People in hell want ice water. What did you do with the lady and kid?"

D saw him hesitate and knew for certain he was guilty of more than a stolen car.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Odd that you're driving her car and don't know what I'm talking about."

"I want a lawyer."

"You're not too bright, are you boy?"

"I'm bright enough to know my rights. I want a lawyer SIR!"

"I want a new Caddy and a large bank account. Where'd you bury them?"

"I didn't bury anybody. I know my rights. I want a lawyer."

"What I want is your smelly ass outta my jail, but it doesn't look like that's any more likely than you getting a lawyer any time soon."

He took him out of the cell and handcuffed him to a steel table in a little interrogation room, turned off the air conditioning and left. When D returned in two hours Eugene was soaking wet and in bad need of a drink. There was a large puddle of puke on the table in front of Eugene.

"I think you should give up drinking Eugene, it don't seem to agree with you."

"I want a drink."

"Right after you tell me about how come you're driving that car."

After a couple of hours, he gave up Sean. D had the puke cleaned up, turned the air back on and gave him a class of water.

Sean was smart enough not to give them the truth. Molly wanted him to because she thought it would save him from going to prison. Sean, however, decided that the truth wouldn't help him and would probably make things a lot worse. Instead, Sean told them that his friend John had told him about the ranch. He said John told him that the old man let him fish on his ranch because he was banging John's mom. He said that when John came up missing he went to the ranch looking for him. He claimed Etty's car was in the yard with the keys in it and there was no one around. At first, he thought they were just away but there was rotten fruit on the counter and most of the stuff in the fridge was spoiled. He said, "I figured that the old man died, and John

and his old lady took his money and car and split.”

The sheriff didn't buy it and wanted to charge them with murder. Even he could see how good a murder conviction would look on his record when he ran for prosecutor. The prosecutor, however, figured that without proof or even a body the best they could get them for was grand larceny.

Ann later pointed out to D that the prosecutor letting these kids off easy would work in their favor when they were campaigning for his job.

During plea bargaining the boy's lawyers managed to get the charges lowered to larceny from an unoccupied dwelling. Ann thought that was even better. Part of the plea bargain was that the judge would give them the maximum sentence allowed by law for their charges.

Sean got five years and was out in three for good behavior. His good behavior included killing a fellow inmate with a homemade knife. However, they never managed to pin that murder on him even though it had been witnessed by at least eight people.

The day Sean was checked into La Tuna, the New Mexico Federal Prison, he was gang raped in the showers by five inmates. That night in his cell, he contemplated suicide but just didn't have the courage to do it. The next day at breakfast a skinny little con of indeterminate lineage sat down beside him at mess. He was staring straight at his plate when he said, “You've got to kill one of em.”

Sean looked at him and said, “What?”

“Don't look at me asshole. Look at your plate.”

Sean looked at his plate and said, “What did you say?”

“I said you got to kill one of them what raped you.”

Sean thought everyone in here must know what happened to him and he was thinking he could not survive five years in this place.

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“Keep you're voice down and watch your plate! You gotta get a shank. Make one or buy one and kill one of em.”

“What's a shank?”

“Saints preserve us. Your red ass aint gonna last a week in here. A shank is a home made knife, they're easy as hell to make and they're everywhere in here.”

“Even if I get a shank and decide to kill one of them I wouldn't have a clue as to how to go about it.”

“Look asshole don't look down. Put you're hand on the bench put what you feel in your pocket. You can't approach them or they'll kill you sure. Tape the shank to your underarm up close to your pit. Keep your arm down so no one sees what you got. When they bend you over to shove it in your ass, you pull the shank loose and shove it in his neck. Don't hesitate and don't swing it easy. You go fast and you go hard or you dead. You don't wanta do this, you figure on havin someone's dick up your ass every day till you get out. Don't talk to me again till one of those is dead. Nother thing. When you done wipe the shank drop it right there and walk away.”

Chapter eighteen

Sean had never been so scared in his life but he figured the worst they could do is kill him and he'd rather be dead than go through that again. He was a bundle of nerves. He was deathly afraid to get near anyone. He avoided situations where people were crowded together like the plague. Two days later while in the exercise yard a con stepped up close to him and said he'd see him in the showers that night. Sean jumped like if he'd been poked with a cattle prod making the con smile. He tried to walk away, but the con followed and continued to harass him.

"Aint no point in hide'n asshole. You gonna be my bitch. If you treat me good I'll see that the rest these assholes leave you be."

When he was back in his cell, Sean taped the shank like he'd been told and practiced ripping it loose and making the stabbing motion over and over. The problem was he wasn't sure he could do it when the time came. All the time he was practicing his cell mate sat on his bunk watching.

That night three of them came at him in the showers and pulled him off into a corner. They pushed him against a wall and one of them came up against his back. Sean grabbed his shank from under his arm and whirled around in one smooth motion, just as he had practiced. Sean drove the razor sharp knife into the guy's neck all the way up to his fist and immediately pulled it back out in anticipation of further attack. The carotid artery had been severed and a stream of blood was gushing from the man's neck. The man was trying to talk but only managed to make

gurgling sounds. Blood bubbled and spit out of his mouth with each sound. Sean backed against the shower room wall shocked and somewhat sickened by the site. By the time Sean got a hold on himself and thought to check what the other cons were up to, he was all alone. The con he had stabbed was now on his knees with his hand clasped to his throat as if he was trying to hold in the blood.

Sean ran to the sink, wiped down the shank with paper towels, and dropped it along with the towels in a waste can. He quickly stepped into a shower stall and scrubbed down. He was dressed and walking out of the shower area when the first guards arrived. By the time the guards were over the shock of what they in encountered Sean was long gone and not one of them could remember who had passed them on his way out.

The following day in the exercise yard, Sean walked up to a group of cons working out with weights, and said hi.

“Hey Cochise take yo skinny red ass over and play with them nigger’s. This area’s for white folk.” Sean wasn’t about to push it, the guy’s biceps were bigger than Sean’s thighs. It wasn’t hard to see how things were in La Tuna and Sean figured if he was going to survive the next five years he better learn the rules fast.

Sean walked over by the wall, found an unoccupied bench and sat down. He hadn’t been there long when the skinny little guy from the mess hall came up and sat down beside him.

“Names Weasel, you did good.”

“It’s okay to talk to me now that I’m a killer?”

“Hey, it is what it is. You don’t want to hang around them skin heads.”

“Skin heads?”

“Lordy, how’d you get in here? You rob some Girl Scout cookies? Skinheads is white supremacists. They don’t like your kind, they don’t like my kind, they don’t like no kind.”

“Well thanks for the help Weasel.”

“What help? I didn’t help you. I don’t help no body. Aint nobody in here help nobody.”

Weasel was from Flint Michigan. He was sent up for sticking up a 7-Eleven with a squad car sitting next door at the Krispy Kreme. One of the cops had seen him go in, walked over and watched through the window. The cop knew Weasel well. He had been hauling him in since he was fifteen. He only got sixty-five bucks but drew a twenty-year sentence because he used a gun to get it.

Weasel was born George Armstrong Custer in a shack two miles north of Arnold Michigan. His father was Leon Custer. Leon had served in the eighth cavalry. When he got home from the army, he shacked up with a chubby little Indian girl of Huron descent named Betty. When Betty gave birth a year later Leon, who wasn’t the brightest bulb on the tree, decided it would be a great joke to name the boy George Armstrong Custer. As it turned out, no one got the joke except him. George was even less intelligent than his dad. However, what George lacked in brain power he made up for in cunning.

By the time he was twelve years old everyone just called him Weasel. His dad had long since disappeared. Leon hadn’t stuck around long enough for George to even remember him. George wasn’t able to comprehend most of what they tried to teach him in school and consequently quit attending school by the time he was ten. No one seemed to care. He supplemented Betty’s income by stealing anything he could lay his hands on. During the winter months, his target of choice was vacant cabins. He would get food, mostly canned, cameras and various electronics that were easy to sell. He would occasionally get a gun from one of the cabins. Those were not only easy to fence but brought the best money. The problem was that not having a car, or being

old enough to drive even if he had one, his working area was severely limited which made for a dwindling supply of places to rob.

When he was fourteen, he raped a thirteen-year-old neighbor girl. It had started out as consensual but Weasel not being experienced in the ways of love, got over excited. He ripped her panties off with such force that the elastic cut her leg. She screamed and he slapped his hand over her face with enough force to cut her lower lip. At this point, she decided that she had about enough sex for one day. Weasel wasn't about to quit at that point and when it was over she made the mistake of sobbing out that she was going to tell.

He left her body in the woods covered up with brush and leaves and never went back home. He walked and hitchhiked east with no idea of where he was going. When he got to I-75, he sat down on a rock by the entrance ramp and stuck out his thumb. It was an hour before a car stopped. He was just about to start walking when he finally got a ride. The guy that picked him up was going to Flint and he thought Weasel looked like an easy mark. Weasel although dirty and poorly dressed, wasn't bad looking for a skinny fourteen year old.

The man asked Weasel how old he was and Weasel told him the truth. The man laid his hand in Weasels lap and said that if he would like to go home with him he would see that he was well taken care of. He told Weasel that he was rich, and that he would be very nice to him. Weasel said, "My name is George and I would be happy to go home with you since I got no where else to go."

The man said, "My name is Bruce, I promise you won't be sorry."

When they got to Bruce's apartment, Weasel killed him with the same knife that he had used to kill the girl. Weasel spent the night in his bed. In the morning, he took the money from his wallet and ransacked the apartment looking for anything he could easily cart away and sell. It turned out that the guy had quite a lot of jewelry and kept a considerable amount of cash in the locked drawer of an antique desk. Along with what he had in his wallet, the cash amounted to nearly five thousand dollars. In Weasel's mind he was well on his way to becoming a very rich man. Weasel stayed in the apartment until Bruce started to smell and then moved on.

Weasel and Sean became friends and Weasel made it his job to teach Sean the facts of life. Although Sean considered Weasel's name a fair description of the man himself, he couldn't bring himself to brush him off. He felt as though he owed him his life and he very well may have. Without Weasels tutelage, he would have never killed that con. He would probably have wound up either being his bitch or committing suicide.

Sean made up his mind to figure out how the system in La Tuna worked and to make it work for him. Sean had never thought of himself as being overly bright, but soon considered himself head and shoulders above his fellow inmates in that department. He figured that Weasel was more than borderline retarded and that most of the other inmates were not much better off. Sean made friends with the trustee in charge of job assignments and convinced him to get him a job in the library.

The library had computers and Sean was seeking Internet access. Sean had taken computer classes in high school and was familiar with You Tube, My Face and similar sites frequented by teenagers. He thought that these young naïve kids would be easy to exploit.

Sean was soon to learn, however that there was very little access to the Internet and what little was available was well supervised. Moreover, the majority of computers were antique by today's standards. The few computers that had access were desktops with wireless connection to a central router. All of these computers were password protected. He eventually found an older lap top that was equipped for wireless but had never been set up for it. Sean hid that computer

and waited to see if it would be missed.

After a month he was sure that its absence had gone unnoticed. He bribed a trustee to get the laptop to his cell and while waiting for it, built a secret compartment in his mattress to house it. It took Sean only one night to get the computers wireless option working and to find that there was a router within range of his cell. It, however, took him three months to access that router. In two months he gave up trying to crack the router code and set about finding someone that knew where the router was located and could be bribed to copy the codes off of it.

By the time he had Network access he had made a lot of promises and owed a good deal of money in bribes. He was starting to worry that if his plan didn't work he would be in a world of hurt.

He immediately set about farming Myspace.com and other teen frequented sites for bleeding heart teenyboppers. His plan was to convince them that he was innocent and needed their help. The story he concocted was that he had been railroaded because he was an American Indian that didn't know his place. He contended that in New Mexico Indians were treated worse than black people were in many parts of the country. He then wove a story about the horrors of prison life. He convinced them that if they sent him money his life would be much more bearable. He told these gullible young people, mostly girls, that for very little money he could bribe his fellow inmates not to rape him. He never asked for much on the premise that money was worth a lot more in prison. He figured that it was a lot easier to get a little from many, than to get a lot from a few, and with the same results.

Before long, he had quite a few sending him small amounts. The small amounts from many soon became quite an income. Life in prison is much easier if you have money. Guards can be bribed for a surprisingly small amount and inmates will do favors for even less. He was able to get drugs, tobacco and booze, and although he couldn't get women, pornography was plentiful.

Sean kept in touch with his father who had made it clear that he blamed the misfortune of his son on the prejudices of the white establishment. He, however, refused to answer his sister's correspondences, partly from shame, but mostly because he knew she felt he had brought this on himself. In his mind that couldn't have been further from the truth. As far as he was concerned this was completely Eugene's fault. Sean never forgot however, Molly's look of accusation and her admonition that the things he was taking from the ranch, were not his.

Sean had no plans for what he would do when he was released other than the sure knowledge that it wouldn't involve honest labor. Sean believed that his fellow inmates were here solely because of their own stupidity. He didn't think it would be all that hard to make a dishonest living without being caught.

When they had been friends for a few months, Weasel told Sean that he was due to be sprung soon. He had served eight years already and word on the block was that they were way over crowded. Apparently, the system wasn't that over crowded, it took two more years before Weasel was dumped back on society. Before he left he told Sean where to find him. He said there was some easy money to be made in the U P in the winter robbing summer homes. He said, the rich assholes build cabins in the U P to mingle with the hicks. When the season's over, they turn the key in a two-dollar lock and go back to their mansions in Ann Arbor or Grosse point.

"What the hell's a U P?"

"It's what everybody in Michigan calls the Upper Peninsula.

Weasel said he'd had about enough of Flint, for one thing, there were too many cops and most of them knew weasel well.

Sean had just turned eighteen when he went into La tuna. He was, by criminal standards

extremely naïve. He was also somewhat bitter. He believed that Indians as a whole got a raw deal and he in particular had been treated worst than most. When he walked out his attitude hadn't improved but he was no longer naïve. The past three years had made him a very hard man and he left prison determined to accomplish two things. One was to live very good on other people's money and the other was to never get put back in a place like La Tuna. He didn't think Weasel's idea of robbing cabins would make much money but he intended to look him up anyway. Weasel was dumb as a box of rocks but he was loyal as lap dog and would do what ever you told him.

Chapter nineteen

When he was released on parole, his father was at the gate to pick him up. Exactly one week out, he broke his parole by lifting a nine-millimeter Smith and Wesson from his dad's dresser drawer. He then started hitchhiking to Michigan. When his first ride passed a little convenience store setting on a half acre patch of gravel out in the boondocks, Sean asked to be let out. He had noticed that there was only one car at the store and rightly figured it belonged to the owner. His ride pulled to the side of the road three thousand feet past the store and asked if he was sure he wanted out there. The store they passed had not even registered with him. As far as he was concerned there wasn't anything around for miles. Sean said, "This will be fine," Thanked him for the ride, and walked back to the store. He went inside and stuck his gun in the face of the old man behind the counter. Before he left the store he picked up a two cases of beer, ten cartons of cigarettes, a bag full of candy and snack food. Before he left the store he yanked the phone out of the wall. He only got eighty-two dollars but he also took the old man's car. The car wasn't worth much more than the cash but at least it got him out of New Mexico. He filled the gas tank along with four five-gallon gas cans from the store. He stashed the gas cans along with everything else he took from the store in the trunk of the car and headed for Flint. He had one stop to make on the way.

Molly was going to school in Ann Arbor Michigan and Sean figured he may as well stop and see her since it was practically on the way to where he was going.

Along with Molly's ability to walk had came an almost perfect memory and an ease for learning. Molly had spent her last two years in high school tutoring children without her abilities. Before she had been healed she had a hard time with learning, and it wasn't for lack of trying. She was well aware that the only way off the reservation was through education. Molly had decided that the least she could do to repay her good fortune was to help her Indian brethren.

She had graduated top of her class with a 4.0 grade point average and had aced her SAT's the year before. That coupled with her Native American status virtually guaranteed a free ride to just about any school in the country. She chose The University of Michigan for its renowned medical school.

The last person Molly expected to have show up at her dorm was her brother Sean, but here he was. She had tried to keep in touch after he went to prison but after six months of unanswered letters, she gave up. She knew he was out but assumed he was in New Mexico and had no idea that he would want to see her.

She suggested that they go to the cafeteria to talk. She had a roommate that didn't tolerate men in the room, even relatives. Molly got a cup of coffee and Sean got a coke. When they sat down Sean pulled a pint out of his jacket pocket and poured a good double shot in his coke. Molly glanced around embarrassedly, but didn't say anything. After about a half hour of idle chatter Molly dropped the bomb, "Guess who's on campus, John Hanson."

"You gotta be kidding."

"No it was him I'm sure of it. I saw him a couple of times. He's not going by John Hanson though. I tried to find him in the university directory. No luck." Sean asked where she had seen him and she caught something in his eye. She wondered if she should have kept quiet.

"You're not going to try and find him are you?"

"No, just curious. I doubt that he'd be interested in hanging out with an ex con."

"Well, it was at the main campus library both times. From the books he was reading, I think he may be in engineering."

Had Molly had any interest what-so-ever in football she would have known for sure what his name was, but she didn't.

Right after Sean left Molly, he made it a point to find out where the main library was. As it turned out it was amazingly easy. He just asked the first person he saw and she was more than happy to give him directions.

Molly, back in her room, couldn't get over the uneasy feeling that she had made a mistake in mentioning John. Her brother was nothing like she remembered him. He had a hardness about him that wasn't there before. Even as children, Sean had struck her as bitter at times and unaware of others feelings except when it came to her. It had always been obvious to her that he loved her but she didn't get the feeling that he cared much for anyone else let alone loved them. She even had the feeling at times that he resented John and he was his best friend. Sean had told her once that if it weren't for the color of their skin he would have been the quarter back instead of John.

Sean had been sitting in his car across from the library off and on for over a week and was about to give up and try another tact when he spotted him. Sean had been drinking beer and listening to the radio and had fallen asleep. It was just dumb luck that he woke up as John came down the library steps. It was after ten PM and not a night for strolling, a light snow was coming down, the temperature was hovering around ten degrees and Sean didn't see another person in sight.

John had only gone a short distance when he felt the barrel of a gun pressed against his neck. He'd never had a gun pressed against his neck before, but he knew instantly what it was and froze.

"Hi John, remember me?"

When John heard Sean's voice he new instantly what had happened. He had seen an Indian girl in the library a few weeks ago, that looked like Molly. He'd thought at the time it probably wasn't her. This girl had resembled Molly but was a real beauty. When he knew Molly she had been chubby and this girl was anything but. Furthermore, he couldn't imagine Molly attending U of M. He saw now that that was a major error on his part.

"Sean why are you pointing a gun at me again? I thought we were friends."

"Not fucking likely asshole."

"Do you have a car?"

"No."

Sean hit him in the side of the head as hard as he could with the gun. John didn't see it coming and it dropped him like a stone. John was trying to get to his feet and figure out why he had been laying on the ground when Sean kicked him in the crotch with a steel-toed boot. He went back down on his knees and vomit spurted from his mouth. Sean jumped back and said, "Goddamned lucky for you that you didn't get any on me asshole."

John was back on his feet and coming to his senses when Sean said, "Where's the car?"

"How did you know I have a car?"

"Rich ass white boys don't use public transportation idiot. Now where the fuck is the car?"

Sean followed John about two blocks to a campus parking lot. John stopped by a red sixty-five Mustang and said, "This is it."

"Unlock it and give me the keys."

"John took out his key ring and pushed a button. A siren went off along with the horn and the lights started flashing. John was already ten feet away and running fast. Sean steadied the pistol and at about twenty feet, he pulled the trigger. John went down and slid four feet through the snow on his face. Sean walked up to him and kicked him in the head.

“Asshole!”

The snow was covered with blood and the dark red spot around John was growing rapidly. Sean reached down, took the keys out of his hand and his wallet out of his back pocket. He pushed the button to stop the alarm and walked back to the Mustang.

“Fuckin rich assholes. Who has a sixty five with an alarm system?”

Sean wasn't very concerned about the alarm or the gunshots. He was in a city and from what he had heard; no one in the city paid any attention to that sort of thing. He was wrong about that. He was in Ann Arbor, not Detroit. He was sure that John was dead, but he was wrong again, for the umpteenth time in his life.

Sean got in, started the car and checked the gas gauge. The tank was full.

“Thanks asshole.”

He pulled out of the parking lot, drove a few blocks and pulled to the curb under a street light. He opened the glove box and found an envelope marked important papers. He opened it and took out the registration. It was made out to John Martin with an address in Crystal River Florida. He then opened the wallet, took out the money and counted it. There was three hundred and ten dollars. Sean thought, “not bad and a full tank of gas.”

He was just about to leave when there was a tapping on his window. He whirled his head and found himself looking in the face of a cop. Shit, he thought; the wallet was lying in plain sight on the console. He looked in the rearview mirror and thought where the hell did he come from. There was no squad car behind him. The cop tapped on the window with his nightstick again. It took Sean a little time to find the crank but he finally lowered the window. He said, “Is there a problem officer?”

“You tell me.”

“No problem. I just stopped to check my map. I'm a little lost.”

“Can I see your license and registration please?”

Sean reached in his pocket. The officer having seen the wallet lying on the console jumped back from the window and reached for his gun, but not in time. Sean shot him in the face just below his left nostril. He pulled the shift lever out of park and was on I-94 ten minutes later. He had no idea where Crystal River was or even Florida for that matter but he intended to find out, but first he was going to pick up Weasel.

Chapter twenty

Sean turned off I-94 onto I-23 and followed it north to Flint. He followed Weasel's directions to a decrepit building in a run down neighborhood. There was a neon sign over steps to the basement that read "Jolly's Billiards". He parked by the curb in front of the railing to the stairs, got out and pushed the lock button on his key ring. The stairwell was littered with trash and smelled of urine and vomit. "Nice place," Sean thought. He pushed open the door and was slightly surprised to find it open. It was twenty minutes before two.

Inside he walked over to the bar and ordered a Bud draft. He said to the fat man behind the counter who looked anything but jolly, "I'm looking for a little guy named Weasel."

"Never heard of him."

"He told me to meet him here."

"You got a name?"

"Proudfoot."

"You do some time in a house named for a fish?"

"Cactus."

"Huh?"

"La Tuna. It's Mex for a kinda cactus."

"Okay professor he's back in that corner on table twelve."

Sean picked up his beer and walked back to table twelve.

"Hey Weasel. How they hangin?"

“Hey Sean when’d you get out?”

“Week or so.”

“So you play pool?”

“No. They didn’t have many pool halls on the reservation.”

“So, we gonna go up north?”

“Nah, I’m thinkin Florida, the weathers better and I know a guy down there got somethin I want.”

“This somethin worth money?”

“Oh yeah. More money than you’ve ever seen.”

“Well hell lets go get it then. I just hope that Klan don’t get me. I hear they hang folk my color.”

“I think that was awhile back. Sides they fuck with me, it’d be the last guy they fuck with.”

When they left the pool hall Weasel said, “Nice wheels man, where you get this fine ride.?”

“Used to belong to a guy what don’t need it no more.”

They drove to an all night diner, had a sandwich and coffee and then went to Weasel’s room. It was a single room over a bar with a sink and a toilette. The toilette had a plastic shower curtain hung on a circular bar for privacy. The curtain, like the sink and toilette, hadn’t been cleaned for many years.

“Nice place you got here Weasel. Looks like you been doin real good.”

“Thanks.”

The sarcasm went completely over Weasel’s head. Sean figured Weasel wasn’t the type to appreciate subtle, or even not so subtle humor.

Oh well Sean said, we won’t be here long anyway. We’ll head for Florida first thing in the morning.”

The next morning before they left Weasel asked Sean if he had a gun.

“Yeah, why?”

“Guy down the hall owes me some money, tried to stiff me. Sides he deals some crack. I figure he might have more than he owes me.”

Sean went over to the table, picked up a liter bottle of coke, dumped what remained down the sink and said, “Let’s go see this guy.”

Weasel knocked on the door and a voice replied groggy, “Yeah.”

“It’s Weasel I need some stuff.”

“Just a minute. Jesus Christ, it’s only nine o’clock.”

Sean stood out of sight of the peek hole and when the door opened, he shoved the gun in the guy's face. Weasel told him he wanted his money. The guy looked at the gun and said, “Sure weasel no problem.”

He reached in his pocket, took out his wallet and counted out a hundred dollars. He handed the money to Weasel and went to put the wallet back in his pocket.

“Give me the rest of it.”

He pulled the rest of the bills out and handed them to Weasel.

“You won’t get away with this.”

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“I don’t know what you mean, that’s all I got.”

Sean crammed the coke bottle over the barrel of his gun and shot him in the knee. The shot made a noise like an air rifle, but the man on the floor was much louder. Sean walked over and pointed the gun down at his head.

“Stop fuckin around asshole where’s the money?”

“It’s in the desk.”

Sean pulled the trigger. The desk was locked but it was a cheap lock. There was two thousand dollars in the desk. Along with what was in his wallet, they had Two thousand two hundred and sixty five dollars. Sean put the two thousand in his pocket and said, “Let’s go to Florida.”

Weasel wasn’t too happy about Sean sticking most of the money in his own pocket, but he didn’t say anything.

Chapter Twenty one

John came from the darkness into a faint light that seemed to be getting brighter. Not like a man coming into a lighted room, but rather like a diver returning from a great depth to the burgeoning light above. He had a slight sensation of movement and as the light brightened, he heard a far off screaming. The pain hit him all at once and seemed almost unbearable. He wondered if the screaming was coming from him and then the darkness returned.

The heart monitor went flat and the emergency medical technician that was by his side yelled, “Were losing him and commenced cardio pulmonary resuscitation. After two minutes, he ripped John’s shirt open and yelled charge. He pressed the paddles to John’s chest, said clear and pushed the button. John’s back arched and the EMT was rewarded with a weak but steady beep from the heart monitor.

The EMT’s had John on two different drips plus oxygen and had given him three units of blood in the short time he had been in their charge. They also had him covered in heat blankets for shock and were streaming his vital statistics to a doctor at the U of M emergency room whom they were in voice contact with. They were two minutes out from the U of M hospital and the EMT by his side knew it was going to be close. He didn’t think this boy was going to survive, but was determined to deliver him alive to the hospital. He had been the EMT in charge for three years, and had never had a patient die en route yet. He had responded to some that were dead on arrival, but had never lost one that was alive when he picked him up and he didn’t want this one to be the first.

The medical team that took over for the EMT’s consisted of three nurses, one RN and two LPN’s, a surgeon, an anesthesiologist and two interns. Twenty-two people ranging from surgeons to medical students watched the operation from the gallery. The large turnout was due in part because U of M was a teaching hospital but more because of the reputation of the operating surgeon. Dr. Frank Blanchard had volunteered for duty in Afghanistan as soon as he finished his internship. After two years in Afghanistan, he practiced at Mercy Hospital in Chicago where gunshot wounds were as common as the “common cold”. When the University of Michigan offered him the Head of Trauma Surgery, he moved to Ann Arbor. Dr. Blanchard had the reputation of being, if not the best, certainly within the top ten trauma surgeons in the country. It was very lucky for John that Dr. Blanchard was on call when he was shot, for it is nearly certain that he would not have survived otherwise. Dr. Blanchard’s team worked on John

for six hours before he left the OR leaving the closing to one of the other doctors. He didn't however, leave the hospital. It was Dr. Blanchard's habit to never leave the hospital until the patient was out of recovery and safely in post-op.

The following morning, the EMT that had brought John in the night before came into the ER and walked up to the nurse's station.

"Hi Bob."

"Hi Sally. I heard my fare made it. Does he have a name?"

"John Doe. I didn't know he was one of yours?"

"Yep. I was afraid he was going to spoil my record."

"Word is if he hadn't had Blanchard, he would have."

"Lucky for me. I think I'll just peek in on him and be on my way. Which room?"

He stood in the doorway watching John and his monitors for five minutes. Satisfied that he would live he turned and walked away.

Before John was out of the OR a uniformed police officer had come by and picked up his belongings which were now at the Ann Arbor Police Department's Crime Lab. The clothing had been cut off John and now consisted of little more than rags, which didn't matter to the technicians since they were only interested in trace evidence. There wasn't much evidence other than blood, of which there was plenty. It was all irrelevant though since everything they found was connected to the victim including the blood. They did have three items relevant to the investigation, a library card, a cell phone and a slug from a nine-millimeter. The slug was of special interest since it was later matched to the one from the university's security guard.

The two detectives assigned to the case stopped by the crime lab and talked to CSI in charge. The one who did most of the talking was Lt. Mark Williams. Detective Williams was the older of the two and had joined the force after college. He had taken his first criminology course as a whim, but it had sparked a real interest. He had never seen a dead person prior to joining the force. Even now nearing the end of his career, he had never been involved in any life threatening violence or fired his gun in the line of duty.

His partner Sgt. Otis Brown, on the other hand had known violence his entire life. Detective Brown grew up in Detroit in an area where the sounds of gunfire and sirens were as normal as the sounds of insects and birds in the suburbs. He had known violence almost from birth, had joined the force immediately after high school and worked his way up through the ranks. He had spent the first ten years as a policeman on the mean streets of Detroit while attending night school. Ironically, Brown was the more gentle and sympathetic of the two.

They spent an hour with the CSI Chief talking about the evidence. When they left, they had a copy of the library card and a list of the names and numbers from the cell phone.

Sarah answered the phone with "Yes?"

"I'm homicide Detective Williams, Ann Arbor Police Department. We have reason to believe your son's been shot."

Chapter twenty two

“Oh my god!”

Sarah’s knees went weak, she dropped the phone and slumped toward the floor. Just before she reached the floor, Rick grabbed her by the waist and settled her in a chair. He picked up the phone and said who the hell is this. After Williams went through it again, Rick said; “Is he alive?”

“He’s in the hospital, he’s in pretty bad shape, but it look’s like he might make it.

“It’s okay Sarah, John’s going to be all right.”

“What happened?”

“It appears to be a robbery.”

“Are you his father?”

“No. I’m his uncle, by marriage.”

“What’s the boy’s name?”

“You don’t know his name?”

“He’s listed as John doe.”

“Then what makes you think he’s our nephew.”

“He was carrying this phone with your number listed under “Home”. The lady that answered said she was his mother?”

“No. She’s his aunt. She’s been taking care of him since his parents were killed in a car accident. That happened before Sarah and I were married.” His name is John Martin”

“Did he have a car?”

“A red sixty five mustang convertible.”

“He didn’t have any keys on him so it’s possible that the car has been stolen. We’ll check that out. I’ll need the plate number and a list of his credit cards.”

After hanging up Rick called the hospital and was connected to the ER nurse’s station. The nurse that answered told him that the doctor would call him back as soon as possible.

Rick wrapped Sarah in his arms and explained as much as he knew. He did what he could to assure and calm her but at this point she was too distraught to be calmed. Rick thought that the best thing he could do was to get her busy. He told her that she needed to pack for about a week and that they needed to keep the phone line open. As she went to the bedroom to pack, he used his cell phone to call a golfing buddy of his that flew a private plane out of the Crystal River airport. The Crystal River Airport was a small airport with no commercial traffic except for a few corporate planes.

“Hello.”

“Hi Ed. This is Rick.”

“Hi. Rick. What can I do ya for?”

“I was wondering if you knew anyone local that does charter flights.”

“I know a couple, but they’re not legal. You have to have a commercial license to fly for pay and neither of these guys does.”

“I’m not picky as long as they’re competent.”

“How far are you going and how many?”

“Two of us and luggage for a week. Were going to Michigan. The thing is we have to leave real soon. The sooner the better.”

“I know a guy that might fly you. If he agrees, you have nothing to worry about. This guy is very good. His name’s Rick, Ricardo Valencia. It would be best if I call him. I’ll express your urgency and have him call you.”

“Thanks Ed. Have him call my cell I’m trying to keep our land line open.”

“Is there anything I can do Rick, it sounds like you’ve got trouble.”

“Thanks for asking Ed, it’s a family problem. John’s been hurt and we need to get there as fast as we can. If you get us this plane, that will be a big help. By the way if he can’t make the trip to Michigan ask if he could fly us to the airport in Tampa.”

Rick thanked Ed again, told Sarah he had to go to the bank, grabbed his keys and left. He was just pulling into the bank parking lot when his phone rang.

“Hi, this is Rick. I hear you need a ride.”

“Yes, just as soon as I can get it.”

“Okay the deal is, it will cost you fifteen hundred. I know that’s a lot but the gas alone will cost me six hundred, give or take. If you’re interested I can leave immediately.”

“I’m interested. We can meet you at the airport in an hour.”

“Give me your address and I’ll pick you up. Save you a taxi.”

Rick gave him the address, hung up and went to the bank. He took the ball that was in a small leather pouch out of his safety deposit box and withdrew five thousand dollars from his savings account. From the bank, he went to his office to make a list of things needing attention while he was gone. He planned on leaving the list on Jackie’s desk, the real-estate agent that worked for him, but as it turned out, she was at the office. He explained what was going on and told her that she would be in charge until he returned.

By the time Rick returned home Sarah had finished packing. She told Rick that Ollie had come over and got Toby. She said that she had only asked Ollie to come over and let him out but he said he’d just take him home.

They were at the front gate with their suitcases when Rick pulled up in his car. He introduced himself and helped load their baggage in the trunk. On the way to the airport Sarah said I’m going to call you Ricardo if you don’t mind, it will save a lot of confusion.

“Don’t mind at all that’s what my mother calls me. I have to know one thing though. Are you’re taking this charter to avoid security?”

Rick thought of the ball and wondered what it would do to a metal detector. He also wondered if it was radioactive. He hadn’t thought of either of these things before. Sarah looked at him and she knew exactly what he was thinking. Rick decided to chance it and said, “No. Were fine with security.”

“Good, then we can land at Ann Arbor; otherwise I would’ve had to find a little airport.”

Rick had never flown in a small plane before and Sarah had never been in a plane of any size. If it hadn’t been for their concern for John, they both would have enjoyed the experience a great deal.

There was a pronounced bump and Sarah said, “What was that!”

“What was what?”

“That bump, it felt like we hit something.”

“That’s just rising air currents. It’s kind of like driving on a road with really bad potholes. After awhile you don’t even notice it.”

“I always imagined flying as smooth and quiet, this is neither.”

“After awhile you don’t notice it so much. Small planes tend to be a little noisy because you’re so close to the engine. If the noise bothers you it would be a little quieter in the back

seat.”

“No, no it’s fine. It’s just not what I expected.”

“I know, once we get to cruising altitude it will smooth out considerably. Most pilots listen to music over their headphones on long trips. It cuts down on the noise.”

Sarah couldn’t take her eyes off the scenery below them. She thought how tidy every thing looks. They were flying over farmland and the terrain below them resembled a patchwork quilt made up of varying shades of greens and browns with the patches bordered in black.

Once they reached their cruising altitude, Ricardo let them take turns piloting the plane. He explained the purpose of a few of the instruments crucial to level flight and maintaining the proper heading. They both discovered that flying an airplane once it was in the air was much easier than driving a car.

Ricardo said, “The main difference between piloting a plane, and driving a car is that in a plane you use mainly interior information. In a car you use mainly exterior information.”

The plane was equipped with an automatic pilot so most of the trip no one was at the controls. During the trip, Ricardo gave them his cell number and explained that he would be spending a few days in Ypsilanti. He told them to give him a call when they were ready to go back, if he were still there, he would take them back for free since they had already paid for the gas both ways.

As it turned out, security wasn’t a problem at Ann Arbor. Ricardo parked the plane at a lot used by private planes and they exited through a private pilots lounge. There was a car rental located just outside the lounge in the airport lobby. They rented a midsize car and within an hour of landing were parking at the hospital. They were amazed to see Molly when they walked into John’s room. Although she looked very little like she did six years ago, Sarah recognized her at once. Molly at thirteen had been plump with a round face. Now she had an extremely good figure, high cheekbones, dark eyes and long straight black hair. She was very attractive. Although Molly’s presence surprised Sally, she ignored her at first, and went to her son. Matt didn’t recognize Molly at all. Molly said, He hasn’t come to yet Mrs. Hanson.”

Sarah replied in a cool voice that was not at all like her.

“I’m Mrs. Moore, Sarah Moore, what are you doing here Molly?”

“I saw the shooting in the paper and I just knew it was my fault, I had to come and see for sure.”

“How is this your fault Molly?”

Molly broke down crying, when she had composed herself enough to talk, she explained to them about Sean, his having been in prison for robbing their ranch, about him coming here and her mentioning of John. When she was all done she said, “I’m so sorry Mrs. Han,, Moore. I never thought he would do something like this.”

Tears were rolling down Molly’s face and dropping from her chin. As she dabbed at them with the back of her hand, Sarah said, “Are you sure it was Sean?”

“Yes, I pray I’m wrong but I’m sure. I saw it in his eyes the second I told him. I’ve never been so sorry for opening my big mouth in all my life.”

Sarah’s voiced had warmed, “It’s not your fault Molly. We just have to figure out what to do now.”

Rick said, “I hate to use the ball until I’ve talked to the doctor although it really don’t matter I guess if he has been like this since the shooting I don’t see what else to do. It’s been two days already.”

Rick took the pouch and a surgical glove from his pocket, put on the glove, took out the ball

and held John's hand with the ball pressed against his palm. He said, "I don't know what the doctor will make of this, but I don't know how to get him out of here in this condition."

Molly said, "Mrs. Moore may I have your phone number? I would really like to talk to John when this is all over and apologize."

Molly wrote down the number but seemed reluctant to leave. Sarah noticed and said, "Molly, you're welcome to stay if you'd like."

Rick left Sarah with her son and went to the nurse's station. The nurse's manner told Rick that they didn't have much hope of a full recovery.

"I'll page Doctor Blanchard and let him know you're here. I'm sorry, but you need to talk to our accounting department when you have time."

"No time like the present. Point me to it."

A very pleasant, bespectacled, lady with bluish grey hair explained that it was all taken care of. The university was going to cover the bill. She leaned slightly closer to Rick and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I think they're afraid of being sued." Straightening up she continued, "Besides he's the star on our football team. The school certainly doesn't want to lose him."

Rick thanked her and went back up to the ER. When he walked in Molly was gone and he had the impression that Sarah had been crying, but when she turned to him her face was dry, and held a semblance of a smile. She put her arms around Rick and asked him to tell her that it would be all right. He did.

Later that day they met with Dr. Blanchard. He was solemn and didn't offer a lot of hope. His biggest concern was the length of time that John's blood flow had been severely limited. He was afraid of brain damage, but explained that there was no way to tell until he regained consciousness and he was afraid that may be quite some time. He told them there was a Ronald McDonald house near by and asked if they wanted him to speak to the nurse about it. Rick told him that they could afford a room and would rather leave the ones at the Ronald McDonald house for those that need them. The doctor got up to leave, hesitated, and said "I'm sorry I couldn't have been more positive but I don't believe in offering false hope." He smile slightly and said, "You may take hope in the fact that I'm sometimes wrong. After all these years, patients still often surprise me."

After he left, Rick said, "This one is going to more than surprise him, this one is going to blow his mind."

Chapter twenty three

Rick called the Ann Arbor police department and was put through to Detective Williams. The detective asked him to come in.

Rick and Sarah were escorted down a hallway to a door with HOMICIDE printed on the glass. The room contained a half dozen large two-man desks. The one they were taken to had a large overweight man in his forty's seated on one side and a black man seated on the other. The black man appeared to be in his thirties and looked like he could play linebacker for the Oakland Raiders. The older man got to his feet and offered a hand.

"Hi. I'm Detective Williams and this is my partner, Detective Brown. You can call me Mark.

"Hi. I'm Otis.

"I'm Rick and this is my wife Sarah."

Detective brown offered Sarah his seat and pulled a folding chair over next to it for Rick. He walked around the desk, turned a second folding chair around and sat facing them. Detective Williams spoke.

"You guys don't look much older than your charge."

"We get that a lot. Sarah was nineteen when her sister was killed and John was fourteen so

there's only five years difference."

"My mother had me late in life. There was twenty one years between my sister and me. She married when I was three."

"We talked to the dean and your nephew's friends. As far as we can tell, he was not into drugs, excessive partying or gambling. The problem we have is it appears to have been someone that he knew and that just don't match with his profile."

"What makes you think he knew his attacker?"

"Snow. There was snow on the ground. John was walking from the campus library when someone walked up too him. They apparently talked for a sort time and then walked together to a parking lot. When they got to the lot, John took off running and was shot. The other person then walked to the body, kicked him in the head, walked back to the lot and drove away. Two of those things make me think John knew his assailant. The walk to the parking lot didn't seem to be forced although it may have been. There was some evidence of a scuffle before they got to the lot but that could have been something else. At the location of the scuffle, your nephew was sick, he threw up, but that could mean just about anything.

"Do you think he was drinking?"

"No. There was no alcohol or drugs in the vomit or in his blood. The main thing that makes me think he knew his attacker is the kick to the head. No reason to kick someone you think is dead unless you're really mad at him."

"Maybe he didn't think John was dead."

"Oh he thought he was dead alright. This guy is a stone cold killer. The only thing that saved your nephew's life was that this guy thought he was dead.

Sarah had tears in her eyes. Detective brown leaned toward her, handed her a tissue, and said, "I'm sorry you have to hear this Ma'am. I know this situation isn't easy for you. From all we found that's a very nice boy you have. For you just being a girl yourself you must have done a very good job of raising him."

After the interview, Rick apologized for being of so little help and he and Sarah went to diner. While they were at the restaurant Sarah's phone rang. She got up and went to the lobby to answer it.

"Hi Dolly."

"Oh Sarah, I'm sorry to bother you. I know you got troubles of your own, but I just had to talk to someone."

"What's wrong Dolly?"

"It's Oliver, he's had a stroke."

"Oh God. I'm so sorry, how is he?"

"It's awful Sarah. He can't talk and he doesn't seem to have any control over his limbs. He just keeps flailing around. Now they have him restrained."

"What do the doctors say?"

"That's the worst part. They're not telling me anything much, but I get the idea that they don't think he is going to make it. Sarah I'm just beside myself. I don't know how I could make it without him..... I'm sorry Sarah, I didn't even ask about John."

"It looks like he's going to be fine it's you we have to worry about right now. Dolly I'm going to hang up now, but I will call you right back. Hang in there."

She hung up, went back to the table and explained to Rick about what Dolly had told her. They discussed the problem while they finished dinner. Sara's food was cold, but she didn't feel much like eating anyway. She just picked at her food while they talked about Ollie's situation.

They both felt that they had to help and if he were in that bad of shape, it would have to be soon. Sarah was adamant that she could handle the situation there and that Rick should go back to Crystal River. They discussed how the doctor was going to react tomorrow morning. Sarah said she intended to tell him she prayed all night and in the morning, he was talking.

Rick called Ricardo and found that he intended to leave the day after tomorrow and told him they would be going along. He also told him there would be an additional passenger on the way back. When he got off the phone, he told Sarah to call Dolly and tell her they would be there by the day after tomorrow.

"I don't think you should try to explain anything at this point. Just try to comfort her as best you can." A short time after they got back to John's room a nurse came in and said that she could get them cots if they wanted to spend the night. Rick thanked her and asked her to get one cot and blankets for Sarah. He said that he would be fine in the chair.

The next morning, Sarah was awakened with "Mom". She leaped from the cot, rushed to his bed and kissed him. Rick got out of the chair, went to her side and put his arm around her.

Sarah had tears running down her cheeks, "I love you baby"

"I love you too Mom."

"Sarah smiled and said Aunt."

"Yeah I know Mom."

John filled them in on what happened and they told him about their interview with the detectives. They were all surprised at how well the detective had pieced it together. Sarah told him that Molly had been to see him and he told them about seeing her on campus.

"This is partly my own fault, I saw Molly on campus but I wasn't sure it was her. She is so much prettier now, I don't mean to sound like a bigot, I just never expected to see her here."

"It's not your fault Honey. You had no way of knowing she would tell her brother and certainly no way of knowing he would do this even if she did."

They had been talking for a half hour and John was having trouble keeping his eyes open. He finally gave up and went to sleep. Rick and Sarah were just talking about going to breakfast when the doctor walked in with five med students. They hadn't thought about this being a teaching hospital. Sarah said to Doctor Blanchard, "John was awake this morning."

Doctor Blanchard raised an eyebrow, looked toward the bed and said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure, he talked to us."

"Really, did he seem alert and cognitive?"

"Yes, very."

The doctor leaned over the bed and pushed back John's eyelid and to his amazement, he opened both eyes and looked at him.

"How do you feel?"

"Fine, just a little tired and my back hurts a little."

"I shouldn't be surprised!"

The students had apparently seen John shortly after the operation, and a few had watched the operation from the gallery. They were all now standing around the bed chattering as if they had just witnessed a UFO landing. Doctor Blanchard who was busy examining the patient told them to keep quiet unless they had something intelligent to say.

He straightened up and said. "I have never seen anything like this. I don't know about his internal organs but his exterior wounds have almost healed. I don't..... I can't..... I damn well don't believe it. Did you give him some sort of drugs?,, no, no of course not. I don't know what I'm saying. I just don't know what to think."

Sarah said, "I know what it is, I prayed all night and this morning God answered my prayers."

John said, "What is everyone carrying on about?"

The rest of the day there was a steady stream of doctors, students and nurses through the room. Even the head of the hospital was there. Rick impressed on him that if this were to get to the press and John were to be made into a sideshow attraction that he would sue the hospital, the staff, the university and him personally. He assured Rick that there was nothing to worry about. He further assured him that if it should leak, that the hospital would adamantly deny the story.

"I don't, however see anyway to stop Dr Blanchard from doing a medical paper on this. It is after all a medical phenomenon and very well may be the highlight of his career."

"I understand. I just don't want this to turn into a media circus."

Shortly after that conversation, the parade of people through the room was drastically reduced.

They had removed John's exterior stitches and told them that the interior ones took care of their selves. They had done x-rays, CAT scans and ultrasounds and had no more idea of what happened that they did that morning.

Rick had asked to check John out the next morning and the doctors had agreed. Doctor Blanchard said that he would like to keep him there but couldn't prevent his leaving if they wanted to go. Rick allowed as how it was time to get him home. He did agree, however, to have John contact him when he returned to campus.

Sarah went to John's dorm room and picked up clothes for the trip home. The detectives stopped by and talked with them, but had no more authority to stop their leaving than the doctors did. The next morning they met Ricardo and went home. When they got to Crystal River, Ricardo drove them home. When they came up on their house Rick's Lincoln was in the drive, the garage door and gate were both open and they could see John's mustang in the garage. Rick had Ricardo back up and drop them at the Hearsts'. Rick thanked him, they took their bags and went to the front door. When no one answered the bell, Sarah said she had a key but it was at home. John reached out and tried the latch. To all of their surprise it wasn't locked.

From inside the Hearst's house they talked about what to do. Sarah thought the first thing to do was go help Ollie. John thought they should go next door and beat the crap out of Sean. Rick thought they should call the police. After a bologna sandwich, and a beer apiece they settled on calling the police. Rick found the number and dialed. A half hour later after explaining the situation, giving them the detectives number in Ann Arbor and promising to stop into the police station in two hours he hung up. While Rick was talking to the police Sarah had called Dolly and told her they were in her house and why. Dolly in her distraught state had trouble following what Sarah was telling her, but she understood that they were in trouble and couldn't go home. She told Sarah where to find Ollie's car keys and asked her to hurry.

"He's getting worse by the minute Sarah, I don't know how much longer he's going to last."

When they walked in the room what little control Dolly had maintained collapsed. They looked at Ollie and although they were both expecting him to be in bad shape they were shocked at his appearance. He looked like he had lost twenty pounds. His skin was almost translucent and his eyes were neither open nor closed. His body seemed to be in a constant state of movement even though he was restrained and his eyes seemed to be flickering behind his half closed lids. He was on oxygen, IV's and had monitoring wires stuck to his body in numerous places.

Sarah went straight to Dolly, sat her down in a chair and knelt on the floor in front of her. She took Dolly's hands in hers and said, "Listen to me Dolly, what I'm about to say makes no

sense but its true. Rick is going to heal Ollie.” Dolly’s eyes shot to Rick who was standing over Oliver. He had a glove on one hand, and was taking something out of a little bag. Rick pressed his gloved hand against Ollie’s arm and he immediately quit moving. In a few seconds, his eyes closed and he started breathing easily as if in an untroubled sleep.

Dolly leapt to her feet and went to his bedside. As she went to touch Ollie, Rick withdrew his hand.

“Is He dead?”, Dolly Asked accusingly.”

“No, he will be just fine now. By morning he will be sitting up talking to you.”

“I don’t understand. What just happened?”

Dolly was standing with her hand on Oliver’s chest feeling his steady breathing with tears welling in her eyes. Rick said, “Dolly we have to leave now.”

Dolly looked at Rick as if he’d lost his mind.

“I can’t leave! I have to stay with Oliver.”

“We have to go. I need to explain what just happened and I can’t do it here. Sarah will bring you back soon, but right now, we have to go. Ollie will be fine. He’ll sleep for quite a while now.”

Just then, a nurse hurried in to the room and went to the bed. She looked at the monitors and said, “I don’t understand what’s going on. All of a sudden, his monitors all went back to normal we didn’t know what to think.”

Although the nurse was astonished, she kept it to herself. She was thinking that she had to get the doctor immediately, but she said, “He seems to be doing much better. I’ll have the doctor come in and check on him soon” and turned to go.

“Look nurse we have to go, but we’ll be back in an hour or so.”

Rick took Dolly’s arm and hurried her from the room before she could say anything to the nurse who was looking at them like they had just exited a spaceship.

At Dolly’s house they all sat around the kitchen table drinking iced tea taking turns trying to convince Dolly that they weren’t nuts. Even John got in on it. Rick was trying to explain to her how their lives were going to change and what had to be done. Dolly couldn’t deny what Rick had done in the hospital was amazing but it was still a long way from restoring youth. Rick finally decided that there was nothing they could say that would convince her until she saw it for herself, so they changed tacts.

They explained that they had to get Ollie out of the hospital early tomorrow before the changes in him became apparent to the hospital staff.

“But they have already seen the change.”

Rick said, “No Dolly, I’m talking about him becoming younger. Believe me by tomorrow it is going to start to show. By the next day it will be apparent to anyone associated with him that he is younger. Look Dolly I know this is hard to swallow, but if Ollie’s his old self in the morning will you agree to get him out of there?”

She looked at him with a somewhat befuddled look and said, “I guess so.”

Rick looked at the ceiling and muttered, “This isn’t going to be easy.”

Sarah took Dolly back to the hospital using Dolly’s car while Rick took Ollie’s and went to the police station. When Dolly got back to Ollie’s room he opened his eyes and smiled at her then went back to sleep. Ollie already showed improvement. His color was back to normal and his skin as a whole looked much healthier. Dolly told Sarah that it was getting harder not to believe them.

At the police station, Rick was escorted to the chief’s office.

“Hi, I’m Chief Banks, Leo or Chief to my friends.”

They basically rehashed what they had discussed on the phone. The Chief did tell him that he had his house staked out and that he had talked to Detective Williams in Ann Arbor. He told Rick that Detective Williams wanted to be in on the arrest and that he wanted to take Proudfoot back to Ann Arbor. He would be arriving some time today at the Ocala Airport and should be in Crystal River by this evening. He said that he was bringing extradition papers with him.

He told Matt that the plumbers van next door to his house was the stake out. He also filled Rick in on the campus police officer that was found shot to death, a short distance from where John was shot. He explained that he was killed with the same gun that was used to shoot his nephew. The Chief questioned him at length about the case, but he feigned complete ignorance.

Chief asked, “What made you think that the person who shot your nephew was the same one that was in your house?”

“My car was in the driveway and John’s car was in the garage. The guy that shot John took his car and his wallet. That gave him John.s keys, his gate and garage door opener and our address.

When Rick returned to Ollie’s, his Lincoln was nowhere in site and the gate and the garage door was closed.

Chapter twenty four

Proudfoot and Weasel crossed the Kentucky line on I 75, headed south, bout the time Rick and Sarah landed in Ann Arbor. They pulled off the expressway for gas, bought a case of beer, a

carton of cigarettes and various snack foods. Weasel was entering withdrawal and getting very vocal about scoring some dope of any kind. However, they didn't know the area and Sean wasn't wild about Weasel being high on the road anyway. He figured that they would have trouble enough if they got pulled over without that. He thought that there was a good chance that the Mustang hadn't been reported stolen yet but that it sure would be soon. The chances were that if they pulled in on drug charge that they might never get out. Sean was getting very tired of his bellyaching and was having second thoughts about bringing him along.

When they walked back to the car, Sean asked Weasel to drive for awhile. Weasel said, "I aint never drove no car before and I got no license."

"Shit. Well we're gonna have to stop for the night then, I sure as hell can't drive all the way to Florida. I can hardly hold my eyes open now. How the fuck's a man get to be twenty five without learnin how to drive?"

"Twenty six."

"Whatever."

"Jesus Proudfoot, I spent most of my whole live in prison. They don't give no drivin lessons in the Tuna

Sean thought just as soon as this job's over weasel is history. He figured stupidity was what got most people in prison and Weasel was about as stupid as they came.

By the time they reached Crystal River it was ten o'clock at night. They would have been there earlier, but they drank a lot of beer the night before and had a little trouble getting out of bed that morning. By the time they had breakfast and got on the road it was almost noon. That along with Sean's strict observation of the speed laws stretched the trips timeline somewhat. Sean wished that John would have equipped the Mustang with a fuzz-buster instead of the useless alarm system.

When they got to Crystal River, they checked into a motel and went out to eat. On the way back to the motel, they stopped and picked up some more booze. Weasel spent most of the evening complaining about not having any dope until Sean told him to shut up. Neither one of them had a clue about how to run down an address but figured they would worry about that tomorrow.

The next morning while they we're checking out, Sean said to the clerk, "Were looking for four eighty Manatee loop. You have any idea how to get there?"

The clerk reached under the counter and came up with a map of the area. He laid it on the counter and looked up Manatee Loop. He pointed it out on the map and said, "Manatee loop is only three blocks long, it shouldn't be very hard to find your address."

"Thanks man. Can I keep the map?"

"Sure. Have a great day."

They got in the car and drove to the address. When they were coming up to the place, Weasel said, "I sure can see where this guy might have somethin worth money." Sean parked in front of the gate, got out of the car and tried to open it.

"Shit. How the hell we gonna get in there without everybody for a mile around knowin?" Weasel said, "Try the garage opener. Lotsa rich people have electric gates."

Sean pushed the button on the opener attached to the sun visor, the gate opened and the garage door went up. Sean said, "Damn Weasel you're smarter than you look."

He pulled the car up to the garage and stopped. It was a three car garage with one double overhead door and one single. The double door went up but the single had stayed down. There was a Lincoln town car in one stall of the double bay. The second bay was taken up with three

bikes and a two man kayak.

He got out, put his gun in his belt at the small of his back and hurried in through the garage to the back door. As he passed through the garage he noticed that the stall behind the closed garage door held a little red convertible with the top down. Sean figured this meant that they were home. Since they apparently were not noticed yet Sean went back to the driveway to confer with Weasel.

He told Weasel to go to the front door and ring the bell and returned to the back door. He took out his gun and listen at the door until he heard the doorbell ring. Hearing no movement he tried the door and to his surprise found it unlocked. He stepped inside, took a quick look around and got the general sense of an empty house. He hurried to the front door and found it locked. He unlocked the door just the bell rang again causing him to whirl around and look behind him. He let out a long breath, trying to calm himself and let Weasel in. They made a quick search of the house and then Sean went out in the lanai to make sure the back yard was empty.

“I guess no one is home. I don’t get it there are two cars in the garage.”

“Maybe they went out with somebody that picked em up.”

“Maybe.”

Sean went back to the kitchen door and closed the garage door The two of them walked through the house wide eyed. Weasel said, “This got to be the finest house I ever seen outside a movie.”

Sean said, “Christ, so this is how fuckin rich people live. Once I get my hands on that ball this is how I’m gonna live.”

“What ball’s that?”

“Don’t worry about it.

“What we gonna do Proudfoot?”

“We’re gonna wait awhile. They may just be out.”

“What about the Mustang. Their sure as hell gonna notice that when they come back.”

“Don’t worry about it. They know the car. They’ll just think he came home.”

“Who came home?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

A little later Sean said, “Shit I know where they are. Their at a funeral. I don’t know why I didn’t think of that.”

“I’m going to put the Lincoln in the drive and the Mustang in the garage in case the neighbors know that John is away.”

When Sean pushed the garage door opener he was startled by the alarm but when it quit right of way he figured out what it was. He said to Weasel; “That alarm must go off when the gate opens. That’s some good information to have and it should keep us from being surprised.”

After moving the cars around they spent an hour searching the house for a safe or hiding place, but the only thing they found of interest was Rick’s pistol. Sean let Weasel keep it since he already had one. After that, they sat down in the lanai and drank a couple of Rick’s beers. Weasel said, “That sure is a nice boat Proudfoot. You ever on a boat?”

“Nothing like that. I was in a row boat once, fishing on the Pecos.”

“You think maybe we could take it for a ride.”

“You crazy Weasel what if the neighbors know they’re gone and see us buzzin around in their boat? Hell a neighborhood like this, they’d have the law here in a fuckin heartbeat. I think we better keep a pretty low profile.”

“By the way Weasel, go make sure all the doors are locked. I don’t want to be surprised

regardless of the alarm.”

The one thing Weasel didn't check was the garage door, and Sean had inadvertently left it up.

By nine that night, they had drunk all of the beer in the house plus all they brought with them and decided to go out. They spent some time clearing out the third garage stall so that when they came back they could put the Lincoln in the garage. They then went looking for a bar.

The one Sean picked had quite a few motorcycles in the parking lot. That made Weasel nervous since he kind of put bikers and skinheads in the same category, but he didn't say anything. The bikers had a money game going on the pool table and paid no attention to the new arrivals. After awhile, Weasel who considered himself a hustler decided to try to get in the game. By eleven o'clock, he had lost all the money he had on him and was begging Sean for more. Sean said, “Maybe pool ain't your game. I got better things to do with my money than give it to those guys. Sit down. I'll buy you a burger. You're bout too drunk to hold a cue anyway. Say, while were waiting for the burgers, go see if those new friends of yours will sell you some pot.”

He figured a little pot wouldn't cause any problems and that it might get Weasel off his ass for awhile.

While Weasel was dealing for the pot a girl down the bar said, “Would you like to have someone to smoke with?”

When Weasel told Proudfoot what they wanted for the pot, he groused a little but he handed him the money. He then moved down the bar next to the girl that was looking for a free high and asked her name. Sean thought someone should have told her by now that nothing is free, then he thought maybe she knew and didn't care.

“Virginia McGill, everybody around here calls me Gill.” By the time Weasel came back with the pot Proudfoot had started to lose his interest for hamburgers. He told the girl behind the bar to put the burgers in a bag. As soon as they came Proudfoot paid the bar tab, \$110, and the three of them left the bar.

When they got to the car Gill said, “Nice car.”

When they pulled in the drive at the house she let out a low whistle. They had stopped on the way for beer, booze and cigarettes. Sean had decided he was going to have fun tonight. Sean parked in the garage and they went in through the service door. Proudfoot's little friend was very impressed. She asked if she could look around. When she got back to the kitchen, she asked with an indifferent tone “Your wife Outta town?”

“What the fuck you talking about girl? I ain't got no wife.”

“Oh, you still live with your mother?”

“Gill, I think you've slipped over the edge. My mother's in New Mexico, If it's any of your fuckin business.”

“Well there sure as hell is some woman living here.”

“Don't you worry about no woman, or anything else. We got this place all to ourselves.”

Proudfoot grabbed a bottle of scotch and took Gill into the master bedroom. An hour later when he came out Weasel Said, “Mind if I have some of that?”

Proudfoot shrugged his shoulders and went in the kitchen. Weasel walked in the bedroom as she was dressing.

“What the hell is this, I ain't no whore and I don't fuck niggers.” Weasel walked over, hit her in the stomach hard enough to knock the wind out of her, and threw her on the bed. He came out of the bedroom a half hour later and rolled a joint. She stayed in the bedroom nursing the bottle of scotch.

Sean tried to figure how long it would be before Matt and Etty got back. Given that they had no family there, the funeral should be pretty quick. They had apparently flown to Michigan so you only have one day each way plus a couple of days for the funeral, say four days all together. Hell, it had already been four days since he shot John. They could be back any time. Apparently math wasn't Sean's strong suit. He had miscalculated by a bit. It had actually been five days.

The three of them stayed up half the night drinking and smoking. Sean kept the TV tuned to CNN in hopes of hearing something about the shooting in Ann Arbor, but was disappointed. After the little incident with Weasel, the girl wanted to be taken back to the bar, but Sean told her to sit down and shut up. When she realized the only way she could get out of there was to walk, she decided it wasn't such a bad place after all. Besides there was plenty of booze and weed left.

She rummaged around the cupboards looking for some munchies until she found a box of microwave popcorn. She popped up four bags of it, went in the living room and dumped it on the coffee table. She looked at the TV and said, "Is that the best shit you can find to watch?"

Sean answered, "It's not the only fucking TV in the house. If you don't like it, go watch something else."

She sat on the floor by the coffee table rolling a joint and said, "Excussee me"

Long before morning, Gill decided she should have stayed at Curly's. By the time she finally got to sleep she was plotting revenge. She figured she might come back with some of her biker friends and teach the Indian and his nigger buddy a lesson.

The following morning, before daylight four uniformed police officers from the Crystal River P.D. came up the river in a small boat with an electric motor, tied up at the dock and stationed themselves across the back yard. Three uniformed officers from the Citrus County Sheriff's department climbed over the front yard wall and scattered across the front yard. They had three high candlepower flashlights with them. The police Chief and the two detectives from Ann Arbor stood looking through the front gate. At precisely six o'clock, the Chief raised a bullhorn to his mouth. "Leave your weapons inside and come out with your hands above your heads"

At the same time, they turned on the lights.

Chapter twenty five

They all heard the bullhorn at the same time including the neighbors. Next door Rick, Sarah and John came out on the front porch to watch, as did the people across the street and a few other curious neighbors. Lights came on in quite a few windows where the occupants chose to stay inside. Although the three in Rick and Sarah's house were extremely hung over, the bullhorn got their attention. The girl woke up, looked at Sean and said, "What the hell is that!"

Sean said, "Shit!"

When Proudfoot came in to the living room pulling on his shirt Weasel was peeking through living room drapes. With the brightness of the lights, he couldn't see a thing.

"Come out with your hands on your heads, we have the house surrounded."

Weasel said, "I'm going out. They got nothing on me but some B an E and maybe breakin parole. I'll be back out in a year."

"Go ahead asshole. They sure as hell ain't taking me."

The girl came out of the bedroom screaming and crying at the same time. She ran to the front door and opened it as Proudfoot jumped back against the wall. When the door swung open, one of the officers fired his gun. The bullet hit the porch light peppering the girl with flying glass. She fell to the porch on her knees, holding her hands over her head and screaming. The bullhorn blared, "Hold your fire! Hold your fire!"

Weasel yelled, "Don't shoot, I'm coming out. I'm unarmed. Hold your fire."

He laid Rick's gun on the entryway table and went out the front door. Totally blinded by the lights he tripped over the girl kneeling on the porch, fell on his face, split his lip open and bloodied his nose. The girl started screaming all over again as if she had been shot.

Sean figured that if they knew he was here they knew that he killed John and maybe knew about the cop. He thought if they take me I'll spend the rest of my life inside, probably on death row. He didn't know how they executed people in Michigan, but had no desire to find out and he would much rather be dead than spend his life in prison.

While Weasel was going out the front door, Sean grabbed the keys to the Lincoln and headed for the garage. He got in the Lincoln, laid his gun on his lap and started the car. He hit the garage door opener and ducked down below the seat. When the door was about four feet up he threw the

car in reverse and pushed the accelerator to the floor. The car caught the bottom of the door on the way out and took it off its tracks. He scraped the side of the garage door on the way out, taking a side mirror off the Lincoln. By the time he reached the gate, he was doing thirty miles an hour.

The gate was only about a third of the way open when the Lincoln hit it. The hinges of the gate were mounted to the concrete and stucco wall with six-inch bolts, but they may as well have been toothpicks. The gate flew into a Crystal River police cruiser that was parked across the end of the drive. As the chief and the detectives leaped out of the way both the gate and cruiser were driven across the street into a shallow ditch. Sean slammed on the brakes, dropped the shift into drive and put the gas pedal to the floor.

At least twenty bullets had struck the car but Sean was only vaguely aware of the gunfire. He was doing fifty by the time he reached the first corner. He slammed on the brakes and glanced in the rear view mirror. The rear window was a spider web of cracks that made it impossible to see out, but as he slid sideways around the corner, he could see at least three squad cars starting after him. By the next corner, he was doing eighty and there was no way he could make the turn. The car hit an above ground water line over a culvert and went airborne. It landed upside down in a canal in about ten feet of water and sunk quickly while a twenty-foot geyser spewed from the ruptured water line.

The cruisers pulled over to the side of the canal and one of them got on the radio and called for a wrecker and a diver. No one thought there was a possibility that Sean was alive. The Chief pulled up, got out and asked, "Has anyone called Ozello water?"

"They've got leak meters Chief, they're probably already on the way."

"Call them anyway."

Three hours later Williams was sitting in the police station questioning Weasel. The girl was in another room being interrogated by a Crystal River detective with a female cop present.

"What were you doing in that house?"

"I met them at Curly's bar and they invited me over for a drink. That nigger raped me. I want to file charges."

"Fine, but first we need you to answer some questions."

The detective questioned her for an hour without getting the slightest bit of useful information. Meanwhile detectives Williams and Brown were interrogating Weasel.

"What were you and Proudfoot after from The Moore's?"

"I don't know. Comin here was Proudfoot's idea. I aint never heard of Crystal River."

"You trying to tell me that you came all the way to Florida and you don't know why?"

"Proudfoot wouldn't talk about it. I asked him a bunch of times. He just said that this guy had somethin he wanted. Somethin that was worth a lotta money."

"Look George, you might want to help yourself out here. If your buddy Proudfoot dies you're up for a murder charge."

"What? I didn't tell that fool to take off in that Lincoln."

"It don't matter George. When someone's killed in the commission of a felony, its murder and the fact that it's one of the felons don't change it. Now you give us something we can use and we might be able to lower it to manslaughter. You give us something real good, and we might just decide it wasn't your fault that dumb Indian killed himself."

"One time he said somethin about some ball but that's it."

"What about a ball?"

"I don't know. He just mentioned it. When I asked about it he just clamed up."

“This guy that had something Sean wanted, how well did he know him?”

“How the fuck should I know. Proudfoot’s real close mouthed.”

“You’re not helping yourself very much Weasel. If we don’t start getting some answers you’re going back in for life, if not the needle.”

“Okay. He seemed to know them. I mean everyone that lived there. I also think he didn’t like them much. It was like he had score.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s all I got. I’m being straight with you guys. You gotta help me out here. I didn’t do nothin but a little B&E.”

The interrogation went on for another hour without the detectives getting no more than they had in the first half hour. Williams and Brown went to the other interrogation room to talk to the girl.

“That nigger raped me. I want to file charges.”

Brown said, “Fine, but were taking that nigger back to Michigan to stand trial. You’ll have to come back there to testify against him.”

“You know I can’t do that. I should have known that you niggers would stick together.”

“Little girl, what we got here is a murder investigation and you’re starting to piss me off. If I hear the word nigger out of that toilette you call a mouth one more time, in fact if I hear anything other than Sir, Mister, or Detective I’m going to have your lily white ass thrown in jail.”

“I ain’t done nothing. You can’t put me in jail.”

“Wouldn’t bet on it. I can put you in jail for failure to cooperate in a murder investigation. I can put you in jail for pissing off a police officer. I can put you in jail for consorting with known criminals. I can put you in jail for possession of that dope we found in the house. In addition, let us not forget abetting. You were riding in a stolen car so I might add grand theft auto. You might get out of jail by the time you’re sixty.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Of course I can. I’m the law. Now about that rape, I don’t believe you were raped. I think you would fuck a beagle if you thought there was something in it for you.”

“You can’t talk to me like that you ni... I want a lawyer.”

“Good luck.”

When they walked out of the interrogation room, the chief who had been watching though the two-way mirror said with a smile, “For pissing off a police officer?”

“Why not?”

Detective Williams looked at his partner and said, “You okay Brown?”

“Yeah, she just pissed me off. I don’t like being talked to like that.”

“Hell brown, I’ve heard lot’s of perps talk to you worse than that, I recollect I may have said a few nasty things to you myself.”

“The difference is you didn’t mean it, and even those perps knew in their heart that I was at least their equal. That miscreant piece of white trash in there truly thinks she’s better than me.”

Chief said, “I’m afraid you will find quite a bit of that down here. If it is any consolation, most of it comes from uneducated scum like your friend Gill in there. Well I’ll hold her over night and turn her loose. The only thing we really have on her is being stupid.”

“Yeah. What did Flint say about our friend Weasel?”

“They wanted to know if we had a gun. They said he is a person of interest for a murder in his apartment house. The idiot left his prints all over the crime scene.”

“That’s interesting. We have ballistics from his buddy Proudfoot’s shootings. I think when

we get back we may do a little comparing. We can't put them together for the Ann Arbor shootings, but we may be able to for the Flint one." I think I'll call the Flint PD back and get extradition papers on George.

The Chief said, "I wonder what kind of parent would name a half-breed Indian son George Armstrong Custer. His Momma must have had a real warped sense of humor."

"There's no accounting for people. Mind if I use your phone Chief?"

"Not at all, in the meantime I'll get an officer to put that cutie in a cell. I'll be right back."

The car had been empty when they pulled it out of the canal. The divers were still looking for the body with no luck. Williams was starting to think there wasn't going to be a body. The water was clear as glass and he figured that if they hadn't found him by now, they weren't going to find him. Hell they could just row up and down the canal looking for him, fuck the divers. However, the divers did find one thing in which Williams was very interested. That thing was a nine-millimeter Smith and Wesson.

Chapter Twenty six

The next morning when Dolly awoke it was five thirty in the morning. She got out of the chair and went to the bed. She laid her hand on her husband's hand he opened his eyes and said, "Hi sweetie."

Dolly threw her arms around him and started crying. Her body was racked with sobs.

"Hey, hey, hey, what's the matter?"

"I thought I lost you Oliver."

"I'm fine Dolly, fit-as-a-fiddle. Am I in a hospital?"

Dolly continued to sob. She was blotting her eyes with tissue, but it was a losing cause, the tears were welling faster than she could wipe them away. She choked through her sobs, "How do you feel Oliver?"

"I feel great, please stop crying. I think I'm disoriented Dolly. What day is this?"

When she told him he said, "Jesus Dolly, what happened?"

"You had a stroke. I'll explain it all when we get home. I need to go call Rick. I'll be right back."

"Why are you calling Rick? Aren't they in Michigan?"

"No dear, they're here. I'll explain later, but I have to go now. I'll be right back."

Dolly had decided not to say any more right now. She wanted to wait and see what the doctor had to say and find out if there was going to be any problem about getting him released soon. She had still been skeptical about what the Moore's had told her but she was now starting to think it just might be true. There was no doubt in her mind that Oliver was very near death when Rick laid his hand on his arm. If everything they told her was true she could certainly see the need for secrecy. There was so much to try to grasp that she couldn't quite control her mind. It seemed to be going in a hundred directions at the same time. She tried her best to calm down, thinking this is no time for me to come unglued.

Rick was standing on the front porch with Sarah and John watching the spectacle next door. They all moved a little ways back on the porch when the shooting started and Sarah grabbed Rick's arm. When Rick's Lincoln smashed through the gate, Sarah grasped Rick's arm even tighter.

"Not the gate!"

Rick said, "It's just a gate Sarah."

"I loved that gate."

Just then, his phone rang. Dolly had managed to calm down somewhat and was able to explain Ollie's condition without breaking down. Rick explained what was going on at home, but when he realized she wasn't grasping much of what he was saying he just told her that he and Sarah would be there soon and hung up. The excitement was about over next door. The few that hadn't joined in the pursuit show was just milling around the yard or stringing "crime scene" tape.

Rick went over what Dolly had told him while they ate breakfast.

Driving out of the neighborhood, Rick slowed the car as they passed the commotion where Sean had driven his Lincoln into the canal. He didn't see any sign of either his car or Sean and although curious about what happened he kept going. He felt that there were more important things to worry about right now, than what happened to Sean.

When Rick and Sarah arrived at the Seven Rivers Hospital Dolly was talking to the doctor trying her best to get him to release her husband. He was adamant that he stay another day and refused to sign a release form. As soon as he left the room Rick said to Dolly, "Get his clothes

and get him dressed. I'll bring the car around. Oliver started to protest but Rick cut him off.

"Oliver you have no concept of what is happening right now. We will explain as soon as possible but for right now you have to do as you're told."

"I'm not doing a Goddamn thing until some..."

"Goddamn it Oliver, for once in your life just shut your mouth and do as you're told."

"Oliver had rarely been spoken to in that manor by anyone and certainly never by his wife. He was so taken aback that he had no reply, but when Dolly handed him his clothes he started to get dressed, seemingly unaware that Rick and Sarah were in the room.

A short stocky nurse ran down the hall toward them and caught up just as they reached the front door. She placed herself between Oliver and the door and panted out in an extremely stern voice, "You can't leave the hospital. Your doctor has not released you. Please return to your room at once or I'll have to call security. Dolly stepped between the nurse and her husband, looked down at her nametag and said, "Look Miss Goodman, I don't like your uppity attitude. I don't know where you think you are but the last time I looked this was still the USA and it was still a free country. You can't hold my husband against his will and if you try it your going to get your ass sued off."

Miss Goodman was not used to being confronted by someone that was unimpressed with her authority and was at a loss as how to handle it. She finally stammered out, "But... but, but, you at least have to sign a self release form."

"I don't think we have to sign anything but if it will make you happy we will. Oliver you get in the car. I'll go sign her silly form and be right back."

After the nurse and Dolly had gone and Rick and Ollie had gotten in the car, Ollie said, "What the hell is going on here?"

Rick thought, this isn't going well at all.

"Ollie, you're not going to believe what I tell you, but in a very short time it will be apparent. I'm going to give you the Readers Digest version. You had a massive stroke. The doctors made it clear to Dolly that you were not going to survive. She called Sarah, and Sarah asked me to save your life. So I did." As Ollie started to interrupt Rick held up his hand, "But that's not all I did, I also gave you back your youth. The youth part will take a week or so, but believe me it will happen. We couldn't leave you in the hospital. Your survival is hard enough for them to accept, there's no way to explain you getting fifty years younger."

Ollie looked at Rick as if he had just grown another head.

"Have you lost your mind? Apparently I had a stroke; I wake a day later and the world has gone mad. My wife is acting like a complete stranger and you are spewing drivel that only an idiot would believe."

"It was two days later, oh never mind. I can see I'm wasting my breath here. You will find out soon enough."

Dolly came out the front door. Rick saw her, got out and opened the door for her.

"Dolly this man has gone totally insane. He thinks he healed me and that I'm going to morph into some kind of pimple faced kid, and what the hell's with this cloak and dagger escape? I would have been released tomorrow and if the Doc thought I should stay, maybe I should have."

"Rick did save your life. As for the other, I don't know, but if they say it's true I'm starting to think it must be. Oliver you were dying. Two days ago, I had no hope and then Rick came and touched you and you were instantly better and very soon you were completely healed. I don't understand it either but that is what happened, hard as it may be to believe that's what happened."

On the way back to their house, Rick filled them in the best he could without mentioning the ball. He didn't know if Dolly had seen it or not or realized what it meant if she had. For now, he would rather that she believed he had the power himself since the less people that new about the ball the better. Back at the house they gathered around the dining room table and Rick said,

"I haven't got it all figured out yet but, I think we will have to get a death certificate for Ollie. I don't know anything about Canadian law but I doubt that you can sell your property without Ollie's okay and I assure you by the time you find a buyer no one will believe that Ollie is Ollie. Ollie you're already starting to look younger. He explained that Dolly was going to have to go back to London and take care of selling their property and closing out their accounts.

"Now here is one that you are going to need to trust me on. You need to sell me your house. Just as soon as you get new identities I'll sell it back to you for what you sold it to me for."

"Goddamn it Rick this is starting to smell like a scam."

"Ollie, you stop that this minute. Rick's already saved your life and he is going to a great deal of trouble for us."

"You're really buying this bullshit Dolly? Moreover, what is this crap about selling our London property? I have no intention of selling our house or any thing else."

"Then you will lose it. Two weeks from now, you're going to look about nineteen. No one is going to believe you're who you say you are. I guess you could prove it with science being what it is today, but if you do you will have destroyed my life in the process. This is not bullshit Ollie and you are going to realize that soon enough. Dolly already knows because she saw you after the stroke. By tomorrow, you'll know. By the way have you lost your fillings?"

"What fillings?"

"The fillings in your teeth."

"I don't have any teeth. I have false teeth and come to think of it they're not fitting very well this morning."

"That's because you're getting new teeth. Go look in the mirror. By tomorrow, you'll have a complete set and while you're looking in the mirror look at your head. You're starting to get hair."

Ollie came back from the bathroom fifteen minutes later. He had a set of false teeth in his hand and a stunned look on his face.

"It's true...I'm getting teeth...I'm getting hair. I just can't believe this is happening. How old did you say you were Rick?"

Rick called the chief to see if they could get back in their house.

"The crime lab's still working in there Rick, my best guess would be late tonight, or maybe tomorrow morning. I'll give you a call on your cell when they're done. In the meantime, we'd like you to come down to the station. We have some questions we need to clear up."

"I'll be right there Chief."

As he hung up, he thought about the other people that had come out of his house that morning and wondered what they told the police. He figured his best bet was to deny everything. There was no way they could have any hard evidence. Moreover, if Proudfoot was dumb enough to tell them about New Mexico it should be easy to laugh off. He certainly didn't think the police would take a story like that serious. When he arrived at the station, he was offered coffee and ushered into the Chief's office. The Chief was behind his desk and the detectives were sitting on a couch drinking sodas.

Williams said, "I can't see how you people can drink coffee in this heat."

Rick replied, "What heat, it's a little chilly today, don't you think Chief?"

“Just about right, I’d say?” The chief countered.

Rick took a seat in front of the desk and sat his coffee cup down on the edge. What with all the other coffee cup rings, he didn’t bother looking for a coaster. When he was settled Williams said, “Rick, you saw the people that came out of your house this morning, how well did you know them?”

“Total strangers.”

“We know you knew one of them, Sean Proudfoot.”

“Never heard of him. Did he say he knows me?”

“We haven’t got him, but his buddy says he knows you.”

“His buddy’s wrong.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re not being totally honest with me Rick?”

“I don’t know Mark. Maybe it’s just your detective’s penchant for distrust of your fellow man.”

“What about the ball Rick.”

That one got to him. He couldn’t keep from hesitating for a beat, but he didn’t stutter.

“What ball is that Mark.”

“The one they almost killed your boy for and drove half way across country for. I think you know what I’m talking about Rick.”

“Nope, can’t say as I do.”

After Rick left, Mark turned to the Chief and said, “That question about the ball got to him. He’s lying to us. I don’t know why but I intend to find out. What did you manage to find out about him?”

“The Moore’s moved to Crystal River from Tallahassee two years ago and Rick opened a real estate office. Sarah is unemployed. They own the home they live in plus considerable acreage north of town. Each property is worth a considerable amount. These are definitely not poor folk. They are also raising a dependant nephew. We couldn’t find any record of them prior to Tallahassee. Everyone we talked to spoke very highly of both Rick and Sarah even those he does business with. That kid of theirs is a parent’s dream come true. He has never so much as had a parking ticket. His scholastic record is next to perfect and he’s going to U of M on a football scholarship. I understand he has good hands and can run like the wind. As far as I know they don’t attend church, they drink in moderation and are kind to animals and small children. There is no record of misdoing but then there isn’t much of a record at all. It’s like they just dropped out of the sky three years ago.

Detective Williams said, “Yeah, they’re a genuine Beaver Cleaver family.”

The Chief looked at him and said, “Isn’t it possible that these people are exactly what they seem to be, just genuinely nice folks.”

“Mark said, There aint a motherfucker in the world that nice.”

Otis said, “I’m afraid I’ve got to agree with my partner on that one. Besides, he lied about the ball.”

The Chief said, “It crossed my mind that they could be in the witness protection program. That would account for a lot.”

“Well, Brown retorted, if that’s the case we never will find out. The FBI is about as chatty as carp.”

Chapter twenty seven

While Rick was at the police station, John sat on the lanai with Ollie. He was trying to make him understand what they were going to have to do to change their identities.

“I don’t see why we have to change our identities?”

“It’s going to be a lot clearer to you in a week Ollie, when you’re young. You must have friends both here and in Canada. How are you going to explain being twenty-one again? They wouldn’t believe you anyway. Hell, I didn’t even believe my own mother when she told me. Besides Ollie, if you don’t change your identity we will have to give up our life and go on the run again. Is that the way you want to thank Uncle Rick for saving your life?”

Ollie didn’t say anything, but he was more than a little upset. He didn’t like being told the facts of life by a nineteen-year-old kid and he didn’t like being told what to do by anyone. Ollie was used to giving orders and didn’t like not being in charge. While John and Ollie talked, Sarah and Dolly were sitting at the kitchen table drinking iced tea and discussing the same subject. Dolly said, “What a wonderful gift Rick has.”

“I once thought so but I’m starting to think it’s a curse.”

“How can you say that? You both have your youth. You saved my Oliver from a certain death. You don’t even have to pay for health insurance. I don’t see how can you call that a curse?”

“Think about it Dolly. Because of this so-called gift, Rick was forced to give up a way of life that he loved. The only way of life, he’d ever known. He lost a ranch that had been in his family for four generations. We have all been forced to give up our friends and start over from scratch. My son, yes John is my son, was almost killed, and we had a maniac in our house that was prepared to kill us to get this so called gift.”

“But, Sarah look at all the good that’s come of it. You have your youth back”

“Dolly, that’s true, not only do I have my youth, but I now have a life that I couldn’t even dream of a few years ago. However, I would give up anything in this world, including my youth,

to keep my son safe. You don't know how close we came to losing him. Never having had children, you can't possibly know what it would be like to lose a son."

"I understand your fear with all that's happened, but I know what it would be like to lose a husband, and Rick's gift kept that from happening."

"Rick was leery of this thing, and its potential to bring out the worst in people from the start. At first, I just couldn't see it, I was so sure, like you, that it was just a wonderful gift. Now I'm not so sure; that gift could cost me my husband and perhaps even my life. Another thing, that young man that tried to kill my son was once his best friend. They grew up together, hunted, fished and played ball together. They sat at my kitchen table talking about football and girls. If it wasn't for this "gift", they may have been friends for life. Now he has spent time in prison, killed people and god-only-knows what all. Moreover, there is a good chance that he is now dead himself. Rick healed that boy's sister who was paralyzed and look how he was repaid. He saved Ollie's life, and now he is acting like Rick is trying to steal from him."

"You have to forgive Ollie. He is just confused right now, and he has always hated not being in charge. It makes him feel as if he has no control over his life. He will be fine once he gets a grasp on what is happening."

"I hope so. Dolly, everything I just told you is secret, or should have been. I don't know if the police will talk to you, but if they do you can't say a word about what I've said. I shouldn't have said anything, but now that I have you have to promise."

"Of course I promise."

"I mean it Dolly, I can't begin to tell you how important this is."

"You have my word Sarah, and I promise to make Ollie understand too."

When Rick got back to Ollie's, He asked them if John could spend the night.

"Of course Rick, you're all welcome to stay as long as you want to" Dolly replied.

"I think Sarah and I are going to take a little drive. I don't think we'll be back tonight." Once away from the house, he said to Sarah, "I just needed for us to be by ourselves for a while."

"I know just how you feel."

That night, at the cabin, they talked about all that had happened and what lay ahead with Ollie and Dolly for the next month or so. Sarah told him how she felt about the ball.

"Rick I think maybe I finally understand your fears about the ball. Maybe we should get rid of it. It's already given us a wonderful second life, maybe that's enough."

"I don't know Honey, I've thought about it a lot, but I just don't know. I'm reluctant to just throw it away and I can't imagine who to trust with it."

"What about the government?"

"The government may be the last ones I would trust with it. I'm fairly certain that they would see it as a weapon. They could create a strong, intelligent army that if wounded, could be back in battle within days."

"What about science?"

"Sarah, even if they did their best to use it for the betterment of man kind I think the government would appropriate it for their own use as soon as they became aware of it. I think the worst thing would be that if science could figure it out and be able to reproduce it.

"Why?"

"Consider a world where no one died or got old and could reproduce for as long as they felt like it. Where are we going to put all these people? How are we going to feed, house and provide water for them. The population of this planet could easily double or even triple in a decade."

"I see what you're saying. Maybe it would be best to throw it in the gulf or in that spring out

there. God knows how deep that thing is?”

“I just don’t know if I can bring myself to do that. This could be the greatest discovery in the history of mankind. I don’t know that I have the right, or the courage for that matter.”

Besides he said smiling, “We skinny dip in there; we might turn it into a fountain of youth.”

“That doesn’t sound all bad.”

“Oh yeah, you’ll think so when we’re overrun with teeny-bopper manatees.”

“I guess your right Rick, they would likely tell all their friends and we wouldn’t have room to take a bath.”

“There has to be something we can do though Rick. I don’t see how we can take on the world’s sorrows. On the other hand, as long as we have it I don’t think I can ignore people’s troubles. For instance this thing with Ollie, there is no way we could just let him die and now we can’t let Dolly stay old while her husband regains his youth.”

“I know Sarah and I’m sure this won’t be the last of these situations. We need to figure out an answer, but it will have to wait until the current mess is solved. Now what were you saying about a bath?”

“Do you think the manatees will mind?”

“They never complained before. You know what I just thought would be neat?”

“What’s that?”

“If we ever get electricity out here, it would be nice to have a light in the spring.”

“Why you lecherous old man, you just want to watch me bathe.”

“I was thinking of the esthetics and watching the manatee, but now that you mention it.”

“Come on then, there’s a moon out tonight. Come to think of it I may do a little leering myself.”

That night as they lay in bed Sara said, “Rick when I die I want to be buried here.”

“You’re not going to die. You’ll live forever if I have anything to say about it.”

“Still if I do die this is where I would like to be buried. Everyone dies some day.”

“Not you and I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

She snuggled up to him and said, “You’re such a big wuss.”

The next morning, after they returned to the Hearsts’ house Rick, Sarah and John discussed how they might get a death certificate for Ollie. John said, “Now don’t you guys be going all hyper, but I know a guy.”

“Oh and this guy you know deals in death certificates?”

“No Aunt Sarah he sells blank birth certificates to kids so they can buy beer.”

“And this helps us, how?”

“It’s how he gets the certificates. He has a way of sneaking into the records area at one of the hospital’s, I don’t know which and stealing blank birth certificates. I figure if he can get birth certificates he could also get death certificates.”

“I don’t want you involved in this John. This seems like something you could go to prison for.” Aunt Sarah I won’t be involved. My friend says this guy will do anything for a hundred bucks. I’ll just tell my friend what I need and pay him when he gets it.”

Rick said, “It doesn’t sound too bad, but I don’t want you to have any contact what-so-ever with the guy that steals the certificates. You just let your friend be the go-between. You give him the money and make sure you’re some where safe when you take the certificate from him. It strikes me that if this guy got caught taking death certificates he might help the cops set up a sting to keep himself out of prison. The police might be more interested in someone who wants such a thing than the guy that stole it.”

It turned out the guy wanted five hundred. His reasoning was that he had to do a separate heist for this certificate. Every time he went in the hospital was just one more chance of being caught. Each time he went in he would lift ten certificates which he would sell at a hundred a piece. He surmised that his chances of selling another death certificate were slim to none.

Rick decided that since they had no other way of getting what they needed to go ahead and pay him. A week later Ollie came over with an antique typewriter he had picked up in a junk shop. He filled out the certificate and signed it with the name of the doctor that he'd had for his stroke. Rick having a notary's license, as did most realtors, embossed it with a raised notary stamp.

Sarah was concerned about Rick notarizing the certificate, but he explained that it was just a stamp. Unless I add my license number and initial it, there is no way to trace it back to me and it will make it look more authentic. They looked it over and decided that Dolly shouldn't have any trouble. They all agreed that the chances of Canada bothering to check with the U.S. on a death certificate were slim, especially for a man in his seventies.

Sarah said, "When my husband died..."

"Your husband?"

"It's a long story. Anyway I was given a bunch of copies of the death certificate for the bank, and whoever else needed one. In my case, there weren't many people that needed them but you may need them for brokers, real-estate people and so forth. The point is that I never saw the original. I have no idea who has that."

"Sarah's right. I had the same situation when my dad died, and also my wife."

"Wife?"

"That's another long story. I think you need to make copies of the death certificate. You could take the original along, just in case, but I think all you will need are the copies."

The next day John left for Michigan in his Mustang and the Hearsts prepared to go to Canada. Rick was against Ollie going to London with his wife. He was sure that they knew many people there and it was going to cause situations that would be hard to explain. Ollie contended that he was the one that knew about their investments and properties. He felt that his advice was critical to getting their business taken care of in a timely manner. He promised to lay low and avoid being seen with Dolly, especially if there was a chance of seeing people they knew.

Rick was skeptical.

"How are you going to explain being in her house? I'm sure many of your friends and acquaintances will be stopping by to offer condolences. Someone is sure to notice the resemblance to her late husband. They may also think it strange that she has a young man living with her within weeks of her husband's death."

"Rick, give me credit for not being a total fool. I never planned on taking over the duties of her late husband. I was thinking more along the lines of a trusted advisor."

"Trusted advisors to widows, especially young good looking ones, come under immediate suspicion. At best people will think you're after her money."

"I think I can handle this Rick. I got by for a long time without having an instructor."

"Don't get pissed. I'm just trying to help. You may have got by for a long time, but I doubt that you've ever encountered a situation quite like this."

In the end, they went back to Canada together. Rick thought it foolish but could see no way to prevent it.

Chapter twenty seven

After Ollie and Dolly left, Rick said, “I don’t get Ollie’s attitude. He acts like this is something that we foisted off on him, and we’re trying to control his life. Hell, a little while ago he was acting like I was trying to steal his house.”

“Well Rick, in a way, I guess we did foist this on them. They never asked for this. They’re

world is turned upside down. For that matter Dolly didn't ask for this either. We took it on ourselves without giving them a choice. As for the house, wouldn't you be a tad suspicious if someone asked you to sign over your house?"

"I guess that's true, but do you think for a minute that they wouldn't have begged us to do it if they knew we could?"

"I suppose not, but the fact remains they didn't ask and I think Ollie just feels like he's losing control."

"I'm not trying to take control. I'm just trying to protect my family. All I'm asking is that they consider our situation. If this gets out we are going to have to start all over again. We stand to lose everything and I get the impression that they don't get it."

"Just give them a little time to get used to the idea Rick."

"Fine I just hope that they don't screw up our lives while they're getting used to it."

The next morning while Rick and Sarah were driving them to the airport in Tampa Ollie said, "I'm sorry if I didn't sound grateful last night Rick, I really do appreciate what you're doing for us."

Rick was unable to keep the irritation out of his voice when he replied.

"Ollie I am very comfortable in my skin. I don't need you fawning over me and telling me how grateful you are. I just assume that you're grateful. What I do need though is for you to take this serious."

"Goddamn it Rick, I don't know why you think I don't take this serious..."

"Because, Rick cut him off, you seem more interested in proving that you're in charge than you are in protecting our secret. This isn't some trivial little thing like I'm a closet homosexual or some such foolishness. If this secret gets out Sarah and I lose everything, we have. We will be on the run again. John's scholarship and any hopes of a career in football will be gone. All because you don't trust your wife to take care of what needs to be done. Apparently you don't have much faith in your wife's abilities. What the hell would she be doing right now if you really were dead?"

Ollie sat with his head down, seething. He wanted to lash out at Rick, but had sense enough to control his temper. Ollie was silent for quite a while and just as Dolly was about to speak in an attempt at relieving the tension he said, "Okay Rick I didn't mean to upset you. When we get to London, I'll check into a hotel and stay out of sight. I'll make sure that Dolly and I aren't seen together. At least she can call me if she needs anything, and we can see each other once in a while."

Rick felt like saying you still don't get it, but thought what's the use. The car was quiet for the rest of the trip. Ollie was aware that Rick was upset with him, but felt he was in the right. Even Dolly and Sarah were quiet.

They dropped them at the terminal and said their goodbyes. They wished them well and said they hoped that all went well, asked them to keep in touch and started back for Crystal River. On the way home, Rick asked Sarah if she felt that he was out of line. She said, "No Rick, everything you said needed to be said. I think you could have been a little more diplomatic... no I guess not. I don't think you got through to Ollie even with the way you laid it on the line."

"I just hope we don't live to regret this. You know what they say?"

"No, what's that?"

"No good deed goes unpunished."

Chapter twenty eight

When the Lincoln hit the water main and went airborne the driver's side door flew open and Sean was thrown thirty feet down the canal. He hit the surface and skipped like a stone. When he came to a stop, he sunk to the bottom with the wind knocked out of him. Although unable to breathe, he fought his way to the surface. He came up gasping for air, and luckily for him, there was a moored rowboat between him and the crash scene. It took him some time to get his breath and orient himself

Eventually he got himself together enough to peek around the boat. What he saw did nothing to calm his frayed nerves. There were at least five squad cars with flashing lights, and numerous cops milling around where the Lincoln had entered the canal. He figured it was just a matter of time until they came looking for him. He moved over to the shore which consisted of a low sea wall. Above the sea wall was a huge azalea bush. He climbed up into the bush. It scraped the hell out of him but at least it offered cover. Approximately fifty feet from his hiding place was a modest house surrounded by various kinds of flowering shrubs. There was a small screened lanai facing the canal.

Sean hadn't been in the bush for more than a few minutes when a large snake slithered across his leg on its way to the canal. It was a harmless black snake, but Sean had grown up

where snakes can be deadly. Having no idea what kind of snake this was he almost let out a yell. Having managed to keep his wits enough not to give himself away, he decided it was time to move on.

Sean watched the cops until it seemed that none were looking in his direction and made a run for the lanai staying as low to the ground as he could. When he got the lanai between himself and the police, he realized that he was beside a door to the lanai. It was only a screen door but when he tried the handle, it was locked. He took a jackknife from his pocket and cut the screen next to the latch, reached through the hole and opened the door. After he was inside he ducked under the kitchen window and tried the sliding door. It was locked and the drapes were closed.

He looked around. The lanai was quite small, no more than fifteen feet long and ten feet wide. The furniture consisted of a wicker couch, chair, end table and coffee table. The only other furniture was a twenty-one inch TV on a small stand. Sean rightly figured that no one was up in the house yet. He went over, crouched down in the corner nearest the outside door and waited. He was wet and cold.

There was a low stucco wall on the backside of the lanai between Sean and the back yard with screen above it. Every once in awhile he would raise his head and look at the activity by the canal. He had seen cops walking along the sides of the canal in both directions from the crash site. He patted himself on the back for being wise enough to leave the bush. He figured that had he stayed there he would now be cuffed and on his way back to prison.

The early morning temperature was hovering around fifty degrees and the lanai was unheated. He looked around desperately for something to dry himself with, without luck. He was so cold he was shaking, of course part of that may have been fright although Sean would never have admitted that. At any rate, he was extremely cold and very anxious to get off of this porch.

An hour elapsed before he heard the rustle drapes opening and the click of a lock. He was ready to spring if the slider opened, but it remained closed. He crept over and peeked inside. He couldn't see anyone so he slid open the door as quietly as he could until he could slip through it. There was an old lady at the kitchen counter with her back to him. He crept toward her as quietly as possible, but when he was almost to her, she turned and opened her mouth to scream. Sean hit her hard just below her left eye and she went out like a light.

Sean searched the house, first for other people and then for any thing of use. He found two hundred and thirty dollars plus change in her purse, but little else of use to him. He picked the old lady up and sat her in a kitchen chair. He thought Christ she doesn't weigh a hundred pounds. First he tied the old lady to the chair and then stripped off his clothes and climbed in the shower to warm up. When he got out of the shower, he found the thermostat and turned the heat up. He thought, Christ how can that old woman live in this cold. He then went to the refrigerator to see what she had to eat.

When she came to, she was gagged and tied to a chair and there was a stark naked man sitting at her table eating. There were two wadded-up bath towels on the kitchen counter along with various food containers. In spite of her situation, her first thought was of how rude, not to mention unsanitary, it was to place a used bath towel on the kitchen counter. After that, she started wondering if she was going to make it through this day alive. Oddly enough, she wasn't awfully scared.

When he realized she was awake, he looked at her and asked, "You got a gun lady?"

She just looked at him as if she was confused. He said, "Lady I asked you a question."

She shook her head vigorously. He picked up an old deer rifle that was leaning against the table, walked over and stuck the barrel against her forehead. Suddenly she was very afraid.

“Lady I already found one so I’m going to ask you again. If you lie to me, I’m going to blow a nice round hole through your head. Is there any other guns in the house.”

She shook her head, closed her eyes and waited to die. She waited for what she considered a lifetime and opened her eyes. He was back at the table. When he was done eating, he went in the living room and turned on the TV. He couldn’t find anything about the shootout so he snapped off the set, and was on his way back to the kitchen when the timer went off on the dryer. The buzzer startled him, but then he realized what it was, he retrieved his clothes and got dressed.

He said to the lady, “I sure hope you got curious friends otherwise your going to die where you sit.” Sean took her keys, went the garage, raised the door and drove away in her old Buick. He made sure to close the garage door as he pulled away from the house.

The old woman didn’t depend on curious friends. She immediately set about getting loose. The first thing that happened was that she tipped the chair over and knocked her self out. It was after noon when she came to. She was desperate. She figured that she had been tied to the chair for at least five hours. She didn’t know how long a person could last without food and water, but she figured at her age it wasn’t very long. She thought for quite a while about what to do and concluded that her only chance was to knock over the kitchen table and break something made of glass. The kitchen table was small and not very sturdy. She remembered that he had drunk something from a glass that morning while he was eating at the table.

Her problem was that she was now lying on her back with her feet in the air and wasn’t sure if she could move herself and the chair. She wondered if she should try to tip the chair over so she was on her side. She decided that was the best plan, and tossed her legs until she tipped over. She then found that she could push herself along with her feet. Luckily, he hadn’t tied her feet to the chair, only her torso. She had noticed earlier that he had ripped the cord off the blind above the kitchen sink. The good thing was that the cord was fairly light nylon and would be easy to cut. It took her what seemed like a very long time to work her way to the table.

She kicked at the leg of the table and found that her strength was almost gone. She said out loud, “dear God please don’t let me die like this” and then gave the table leg another kick. Every time she kicked the table leg, the table moved a few inches. The table finally came to rest against the kitchen counter.

She was so tired and worn out that it was all she could do to keep from giving up and going to sleep. She kept going by telling herself that if she went to sleep now she would likely die. She kicked the table leg with all of her might and thought she felt it give. After three more kicks, the leg tilted in and the entire contents of the table landed on top of her. A diner plate hit her in the forehead and opened a gash above her right eye. The glass rolled across the floor in one piece.

It took another half hour to get a hold of the glass and break it. She finally managed to get it up against the wall and kicked it until it broke. It took another half hour to maneuver herself around, and get her hands on a good-sized piece of the glass. Regardless of her thoughts that the cord would be easy to cut, it took her almost two hours of hacking and scraping to free herself. She had to hold the glass in such an awkward position that her hand kept cramping and she would have to rest.

She was almost ready to give up when she felt the cord give. Her hands and wrists were bloody and covered with small cuts. She had been unaware of cutting herself. She went to the bathroom, took off her clothes and put everything she’d had on in the hamper. She then took a shower, bandaged the worst of her cuts and put on fresh clothes. She combed her hair, making sure that it was just right and carefully applied her makeup. She then went to the kitchen and called 911. When she got off the phone, she went to the refrigerator and poured herself a glass of

milk. She then went to the living room and sat down on the couch to wait for the police. When they arrived, five minutes later, she was sound asleep.

Chapter twenty nine

The morning after the fiasco on Manatee loop, Rick and Sarah woke up early and were preparing to leave the cabin when Rick's cell rang.

Rick answered and listened for a minute, said thanks and hung up.

"Shit!"

Sarah didn't hear Rick swear very often and it worried her, especially with all that was going on right now. She asked, "What's wrong Rick?"

"Sean is alive. Apparently, he wasn't in the canal. He slipped into some old lady's house, took her car and escaped. The only good news is that we can have our house back."

Sarah asked, "Is the woman alright?" Rick replied, "I'll find out for you."

The chief had told Rick that between his unwelcome guests and the crime lab he was going to come home to quite a mess. He said that if he needed someone to help clean up he knew someone that was reasonable and very thorough. Rick relayed that to Sarah, but she allowed as how she could clean her own house. As it turned out, she had plenty of help.

The next day, while they were finishing the cleaning up with the help of John, Dolly and Ollie the police chief showed up at the house. John offered a beer and it was accepted. They walked out and sat on the dock to drink their beer.

"What is it Chief? I don't think you just stopped by for a free beer."

"No I didn't, but it is nice. This is one hell of a nice place you have Rick."

"Thank you. You're welcome here anytime Chief."

"Thank you. I'll remember that. Rick the Ann Arbor detectives have gone back to Michigan, but the reason I stopped is that I felt you should know that they are very suspicious of you for some reason."

"I know, I guess I just don't know why."

"Well there's the matter of the ball, they think you were less than forth coming on that, and I have to admit even I thought you were evasive."

Rick remained silent and eventually the chief asked, "Are you in some kind of trouble Rick?"

"No I'm really not. I can't talk to you about what's going on Chief. I will tell you this much; I haven't done anything wrong, I'm not wanted by the law for anything and that is the truth. Beyond that there is nothing I can say."

"I believe you Rick. I don't know if I should mention this, but what the hell, I did a background check on you when this all started."

"Oh, how did I come out?"

Clean as a hound's tooth, accept for the fact that you just fell out of the sky about three years ago. I just wish you could trust me. I have the definite impression that you're in some sort of trouble and I would like to be of help."

Actually, the chief was more convinced than ever that Rick and his family was in the witness

protection program. The chief couldn't think of another thing that made sense, but that still didn't explain Sean and Weasel. He was sure of one thing though, the Moore's were not criminals. Leo had known many criminals during his career and these people didn't fit the profile.

"Chief take my word that there is nothing you can do for me. If there was I think you may be the one person I would trust."

"One other thing that's got their shorts in a knot is that they figure you know the guys that were in your house. I have to admit that that makes a lot of sense and I get the impression that Williams and Brown are pretty damn good at what they do. Just one more question and I'll leave you alone. Do you think the one that got away, Proudfoot, will come back?"

"Chief I wish I knew and if that's a sneaky way of finding out if I know him, yes there's a chance that he may come back. You sure I can't buy you another beer?"

"No thanks, to tell the truth I shouldn't have had that one, I'm still on duty."

"Chief do you think I would be able to get a permit to carry a gun?"

"Sure, come down to the office, and I'll take care of it personally. Do you know how to handle a gun?"

"Yes sir. I won't claim to be an expert but I'm competent."

"Okay then I'll be going now. Just stop by the station anytime."

"Well, y'all come back, as they say in the south, and bring your wife along. I'm sure Sarah would like to meet her.

As they walked through the house to the front door Sarah asked the chief for the name of the woman Sean had robbed.

"Why do you ask?"

"I thought I would pay her a visit and see how she's doing."

"Well I'm not sure I'm supposed to divulge that kind of information, but I don't see what it could hurt. After all, you could just knock on her door and ask her. Her name is Henrietta, Henrietta Pickett. I'm sure she would enjoy a visit."

Sarah said goodbye to the chief and repeated Rick's invitation to come back and bring his wife. In fact, she said, "I Think I'll give her a call. You can't depend on men in these matters." She added with a smile, "If you could just give me your home number I'll call her this afternoon."

After he left, Sarah asked, "Is there a problem?"

"No, not really. Those two detectives have gone back to Michigan. I'm not sure why Chief came by. I don't think it was the reason he gave."

"What reason did he give?"

"He said he wanted to let me know that Williams and Brown don't trust me."

"Does seem unlikely they all being policemen and him not knowing us all that well."

Rick answered, "I don't know, but I doubt if it's anything to worry about. The Chief seems to be a pretty straight arrow sort of guy. I like him and I think he might be a good person to have as a friend. I suspect he wields a good deal of influence in this town."

"Are you sure that is a good criteria for choosing your friends?"

"Your one hundred percent right about that Sarah, but if you like them anyway it's certainly not something you should hold against them."

Chapter thirty

Leo Banks had grown up in Tampa. He went straight from high school to the police academy, much to the chagrin of his parents. His mother was a high school graduate, but his

father had only gone to the tenth grade. His mother had worked in a department store since a week after she graduated. His father worked in a boat factory as a fiberglass applicator. They had scrimped and saved their whole life with the anticipation having a college-educated son. The problem was that like the dreams of many parents the son didn't share the dream, at least not then.

Leo's grades at the academy were excellent and when he graduated, he went to work as a Tampa City patrol officer. It took him less than half a year to decide this wasn't what he wanted to do for the rest of his life. For one thing, it seemed to him that many of the officers he worked with were crude and often mean. He thought they went out of their way to make the underprivileged citizens of Tampa more miserable than they already were.

After six months on the force, to the amazement of his parents, he signed up for night courses at The University of South Florida. He maintained a 3.8 GPA and graduated in three years with a degree in criminology. Six months later, he was promoted to sergeant and received his gold badge. He worked vice for the first six months as a detective, but didn't think it was what he was cut out for. He put in for a transfer to homicide and a month later received his transfer.

He had met Ann while taking night classes. She was working on getting a teaching certificate. They had been going steady since the day they met. She wasn't crazy about the fact that he was a cop. She had grown up in an area of St. Pete that didn't have much admiration for policemen. She was working hard to get an education and distance herself from that life, but still, old prejudices die-hard.

Leo loved her for her ambition but that wasn't what attracted him to her. Ann was a congenial girl that made friends easily. The first thing he noticed when they started going together was that everyone seemed to like her. She collected friends the way a person walking through a field collects stick-tights and cockle burs.

Ann saw in Leo all of the attributes he credited her with plus a few more. She loved the way he treated not only her, but all people. The men in the area she had grown up in were not known for their courteous treatment of women. Although she was well aware that many women found this treatment demeaning, she loved it. She loved that he held doors and chairs for her. He had once even picked her up and carried her across a muddy parking lot to get to their car while she giggled like a school girl.

The day he received his gold badge he asked her to marry him. She had agreed, but her consent was conditional. She wanted children and lots of them. She didn't feel that the Tampa Bay area was the place to raise kids and Leo agreed. They had both grown up in the area and although they had both turned out just fine they knew that the odds were not good. Leo had known kids whose fathers were cops when he was growing up and the ones he knew felt they had a point to prove and not in a good way. He assumed it was like the adage of the preachers kids.

The problem, as he saw it, was that there was a greater likelihood of a kid finding trouble in the city than in a small town. After discussing it at length, they had both agreed that they would move from the city once they had children. Leo and Ann were both aware, that as with all big cities, there were very nice areas in Tampa. However, the chance of moving into one of those areas on a cop's salary was slim, and Ann had made it clear that when they had children she wanted to be a full time mother.

Ann did though, want to finish her degree before getting married. She had already seen many of her friends' marriages fail, as had her parents' marriage. She felt that a woman needed

something to fall back on just in case. Then there was the unspoken fact that she was marrying a cop, not the safest profession in the world.

When Leo and Ann were still dating, he took her to the firing range. Much to her surprise, she enjoyed target practice a great deal. To the surprise of both of them, she had a real knack. They started going to the range on a regular basis and Leo bought her a Colt nine millimeter. It wasn't very long before Ann was consistently turning in better scores at the range than Leo. It became a running joke at the precinct that you didn't have to worry much about Leo, but you best beware of his wife. Truth be told though, Leo had one of the highest qualification scores in his department.

The day she found that she was pregnant Leo started a job search. Six months later, he held the title of Chief of Police in Crystal River Florida. At the time of his appointment, Crystal River was little more than a wide spot in the road and he took a one third cut in pay to make the move. That coupled with Ann's loss of wages made for quite a change in life style. She had quit her job when they moved to Crystal River, and had no intention of getting another until their last child was out of school. On the plus side, housing was much cheaper in Crystal River than Tampa and they were able to buy a large home to house the brood that they both hoped for.

The house and the ten acres it sat on was what were left of a large cattle ranch. The owner had died some years back and the kids had sold the acreage off over time. Some of the land they sold to adjacent ranches and some they sold as small home plots. The remaining land, except for ten acres and the house, was sold to a housing developer that went belly up. That land remained vacant for years. The house had been vacant for two years and was in need of work to say the least. Leo worked on the house in his spare time and Ann worked on it while he was at work. By the time the baby was born, they had everything done with the exception of two of the bedrooms and a small out building that they planned on turning into an office.

Ann and Leo both believed that raising children required a fulltime mother; in their case it was very true. Over the next nine years, they had six children. Five of their own, three boys and two girls, plus one more that Leo saved from a flaming car wreck on SR 19. Her father had been killed instantly and her mother died a week later. The baby escaped with only scrapes and bruises. Leo had talked Family Resources into letting him take her home with him until her mother recovered and she never left.

Leo and Ann were both well aware of the shortcomings of children's services. They found no fault with the establishment or its employees. The problem was lack of funding and personnel. They were also aware that many people were into foster care for the money alone, with the welfare of their charges being secondary. They were also aware that once in the system the chance of ever escaping it was slim. So when the mother died they started adoption proceedings and since there were no relatives to claim the child, within a year she was a Banks.

Ann spent a good deal of time compiling a history on the girl's dead parents. She retrieved photo albums and trinkets from their home and stored her mother's jewelry and personal items. Leo and Ann settled with the insurance company on the girls behalf and sold her parents house. All of the proceeds were invested in her name and when she graduated from high school, she was, if not rich, very well off.

All six of the Banks children had done well in life. One was a cop in Tampa, three had gone to college, two of which were working for corporations while the other was a schoolteacher. One became a carpenter and now had his own building company. He employed the remaining brother as a mason. Ann and Leo's lives, aside from work and friends revolved around their children and grand children. Leo, although eligible for retirement was planning on working for at least another

five years. He enjoyed his work but both he and Ann were looking forward to the time off.

They had been frugal over the years and had made some sound investments. When they first moved to Crystal River Leo was taken with the low cost of land, even that on the water. Having come from an area with a much higher cost of living, he could see the opportunity here. He and Ann agreed that as beautiful as the area was the prices wouldn't stay low for long. They were also aware that the baby boomers were nearing retirement age and that Florida was the number one destination for retirees.

They started buying land as fast as they could afford too and it paid big dividends. Not only did the sale of property provide for their children's education, it made down payments on their first homes. Although the Banks were not rich, they were comfortable and continued to salt money away for retirement.

Leo was a man that loved a mystery. Perhaps this was due to his profession or perhaps it was the part of his personality that caused him to be drawn to that line of work in the first place. Regardless he was fascinated with the case of the Moore's. He felt that he may have solved the mystery with his theory of the witness protection plan, but was plagued by the thought that there was more to it than that. He just couldn't get over the feeling that he had overlooked a key piece of evidence.

He and Ann had discussed this case many times, as they did with many of Leo's cases, especially the ones he found either frustrating intriguing. Leo had learned to trust her intuitiveness as much as he did his own. Neither of them could bring themselves to believe that the Moore family had a dark side. That they were hiding something was as plain as the noses on their collective faces. However, Leo knew that not everything hidden indicated malfeasance. He was almost certain that Rick and Sarah's duplicity was for their own protection rather than any criminal subterfuge.

Leo, after all his years in police work, was well aware that not all mysteries were solvable. He did, however put a great deal of faith in perseverance or as Ann would call it "plain old bullheaded stubbornness." The fact that they were becoming friends with Rick and Sarah made the mystery even more frustrating. Leo had on more than one occasion tried to draw Rick out and have him confide in him to no avail. Leo remained almost as frustrated by his inability to help his friend as he was by the elusiveness of the mystery itself.

Chapter thirty one

On the evening of the day that the chief had come calling on Rick, John came to Rick and his mother and said he would like to go back to school. He'd already talked to his counselor and had been told that there was no objection from the school. His coach was chomping at the bit to get him back and because of the income generated by football, the dean was also anxious to see him back. His thought was that he had only missed a little over a week and felt that he could easily catch up but that if he waited much longer he would miss a whole semester. Neither Rick nor Sarah had any objection. Rick did say that he thought it would be best to avoid the detectives if possible.

Later in bed, Sarah told Rick that she had heard John talking on the phone with a girl and surmised that this may have more to do with his rush to return than did academics. She also said she had the impression that the girl was Molly. Rick wasn't nuts about that, but figured the boy was old enough to make his own decisions. Rick said he would talk to John in the morning.

The next morning while Rick was talking with John, although she had a million things to do, Sarah baked a cake. When Henrietta answered the door, Sarah was surprised to see that the whole side of her face was black and blue and that she had stitches over her right eye. Her eye was bloodshot and she had a bandage covering her left temple. Sarah blurted out, "Did he do that to you? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm Sarah. It was our house he was holed up in."

"Is that cake for me?"

"Yes it is."

"Then come right in."

"I don't want to intrude I just wanted to stop and say how sorry I am that this happened."

“Nonsense come on in. I have some iced tea and we can have a piece of that cake. It looks lovely. My, you are a beauty. I was good looking too, when I was young, but not like you. You look like model. Are you in the movies?”

“Good grief no, I’m just a house wife and I bet you were much better looking than me at my age.”

“You would lose that bet. Would you rather have coffee with your cake?”

“I think I would, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Oh goodness no. No trouble at all.”

When the coffee was ready, Henrietta cut two big pieces of cake. They sat at the kitchen table, ate cake and chatted about the robbery. Sarah said, “You must be the center of attention with your friends and neighbors, what with all the excitement.”

“Henrietta giggled, put her hand over her mouth and said, “All they want to know is if he had a cute butt and how big his wachee was.”

Sarah’s eyes widened.

“Huh?”

Henrietta explained about him walking around the house naked.

“That must have been a fright.”

“It was, but it sure gives me something to talk about at our card games.” She giggled.

“I think his wachee is going to grow to a size he’d be proud of before I’m done.”

They both got a laugh from that.

Henrietta said that she was surprised that she slept through all the shooting and such.

“I’m usually a light sleeper. I can’t imagine how I managed to sleep though that commotion. (Henrietta was loath to admit that her hearing was going, especially to a stranger.) I got up and unlocked the doors as always. I used to never lock the doors but now I lock them at night. You can bet that after this I will leave them locked all the time.”

“I don’t think they were locked when I got here Henrietta?”

Henrietta looked a little sheepish, “Sometimes I forget.”

Henrietta stood at the counter while preparing the coffee maker she continued; After I unlocked the door the next thing I knew I was tied to a chair and there was a naked man sitting at my kitchen table eating breakfast. I’ll tell you it took a while to make sense of that. If my face hadn’t hurt so much I would have thought I was dreaming.”

“Why did he hit you?”

“I have no idea. I don’t remember being hit. I just woke up and there he was. That was a shocker, I’ll tell you. Then, after he left, I managed to tip the chair over and knock myself out. So I guess he is not directly responsible for all my bruises.”

“What a nightmare. How on earth did you get loose? I assume he didn’t untie you?”

Henrietta went back through the whole story again with a few embellishments. She left out the part about falling asleep while waiting for the police. They had two cups of coffee and a large piece of cake each. Henrietta complained that she wouldn’t be able to sleep because of the coffee, but raved about the cake.

When Sarah was ready to leave, Henrietta asked her to come back again. Sarah promised that she would and that she would have her over to her house. She asked Henrietta if she like boating.

“I haven’t been on a boat since my husband died. We used to go fishing quite a bit. Now I just fish off the dock out back, but in answer to your question I love boating.”

“Good, I promise to take you out boating soon. You can bring a pole, or you can use one of ours. We have plenty.”

When Sarah got home, she told Rick about her tea with Henrietta.

“That must have been quite an ordeal for her. Is she doing okay?”

“I’m sure it was, but now that it’s over I think she is rather enjoying the notoriety.”

Rick got a good chuckle out of Henrietta’s friends wanting to know about the size of Sean’s penis. He said, “I can’t imagine what she thought, when she came to with a buck naked Indian sitting at her kitchen table.”

I can’t imagine. She told me that up until then, she had never seen an adult male naked other than her husband.

After another chuckle about that Sarah said, “Rick I don’t think Henrietta is very well off and I was thinking that maybe we could help her get another car.”

“Sarah, I’m not quite sure how to put this. You have a big heart and I love that about you, but you can’t save the world. You seem to want to take on the troubles of everyone we meet. Besides it might embarrass her if you even suggest such a thing.”

“I suppose you’re right, but I still think I’ll give it some thought. There might be a way to do it without her knowing it was us.”

Rick looked to heaven and rolled his eyes but he was already thinking about how they might pull it off.

Chapter thirty two

Henrietta Pickett was born Henrietta Mullins and was delivered at home in what was known as a “shotgun house” so called because they were so small that you could fire a shotgun in the front door and out the back door without hitting anything. She was the third daughter of Leroy and Bessie Mullins of the ilk referred to by the natives as river rats. Her parents were a homely couple as were the majority of their ancestors. Leroy was of modest stature with a long neck and prominent Adam’s-apple. He had a very long face, what people refer to as horse face, with deep-set eyes and a nose at least two sizes to big for the rest of his features. Bessie was a short heavy-set woman with extreme bosoms. Her one redeeming feature was a round pleasant face that exuded happiness and a contagious smile. However, something in the gene pool combined to produce, from this unlikely source a truly beautiful child. She had curly black hair, fair skin and she had inherited her mothers smile. When Henrietta smiled, even the most dour felt the need to smile along with her.

Their shack was located on the Crystal River with a pier that extended nearly two hundred feet into the river. Moored at this pier was an eclectic clutter of boats from cabin cruisers to skiffs all of which wore a patina of age brought about by a neglect of maintenance. Piled precariously on the pier were coils of rope, wooden floats, stacks of crab traps and coolers of varying sizes along with a plethora of fishing apparatus. Much of this paraphernalia belonged to Henrietta’s father but the majority belonged to relatives. There was also a large sink for cleaning fish. This had a hand pump attached that pumped river water to the sink. The Munn’s were a large family many of which didn’t live directly on the river but still derived their living from it. A lot of them that didn’t have river front property kept their boats and equipment at Leroy’s pier.

The house itself consisted of an open corridor, front to back, with bedrooms and a common room on one side and a kitchen on the other. There were only two bedrooms, one for the parents and a larger one for the children. Once the children began to reach puberty, blankets were hung across the room to separate the boys from the girls. The necessity room consisted of a two-holer out back with a half moons cut in both sides of the four by eight structure. There was a large wooden platform along the back of the house with tubs for doing laundry. On that platform was a water pump that served both the house and laundry.

Henrietta had a very happy and mostly carefree childhood. She knew almost everyone up and down the river and was related to most of them. The river people were a cheerful lot that visited frequently and were known for their large Saturday evening get-togethers. These parties that rotated up and down the river, were of a potluck nature, but always included a huge fish boil. The fish of choice was mullet which they netted in large quantities, both for sale and personal consumption.

Although life on the river could be hard, and everyone was expected to contribute from the youngest up, there was never a time in Henrietta's youth that she wasn't surrounded by love. Her early schooling was received in a one-room schoolhouse that she traveled to and from via rowboat. Her teacher thought of this bright young girl with the beatific smile as a cut above her normal student and often spent extra time on her.

When Henrietta finished the eighth grade, her teacher came to the house and pleaded with her folks to send her to high school. There wasn't a high school in Crystal River, but there was twenty miles away in Inverness, and the Mullin's had relation there. After much prodding, by Henrietta's teacher, and Bessie, Leroy contacted his cousin and struck a deal. In exchange for sewing, cooking and general housework, Henrietta would be provided room and board with the understanding that she would be allowed to attend high school.

It was with great trepidation that Leroy sent Henrietta to live with his cousin. Of all of Leroy's children Henrietta was by far his favorite and he was afraid that if she left the river she may never return.

During her time in Inverness she was treated well and kind of enjoyed the larger town but was desperately lonely for her folks and the river. To compensate for the lack of companionship she had enjoyed on the river, she immersed herself in schoolwork. Due to her diligence, her grades were excellent and in her senior year her teacher urged her to apply for scholarships. She was accepted by three schools but chose the University of Florida in Gainesville for its proximity to Crystal River. It turned out that Henrietta was not only the first in her family to graduate high school, but also one of the very few to ever graduate college.

During her freshman year Henrietta met a young man named Adam Pickett at a fraternity dance. Henrietta thought he was very handsome, dashing and sophisticated. Of course, Henrietta's total lack of sophistication may have caused her to endow Adam with a quality of which he had only a smattering of, at best. The topper however, was that he owned a bright red new Ford convertible. Henrietta had never known anyone that owned a very nice car let alone a new one.

If Henrietta was impressed, Adam was completely smitten. They had only dated for a month when Adam proposed. Henrietta was adamant about completing college and replied that if they were still together when she graduated, she would give him his answer then. They were inseparable from the day they met and both were convinced that they were made for each other. When their first Christmas approached Adam asked her to go to Tallahassee over Christmas break to meet his parents, but she turned him down. She apologized but said there wasn't any way she could miss Christmas with her family. He managed to talk her into going the weekend before Christmas instead.

Adam's family lived in an upscale middle class neighborhood. Henrietta was flabbergasted by the house, the furnishings and by the neighborhood. She was convinced that Adam's parents were extremely wealthy and couldn't help but wonder how he would perceive her family. The main thing that impressed Henrietta with Adams house was the size. It was a four bedroom with a living room, dinning room, kitchen, den, lanai and summer kitchen. Her uncle's small three bedroom house in Inverness, which was the largest house Henrietta had ever been in, was tiny by comparison.

Henrietta got along well with Adam's parents and was especially fond of her mother. When they were leaving Adam's father said, "I sure hope my son is smart enough to not let you get away." which made Henrietta blush.

Henrietta spent Christmas break on the river. She was often aware that she was babbling

about Adam way to much but somehow wasn't able to stop herself. Her mother was happy to let her talk all she wanted. It was obvious that her daughter was in love and was anxious to learn all she could about the boy she was in love with. Bessie was ecstatic that her daughter was so happy but Leroy's reaction was less enthusiastic. He had the uneasy feeling that he was losing his favorite child. He felt that the premonition he'd had when she left home to attend high school was coming true.

When spring came Henrietta invited Adam to visit the river and meet her folks during spring break and he eagerly agreed. Since Henrietta's folks didn't have phone service, she wrote and told them she would be coming home during spring break and that she was bringing her beau. Adam was anxious to meet her family and had wore his best suit for the occasion. She started to tell him he was over dressed but thought better of it. She decided to let him handle the situation in his own way.

When the pulled off the dirt road and into the driveway Adam looked at the house and with a dumfounded look asked, "You grew up in this house with how many siblings?"

"Five."

Henrietta had hesitated before answering trying to comprehend Adam's thoughts, but Adam showed no indication of having noticed.

"That is absolutely amazing!"

In addition to the crowd scattered around the front yard and pier, there were more emerging from the house. Henrietta thought that her dad must have invited everyone on the river. Henrietta's father came out of the house wearing his Sunday best, which consisted of slacks and white shirt with bright red suspenders. He walked up to Adam, stuck out his hand and said, "You must be Henrietta's fella."

"I sincerely hope so. you must be Mister Mullins. I'm very glad to meet you. Henrietta talks about you constantly."

With the pride showing on his face he said, "Don't believe everything you hear. Please call me Leroy. This is the missus, Bessie."

"I'm very pleased to meet you Mister Pickett. Please come in out of the heat. My what a fine southern name you have. Are your folks from around here?"

By now people, all wanting to shake his hand and with everyone talking at the same time surrounded and carried them toward the front yard like flotsam on an incoming tide. On the way to the house, he noticed that his car was full of kids with most fighting for the coveted front seat positions. He said, "Mister Mullins...uh...you think...maybe I should take my keys out of the car."

Leroy following his gaze slapped him on the back and said, "I wouldn't worry none about it, most of them youngsters drive purty good."

He said it with a straight face and Adam couldn't make up his mind if he was joking or not.

When they all gathered to eat and started vying for a place at one of the many tables set up on the lawn, Henrietta noticed he was no longer wearing his coat and tie. She also noticed a glass in his hand that she was sure was moonshine. Unbeknown to Henrietta it wasn't the first.

Henrietta and Adam slept on two of the beds in the kid's bedroom with a blanket hanging between them. Just before they retired Leroy told Adam, with a wink that he and the missus was very light sleepers. Adam had known Henrietta in the biblical sense for some time but was wise enough to keep that information to himself.

Once they were in the bedroom Adam couldn't help but smile at the warning. There were children of all sizes scattered across the floor providing an effective minefield between him and

Henrietta. On top of that Adam wasn't sure he could have navigated a clear room let alone that living mine field. Adam had never drank moonshine and he was drunk as the proverbial skunk.

The next day Adam awakened with the worst hangover he'd ever experienced. He sort of wondered if that wasn't what his future father-in-law had planned. After washing his face at the pump he walked around to the front yard to encounter the biggest breakfast he had ever seen. As he sat down next to Henrietta he felt his stomach do flip flops. He jumped up from the table and made a bee line for the outhouse. He almost made it. When he had emptied the contents of his stomach went to the water pump, washed his face, came back with a bucket of water and washed down the mess he had made in the back yard. He was thankful that Henrietta had not followed him to the back yard. When he returned to the table and embarrassingly retook his seat, Henrietta's dad asked if he was alright.

After two cups of scalding coffee his stomach settled somewhat and he discovered that he was hungry. After breakfast Henrietta helped clear the tables while Adam, along with the rest of the men, drank coffee, smoked and talked about fishing. Adam noticed that he was the only one smoking tailor made cigarettes. He offered them around but the only taker was Henrietta's father. He said, "Never turn down a fancy smoke."

After a very prolonged goodbye, shaking every hand and making a sworn promise to return, he and Henrietta drove away along the river road chased by dogs, children and a cloud of dust.

After out running the kids and critters Adam said, "I've never ate so much in my life. I must have gained ten pounds. Do these people always eat like that?"

Henrietta instead of answering said, "Well?"

Adam realized that this was the first opportunity they had to talk alone since arriving.

After a short hesitation Adam said, "I was overwhelmed to say the least. I have no idea what I expected, but it sure wasn't that."

"You didn't like them."

"On the contrary, I loved them, every one of them, although I have no idea who most of them are."

Henrietta slid across the seat, threw her arms around him and kissed him full on the mouth nearly causing him to lose control of the car.

"Whoa, careful with the driver. We might wind up in the river."

"You really like them?"

"You bet. I can't remember ever having a better time and I especially liked your mom and dad. I can only imagine what a hoot it must have been growing up with that gang."

"I really do love you Adam."

"Was this some kind of test Henry?"

"I guess it was in a way. I'm sorry, I should have told you what to expect but I really wanted to see your unbiased reaction."

"There is no need to apologize. I can't imagine how you could describe that to anyone who hadn't seen it for them self. I don't think I would have believed you even if you had tried."

"Adam, there's no way I could marry anyone who looked down on my people and after seeing how you were raised I was afraid you might."

"Are you kidding? I don't see how anyone could help but like those people. I can't remember ever having such a good time, especially among strangers. Does this mean you will marry me?"

"Adam I would love to marry you, on one condition...no, I take that back. There are no conditions. I would love to marry you. However, I do have to graduate first."

“I’ll try to be patient. By the way, what was the condition you were thinking of?”

“Adam, if it’s all right with you, I would really like to live in Crystal River after we are married.”

Chapter thirty three

The house on Manatee loop was back to the pre-Proudfoot condition. Contractors had repaired the gate, replaced the garage door, and front door. The town car was replaced with a new Lincoln since it was necessary for Rick’s real-estate business and was in fact owned by the business. Rick had also insisted on replacing their bedroom set including not only bedding and furniture but carpeting as well. Sarah tried to convince him that the room would be fine with a little laundry and scrubbing but he was adamant. He had insisted on their sleeping in one of the guest rooms until everything was replaced.

“Rick now that this mess is over I think we should have a party, just a small get together. She told him about her promise to Henrietta. Maybe an afternoon party, we could take the boat out on the bay and later we could cook on the dock. Would you mind?”

“Of course not. I think it would be fun.”

Rick had a fleeting thought about the difference between his life here and the solitary life he lived on the ranch. He decided he liked this much better. He thought maybe if he had made an effort to have more company at the ranch, his first marriage would have been better. “Who were

you thinking of inviting?”

“The Banks, José, Jackie, and of course, Henrietta.”

“Jackie? You mean the Jackie that works for me?”

“Why not?”

“This sounds to me like match making.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh come on. Jackie Martinez and José Rodriquez, about the same age, both single and have never met each other, at the same party.”

“So what’s the harm? Maybe they will hit it off.”

“They’re like Mutt and Jeff. He’s short and scruffy, she’s tall and a fashion plate.”

“Jackie’s not tall.”

“She’s at least three inches taller than José.”

“So what? Maybe they will hit it off. José needs someone and Jackie is very nice.”

Rick just shook his head and went back to what he was doing.

The party was on Saturday. They had drinks on the lanai to get acquainted before going out on the boat. Henrietta had two wine coolers before getting on the boat and was in high spirits. She couldn’t get over the changes on the river and Kings Bay since she had last seen them from the water. She told Sarah that she had lived in Crystal River all her life and couldn’t believe how much it had changed. She told about how she had lived on the river as a child. She said that it was mostly shacks back then, and many of the river people made their living on the water.

“My father fished and crabbed for a living like most of the folks we knew. We used to have fish boils on Saturday and people would come from all up and down the river. There was always dancing and many of the young guys would bring moonshine.” She giggled and said, “Those shindigs were responsible for a lot of shotgun weddings.”

She allowed as how she rather missed those days.

This talk of the past put Rick in a pensive mood.

“We all miss the old days.” he said.

The sincere way that he said this brought a raised eyebrow from the Chief. He wouldn’t think him old enough to even think about the old days let alone with reverie.

Rick would be the first to admit that he wasn’t the most observant person in the world. However, when Sarah asked him later that night if he thought that José and Jackie had gotten along well, he was at a loss for words.

“I think you are imagining what you hope will happen. I don’t think they said ten words to each other.”

“I think they liked each other. It takes a little time for these things, but I’m very optimistic.”

To Rick’s amazement, a week later Jackie said to him, “I kind of liked José, but he seems kind of shy. I doubt if he will ever call, do you think it would be all right if I called him?”

That night when he told Sarah about his conversation with Jackie she lit up like a Christmas tree.

“See, what did I tell you?”

“It’s not polite to say I told you so.”

“Can’t help it. I’m so happy for them. I hope this works out. José really needs someone and Jackie’s nice. I hope they get married.”

Rick just shook his head in wonderment. He thought how can women jump the gun like that. Then he had been wrong enough times to have learned to keep his mouth shut.

The next day when Rick came home Sarah greeted him at the door with a wide grin and short blond hair.

“What in God’s name have you done to yourself?”

She whirled around, and walked quickly away. He followed her into the bedroom and found her sitting at her vanity wiping her eyes with a Kleenex.

“I thought you would like it,” she said, with quiver in her voice.

“I do like it.”

“You hate it.”

“No I don’t. It just took me by surprise.”

“You’re so beautiful you would look good no matter what you did to your hair.”

She immediately started sobbing harder and buried her face in her hands. Rick thought “what on earth did I do now.” He would be the first to admit that he knew very little about women, but he thought this is getting ridiculous. However what he said was, “Sweetheart I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. You look beautiful. Maybe I could just go back outside and we could start over?”

She got up and put her arms around his neck and said, “It’s okay, I shouldn’t get upset so easy. It’s just that I always want to please you and I want you to think I look nice.”

“Sarah, you have never displeased me in your life. It’s just that I’m so used to you as a redhead that it came as a shock. Hey, don’t I at least get credit for noticing?”

Sarah got an incredulous look on her face and said, “If you hadn’t noticed this I think I would be fitting you with dark glasses and a white cane, or checking your pulse. Anyway, this is the first time in my life that I have been to a beauty parlor, and I may never go again.”

“Now don’t start up again. What brought this on anyway?”

“Dot and I were having tea and I just happened to mention that I had never been to a beauty parlor. She immediately got on her phone and called around until she found one that would take us right then. I just kind of got caught up in the whole thing. It was fun though, I even got my toenails painted. Look at my fingernails.”

“Judas priest lady. You could hurt someone with those.”

She started to pout again, but he suspected that she was putting him on this time.

“You don’t like them.”

“Yes dear, I like them fine, just please tell me those aren’t real diamonds on them.”

“They’re not even real nails, let alone real diamonds. I can just peel them off if you’re afraid of being slashed to death in your bed.”

“I guess I’ll take my chances.”

“They wanted to give me a bikini wax too, but I told them that that’s where I draw the line. If I felt I needed something like that, I would do it myself. Don’t people have any modesty anymore? I also told them that where I do my swimming I don’t have to worry about that. Dot has been after me ever since to tell her where we go swimming.”

“I know I’m just a cowardly male, but don’t that hurt a lot?”

“A bikini wax?”

“Yes.”

“I guess it would. I’ve never had one, but I was shaved when I gave birth.”

“I would certainly think that would be preferable to wax, for more than one reason.”

“Well if I ever have it done I’ll let you in on all the gory details.”

“No Thanks. I think I would rather stay ignorant.”

“Men. You’re such wusses.”

Chapter thirty four

Four miles north of Crystal River Sean picked up a sixteen-year-old girl, hitchhiking. She didn't seem at all curious about the rifle lying on the front floorboards. She asked him if she could put it in the back seat so she could have a little foot room. Sean said, "Sure" and asked her where she was going. She answered, "I don't know. I was thinking Tallahassee. Where are you going?"

The girl was a little on the plump side with a slight acne problem, but was very cute in spite of it. After a mile or so of silence the girl said, "Do you talk?"

"Sometimes, what's your name?"

"Samantha, Samantha Giacobone. Everybody calls me Sam, but I don't like it."

"What do you like?"

"Mandy."

"Okay Mandy it is."

"What's your name?"

"Sean Proudfoot."

"You some kinda Indian or something?"

"Full blooded Navajo. You got a problem with that?"

"Nope. Just haven't ever met an Indian before. Sean doesn't sound much like an Indian name."

"Mom liked it. Dad didn't. How old are you Mandy?"

"Sixteen. You worried about statutory rape?"

"Nope. Why, you thinking about raping me?"

"You never know. You're kinda cute."

They spent the night in Tallahassee and in the morning, over breakfast, Sean asked if she was from Crystal River.

"No. I'm from Tampa. Actually, I'm from Toledo but I've been in Tampa for the last six months. The night before last, my boyfriend decided to use me for a punching bag. I waited till he was asleep, cleaned out his wallet and hit the road. I don't take that kind of shit from anyone. I would have taken his car too, but I figured he would report it stolen so instead I just slashed all his tires. Why do you ask?"

“No reason much. I might need to go back there after awhile. Did you get much?”

Mandy was hesitant to divulge the amount of money she had but something told her she could trust Sean, at least up to a point.

“Only a couple thousand. Why?”

“Just curious”

“What do you do for a living Sean?”

“I rob people.”

“Really? You make any money doing that?”

“Haven’t lately but I’m thinking of branchin out. You know what one of those old-time robbers said, when they ask him why he robbed banks?”

“No.”

“Because that’s where the money is.”

“Ha... Ha. Are you thinking of robbing banks?”

“Don’t know yet. I know one thing though. I’ve got to get me a gun. I had to leave mine in Crystal River and you can’t rob nobody with a rifle. Trouble is I aint got a clue as to how to find a friendly gun dealer.”

“Apparently you don’t have a clue about the laws in Florida either. Anyone can buy a gun in this state.”

“You don’t need a permit or license?”

“No. You just walk in and buy it. I think they ask if you’re a felon, which I suspect you might be, but I doubt that you’re above telling a lie.

“Christ. I never realized I was in such a civilized state.”

“Hell Cochise, it gets even better....

“Don’t ever call me that again!”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were so touchy.”

“I’m not touchy. I just don’t like to be made fun of and I sure as hell don’t like being insulted.”

“I wasn’t making fun of you Sean and I sure wasn’t insulting you. I was just joking around.”

“Well I didn’t find it particularly funny.”

“I’ll have to remember that you don’t have a sense of humor.”

“I have a fine sense of humor.”

“Okay, fine, How do you feel about Geronimo?”

“You know you’re a real smart ass?”

“Yeah, I get that a lot. It probably comes from associating with “bad-assed robbers.”

“Finish up your coffee Mandy. We’re going to find us one of those “flea markets.”

When he paid the bill, he asked the girl at the register if she knew where there was a flea market.

“Sure, just go east on I-10. Turn south on 19. It’s only about ten miles, but I’m not sure what days it’s open.”

After they left the restaurant, Sean said, “Mandy you up for some robbin? You don’t really strike me as the robbin type.”

“You bet your ass Co... Sean. I’m not too sure about banks though. It seems to me that they would have an awful lot of security. But I could be up for some “robbin.”

Mandy caught herself and hoped that Sean hadn’t, but he had. She hesitated slightly but went on.

“We’ll have to give some real thought to that for sure.”

“Hey you makin fun of me?”

“No Sean, just joking a little.”

“You know before I did time, I spoke fairly good English. I keep hangin.. Hanging around you and I might again.”

Sean didn't have a very good memory. He had never used proper English, although it was a little more socially acceptable version before prison. La Tuna, however, had turned him into a very vulgar person. Some might say, La Tuna had added color to his speech. Some people had the ability to temper their speech to their environment like men returning from war. Sean however, found it difficult to change a habit once established.

“You did Time?”

“Yeah, I made the mistake of doin a job with an idiot.”

“You mean, like in a real prison?”

“Yeah, La Tuna is about as real a prison as prisons get.”

“Where is La Tuna? It sounds like a fish.”

“It's the New Mexico federal prison and a lotta people that don't speak Spanish take it for a fish. It's actually a Mexican name for a cactus that grows in the west.”

“Habla usted español?”

“Si`, una poco, almost everyone speaks a little where I came from. I didn't know they spoke a lot of mex in Toledo.”

“They don't and I don't. I just picked up a little in high school. For awhile in my senior year the snooty kids kind of thought it was cool.”

“High school, senior?”

“Yeah, well I skipped over a few grades. I'm kind of bright.”

“What the hell is a “kind of bright” kid from Toledo doin hitchin around Florida?”

“I didn't get along with my father. It's a long story and I would rather not talk about it. If you don't mind!”

“Hey don't get pissed with me. I was just makin conversation.”

“Tell me about prison, I hear that it's really nasty.”

“I didn't get along to well with my playmates. It's a long story, and I'd rather not talk about it. If you don't mind!”

“Touché.”

They were in luck. The flea market was open and there were a number of people selling firearms. They stopped in front of a beat up six-foot folding table that held an impressive array of pistols, rifles and shotguns. Behind the table on a canvas folding chair sat a man of about sixty. He was wearing worn bib overalls, a John Deere cap and sported a foot long beard. He looked more like a farmer than a gun dealer, but he seemed to know his business. Sean settled on a nine millimeter Glock and bought Mandy a Smith and Wesson twenty-two both with leg holsters. The dealer gave him fifty for the rifle and threw in a box of shells for both pistols.

“You do know of course, that you have to have a permit to carry a concealed weapon in this state.”

Although Sean hadn't had a clue he answered, “Yeah, that's not a problem.”

After they left the flea market Sean said, “We need to get the hell out of Florida for awhile. I also need to dump this car and get another one.”

“Is it hot?”

“Very, and the last thing I want is to wind up back in prison over some P.O.S. Buick.”

“P.O.S.?”

“Piece of shit.”

“Ha ha. Maybe we should buy a car. I know we can’t afford much, but at least it wouldn’t be hot. We could put it in my name. I don’t think anyone’s looking for me.”

“You know what I think?”

“No, what?”

“I think maybe you are kinda bright.”

“You know something?”

“You mean beside you’re kinda bright?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?”

“If you’re set on robbing people for a living, I know someone you could rob easily, and he has a lot of money.”

“Who’s that?”

“My dear sweet father.”

“You would rob your own father?”

“In a heartbeat, and with glee.”

“What about your mother?”

“She won’t be a problem. She has made a career out of not being a problem. If you’re half the bad guy you seem to be, Daddy won’t be a problem either. When I get done neither one of them will ever be a problem again.”

“You sound like you’re thinking about killing your parents.”

“I can’t think of another thing in this whole world that would please me more.”

“Are you serious?”

“Serious as a funeral. I’ve been planning this a long time, but if you’re not up for it I’ll find someone else.”

“Hey it’s fine by me. They’re your parents. I’m just a little surprised I guess. It’s not every day you come across someone that wants to kill their parents and you sure didn’t strike me as a killer. What the hell did they do to you?”

“I don’t know you well enough to talk about my personal life. If you stick around long enough and I get to like you enough, maybe then.”

They bought a five hundred dollar car and ditched Henrietta’s Buick. The new car was a fourteen-year-old Mercury Sable. The man on the used car lot assured them, that although the Sable wasn’t pretty, it was dependable. After leaving the lot, Sean said to Mandy, “I hope you know what you’re doing cause I’m getting real close to broke.”

They stopped for a quick lunch and then headed for Toledo. Sean drove at exactly the posted speed limit even in construction zones. That garnered him a few dirty looks and a few even flipped him the “bird”, but he wasn’t taking any chances of being pulled over. He was certain that he was a wanted man and for more than just parole violation.

On the way to Toledo Mandy filled him in on the setup. She had a key and knew the code for the alarm system. She was certain that her father wouldn’t have changed the locks. The alarm system was something else. If he hadn’t changed the code no sweat, they wouldn’t know they were in the house until they woke them up.

“What if he has changed the code?”

“I doubt it, but if he has we’ll come back in the daytime to visit my sweet mother and wait for him to come home.”

“Once the alarms gone off won’t they wonder what’s going on?”

When you open the door, you have one minute to reset the alarm before it goes off. If they have reset the codes then when I enter the code the pad will read code refused and the alarm will sound at the security company. By the time they get there we will have relocked the door and be long gone. Just another false alarm, it happens all the time.”

“Your folks won’t wake up?”

“It’s a silent alarm. It only sounds at the security company office and if they find the doors locked and no sign of a break in they will just write it off as a false alarm. They may call the house to confirm that they’re alright, but we will be away from there by then.

“Sweet.”

Mandy told him about the way the house was laid out and later that night in the motel, she drew him a floor plan of the house and a diagram of the grounds. Her plan was that they would take whatever money there was in the house. That would kill two birds with one stone. It would net them considerable cash and also make it look like a robbery. She thought that there should be a lot of money in the house. Her father had a safe in his office in which he kept a considerable stash. It turns out daddy was a very shady character that had trouble explaining where a lot of his money came from.

Mandy also figured on holding on to Dad while Mom went to the bank to make a hefty withdrawal. Mandy didn’t think that Mom would be hard to convince since they were going to improve her life drastically.

Sean didn’t like the idea of sending mom to the bank and said so.

“There is too much that can go wrong with that Mandy. She could go to the cops, scream robbery, or just not come back. If she had any idea what your plans for her was she would be a fool to come back.”

“I guess you’re right. There should be plenty of money in the safe anyway.”

“It sounds to me like you’ve been planning this for quite a while.”

“I have, the only thing lacking was someone with guts enough to help me. I’m not sure I could do it by myself. I had a boyfriend once that said he would help, but when it got down to it, he was chicken. I think he only said he would, so that he could get in my pants.”

“And mighty lovely pants they are too. I’m getting the feeling that you don’t like Dad and aint to fond of Mom either.”

“You got that shit straight Co... Sean. I’m sorry Sean, I don’t mean any disrespect, I just think it’s cute, you being an Indian.”

“I’ll try not to get pissed Mandy. Just don’t make a habit of it and sure as hell don’t do it in public, Okay?”

“Okay. I know I have a smart mouth on me, but I don’t mean anything. I really like you Sean.”

Sean decided to tell her about the ball. He thought they were going to make quite a pair and he figured she should know since he intended to go back for it. At first, she looked at him as if he was nuts, but after he told her about Matt and Etty and how Matt had healed his sister she started coming around.

“So what do you figure, about this ball?”

“I have no idea. I understand that he found in out in the desert. The only thing I can figure is that it come off one of those UFO’s that crashed out there in the old days.”

“I have heard of that. I never thought that there was any truth to it. If you get it, what do you plan on doing with it? Well, for one thing, I think this thing does more than heal or make you young. After my sister was healed she was all of a sudden a straight A student and she wound up

getting herself a scholarship to some fancy medical school up in Michigan.”

“Now that is interesting although I’m already kind of bright you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Maybe we could both be kinda bright. See I’m thinking that a man could make fortune with that thing. I mean my God, what would people pay to be young again or to be healed. Think about all the people with cancer not to mention the cripples. Christ the possibilities are endless.”

I don’t know Sean, I think it could get out of hand real easy. You might not be the only one to think it would be nice to have. Moreover, if you start healing people for money, how are you going to control it? You could have literally thousands of people mobbing you and refusing to take ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Well shit I guess I better just forget the whole fuckin thing!”

“No Sean, I’m not saying that, I’m just saying you have to be real careful how you use it. It sure would be a nice thing to have.”

Sean told Mandy to get dressed.

“I’ve got to go shopping. I had to leave the last place in a hurry and I don’t even have a change of underwear. For now I’ll just get the necessities, if this job of yours is as good as you say I’ll improve my wardrobe afterward.”

He drove to Wal-Mart and parked the car. As they were walking toward the entrance, Mandy said, “Wal-Mart.”

Sean replied, “I been shopping at this kinda store and worse my whole life. Maybe you’re some kinda high society, but I’m not. Shit, back on the reservation, when I was a kid I wore used clothes. Most of us did. White folks take pity on us poor dumb redskins. Maybe if this job of yours comes off good you can show me how to dress right.”

“I’m sorry Sean. I didn’t mean anything its just that the kids I grew up with made fun of people that shopped at Wal-Mart. I guess that wasn’t very nice, but you know how kids are. Especially us spoiled little rich brats.”

“No I guess I wouldn’t know, I never knew any rich brats.”

“After we leave Toledo, I’ll take you to a real store and get you some nice clothes. I guess I did get a little snobby growing up with money, but it’s still nice to have good clothes. Besides people treat you different when you’re wearing expensive clothes, it’s almost like if you can afford to dress well you must be a better person.”

While they were in Wal-Mart Mandy bought them each a pair of gloves explaining,

“You’re prints are on file and I’ve been gone long enough that the police wouldn’t expect to find my prints in the house.”

Chapter thirty five

When they got to Toledo the following day, it was five-thirty in the afternoon. Mandy gave him directions and they drove by her house.

“Holy Shit, this is some fuckin house. I can’t imagine why you ever left.”

The house was two and a half stories, constructed of red brick and had what appeared to be a slate roof with four separate chimneys. It was set back from the street two hundred feet with an undulating lawn tapering down to a brick wall that ran the length of the property. To the side of

the house was a five-car garage with rooms above the stalls. There was an enclosed walkway over the drive connecting the house and garage. The drive curved from the house down to a wrought iron gate set in the front wall. The house and buildings were of Tudor design, although that fact was lost on Sean. All he knew was that the house appeared costly to say the least. There was an arm sticking out from the gatepost with a touch-pad and intercom.

Mandy answered, "Believe me, some things are not worth what they cost."

"You didn't tell me about the gate."

"It's not a problem. There is no alarm on the gate, and I know the code to open it."

"What about the rooms over the garage? Are there servants?"

"No, Daddy was paranoid about having servants living on the property. I used to use the servants quarters to play in when I was a kid." A dark look passed over her face and she said, "Until I was ten."

They had decided to go in at three in the morning. That left them about nine hours to kill. They decided to go check into a motel and then get something to eat. After supper, Sean drove back to Mandy's and from there to the expressway by varying routes. With Mandy's knowledge of the area, he figured the best route out in case they had to leave in a hurry and then went back to the motel to get some sleep.

The Sable pulled up to the gate at three-ten with Mandy behind the wheel. She punched in the code and waited for the gate to swing open. She drove up the drive with the lights off and turned the car around at the garage. She left it parked under the overhead walkway facing the street and got out. She left the motor on, had Sean slide over behind the wheel and told him, "Keep your eye on the door, if all is well I'll signal you. If not we will have about ten minutes to get away from here. She then went to the side door, unlocked it and slipped inside.

Moments later, she was back at the door and signaled Sean to join her. He shut off the engine and joined Mandy in what in most houses would be a mudroom, but in this house was an elegantly appointed foyer. There was furniture and even oil paintings on the walls. They walked through the foyer into a room that Sean compared to an arena, only better furnished. As they entered the living room, a huge black dog padded up to them, and Sean almost messed his pants. Mandy just scratched his head and said, "Hi Hugo."

She told Sean that he had nothing to worry about as long as he was with her. She then led Hugo to the kitchen and closed him inside.

Sean followed Mandy through the house and up an elaborate staircase that had more square footage by itself than the house Sean grew up in. He felt like he was in a museum. After a lengthy walk down a wide hallway, Mandy entered a large bedroom and snapped on the light. The two people on a king sized bed awoke and looked at their daughter. The woman was around forty, good looking and stark naked. The man was sixtyish, jowly and wearing jockey shorts that almost disappeared under his immense belly.

The man was the first to find his voice, "What the hells going on here Sam?"

Mandy said, in a shaky voice, "I've just come home for a visit Daddy and to pay you back for all your kindness."

The woman noticed Sean staring at her breasts, and yanked the sheet up over her. She said, Samantha, who is this man and what are you doing with those guns?"

"I've come home to collect a debt."

"I can't imagine what you think we owe you. We gave you everything and would have given you more if you hadn't run off with that bum."

Mandy retorted in a still shaky voice, "Yes Mother you gave me everything, and daddy gave

me way more than I wanted since I was ten-years-old.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. Let us get dressed and we can talk about it. If you feel we owe you something, I’m sure we can work it out without those guns.”

Her father’s mind was racing with thoughts on how to get out of this mess. He had known the instant that he awoke that he was in a world of trouble.

“Look Sam, I’m sure we can work this out. If it’s money you want, I’d be glad to give you some. Just tell me what you want.”

“For a start get dressed. We’re going down stairs.”

“I can’t get dressed with that man here.”

“Of course you can mother he’s already seen you naked and besides as I remember you weren’t bashful when you were fucking the hired help.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She glanced at her husband, but it was obvious that he had other things on his mind than his wife’s fidelity.

Her mother and father got out of bed, put on their robes and with a little prodding from Samantha went into a huge walk-in closet. Mandy told her father to open the closet safe where her mother kept her jewelry. He said, “I don’t know the combination, she keeps changing it.”

“Mother open the safe.”

“I’m not opening my safe. If you want money get it from your father’s safe.”

Mandy stuck her pistol under her mother’s nose and pressed upward. She changed her mind and did as she was told. After opening the safe, she went back in the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. Her husband sat in a straight-backed chair with Sean standing over him while Mandy went through the contents of the safe. The only jewelry she took was a velvet case containing ten large unset stones. There was five thousand dollars in paper money and a small velvet pouch containing twenty gold coins, which she also took. She picked up one of her mother’s empty purses from the closet to hold what she had taken from the safe and returned to the bedroom.

“Let’s go down to Daddy’s office and see what he has in his safe.”

As he got up from the chair Mandy’s dad said, “Damn it Sam, not all the money in that safe is mine. I can let you have some, but not anywhere near all of it.”

Sean said, “It don’t look to me like you’re in charge here ‘Daddy’. I think we’ll decide how much we can take.”

“Don’t call me daddy, you fucking punk, you have no idea what kind of trouble you’re in.”

Sean caught him under the chin with all the force he could muster. The Glock opened a three-inch gash in his jaw that penetrated to the bone. To the old man’s credit, he stayed on his feet, and for a moment Sean thought he was going to take a swing at him. The moment passed and while blood ran down the front of his shirt, his wife darted into the bathroom and returned with a towel.

“Samantha your father needs medical attention.”

“He’ll be all right for now, as long as he does as he’s told.”

Her father’s office had dark mahogany paneling with a bookcase of the same wood extending the length of one wall. In front of the bookcase, facing the door was the largest desk Sean had ever seen. The entire desk, with the exception of the working surface, was carved with figures of women in native dress. A half-inch thick sheet of plate glass covered the top of the desk. The only thing on the desk was a keyboard, computer monitor and a telephone. Hanging from the ceiling was a fifty inch, plasma television. There were two overstuffed leather chairs

facing the desk, and a leather couch across the far wall. In front of the couch was a coffee table holding a copy of Remington's "Trails end." At least Sean assumed it was a copy.

Mandy's father went to his desk, opened a drawer and reached inside. About ten large tomes along with the shelf that held them swung out from the bookcase revealing a safe. Her father spun the combination until the lock clicked, he swung the door open and started to reach into the safe. Sean snapped, "Don't even think about it." Daddy returned to his desk and sat down. Sean walked over and looked in the safe. To his surprise, there wasn't a gun. Mandy went to the safe and started removing money. When she was done there was a pile of bills on the desk that amounted to a hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars.

Her father said, "You'll never get away with this."

Mandy pointed the gun at him. He glared at his daughter but kept quiet. Mandy went to her mother, who was standing in the middle of the room and led her to the couch. When they were seated Mandy told her what she wanted her to go to the bank and make a withdrawal. She refused.

"Mother I need the money. All you have to do is get the money and come back here. If they question you, you can have them call father here."

"I won't do it; you've got enough from us. Just go away and leave us alone. I hope I never see you again."

"If you don't do this I will shoot you both."

"Don't be silly dear, you wouldn't shoot us, we're your parents."

Mandy got up and walked over to the desk, stuck the barrel of her twenty-two against her father's forehead and pulled the trigger. Her mother started screaming and flailing her arms. Mandy walked back to her and slapped her across the face with the twenty-two. She looked over at her father slumped face down on his desk with blood spreading across the plate glass and said, "I've wanted to do that for the last six years."

Her mother sat on the couch sobbing. When Mandy pointed the gun at her, she looked up and said, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry Samantha." Mandy said, "I know you are" and pulled the trigger.

Sean went to the kitchen to get something to eat. He walked into a kitchen that would have made most chefs jealous. Hugo came over and sniffed him but then ignored him. Sean stepped over to a refrigerator that would have held enough food to last most families for a year and opened the door.

Mandy went back to her mother's closet, found an over-night bag and returned to the office. She put the money plus the purse in the over-night bag and joined Sean in the kitchen. He was standing by a butcher-block island eating a piece of blueberry pie from his hand. The blue juice was running down over his glove and dripping on the floor. Hugo was at his feet licking up the sweet drippings. The scene slightly repulsed Mandy, as if his display of bad manners was somehow worse than killing and robbing her parents. Sean said, "I'll go though the house and see what else there is of value."

"There's not another fucking thing I want from here, I'd like to go."

"I'll just be a minute, your mother must have a purse and your dad a wallet. I'll go check it out and then we'll go."

When Sean came back, he was wearing one of her father's Rolexes and had an additional nine hundred and fifty dollars. Before they left Mandy took a roast and two steaks out of the refrigerator and gave them to Hugo. She then closed the office door and left the house. She didn't bother to reset the alarm.

The maid arrived at eight sharp. When she couldn't get anyone on the intercom, she phoned 911. It took the police an hour to arrive and almost that long to decide what to do. They contacted the security company who, in turn, sent one of their men to open the gate and let the police in the house. By the time the police were aware there had been a crime committed Sean and Mandy were halfway to Chicago. What Sean and Mandy didn't know was that there was a loose stone in a basement wall that hid more money than they had taken from both safes.

Mandy was very quiet after they left her house and Sean sensing that she needed some time with her thoughts left her to her own musings. After about an hour, Mandy said, "I need to get rid of these gloves and gun."

"Good idea, we can always get you another one."

"I don't want another one. I'm done with robbing and I'm sure as hell done with killing."

"I see. are you done with me too?"

"No, I'm not done with you Sean. Don't go getting all needy on me now. I like you, I might even be falling in love with you, but I'm not a demonstrative person so don't expect me to be cooing over you and telling you how I adore you all the time."

"Fine, you know for a kinda bright girl, you tend to grate sometimes."

"I know. It's one of my best traits. Look Sean in fourteen months I turn eighteen. Until then I have to keep my nose clean. As far as anyone knows, I'm just a runaway kid, bumming around the country. If I don't mess it up between now and then when I turn eighteen I inherit my father's estate."

"So in fourteen months you're just gonna waltz back home and say I'm here to collect my inheritance."

"No. I think in fourteen months I'm going to be tired of bumming around the country and I'm going to be missing my family. I'll call my daddy to say I'm sorry, and ask if I can come back home. Imagine my surprise when I find that our phone's been disconnected, or even worse some stranger answers. The only thing I can think to do is call my daddy's lawyer and tell him I'm having trouble reaching him."

"I'm sure that you will be shocked to learn that he's dead."

"I shouldn't be surprised if I become somewhat hysterical at that point. We had a few small differences, but after all, I did love them dearly. I think a nice touch at that point, would be to ask when the funeral is going to be."

"And what if the lawyer tells you that you're a prime suspect, being sole heir and all?"

"Then I would be more than shocked. I would be outraged. If you remember, I wore gloves the full time I was in the house so there are no fingerprints. Even if they should find DNA, say a hair or something, I lived in that house for sixteen years. The dog was bribed with meat. Of course, I don't know that but if it came to a trial, I'm sure my lawyer would find it out. I certainly wouldn't have any reason to bribe my own dog."

"Slick. I would never have thought of that. In fact I wondered why you gave him so much meat. I thought he'd probably get sick."

"I suspect that in fourteen months the police will have forgotten the whole thing anyway. After all, Daddy was a gangster and I'm sure the police have better things to do than worry over mob slayings."

"You really had this thing planed out didn't you?"

"I've been planning it for three years. It's not the only reason I left home but it was an intricate part of the plan. Now all I have to do is stay out of trouble for fourteen months. We have more than enough to live on until then so we're done with robbing."

“What about the jewels, they could be traced and the person who buys them may remember who sold them to him.”

“The only reason I took them is that when I was a very little girl my mother would show them to me. She called them her “mad money”. I took them because I knew it would hurt her. If we sell them I will wear a disguise and sell them one at a time over a wide area.”

“What are they worth?”

“I don’t know, but my mother talked like they were extremely valuable.”

“There is only one thing I don’t understand. I thought we had decided against sending your mother to the bank?”

“I never would have let her go. I just wanted to see if in the end, she would help me. I wanted to know if for just once she would be on my side.”

They fell into silence for a while, Sean drove and Mandy stared out the window at the Indiana farmland. After a time she said, “Sean.”

“Yes.”

“Killing them wasn’t as satisfying as I thought it would be.”

Sean looked over at her and she had tears running down her face. He had enough sense to keep quiet.

“I think I’ll sleep for awhile.”

While he drove and Mandy slept, Sean pondered what they had done to make her hate them that much. He thought he knew, but wasn’t sure. He thought about the first person he had killed and he thought that if it was what he thought it was they got exactly what they deserved.

He considered the fact that Mandy very well may inherit a fortune, and thought what that might mean to their future. He wasn’t sure he could stand life as a kept man. Sean thought about Mandy’s house and wondered what it would be like to live in a place like that. While driving along the Indiana toll way he daydreamed about what it would be like to be that rich. One thing was for certain, he wasn’t going to forget about the ball. Before they went back to Ohio, he was going to get that. If she wanted to help fine, if not, he would do it alone. He thought it would be real nice to be that rich, but it sure as hell didn’t compare to living forever.

Mandy was startled awake when the tires hit the rumble strip about fifty miles west of Chicago. Sean jerked the wheel and got the car back into its proper lane.

“Where are we?”

“A little west of Chicago.”

“Would you like me to drive for awhile?”

“Yes I would. I can’t stay awake.”

Mandy took over the driving and Sean was immediately asleep. It was dark when they crossed the Missouri river. Mandy took the ramp for Davenport and worked her way toward the river. She finally came to what appeared to be a commercial dock area and parked the car. The dock stretched two hundred feet along the riverbank with a pier jutting fifty feet into the river. The dock didn’t seem to be in use. It may have been, but it had an abandoned look about it. The boards were curling up in places and there was no watercraft moored. The warehouses fronting on the dock also appeared abandoned. At the very least, they had been neglected for some time. The wooden buildings had not seen paint in her lifetime and possibly not in anyone’s lifetime. Sean awakened, and asked where they were.

“Davenport. I thought this would be a good place to get rid of the gun.”

She got out of the car and walked to the end of the pier. She dropped the gloves in the water and watched them float away. She then took the gun out of her pocket, looked at it for a moment

and threw it as far as she could toward the center of the river. She turned to Sean and said, "Let's get something to eat, and then find a nice room with a Jacuzzi. I'm about sick of looking at cornfields and I'm feeling kind of horny."

As they were leaving the pier, Mandy spotted an old man sitting on the edge of the dock fishing. She was very startled. They had been on the dock for some time and she had thought they were alone. Although there was really no reason, he made her feel uneasy. She took Sean's hand and hurried from the dock.

That night, in bed, after the best sex Sean had ever experienced, they talked about where to go next. If Sean was a man who thought about why things were what they were, he might have wondered at Mandy's voracious sexual appetite just hours after murdering her parents. Sean, however, was not known for his depth of thought and so enjoyed his good fortune without question.

Later on as they lay in bed, discussing their next destination, Mandy said that she was partial to California. That was okay with Sean as long as they stayed away from the big cities. Mandy said, "How about north of San Francisco? I've always wanted to see the Redwoods."

Sean, was lying on his side playing with her left nipple. He said, "Why not. Sounds like fun."

He had no more of a notion where the redwoods were than he did Timbuktu, but he was beginning to have things on his mind other than travel. Judging from the hardness of Mandy's nipple, so was she.

Long after Sean was sound asleep, Mandy lay awake pondering the recent events. She also reviewed in her mind her sexual appetite. To her the most amazing thing was that the things she despised doing with her father were now the things that brought the most pleasure. She had recently come to the realization that her favorite place for sex was a Jacuzzi, or better yet a bathtub. Mandy was starting to get aroused again.

Chapter Thirty six

Mandy started life as Samantha Colleen Giacobone. The Colleen was for her grandmother on her father's side. Her father often told her what a beauty her grandmother was and that she looked just like her. Samantha enjoyed being a beauty. Until the age of ten, she led a fairytale existence. Her mother and father doted on her almost to the point of idolatry. She was given everything a child could dream of. She had total run of the house and if a servant should fail to do her bidding their service would soon be terminated.

She roamed freely over the estate, usually in the company of a massive German shepherd named Victor with a nanny hovering near by. She would gather frogs and polliwogs from the stream that ran across the back of the estate. If the nanny were to admonish her for wading with her shoes on, Samantha would soon put her in her place. After all, daddy would buy her new ones and she already had more than she could ever possibly wear out. Never the less the nanny had trouble holding her tongue. She abhorred waste and she was well aware that Samantha's shoes cost more than her weekly stipend. She was also aware that she would be berated for allowing the shoes to be ruined, but she wouldn't be fired. She after all knew her place and her place was not to discipline the child, or for that matter even instruct her. Her place was to tend to the child's needs and to save her if need be from her own foolishness.

Her mother had turned one of the rooms over the garage, that had been intended as servant quarters, into a playroom. It was replete with child-sized furniture including half-sized working appliances. The kitchen counters were designed to accommodate a person of approximately four feet in height, as were the cupboards. The room contained a stereo, television and her own telephone line. There was also a computer equipped with high-speed internet service.

Her birthday parties were social events for both children and adults. Everyone who wanted to be in her father's good graces came and brought their children. That included not only the higher echelon of the criminal element but also a goodly portion of the legitimate tradesmen of Toledo. For certain it included most of the local politicians.

When she was ten, almost eleven, her father came into her playroom where she was reading celebrity magazines. It wasn't unusual for him to come there, but this time she thought he was acting odd. After a short time, he began to fondle her, not in the usual way, but a way that made her uncomfortable. He told her that this was how grownups played. By the time he left the room Samantha was disheveled and had tears running down her cheeks. After he left the room, she ran to find her mother and told her all about it. Her mother told her that she was imagining things so she went to her nanny. Samantha was not accustomed to being ignored.

The next day the nanny was gone and when Samantha asked about her, she was told the nanny had quit. When Samantha asked when she would get another nanny, she was put off. Eventually she was told that she was too old to need a nanny. The fondling continued and soon her father started giving her nightly baths. It wasn't long after that he started bathing with her and Samantha was required to help him wash his private parts. Although she found this disgusting, especially once he began ejaculating while she washed him, she got used to the ritual. However, she always took a shower after their shared bath. Then on her twelfth birthday he came to her room at night and raped her.

This was much worse and she went to her mother again. This time she was told that she was

growing up and that there were certain things that a woman had to endure.

“Your father is a very powerful man that takes what he wants. That is just the way it is and there is nothing either of us can do about it. If we try, we will lose everything we have. You are going to have to learn to live with this the same as I have.”

Samantha did learn to live with it after a fashion, but he frequently did things that hurt and the longer it went on the angrier she became. Shortly after it started, Samantha began plotting revenge. She had been in control her entire life and did not care for this shift of power in the least. She also could not understand how her father, who had provided for her every whim for so many years could suddenly decide to torture her this way. Neither could she understand how her mother could tolerate this situation.

Samantha hated her mother every bit as much as she did her father. She assumed that her mother was all right with the situation because it meant that he would leave her alone. It never occurred to her that her mother was jealous of her.

What Samantha didn't know was that her mother was far too terrified of her father to stand up to him. She was sure that if it came to divorce she would be left penniless and would lose her daughter too boot. She suspected that if it came down to paying her off or eliminating her, she might just disappear. One thing she knew for certain, he would not give up his daughter easily and he was a very powerful man with few scruples. It had been made clear to her not long after their wedding day that she was property, and not awfully valuable property at that. However, as long as she didn't overly assert herself she was treated, if not lovingly, at least amicably.

Although she would never admit it, she had married for the money anyway. As long as she had the house, the cars and the credit cards she could live with a loveless marriage. There were plenty of dotting men available to a beautiful rich woman and most of them more sexually desirable than her husband.

As for Samantha, she couldn't comprehend a mother who was dotting and protective suddenly withdrawing that protection. She never forgot her mother's statement about losing everything they had. She made up her mind that if money were that dear to her mother, whatever plan she came up with would include taking away her wealth. When the abuse first started she would hide in her closet to sleep, but when her father found her, he would be angry and the resulting act would be even worse. After a time the pain stopped but the humiliation never did. The body that she had once thought of as warm and cuddly was now a vile obscenity. It was almost more than she could endure to have his blubbery weight pressing her down, even putting aside the other indignities. At first, she thought she would surely vomit, but she came to find that the human spirit can become inured to nearly any circumstance.

She had always been a spoiled demanding child, she now became even more demanding. She found that a woman that was sharing a bed with a man garnered some power from the arrangement even if that woman was his not quite mature daughter. Although her demands in the past had been attention and trinkets, they now became cash or things that could easily be converted to cash. She had come up with a plan and her plan was going to require a large amount of money.

On her thirteenth birthday, she discovered that her mother was having an affair with the yardman. She started watching her mother and keeping track of where she was as much as she was able. It didn't require great sleuthing skills to discover that her mother was having sex with the yardman at least weekly. The yardman was of Greek descent. He was handsome in an arrogant sort of way and well built. In warm weather he was more often seen without a shirt than with one.

She was almost certain that her mother's infidelity went beyond the yardman because of things she began to notice at her father's many parties. She was amazed that her father was seemingly unaware of his wife's dalliances.

What Samantha didn't know was that her mother's infidelities increased drastically after her husband began sharing a bed with his daughter.

This knowledge of her mother's infidelities brought even more income. Although Samantha stopped short of outright blackmail, she made sure that her mother knew that she was aware of her indiscretions. The veiled threat of course was that sharing her father's bed gave her good deal of opportunity for sharing confidences.

Her dog died when she was thirteen and her father brought home another one. She would have preferred a Poodle or Scottie, but it was obvious that this dog was picked for his guard capabilities rather than for a pet. Of course, so had the last one but as a young child that had not occurred to her. This latest dog was twice the size of a Poodle and it was only four months old. She named him Hugo and decided to dislike him. He, however, worked his way into her affections as only puppies can. He soon was following her everywhere much the same as Victor had. Although Samantha, along with the rest of the household, considered Hugo her dog he was never allowed to sleep in her room and of course neither had Victor. The dog's main job was to make certain that no one worked their way past the alarms and entered the house while the residents slept.

When she was fourteen she started having sex with any male that would have her, but soon decided this was foolish and would do nothing to get her out of her situation. She settled on a man that worked on the estate because he struck her as not too bright and somewhat brutish. She explained her plan to him and since it didn't take effect until after she was sixteen he went along. She wasn't bad looking and had a good body albeit a little plump and she always had money for drugs. He was twenty-two, but wasn't bright enough to consider the consequences of having sex with an underage girl, especially an underage girl whose father wouldn't bother going to the law if he discovered the affair.

She graduated high school just after she turned sixteen and had saved enough money to get by until she was eighteen if they were frugal. A short time later her and her brutish boyfriend, who turned out to be anything but frugal, left the state of Ohio for warmer climes. Within six months, he had gone through what Samantha had planned on lasting them for the two years.

One day while he was out drinking, Samantha went to her stash for money to order a pizza. She discovered that there was less than two thousand dollars left. Although she was aware that he had been spending a lot on booze that certainly couldn't account for this discrepancy.

When she confronted him about where the money was he told her to mind her own business. He was drunk, as usual, and when she demanded to know how much money they had left, he hit her hard in the face with a clenched fist.

The second her butt hit the floor she decided she was out of there, but not until she got what belonged to her.

He drank until bedtime and fell instantly to sleep. Samantha figured with the amount of alcohol that he'd consumed there, was little chance of him waking up and catching her. When she found out how little was left she was dumbfounded. She searched every inch of the apartment and car before accepting the fact that he had spent all of her money. She took what was left of her stash and what was in his wallet. Before leaving used his knife to slash the sidewalls of all of his tires including the spare. When she finished she tossed his keys in the trunk of the car, closed it and walked away. She would have taken the car but she was sure he

would have reported it stolen.

Although she knew there was no way she could stay, she was none-the-less fearful of leaving. She was well aware that she couldn't get by for long on the money that was left. She was also aware that there were very few ways for a sixteen-year-old girl to support herself. She had no idea what she was going to do, but she thought her best alternative would be to get another man.

Chapter Thirty seven

When the Hearst's returned from Canada, One of the first things Dolly said to Sarah was, "You've got to have Rick work his miracle on me. Ollie's turned into a stud bull and I'm ashamed to even undress with him in the room, given what I look like and what he looks like."

Sarah called Rick's office to tell him that Dolly and Ollie were back. Jackie said that he was out showing a property, but that she would have him call her when he returned.

"Is everything okay?"

"Sure I just need to talk to him. I also want to hear all about you and José, could we get together for lunch?"

"I'd love to. I'll call to set a time for Thursday if that is okay."

"That would be great. I'll talk to you then."

When she got off the phone, she said to Dolly, "You can't believe what your love life is going to be like after this."

When Rick came home, Sarah and the Hearsts were sitting at the kitchen table. The girls were having iced tea and Ollie was nursing a beer. After saying his hellos and learning how things went in London, Rick said, "There is no time like the present." and went to the garage.

After the incident with Sean Rick had decided to make some changes. He had a cabinetmaker design a secret compartment into the kitchen cupboards. The man had done an excellent job and Rick doubted that anyone could find it without knowing where it was and how to open it. He had then searched craft and gift shops until he found a reasonable replica of the ball. The secret compartment was simply a ploy. He put the fake ball in the compartment along with a few hundred dollars. He thought that if Sean came back it would be enough to fool him. He could readily give it up and hope that Sean would be placated enough to give him time to handle the situation. He put the real ball in a jar filled with ball bearings and marbles of varying sizes. He then placed the jar in a cluttered cupboard in the garage.

Rick now put on a glove, retrieved the ball from its hiding place and returned to the kitchen. He sat down beside Dolly, took her hand in his ungloved hand and laid the gloved hand against her forearm.

“How do you feel?”

“I don’t know how to explain it. Happy... No, that’s not it exactly...Serene, that’s it, I feel serene.”

“Good. We’ll wait awhile. I’m not sure how long it takes. It seems to be almost instant, but why take a chance?”

“What’s the glove for Rick? I noticed you used that when you healed Oliver.”

“Dolly the less you know the better off you are.”

“Uh oh!”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, this is really embarrassing.”

Oliver said, “what’s embarrassing?”

“I don’t want to say. It’s just a feeling. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Come on Dolly, tell me what’s going on.”

“No Ollie. I can’t talk about this so just let it go.”

Rick could see she was embarrassed and had a good idea why, but he kept it to himself.

In a short time, Rick returned the ball to the jar and came back inside. He went to his home office, retrieved a file folder and returned to the kitchen.

“Ollie, these are all the papers on the sale of your house to me. Once Dolly is young again we can complete your identity changes and sell the property back to you. No money has changed hands or will there, but according to the government there has and taxes will be due. I don’t mean to pry, but are you going to be able to handle this cost?”

“Of course, and I’ll pay whatever your taxes are from the transaction. Dolly and I are very well off. If I wanted, I would never need to work another day of my life. Since I’m young again I did give some thought as to what I might do. I was in the car business all my life and God knows the last thing Crystal River needs is another car dealership. We have rather decided we wouldn’t do anything for awhile. We liked being Snowbirds so maybe we’ll get a motor home and travel for awhile. We could travel in the summer and come back here in the winter. Dolly...Dot and I talked it over and we’ve basically decided not to do anything right away. We Figure we best get used to being young again and see how we feel before making any big decisions.”

“By the way, I caught the Michigan Notre Dame game Sunday. That kid of yours was the star for Michigan. The Announcers couldn’t stop raving about him.”

Rick said, “I know, he called me a few days ago to talk about football. He said some of the pro teams are starting to contact him about playing for them when he graduates. He said a couple of them have actually made offers. The Lions have tried to talk him into dropping out and

signing with them right now.”

“What’s he going to do?”

“He doesn’t really know yet. He knows for sure he is going to finish school before he decides and that will take two more years, or maybe four if he goes for his masters. He’s not sure that football is what he wants to do for a living, but the money they are offering may be too good to turn down.”

“I understand that. There aren’t very many places that you can make that kind of money.”

“That’s for sure. One of the things he is thinking about is maybe signing a two-year contract. At the end of his contract, he could decide if that’s what he wants to be doing. If not he would at least have a pile of money to do something else with.”

“Do you think they would go for that?”

“I think that the way John plays they would go for almost anything to sign him.”

By the time John got home in the spring, Dot and Don were settled into their new life. The first time he saw Dot he said, “Wow Mrs. Hearst, you’re a real babe.”

“Thanks John, but its Mrs. Swain. You can call me Dot. I don’t care for it as much as Dolly but I guess it will have to do. Oliver is now Donald. We had to get married again to share a name.”

“Did you have a big wedding, Dot?”

“No we just went in front of a judge. Rick and Sarah stood up with us. It was kind of nice.”

“Don’t tell Aunt Sarah Dot, but I…”

“Stop right there John. Don’t tell me anything that you don’t want your Aunt to know. She is the best friend I’ve ever had and if you tell me something that I think she should know, I’ll tell her in a heart beat.”

“Well I guess I’ll wait to tell you until I’ve told her then.”

“No offense John, but you know how I feel about Sarah.”

“None taken. It wouldn’t be fair of me to expect you to keep a secret from her. I just wasn’t thinking.”

That evening, at the supper table John told Rick and Sarah that he was engaged to Molly and that she planned on coming for a visit that summer.”

Although Sarah had her misgivings, she told him that she was very happy for him and wished him all the luck in the world. John knew his mother very well and could see she had reservations.

“You’re worried about Sean aren’t you?”

“A little, it stands to reason that he will contact his sister.”

“Well he hasn’t so far and both she and I hope we’ve seen the last of him. If he did contact her she wouldn’t mention us.”

Rick spoke up and said, “I’m sure she wouldn’t but she will tell her parents and if he contacts them it seems like they would mention it.”

“They have pretty well washed their hands of him too, but I guess it could happen. I just hope that we have all seen the last of Sean. Look Uncle Rick we have plenty of time to think about it, were not going to get married until I graduate anyway.”

Both Rick and Sarah agreed that that was wise. John said, “Molly will still has four years, but most of that will be as an intern and she is hoping to get into a hospital where I can find a job. Of course if I decide to turn pro it won’t really matter since I’ll be on the road a lot of the time for two years at least.”

“Is Molly okay with you being a pro football player?”

“Aunt Sarah, Molly is wonderful, she is all for whatever makes me happy.”

“Well I certainly hope you take her feelings into consideration too. A woman in love doesn’t always articulate what she wants.”

“Mom, You raised me pretty well. I promise I will never do anything to hurt her.”

“Aunt Sarah”

“Well son, it certainly will be nice having a daughter.”

“Niece”

Then Sarah asked when they planned to have the wedding and where. John told her that they hadn’t even talked about that other than that Molly was afraid her father wouldn’t accept the fact that she was marrying a white man. She was afraid that they wouldn’t be able to have the wedding there and that it would break her mothers heart.

Sarah got Molly’s number and right after supper called her and they talked for an hour. Sara asked if her mother had a phone and would it be alright to call her.

“No Sara, we never got a phone. It might cause trouble for Mom anyway. My Dad would not like Mom talking to you. I think he still holds you and Matt, I mean Rick, responsible in some way for Sean’s troubles.”

“Do your parents know about what happened here?”

“No, and I don’t have the heart to tell them. Besides, that would be just one more source of animosity for Dad against your family.”

“Molly you can’t know how much I wish that I could repair this rift. It’s something that will effect You and John your entire life.”

“I know Sara. I think about it all the time.”

“I would like it if you stated calling me mom, if it wouldn’t bother you?”

“I would love that Mom.”

Before they hung up, they both promised to keep in touch and Sarah said she was looking forward to seeing her that summer.

After supper, John asked Rick if he would like to go fishing and he said, “Sure. Would you like to ask Don too?”

“No, I just wanted to get off by ourselves for a while. I thought maybe we could just talk like we used to on your front porch.”

“I would like that.”

“ Why don’t you pull the covers off the boat while I fill a cooler.”

Once they were on the water, they forgot all about fishing. They talked about what school was like and about what John’s plans were after he graduated. John talked a lot about Molly and it was obvious that he was very much in love with her. They talked about football. Rick admitted that what little he knew about football was what he had learned from watching John play for Michigan. He confessed, however, that he was becoming a fan. They talked about Sean and John apologized once more for telling him about the ball. Rick allowed as how if that was the only mistake he had made at fifteen he got off very lucky.

Then John got around to the reason he had asked Rick out on the boat. Rick had wondered how long it would take.

“Rick, I wanted to tell you how thankful I am that you came into our lives. I’m not talking about the things you’ve given us or the fact that you made it possible for me to go to college, although I am thankful for that.”

He hesitated a very long time before speaking again, he finally said, “Before you took us away from Cholla, my mother was very unhappy. She always put up a good front around people,

even around me, but I knew. I would awake in the night and hear her crying. When I was little, I would go get in bed with her but that only seemed to make it worse so I stopped. I don't think she was happy even when my dad was alive, it was always like she was getting by, not actually living."

"Did she ever talk about her life before Cholla?"

"Not really. When Dad was still alive I would hear them talking occasionally about somewhere they'd been. That sort of thing, but that's about it. Does she talk to you about it?"

"Never. I don't know a thing about your mom before she came to Cholla."

"Mom was a very troubled person, but she's happy now. I guess that is all that really matters. I just wanted to let you know that I'm thankful."

"John I didn't really do anything for you guys. I love your mother more than I could possibly express. Actually it was you two that did something for me, not the other way around."

"You can say what you want Rick, but you made my mother happy and I am grateful. The funny part is that when it first happened I was jealous of you. I know it was kind of childish, but after all I was a child."

"Well, I'll let you in on a secret, I knew you were. In fact there was a couple times when I thought you wanted to take a swing at me."

"Yeah, like the first time I realized that you guys were sleeping together."

"The teens are a very difficult time under the best circumstances, and that time was anything but."

"I guess I've said all I wanted to and since we didn't catch any fish, I guess we should head in, and by the way, I'd rather you didn't mention any of this to Mom."

"Hey, she'll never hear from me that her kid likes her."

When they got back, Sarah asked what they had been talking about. Rick and John replied in unison, "Fishing."

Sarah said, "If you didn't want me to know you could have just said so."

As she walked away she muttered "Men."

That night in bed, Rick said, "You mentioned Dot bugging you about your statement of where we swim. Would you like to show them the cabin?"

"I don't know Rick. I kind of like it being our secret place. How do you feel?"

"I guess the same as you. The problem is, once we let the cat out of the bag there is no getting it back in, so we should be very sure before we do."

"I think I'd rather hold off for awhile. Donald has been very nice since returning from Canada, but I can't help thinking of his attitude before they left. Since then I'm not sure I trust him to be discreet, unless of course it's in his best interest."

"I must admit to the same misgivings. I really like Doll... Dot but I've sort of come to the conclusion that Don is pretty self centered. I guess it's settled then. We will hold off for a while. I've been thinking of building a barn and getting a few horses. If I do that, We'll need to put in electricity and a drive. It won't be a very well kept secret at that point anyway."

"I think that would be wonderful. I know how you miss riding, but couldn't we do that on the cleared portion and still have our little secret?"

"That might work. We should start planning for how we want to set it up. What would you think of building a real house there and selling this one?"

Sarah was less than enthusiastic. She liked living on the river and she liked having Dot next door to visit with. She also had got to know most of the other neighbors and enjoyed their company. She was afraid that even a short move would interfere with those friendships. Besides

she liked having the cabin to go to when they wanted to be alone. Rick went along with Sarah as usual, but did say, "I think I will at least add a regular bathroom. I can put in a septic system and use a gas generator for running water."

Sarah agreed that running water would be nice.

Sarah told Rick that she had been thinking of giving the kids a few acres on the gulf for a wedding present. Rick agreed that would be a nice thing to do and even if they didn't want to live here, they would always have it if they changed their mind. They might even want to build a vacation home someday. Sarah was sure that John would want to live in Crystal River, but then once he took a wife things could change.

"Now do you want to tell me what you two were cooking up on the boat tonight?"

"Nothing really, just man talk. I think he misses the time we spent on the front porch at the ranch. You know, he was fifteen and I let him drink beer. He thought it was a big deal, or maybe he thinks since I'm in my eighties that I might have some wisdom to impart."

"Did you talk about me?"

"Of course not. Men don't talk about their women folk when their drinking and having fun."

Sara gave him a very dubious look but decided to let it go.

Chapter thirty eight

Sarah had followed through on her promise to the chief and called Ann Banks. Sarah

tendered an invitation for the following Sunday and it was accepted. They showed up Sunday afternoon with Chief carrying a fresh baked blueberry pie. The four of them sat in the lanai, had iced tea and got acquainted. After a while, Sarah suggested a boat ride. They boated along the river and around Kings Bay enjoying the scenery and wildlife. At three o'clock Rick pulled up to the dock at Crackers and said, "I think it's time for a cocktail, host's treat." They sat at the tiki bar, the girls had pina coladas and the guys had beer.

After the drinks Sarah said, "I think it's time to feed these people. They are probably starving."

Chief replied that he wasn't sure about the rest of them, but that he could probably go a week without eating and it wouldn't hurt him a bit. Back home Sarah put Rick in charge of the grill while she prepared the salad and side dishes. They had grilled chicken, salad fried potatoes and blueberry pie. The Moore's both agreed that the blueberry pie was the best part of the meal.

After the Banks left, Sarah told Rick that she liked them a lot. Rick allowed as how she liked everyone a lot and although there was good deal of truth in that statement, he also liked them. He also pointed out to Sarah, that being friends with the Chief of police couldn't hurt.

When Ann had told Leo about the invitation, he had explained that the Moore's were the ones whose house was the scene of last week's gunfight. Ann replied, "I read all about that in the paper. Tell me about them. Sarah sounded very nice on the phone."

"They are both very nice. Ann, what I'm about to tell you is not for publication. I think they are in the witness protection program. This family is just too nice to be mixed up in anything crooked. The perp that escaped apparently knew them, or at least knew Rick. He tried to kill their nephew, if that's what he is, to find out where they were and I have no doubt that he would have killed them if he could have. They Either have something he wants or is set on revenge. I think they're worried that he'll come back."

"What makes you think they are in the witness protection program Leo?"

"I ran a background check on them and not a one of them shows up anywhere until two and a half years ago. The Michigan detectives seem to think they are mixed up in something illegal and are hiding out, but I don't buy it. I consider myself a fair judge of character and these are honest folk."

"It sounded like you don't believe the boy is their nephew."

"He may be, but that whole story seems contrived to me. I can't quite figure that one out. He can't be a son, they're too close in age and if he isn't related to them, why would he be living with them. The only other thing that would make sense would be if he is the brother to one of them."

"But Leo, if that was the case why not just say he was a brother instead of concocting this story of a nephew."

"You sure got me. I don't have a clue. Oh well, it's a mystery and you know how much I enjoy a mystery."

Chapter thirty nine

Before Sean and Mandy left Davenport, Mandy took him shopping. Prior to this shopping trip, Sean had bought his clothes at K-Mart, Wal-Mart or mom and pop general stores. He had never been in a men's store let alone an upscale men's store. He wasn't used to being fawned over and catered to and at first, he didn't like it. It made him nervous and self-conscious. Mandy noticing his discomfort, said, "If you think this is bad you should try shopping on Rodeo Drive in L.A."

Her mother had taken her to Los Angeles for her twelfth birthday and they had gone shopping on Rodeo Drive. It was one of very few pleasant experiences with her mother after the age of ten. She had been fascinated, not only by the shops and the way the clerks catered to you, but also by the patrons. She had never seen such elegantly dressed and coifed women in her life. Mandy had decided right then to have class when she grew up, unlike her mother. Her mother although wealthy, perhaps more so than many of these women, appeared frumpy beside them.

Mandy was aware that her mother spent a small fortune on clothes, but somehow she didn't manage to create the perception of class that these woman did.

Aside from their finery, or possibly because of it, they exuded an aura of confidence and bearing that Mandy had never seen in women before. Mandy never forgot that experience and vowed that someday she would be like them.

Sean bought only casual clothes somewhat like he had always wore albeit with less of a western flare. He had to admit, however, he looked far more fashionable than he ever had before. Sean knew that without Mandy's influence there wouldn't have been much of a change other than what the clothes cost. He did very much like the way he looked. Mandy also bought a decent set of luggage. Nothing expensive or flashy, but luggage they could take into any hotel without the bellhop looking at it like bugs might crawl out. When they had finished with the shopping, she picked out a fancy restaurant for lunch. It crossed Sean's mind that she was trying to give him some culture.

They driven pretty much straight west until they reached the Oregon coast and then turned south. The rugged Oregon coast fascinated them and they stopped at almost every turn in the road to take in the view. When they reached Northern California, they swung inland to explore Jedediah Smith State Park. If Samantha found the coast fascinating it was nothing compared to what the redwoods did to her

She was enthralled beyond words and would stand gazing intently up through the branches until her neck cramped. Sean was no less impressed than Mandy. Having grown up in the desert, he had never seen anything like this coastline and certainly nothing like these massive trees. Where he came from there were few things that grew over a few feet tall. The many contrasting moods of the coast also fascinated them.

Over the following days they found that the coastline could change almost hourly. One minute it would be serene with gentle waves lapping at its shore and then the tide would rush in with huge breakers battering the rock formations and beaches. Sometimes it would be coated in fog to the point that you could barely see past the hood of your car. Then a few short hours later, bathed in sunshine. The beaches could change from warm and inviting to bone chilling cold on the whim of the breeze.

After leaving Jedediah State Park, they rounded yet another curve, and a large rustic inn came into view. It was set against a backdrop of towering redwoods and looked as if it could have been there as long as the trees. The structure was set well back from the highway. On the opposite side of the road the land dropped sharply to the rugged coast below. Near the road was a sign carved into a slab cut from one of the giant trees and hanging by a chain with links that looked like something out of a Paul Bunyan cartoon. It read, "The Redwood Inn- Est. 1964." The chain hung from a redwood beam between two large totem poles on either side of a gravel driveway. Attached to the redwood slab was a neon sign that read "**Vacancy.**" The neon sign struck Sean as totally out of place in this setting. He then noticed that there was an unlit no in front of vacancy and realized it would have required a ladder to change a printed sign once their rooms filled.

Sean turned under the sign and parked in front of the office. It was a two-story log structure with single story wings on both sides. The two story portion housed a front desk and large common room. The common room was furnished with overstuffed leather furniture, low tables and a massive fireplace along the back wall. There were also writing desks and isolated nooks and crannies for reading or just solitude. In front of the fire place two large apposing sofas faced across an even larger coffee table hewn from a redwood tree. The entire arrangement formed an

inviting conversation area. A large open stairway led to a wide balcony that accessed the guest rooms.

They signed in and the man behind the desk followed them to their car to help with the bags. The room was large and old fashioned with a patchwork quilt on the bed and doilies on the nightstands. The paintings on the walls depicted scenes of the coast, and the Redwood Forrest. The one modern concession was a console television situated so that it could be seen from either the bed or couch. Even that however, had its screen tastefully hidden behind the folding doors of an ancient armoire.

They spent the rest of that day and all of the next exploring the redwoods. They spent Jedediah State Park on a narrow unpaved roads that were not wide enough to pass a car in most places. The road weaved in and out around the trees in a manner that caused very slow driving. Luckily enough, there were few other cars. In fact, they didn't see more than a dozen people their whole time in the park. Mandy, who had grown up in Toledo found this strange, but to Sean it wasn't at all unique. In either case, they both enjoyed the solitude of the forest. In a small glen, they came across a doe and fawn. Mandy said it was the first wild animal she had ever seen outside of a zoo.

They carried on like the tourists that they were. They climbed on the giant fallen logs, walked through hollow logs and even had their picture taken driving through a tree. Mandy used up three rolls of film. She was filling up the trunk with pinecones and souvenirs. One day in the trees she said to Sean, "I have never enjoyed myself this much, not ever. Maybe after I get my inheritance we could move up here, at least for a while."

Rick thought why not, then the thought flashed through his head that after she inherited her daddy's money he may be doing a lot of things that she wanted to, but he said, "Why not, it's nice here."

When they had been at the resort for two days, and had spent another day in the forest, they were ensconced in the common room enjoying cocktail hour and chatting with a couple from Los Angeles. The man had been on a rant about the illegal immigrants pouring across the Mexican border. He contended that they were clogging up the welfare system, stealing American jobs, driving up taxes and generally destroying the state of California. He said it had gotten so bad that a cottage industry had cropped up to supply them with new identities, including green cards for as little as a hundred dollars. Sean's ears perked up.

"You mean to tell me that you can buy an identity for a hundred dollars?"

"Yep. It's done all the time. Half of the illegals in southern California are carrying false I.D."

"It seems like a hundred dollar I.D. would be awful easy to detect."

"I'm told that you can't tell it from the real thing. Part of the I.D. is a driver's license for picture I.D. I'm sure that wouldn't stand up to a police check, but most of them don't drive anyway."

Sean's first thought was that with decent I.D. he could get a real license by saying he'd lost his. Another thought is that he could say he was from New York City. It was his understanding that no one drove in New York. He sure wanted to get safe I.D. They were still driving the Sable because he was afraid that if he bought another car under his real name the cops might find him. If crime shows were even close to accurate, the police had all kinds of ways of tracking you through records.

That night in bed, he discussed it with Mandy. She was skeptical of the price but enthusiastic about the idea. While in prison Sean had heard a lot of talk about buying new identities and although he hadn't given it much thought at the time he was now fired up about it. After a little

more discussion they decided to check out, and head for Los Angeles in the morning.

They hugged the coast on the trip south and Sean just couldn't get over the scenery and never tired of driving along the coast. Sean had never given much thought to his future but he was now starting to look ahead and what Mandy mentioned about settling on the coast was looking more and more appealing.

What with the winding road and frequent stops for sight seeing they only made it to San Francisco the first day. They checked into a nice hotel and on the clerk's advice spent the evening on pier thirty-nine enjoying the food and atmosphere. They took a taxi because by the time they had reached the hotel Sean had had all he wanted of San Francisco traffic. The cabbie asked if they had been to the city before and when they said no, suggested the long route. He took them through China Town, by Hoyt Tower and most of the other main sites. He wound up by driving down Lombard Street on the way to the pier and they were both fascinated. By the time he dropped them at the pier the bill was a hundred and twenty dollars. Mandy gave him two hundred, asked him to pick them up where he dropped them off at about midnight and told him to keep the change.

The next day they drove through Sacramento and down through the Napa Valley. They were both intrigued by the lush farmland, Sean more so than Mandy, but then she had grown up where farming was common place.

They came into Orange County on the five and by the time they were getting close to Los Angeles Sean was a nervous wreck. If Sean was intimidated by San Francisco's traffic, he was terrified by Los Angeles's.

Neither of them had a clue as to the size of Los Angeles and when they got there they were totally lost. Mandy had been in Hollywood when she was twelve, with her mother, but they had landed at LAX and taken a cab to the hotel. Sean had never been in a city of much size, and Mandy had never been in a city remotely like this one on her own. They wound up in what appeared to be the seedier part of town by accident and decided that it just might be a place to start.

Mandy stuck to the motel while Sean started hitting the bars asking questions. If it weren't for the fact that he had the Glock, he would have felt very vulnerable. The area he was in, seemed to house a worse grade of people than he had encountered in prison. He soon found that almost everyone he talked to claimed to have what he wanted or knew someone that did. He also soon learned to be very leery. After being in Los Angeles only three days, he had already been scammed twice. On the fourth day he met a man in a bar that claimed to be able to get him what he was after.

Though skeptical, Sean followed him to a brick building covered with graffiti. They went up a dark flight of stairs that smelled of urine. Sean tagged behind making sure he had ready access to his gun. They entered a small office with a hugely obese man sitting behind a desk. The man looked at him suspiciously and asked him what he wanted in a rather gruff voice. It didn't seem to Sean that he wasn't all anxious to do business with him. The man that he came with lounged against the door in a manner indicating boredom.

Sean said he needed a set of I.D. that would pass police scrutiny. "Something that was good enough to get a passport with."

The man behind the desk nodded and the other one came away from the door and patted him down. He took the Glock and laid it on the desk along with Sean's wallet. The man behind the desk said, "Nice piece."

He picked up the wallet and rifled through it.

“Have you done time Proudfoot?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“La Tuna.”

“Okay, you have any particular location in mind.?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean where do you want to be from.”

“I guess I don’t care.”

“That makes it easier. How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

The man turned to a filing cabinet and went through the folders. He pulled one out and leafed through it.

“I got a guy here that’s twenty-three, from Chicago. Drivers license, Social Security card, Master card, library card, SSI open water diver card and voter registration card for ward twelve in Chicago. No birth certificate, but that shouldn’t be hard to get if you need it.”

“If I show up in Chicago using this I.D., am I likely to run across my name sake?”

“If you run across him anywhere, it will be a miracle. Literally. Look, this I.D. is clean, that’s what you paying for. If you called the credit card company and gave a change of address, you could go right on using the card. No sweat.”

“Sounds good. How much?”

“Two grand. Cash.”

“Wow.”

“You want it or not?”

“I want it. It’s just that I heard the mex’s can get I.D. for a hundred bucks.”

“Yeah, I do that too. All that is, is phony I.D. with their picture and name on it. If anyone checks it, it won’t stand up. What I’m sellin you is the good stuff. It’ll stand up to any inspection.”

“I can be back with the money in fifteen minutes.”

“Mind if my friend here tags along?”

Sean thought a minute, and said, “I guess not. I wont be there long after I get the I.D. anyway.”

“You’ll be there for one more day. It will take me that long to get your ID ready.”

“I thought it was ready to go.”

“Not unless you want someone else’s picture and signature on it.”

Sean and his escort walked to the motel. Sean told Mandy that they would be leaving tomorrow, got the money and returned to the office. The guy with the gruff voice motioned for him follow him though a small door to the side of his desk that Sean hadn’t noticed before. The door led to a room even smaller than the one they came from. In this room was a Polaroid camera on a tripod facing a wall with a blue sheet tacked to it. Along the back wall was a counter with a paper cutter, a machine for plastic coating documents, a computer, scanner, printer and assorted hand tools. Sean was instructed where to stand and the man snapped pictures of him. Once he was sure he was satisfied with the pictures he laid a blank Illinois drivers license in front of Sean. He had him practice signing his new name on a blank sheet of paper until he felt comfortable with it and then sign the license. He told Sean to come back at ten that night and everything would be ready. Sean wanted to say something. He was reluctant to leave them with two grand of his money and trust that they would be there when he returned, but decided he had

little choice. He said he would be back and left.

As it turned out Sean had worried in vain, the ID was ready when he returned. When he returned to the motel, Mandy said, "What's your new name?"

"Jason, Jason Harris. You like it?"

"It's nice. It just doesn't have the same ring to it as Cochise Though."

"Smart ass."

"Yeah, but you already knew that and you still adore me."

"Only because your smart ass is extremely cute."

Chapter forty

They packed and were on the road by eight in the morning. When they got to San Bernardino, they decided to spend some time car shopping and spend the night. They stopped at large used car lot on the outskirts. Sean immediately set his eye on a bright red corvette convertible, but Mandy pointed out that they were on the road and had to have room for suitcases. The salesman, not wanting to lose a sale, pointed out that there was storage behind the seats. "Of course you can't put the top down if you have suitcases in there." They settled on a sporty little Pontiac convertible with a small back seat, trunk space and lots of get. Sean drove the sable when they left the lot. They found a nice motel for the night. After a little afternoon delight, they went out for supper and took in a movie.

Sean and Mandy had decided the night before to go to Las Vegas, so in the morning they headed out with Sean leading in the Sable. They drove until they were well into the desert. About fifty miles from Barstow Sean spotted a sidetrack across the desert, he turned onto it and drove until he was out of sight of the highway. He pulled the Sable off the road, took out his wallet stuffed the money and all of his new ID in his jeans. He threw the wallet in the front seat letting the contents scatter. He then took out his jackknife and sliced open his thumb. He smeared blood across the seat, steering wheel and dashboard. When his thumb stopped bleeding, he squeezed it to get the blood flowing again. By the time he finished it looked like someone had been killed in the car. He even smeared blood in the trunk. He left the keys in the ignition and walked back to the Pontiac. He asked Mandy for a Kleenex, wrapped it around his thumb, and slid behind the wheel. He said, "That might not convince them that I'm dead, but it sure will give them something to think about. Lets you and me take our nice new car and your extremely cute little ass to Vegas."

"Mister Harris, I'm starting to think that all you care about is my ass."

"I assure you that you have plenty of other parts that I find fascinating, but lets not get on that subject or we never will make it to Vegas."

Sean made a U-turn kicking up the desert dust and headed back toward the highway. Sean and Mandy spent the next eight months just bumming around the country, albeit in style, at least as far as Sean was concerned. He had certainly never lived as well as they were now and he was enjoying their nomadic life style. He liked Mandy a lot, but she had come to adore him. She doted on Sean more than anyone she had ever known. It had gotten so that her entire world revolved around him. She could not imagine life without him and she couldn't think of a thing she wouldn't do to keep him.

The only fly in the ointment was Sean's obsession with Matt's ball. Although he rarely mentioned it to Mandy, there was hardly a day went by that he didn't think about it. Finally, one night in bed, he said to Mandy, "I'm going to Florida to get that ball. If you'd rather not go

along, I understand. You have a lot to lose if it don't go well."

"If you are going, so am I."

"You know the last time I tried to get it, it went very bad?"

"I know and I'd rather forget about it, but I know that you have your mind set on having it and I don't think you will be happy until you do. That inheritance is important to me because it will allow me to live my life without worrying about money, or how I'm going to get by. However, I'm not sure I would even want to live without you, so if this is what you want, let's do it."

"I think the best way to do it is like we did at your house. Just walk in and do it. Of course, I don't have keys to this place, which is stupid. I could have if I would have thought. Of course, in my defense I had to leave in a hurry and under some amount of stress. Anyway, I think we should walk up to the front door, ring the bell and stick a gun in the face of whoever answers. It's been long enough that they sure as hell won't be expecting me. A gun in the face makes most people real docile. I used to think when I took the ball I would kill them, but I've gotten over that."

"That's good, I really don't want to kill anyone else."

"Well, I figure that if I kill them the cops are going to be on our tail and there is no real reason to anyway. It's not like they can go to the cops and complain that we stole their magic ball."

They were in Oregon and figured it was time to be heading south anyway. The nights were getting cold, and it wouldn't be long before winter set in. They decided that they would work their way toward Florida and be there well before Mandy turned eighteen.

It took them a month to get to Florida. They checked into a motel in Gulf Breeze, just across the line from Alabama on November first. They planed on being up early and being in Crystal River about suppertime. Sean figured that way they would likely all be home. Sean explained to Mandy about the gate alarms and told her they would climb over the front wall so they wouldn't know they were coming until they rang the doorbell. In retrospect that would turn out to be one of the worst decisions Sean had ever made.

Chapter forty one

When Sean and Mandy were getting out of bed the next morning, Rick and Sarah were still in bed making love. While Sean and Mandy were still lingering over breakfast, Rick was backing out of his driveway on his way to work. Sean and Mandy were turning off SR 98 onto SR 19 when Rick was returning from showing a house and Sarah was on the phone with Ann Banks.

When Rick walked though the door, Jackie shot him the smile that made her one of the best real-estate salespeople in the county, and said, "Good timing boss, your better half is on line one."

When he picked up the receiver, Sarah said, "I love you."

"I love you too. Is that why you called?"

"The first thing I called about was to tell you how much I enjoyed the way you woke me up this morning."

"I bet you didn't enjoy it any more than I did. What was the second reason you called?"

"I was talking to Ann and we were thinking that it would be a nice day for a boat ride, if you and the Chief could get away."

"I don't have anything this afternoon that can't wait. If Chief can get away, it's fine with me."

"I'll call you back and Rick..."

"What."

"I love you."

"So I've heard. I love you too."

"You know if you get here before the Banks, we might have time for an encore."

"Lord Woman, you're insatiable."

"I know. Don't you just love it?"

As Rick was walking through the door from the garage, Sean and Mandy were stopping for lunch in Pinewood.

Sarah said as he walked in, "I'm sorry sweetheart, but they are going to be here in twenty minutes. It looks like the encore will have to wait."

She gave him a kiss that brought instant arousal. Rick said, "If you don't stop that, they are going to find us making love on the kitchen floor."

"You animal."

Rick went and changed out of his suit and had just finished filling the cooler when the Banks arrived. While they were loading the boat, Sean was changing a flat tire in McDonald's parking lot in Pinewood and cussing a blue streak. As they cruised the river toward King's Bay, Leo banks said, "I sure do like this boat Rick. If I didn't have yours to use I might even buy one."

"Rick retorted, I doubt that Chief, you're pretty tight."

Ann said, "I think he's got your number Leo."

"Well, if you're going to insult me, I think I'll drink one of your beers."

"Point proven," Ann said.

When Sean and Mandy were driving by the Crystal River Mall, The boaters were just returning from their ride around King's Bay. As Sean and Mandy were turning off SR 19, they were docking Rick's boat and unloading the cooler. As Sean and Mandy were turning onto Manatee Lane Rick, Sarah and their guests had just come into the lanai and Rick had asked them

to have a seat while he got fresh drinks. Rick was emptying the cooler into the sink and Sarah was getting glasses from the cupboard as Sean and Mandy parked in front of the gate. Sarah was mopping up the mess Rick had made in the sink when Sean and Mandy scaled the low wall in front of the house. Sarah had just opened the refrigerator door, and Rick was on his way to the garage with the cooler when the doorbell rang. Sarah started for the door and said, "That's funny, I didn't hear the alarm. Just as she reached for the door, Rick yelled, "Don't!", and darted to the bedroom. He grabbed his pistol from the nightstand and ran back to the front room.

Sean had heard Rick yell and tried the door. It wasn't locked and by the time Rick came back in the room Sean had his gun pointed at Sarah. The chief had also heard Rick and had heard the panic in his voice. The chief came through the sliding door from the lanai, at the same time pulling out his service revolver. Sean saw him in his peripheral vision, swung his arm and fired. The sound of the gun discharging indoors was deafening. Sarah screamed, and Sean panicked. He whirled and shot without thinking, the shot hitting her in the chest.

The bullet that Sean fired at Leo glanced off the side of his gun, entered his hand just below his thumb and exited six inches above his wrist. He fell backward dropping his gun and grabbing his broken arm.

Sarah stepped back from the shot to her chest with a surprised look and plopped down on the floor with her legs sticking straight out in front of her and with a widening red stain on the front of her bright yellow sundress.

Rick, in reflex mode, ran to Sarah and knelt down beside her. By the time he got to her the look of surprise had left her face. As he kneeled down beside her, her head fell forward her chin resting on her chest. Sean seeing that Rick had a gun swung his gun to cover him. Ann had come from the lanai to kneel by her husband, she picked up his gun and holding it with both hands shot Sean directly through the heart. Mandy screamed and fell to her knees beside Sean. She picked up Sean's gun that was lying in a spreading pool of blood and swung it toward Ann. Ann had her gun still leveled and shot her through the forehead just above her left eye. Rick picked up Sarah from the floor saying, "I'm so sorry Etty, I'm so sorry. Rick calling her Etty wasn't missed by the chief in spite of the chaos.

Chapter forty two

With tears running down his face, he took Sarah to their room and laid her gently on the bed. He was almost certain she was dead. Still, he ran to the garage, returned with the ball and pressed it into Sarah's hand. From somewhere far away he heard some one saying, "Officer down", and after what seemed only seconds, he heard sirens. The room soon filled with Para-medics trying to get to Sarah. He screamed at them to leave her alone and tried to shield her from them.

Ann came in the room and said, "Rick, there is no more you can do. You have to let them take her."

She put her hand on his arm to pull him back. Rick was in a total fog of grief. The only thing he knew was that he was losing his wife and now someone was trying to force him away from her. He whirled and lashed out with his fist in uncontrolled fury. The blow caught Ann under her jaw and propelled her into the living room where she lay unconscious. Leo tended to his wife

while two uniformed police officers subdued Rick and a Para-medic pressed a hypodermic needle into his arm.

When Rick came to, he was lying on the couch and Don and Dot were sitting across from him. Dot had tears in her eyes. He got shakily to his feet and walked toward the bedroom. Dot said, "Please don't Rick, it hasn't been cleaned up yet." Rick kept going as if he hadn't heard her.

The blood-covered coverlet was lying on the floor and Rick reached down, picked it up and pressed it to his face. A shiny, no almost luminous ball fell out, bounced on the carpet and rolled across the floor. Rick picked it up and returned to the living room. He said, "Are they sure she's dead?"

"Yes Rick they're sure."

"I tried to save her."

"We know. It was too late Rick. They said she died almost instantly."

Rick dropped to his knees, bowed his head and sobbed. He was unaware of his tears mingling with the blood on the floor, he was in fact unaware of everything, save for a horrible, empty feeling of loss. He finally became aware that Dot was on her knees hugging him. He sobbed into her shoulder, "How am I going to live with out her?"

Dot said, "I don't know Rick. I just don't know."

Rick finally got to his feet and started for the lanai. The purpose of his movement caused Don to ask him where he was going, but he didn't reply and may not have even heard him. Don caught up to him at the dock, and asked again, where he was going. This time he answered, "I have something I have to do."

Don said, "Let me go with you."

"No I have to do this by myself."

He started the boat and motored out toward the gulf. When he arrived at the cabin he remembered nothing of the trip. He tied the boat to the dock and looked into the deep spring. He took the ball from his pocket, with tears running down his face and everything a blur he tossed the ball into the center of the spring. He sat down on the dock and muttered, "I'm sorry Sarah, I should never have allowed this to happen. It's all my fault. I don't know how I can live with it. I knew there was a chance that he would come back, but I ignored it. I should have moved and change identities again, but I ignored it because I didn't want to lose this and now I've lost everything."

He sat on the dock crying for a very long time, occasionally he would sob out, "I'm sorry."

Rick stayed at the cabin that night. The following day he brought every thing he wanted from the house, and moved in. About all he brought were his clothes, the suitcase from the ranch and Toby. He had Jackie sell the house on the river and he never saw it again. before the house was sold, John put quite a few things in storage.

When Rick moved to the cabin he kept the Lincoln but following the funeral he gave Sara's car to Henrietta. She protested but Rick insisted she would have wanted her to have it and Henrietta knew that it was true.

Rick expected the funeral service to be small with only John, Molly and their closest friends but once the Citrus County Gazette published the funeral schedule, it seemed like most of the town, if not all of Citrus County, showed up. Rick wrote a eulogy but when he got up to give it, he broke down to the point that he couldn't speak. The chief of police, in full uniform, got up and led him back to his seat. While Ann tried to comfort him, Leo delivered the eulogy. The funeral procession tied up traffic along SR 19 for a half hour.

Rick asked Jackie to sell the house on Manatee Loop. He told her to dispose of the contents anyway that she wanted to and that he really didn't need to know what she did. He said that he didn't want to be involved until the papers needed signing and that he would accept whatever she negotiated as sale price.

After a lengthy and costly battle with the bureaucrats of Citrus County, he had Sarah brought from the cemetery and placed next to the cabin. He had a stone cut of rose granite placed on her grave with the epitaph *Etty May Hanson Beloved wife of Matthew Macklin*. Down in one corner, in small letters was, *I'm sorry Sarah. Love Rick*. The only date he had put on the stone was the current year.

For the first month after Sarah died Rick was barely able to function. He rarely ate and spent the majority of his time either sleeping or beating his self up over Sarah's death. Over time he emerged from his fugue and although the pain remained he began to once again have a life. He had electricity installed along with indoor plumbing and added a large bathroom. He never actually put in a driveway but he did have a path cleared through the jungle so that he could get to the cabin by car. He made sure that the path meandered enough that you couldn't see the cabin from the cleared portion of the property or vice versa.

Epilogue

Chief banks became a frequent visitor to the cabin and was well aware of Sara's stone and the epitaph, but never mentioned it. Don and Dot kept in touch for a short time but Rick soon lost track of them. He heard years later that they had moved away. The only close friends that remained were José, his wife Jackie and the Banks. Of these, The Chief was by far the closest.

Almost a year after Rick moved to the cabin the chief showed up one afternoon with a case of Heineken. After a few beers he said, "Rick we need to talk".

"Uh-oh. Nothing good ever stats with we need to talk".

"It is nothing like that Rick, it's just that I could not get this case out of my head. You know what a nosey bastard I am."

"I wondered how long it would take you Chief. Tell me what you have come up with".

"Well I got to thinking about the fact that Proudfoot had done time in New Mexico and a few things that you and Sara said kind of led me to believe that you were from the southwest. I got to nosing around his case and others that occurred at about the same time and in the same area and I came across a strange case. It seems an Etty Hanson, her son and a rancher by the name of Matt Macklin, all went missing about the same time. Moreover, it seems that a young Indian boy by the name of Sean Proudfoot was suspected in the disappearance although it was never proven."

"And you concluded"?

"That is the problem in a nutshell. I have not concluded much of anything. All I learned about the cases in New Mexico, along with some very strange things that the Ann Arbor detectives told me have done little but baffle me. Then there is that tombstone out in the yard. I have some very strange ideas about this case Rick, most of which would land me in the loony bin if I were foolish enough to tell anyone about them".

Rick said, "Let's go out and sit on the boat Chief and I'll tell you a story. After all this time, I guess you deserve to know".

They sat on the boat drinking beer for a long time after Rick finished. Chief didn't comment on what Rick told him nor did he ever broach the subject again, and Rick was never sure whether he bought the whole story or not.

When John and Molly married they received a gift of seven hundred acres more or less on

the Gulf of Mexico. Five days after the wedding Rick wrote a letter to John explaining what he wanted done with the remaining property and explaining where to find the deed and a notarized power of attorney. He wanted the hundred acres containing the cabin to be donated to Citrus County with the stipulation that the cabin and spring be maintained as it was in perpetuity.

Rick bought a throw away phone at Wal-Mart, with the minimum minutes. He then wrote a letter to his friend Chief giving him the number and saying that if he ever had need of his special gift he could reach him at that number. He also included that information in his letter to John.

Rick then packed the old Lincoln, donned his scuba gear, went out to the spring and dove in. It took nearly an hour to find what he was looking for.

The next morning on his way out of town Rick stopped and posted the letters.