



# Cross Keys

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With the exception of certain historical figures,  
all persons presented in this work are fictional,  
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strictly coincidental.

# Two Tough Men

Jack MacLeod and Doc Gray are back, fighting to crack a conspiracy that should have died with the Confederacy. Hidden since the end of the Civil War, the Knights of the Golden Circle survived to quietly infest the highest levels of government and business.

Now the KGC is making its move, using deceit and violence in a bid to dramatically expand the borders of the United States. And the only thing standing in their way are one battered fraud investigator and his friend, the ex-Navy SEAL Doc Gray.

With a little help from the FBI and Special Agent in Charge Andrew McCoy, Jack and Doc will weave their way from the battleground at Cross Keys to the mountains of western Virginia to stop the KGC and its plans.

The Knights have money, power and weapons, but they've made one small mistake.

They've shot him, beaten him, tortured him, killed a friend and taken his money and his honor. For the Knights of the Golden Circle, it's just about business and profits.

For MacLeod, it's about getting even.

# Acknowledgments

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# Chapter 1

## Ransom

They were dead in the moonlight.

The two of them sat in the black SUV on that warm August night, holding hands like lovers staring up across the field of grass where the pasture rolled gently from the road. It was a spectacular, starry night, the moon just a sliver but bright over the mountains, shining down across the field and reflecting off of the small pond where their vehicle sat, lights and engine off.

Both were almost good looking in death, the woman a blonde of about thirty, with nice features if you discounted the slash across her throat and the bloody front of her blouse.

It was one of those mega-big SUVs, an Expedition or something like it, blackened windows so the back seats were obscured. But the light through the windshield was enough to show them both clearly, along with an empty back seat.

Walked slowly, trying to get my nerves under control.

Death had been here, may still be here.

The man was in his forties, with close-cropped hair and beard. Sitting behind the steering wheel, his head cocked as though listening to music on the radio. His eyes were closed and there was a smile on his face, but it was the rictus of death rather than a real smile, because his throat was cut the same way as hers.

How do you make two people sit still while their throats are cut? You might surprise one, but not two at once. So how was it done?

Curiouser and curiouser.

Quick look.

There was blood all over the interior, including the dash and the windows, so this had been a nasty piece of work, and suddenly my survival instinct kicked in telling me to *get out of here, run, look around, you are going to...*

Reached into my pocket for the little .380 Colt Mustang. The note had been specific – no cops, no guns. But Mrs. MacLeod didn't raise any stupid boys, and I don't ever walk into an iffy situation without a weapon.

Because of nights like this.

Dropped the bag with the ransom money, \$100,000 in cash, near the front tire.

Thumb down to snick off the safety, hands together in front of me, breathing slowly and emptying my mind so I could hear the sound of the night and the little whisper of the grass as he came up off of the ground a dozen feet away.

Medium sized man, dark clothes, no hat, reaching out with a pistol in his right hand.

You have to make a call. Some people actually believe what they see on television, and think a gun is like a club that you wave around and threaten people with. On the other hand, there are also people would just as soon kill you as look at you.

No way to know which, so I put two shots into his chest.

You don't threaten. You don't argue, or point, or converse. You just put two rounds into the middle of the assailant's chest.

Double tap.

Pretty good shooting, from my point of view, from ten feet away using an automatic with a two-inch barrel. When he kept coming, put another two in for good measure and he dropped to his knees, snorting and trying to raise his arm to use his own weapon.

Moved to my left, because it is harder for a right-handed person to aim reliably in that direction.

Would have put two more into him, but he was down now and the little Mustang only holds six rounds in its clip. Wanted to leave two just in case...

The roar of the shotgun registered, concussive rush, as I got punched in the back and thrown across the field. Rolled over, blood pounding in my head and my ears ringing as I tried to sit up. Right arm numb and I flopped it

over my legs to shift the gun from the right hand to the left.

He came up slowly, holding the shotgun, a double-barrel model.

Held my right hand in plain sight, my left pressed against my left leg, covering the gun.

Saw his face, large and pale, shock of unkempt beard, missing some teeth in the front, his mouth making noises that I couldn't make into words. Then he smiled, a kind of laughing sneer. Lurched toward me. Shotgun weaving around as he tried to look from me to the man on the other side of me.

Laid on my back, the breath knocked out of me, as he lurched toward me again, and as he looked away from me for a fraction of a second I got the Colt into play and put two shots in his direction. It scared him and he pulled the trigger, the shotgun blast stinging but most of the shot going wide. He leaned over to grab the bag with the money, then staggered out of my vision.

Tried to stay with it. Tried to see where he was. Tried not to feel the blood seeping out of me, breathing and trying to stay awake, focusing on the moon and the stars.

Couldn't.

Felt myself slipping away, the moon blurry, tired. Couldn't move. Couldn't sit up. Vision turning red at the edges, red moving inward, turning to gray. Then black.

Dead in the moonlight.



\* \* \*

A bright light beckoning toward me, and didn't want the damned white light, would not go toward it, because I was not done yet, wanted to find the little sonuvabitch who shot me and wipe that stupid grin off of his face.

Pain.

Hard, cold, bruising pain in my back and my upper right chest, had been shot there, and I tried to reach up to touch the wounds but my hands would not move, tied down, and I jerked against the restraints in an effort to pull free.

Red lights flashing around me now.

*"One, two, three, lift."*

The voice sounded far away. Tried to talk, to tell him about the man with the shotgun.

*"He's back with us. Hold his arms down for a minute, lemme get him on a saline drip. That's a lot of blood. Ok, hold his arm down so I can find the vein."*

Darkness again.

Then awake, could not tell how much later, the quiet drone of television news on a set in the background. I was in a bed with side rails, in a small room brightened by sunlight from the window.

Smell of disinfectant, crisp sheets around me, hands still restrained. A nurse hovered over me, and it took a moment before I recognized Catherine Gray.

"God Dammit."

“Don’t try to talk, Jack. You’re out of surgery, and you are going to survive.”

Tried to turn my head, but couldn’t.  
some kind of brace thing held me in place, and  
my hands seemed to be tethered as well.

“Lie still, Jack, or you’ll pull out all  
those lovely stitches the surgeons gave you.”

Rang the buzzer for the day nurse, and  
arranged for a valium for me.

I was still cranky.

Once in a lifetime long ago, Cat Gray  
and I had been lovers. Maybe even friends,  
though it didn’t get much past the getting-to-  
know-you stage before I learned that she had too  
many demons to be ready for a relationship.

Whether or not I was ready for one was  
moot, because while it may or may not be true  
that every woman is a little crazy in her own  
way, Cat was somewhere off the scale when it  
came to men. A wounded little sparrow.

So we had settled into an uneasy kind of  
acquaintanceship.

Seeing her told me that I was in the  
Critical Care Unit of Rockingham Memorial  
Hospital, the new glass and metal monument to  
higher health care costs that had sprouted up last  
year near where I live and work.

Cat holds down the second shift in the  
CCU, and should not have been here still in the  
morning hours.

“I didn’t expect to see you still here.”

“I wanted to be here when you woke up.  
You’ve got a long day ahead.”

“Long day?”

“The valium should hold you, but I wanted to make sure. And the cops are waiting, and they do not look happy with you.”

Remembered.

Dead people. Botched ransom. Trying to reload, get a spare clip into the little Colt. Hands slippery with blood, fingers wouldn't hold the clip. Slipping away, still not knowing if the grinning man was coming back to kill me.

The cops weren't happy with me? Join the club.

I wasn't happy with me.

\* \* \*

I'm an insurance fraud investigator.

I had been hired by National

Underwriters to help recover a simple artifact that had been stolen and was now being ransomed back. I don't normally do that kind of work, but National is my best customer and it didn't seem like that tough a gig for the money.

I had done this for them twice before, once for a baby stolen in a shopping mall near Philadelphia and once to recover some stolen jewelry. This was a step up, ransoming an artifact from a museum. Very cosmopolitan. Might even get me dates with the art and culture types over at James Madison University.

Someone or ones had worked their way into a display case of artifacts on loan to a local museum from the Museum of the Confederacy

in Richmond, taking an old battle flag that had once been carried by Colonel John Singleton Mosby, the Confederate raider known as the 'Gray Ghost.' A battered, tattered flag without any real significance, except that Mosby was a man who had helped redefine guerilla warfare and made himself a thorn in the side of the Federalists for nearly three years.

This was Mosby's personal flag, as if anyone really cared a century and a half later. Might be worth something to a collector, but it meant little to most people, including me.

The police had just started to work to find who had done the break-in, but then the thieves had called and negotiated an exchange for the flag's return. It happens more often than you would think.

The thieves take something, and then find they can't unload it due to the media coverage. Or their buyer balks. In any event, they sell it back to the insurance company for roughly half its insured value. The insurance company cuts its losses; the owner gets his or her property back.

And so it was that on a warm, moonlit night I had traveled over to the exchange point southeast of Harrisonburg to play errand boy. It was even simpler because the place they picked for the exchange was near to where I lived.

It is called Cross Keys, and these days it is home to farms, family homes and a vineyard known for its very decent white wines and a drinkable red or two.

But there was a time, back in June of 1862, when the Union army came down the Shenandoah Valley from the north in a bid to annihilate Stonewall Jackson's Army of Northern Virginia, that the gentle farmlands of Cross Keys were some of the most important places in America. On this ground, Union forces were beaten in a critical but relatively unknown battle of the Civil War. And because of it, the Confederacy survived to fight on another three years.

One hundred and forty-nine years later, my job was simple. I would take a gym bag with the money, carry it to the thieves, inspect the flag to make sure it was the real thing, and exchange it for the gym bag.

Two things made it easy. First, the amount of money, while big in terms of pocket cash, was not enough to get crazy about. As for the flag, it was not as though I were ransoming the Mona Lisa. They had given me a short list of things to look for to authenticate it, which I had memorized.

Get to the ransom point, check the goods, give them the money, and get out.

Simple, unless you get shot all to hell.

It had taken the surgeons most of the waning hours of the night to get all the buckshot out of my hide, which surprised me given that the shot pellets had hit me squarely in the back of the bullet-proof vest. But a vest is just what its name implies. It will stop the bullet. It doesn't stop the force of the shot, or the surface

damage, but the lead does not penetrate your hide. At least in theory.

Think of it in terms of being whacked in the back with a sledge hammer. The padding may help keep the hammer from breaking the skin, but you still get a heck of a shock to the system and a bruise that extends for as far as the eye can see.

Then there are all the places on arms and legs that the vest does not cover. Collateral damage, not like a direct hit, but they took more than 40 pieces of shot out of my various limbs and buttocks. Sitting down would be possible, but it would not be pleasant, for a while.

Then I was back in the CCU, pumped nicely full of a painkiller and a Valium to keep me quiet.

And Cat showed up, with the state investigators right behind.

\* \* \*

The Bureau of Criminal Investigation is a unit of the Virginia State Police – “staties,” as we fondly call them. That may seem strange, but in Virginia we are home to law enforcement of every shape and kind, from our own police to the FBI and alphabet spy and special tactics units of every kind imaginable.

The Virginia BCI is run by a Lieutenant Colonel, but I must not have rated that highly in their list of investigations because I was facing a First Sergeant and one of their Special Agents.

There was not much I could tell them. The two in the SUV were dead when I arrived. I had fired in self-defense against two people, at least one of whom should still have been lying in the field.

Only the way the sties told it, neither of the guys I had shot at were there when the cops arrived. The first two were still in the black SUV, throats cut.

And there was no gym bag full of cash.

They tried to spin it out a couple of ways, prodding to infer that I was in on it, that I had killed the couple in the car, that I was holding back on them. Threatened to suspend my license or at least give me really dirty looks.

But the truth was that with no bodies other than the ones already dead when I got there, they didn't have much to say. Sure, some shots were fired; that was how help had arrived on the scene as quickly as it did. Neighbors heard the shots and called the Sheriff's office.

But since I did not have a knife or show any other indications I was involved with the couple in the SUV, all they could do was give me disbelieving looks and their best scowls when I shrugged.

Cat finally chased them out, and I rested until dinner. It was then that I discovered that I still could not move my arms – to keep me from accidentally pulling out the stitches and the needles stuck in hands and arms -- and had to be spoon fed. Restraints, courtesy of the doctor, who apparently thought I needed them.

Humiliating.

Cat, back on her three-to-eleven shift,  
loved every minute of it.

“You know, I actually like you this way.”

“What, unable to move?”

“No, that’s just a bonus. I mean the fact  
that you are so drugged up you can’t be your  
usual smartass self.”

Refused to open my mouth for the next  
bite.

She started waving the spoon around in  
the air, making airplane noises, and I was so  
stunned my jaw dropped at the sight and she  
shoved the spoon in my mouth.

Cottage cheese.

Yuck.

\* \* \*

Days passed. The glaciers melted. The  
dinosaurs went extinct. Atlantis disappeared  
into the sea. I was bored beyond belief.

I lay in the bed, taking drugs and  
watching CNN, waking every hour or so to  
watch the screen. The stories did not change,  
but every time I awoke they were new to me.  
Valium will do that to you.

Finally, they began to substitute aspirin  
for the Valium, which made me happier but hurt  
like the dickens every time I got out of bed.

Which was every couple of hours.

Damned if I would have Cat giving me a  
bed pan.



I finally got to ride down the elevator in a wheel chair and go home, easing out of the chair and feeling every minute of my four decades of life.

Wobbly. That kind of eight-feet-tall and half-an-inch-thick feeling that tells you the body and mind are not healed.

Cat had wheeled me down, and for all of our banter and a few unkind words during my stay, I took time to thank her. Wasn't her fault I hated being there, and she had gone out of her way to be nice.

She must have called ahead, because Doc and Jeannie were waiting by the front door. They signed the forms to take custody of one MacLeod comma John, grumpy patient.

Doc is an old friend of the family, more a friend first to the grandfather who raised me, but I had grown up with him looking over my shoulder. Sort of an uncle to me. He may have been older, but delighted in beating me at historical facts and Seven-Card Stud poker. I suspected he could beat me in other skills, as well, but had never asked.

In the hard, lonely times after the Old Man, had died, Doc had been there. Always in the background, so that you never really noticed him, but a part of the things that mattered to me. Steady, with a quirky grin that didn't make the heartache go away but somehow made it more tolerable.

I had been too young to cry much when my parents died, casualties of that faraway

jungle war of the seventies. The Old Man and Maw-Maw had taken me in to raise, and their passing years later had crushed me beyond belief. Doc had seen me through it, as I had him after his wife passed a few years later.

Jeannie, aka Jean Dovel, was part of the equation these days. In her early sixties, she had run a little business on the same floor as my office in Harrisonburg until last year, when she became embroiled in the violence around a case of mine that had gone wrong.

Getting too close to me had nearly gotten her killed, and when it looked like she was still in danger, I had stashed her at Doc's place for safety. Not realizing the situation I was creating by putting two lonely people together in one house. Jeannie had just recently moved into Doc's place on a semi-permanent basis, and they seemed to be successfully coupling.

I was only a little jealous.

\* \* \*

Sat in Doc's kitchen, just a mile or so from my house, and sipped at a shot glass of his clear sugar moonshine while I tried to make sense of why it had happened as it had.

I knew what, where and when, which satisfied three of the questions in the who-what-where-when-why-and-how pyramid they taught us back in Air Force Investigations Academy those many years ago.

"So run me through it again," Doc said.

Doc had, in his younger years, been one of the first of the Navy SEALs. Spent his time in three tours in The Nam, then mustered out to use his training as the team's medic to boost his way through medical school. Retired now as a country doctor, he was still a SpecOps operator in his own mind.

Perhaps in mine as well.

"There were so many things that didn't make sense," I said. "I was there on time, but the thieves were not. No car at the intersection. If it had not been for the sliver of moon, I would not have even noticed the car sitting down by the pond."

Early August, in the last wanting cycle of the moon, but bright and strong off of the chrome bumper and polished black of the SUV.

"The tracks showed where it had busted through the fence. They were faint, just the grass pushed down, but I followed them down to the SUV. It was bright enough, but the windows made it hard for me to see into the car until I was right at the front."

He nodded, fingers drumming on the table. Doc had given up cigarettes years ago, but in moments of concentration he didn't know what to do with his hands, and drummed on the table for something to do. I looked past him, concentrating on the short twist of hair on the back of his head.

In other parts of the world, it is called a "Rat-Tail," and its popularity as a male fashion statement mostly began and ended in the

Eighties. Here in the valley, it is often a symbol not only of the heritage of the hill people who settled the place, but of the Cherokee who were here long before the Europeans arrived.

Doc could have been either, or perhaps just a mullet-headed degenerate from the past. I had never asked.

But you don't make fun of a man's hair in the Valley, where long hair, beards and braids on men hearken back to the Vikings who settled their Scottish homelands more than a millennium ago. The Scots-Irish of Appalachia wore their hair with pride, and took little nonsense about it from outsiders.

I looked at Doc's rat-tail, using it as a focal point, to relax. Concentrated on the five-inch tail off of the back of his head, clearing my mind to think on those moments in the grass field. It's a form of self-hypnosis, concentration on the blue haze of alcohol, rat tail, emptiness of mind.

Began with the blood.

The mind has no capacity to remember pain, but it can retain images of shock and horror, and though I have seen my fair share of people dead by violence these two had been harder to look at because they did not look, except for the dark wetness of blood everywhere, like there had been any violence at all. Settled into that moment, remembering the almost peaceful looks on their faces.

"They had been dead for a little while, because rigor had set in."

My voice low, little inflection, seemed like it came from someone else.

“They must have grabbed him first, cut him soon after they arrived at the meeting place, and then got the SUV ready to roll down into the pond.”

Respiration harder, heart beginning to throb, the little voice in my head screaming, *run, while you can, get away!* Adrenaline flowing.

Colt Mustang .380 pinging off two shots, two more.

It’s not like the Glock 9 mm “Baby Nine” I like to carry, but it is a good concealed weapon. No matter, with any pistol, with either hand, the way to use it is to put two shots into the target.

Double tap.

I had killed my man. I’ve spent too many years in violence not to know when he went down with the life already gone from his heart and soul. So where was the body?

The second one, the smiling gargoyle with no front teeth, I was less sure of. But I saw the first one go down, saw him stagger. He wasn’t wearing a vest, and took at least one hit to the chest.

Dead. But missing now.

We went over it carefully, debriefing it, just trying to get the facts straight. Analysis could come later.

I did not know yet who the players were, or why the ransom had gone bad, or why two people were in the morgue.

Took a small sip of the moonshine,  
feeling its liquid heat slide down my throat and  
explode in my still hurting stomach.

Felt the burn of the almost pure alcohol.

Felt the burn of almost pure anger.

There is a code of honor among men,  
different from that of women.

I don't always understand the code of  
women, though I have seen it in the eyes of the  
ones who have held their families together in the  
worst of times and years. The look in the eyes  
of my grandmother, Maw-Maw, when her man  
or her children were threatened. When there  
was hard and unpleasant work to be done, as  
when someone's child or mate had died. When  
the women gathered to console their own in  
ways no man ever could. Lived with it, without  
really understanding it.

But I know the code of men. I know that  
it has stretched among warriors and men of  
honor since the beginning of time. A code  
embodied in the salute, the hand shake, the  
man's-gotta-do-what-a-man's-gotta-do belief  
system. Bushido. The commitment to do what  
is right. They had broken their word, spilled my  
blood, and taken a small part of my honor.

I did not know why, yet.

But I was going to find out.

Take back the money.

And the stolen Confederate flag.

And my honor.

## Chapter 2

# Healing

Friday started hot and got worse as the day passed. Not the hundred-degree-plus and humid hot that August usually brings in the valley, but hot enough, even in the shadow of the mountains.

At least we were not in DC. The nation's capital was built on swamp land that nobody, not even the Indian tribes, had wanted. I had learned this from one of the gypsy construction contractors here in the valley, an old Cherokee who had spent his share of time in North Carolina as a member of one of the tribal councils until coming back home to Rockingham County.

According to the old Cherokee, the Indians and a group of landholders in Virginia and Maryland had perpetrated the first great swindle against the American government by selling them worthless swamp land along the Potomac River. Land so putrid, so ungodly hot, that people used to die of heat stroke there every summer. Until World War II, when the

Department of War insisted on installing air conditioners.

Land so swampy that when George Washington wanted to get from his official residence as President to the Congress, he took a boat. To this day, Congress and most of the rest of the government takes August as a holiday to escape the heat and humidity. And discerning historians note the curious nickname for the US Department of State, “Foggy Bottom,” denoting its location in the thick of the marshes.

Today we call the whole area Washington, DC.

Summer in nearby Virginia is hot, but not unbearable by any means, and I was able to stand it by keeping the windows wide open in my old rambling farmhouse on Lawyer Road. There’s a nice breeze from the southwest that cools the house all day.

It’s a centennial home than has been in my family since just before the War of Northern Aggression, and while my grandfather and I had both made our accommodations with the building codes of Rockingham County, it maintained the appearance of what it mostly was. A grand old farm house of white clapboard, with one or two back rooms jutting out hither and yon where they had been added on for convenience.

On the third floor is a grand attic where I had played as a child. The second floor holds three rooms and a large bath. One of the rooms now serves as a small exercise area that I use to



work out. Which is three days a week, minimum, except for now when I still had stitches and serious bruising.

On the first floor is a large foyer and the staircase, flanked on the right by my home office and the left by a library combined with living room. My bedroom is in the back, as is the large country kitchen.

Jutting off the back is a rear entrance to the kitchen that serves as a laundry room and mud room, with the sinks and tables I use for canning vegetables during the summer. And around the whole thing, a wide verandah that serves as both front and back deck.

Canning is a lost art, which is a shame given how easy it is. I make my own jellies, which I almost never eat because I watch my intake of sugar. Nonetheless, my apple pie jelly takes prizes most every year at the Rockingham county fair, and even if it did not I would still be the most popular customer ever among the ladies at my bank.

Little old ladies swear that my bread and butter pickles are better than sex, but they are wrong. The dark chocolate and raspberry jelly is better than sex.

My home office occupies what used to serve as the formal dining room. If I ever have a dinner party, which is unlikely, I will have to build another addition to the house. Until then we just eat in the kitchen, whenever company comes to visit.

Showered and shaved on this Friday, taking care not to stress or pull the massive areas of bruise that stretched from my lower abdomen to the center of my chest, and across most of my back. Or the forty or so puckered little places where the stitches were still holding torn flesh together to heal. The bruises were still new, just starting to fade to hues of yellow and green. The puckers were red and angry.

I was hungry.

Padded across the hall to the kitchen and put water on to boil. Ground the Kona coffee beans in my antique farmhouse coffee grinder, pouring it into the French press and adding a smidgeon of cinnamon, brown sugar and lemon peel before covering it in boiling water to steep.

Pampering myself, because I do not willingly take painkillers or any other kind of medication if not forced to. Don't get me wrong; the days on Valium had been lovely. But in real life I prefer to take the pain into my soul, feel it and learn from it through meditation in the manner of those of us who practice Buddhism.

Hollowed out a mango and sliced a banana, then took both food and coffee into my office. Sat at the desk, watching the morning sun light up the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and glimmer off of South River just below my land. The clouds were hues of purple, the sun just shining up through them.

Thought again that the Blue Ridge Mountains at dawn were the most beautiful sight in the world.

I wasn't up to the rigors of tai chi today, so it was well that this fell on a Friday. I work out each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, just a matter of routine. Opted instead for an hour of meditation, the incense burning as I sought refuge from the pains and questions of this world and instead turned inward to release my thoughts and feelings.

Though it has been practiced for centuries and has millions of practitioners in the US alone, meditation has only recently been treated as a serious companion to life here. Mostly it has been treated as part of some strange Hare Krishna ritual or something the Beatles did after the White Album.

We have only recently had controlled experiments that show how it can cut heart attacks, lower stress, lower blood pressure and lower blood sugar rates. I do an hour four days a week, though 20 minutes a day will usually do the trick.

Lit a candle and concentrated on it, emptying my mind and letting go of the world.

\* \* \*

“We cut our losses. That’s the business we are in, Jack. Calculate the odds, minimize the risks, and when necessary we cut our losses.

No one is holding you responsible for the loss of the money or the problems with the exchange.”

Michael Freed, my contact at National Underwriters. They are a secondary underwriter – they do not directly write insurance policies, but take a secondary position. This allows small insurers to assume more risk than normal in unique circumstances, letting National take a part of the risk in return for a part of the profit.

When things start to look wrong with an insurance package, they send the file to Michael. Some of them come to me for investigation. Or action.

“Now, I have a couple of new files to pass your way. They are both a little ways away. Do you feel up to driving a couple of hours?”

He is a prissy little man, almost delicate, and his office looks like the aftermath of a Kansas tornado. In the dozen years I had worked with him, I had yet to see him pick up a check for lunch, or even offer me a cup of coffee when we had our regular meetings. Strictly business, the little stiff.

“Not so fast, Mike.” He hates to be called that.

“In your world, it may be true that I am not legally liable for the loss. In my world, I let some grinning punk and a dead man mess up the transfer, take the money and gun me down. Can’t be left that way. If I let them do it, I’ll have every two-bit thief and swindler from here to DC thinking they can do it, too.”

He nodded.

“But Mac,” he said, knowing I hate being called that as much as he hates being called Mike, “I need to make it clear that the company does not condone personal vendettas. In fact, this conversation never took place. You are not hired to get the flag or the money back. You will not be paid for any efforts in that regard. Nor will we support you.”

Felt the anger rising in me, and turned to look at the fish that filled the aquarium along one wall of his office. They looked pissed, too. Or maybe just hungry. Stared around the messy office, with its stacks of files on every surface.

We had always had a delicate relationship, what with him hating my denim jeans and jacket, and me just as hateful of his bow ties.

Let myself be calm. Zen.

He is not the enemy.

Direct your qi, your life force, to the task.

Tai chi. Center, calm, focus.

“Still,” he continued, “I must in fairness point out that if you were to recover the money, there would be the standard fifteen percent commission. As for the flag, I cannot speak for the museum, but I am sure there would be some type of...um, honorarium.”

I looked at him, at his dark eyes and spooky-white complexion, his corporate manner. All of those things could drive me as crazy as the old biddies down the hall in accounting, who regularly try to reject my expense reports. But

we had known each other a dozen years. He was my client, perhaps even my friend. And he knew me better than any other client I had.

He smiled.

“And Jack,” Freed said gently.

“Company policy notwithstanding, I would personally be pleased if you could bring back my client’s property. Any way you can.”

Notwithstanding? Big word.

\* \* \*

Stopped in to Union Station restaurant for lunch. Cassie Baker, one of the two sisters who own the place, was not there. For which I was grateful, because I was still moving like an old man. And if there is one thing I never want to do, it is to look old and feeble in front of an attractive lady, even if she is already taken.

Point of masculine pride.

I snuck through to the left and back to the bar, where her sister Sirena holds court, and flipped through the menu while trying to look dignified sitting in a chair.

Sirena came over and poured a shot of Wild Turkey 101 with a splash of water.

“You look like crap, Jack.”

“You look lovely, too, Sirena.” She is actually quite stunning, though she is pretty in a different way than her sister.

“Seriously, are you okay? You have circles under your eyes, you are sitting

sideways, and the look on your face would melt pig iron.”

“Tough day at the office.”

She looked at me sideways, then nodded and moved down to pour another wine for an old lady at the end of the bar.

Union Station occupies the second floor of the old Wetzel Seed Company building, on the site of the old Union Train Station. It’s a fun and funky place that I had taken to after my former favorite place changed its menu from Asian fusion to something akin to very bad Italian. And stopped carrying a decent selection of red wines.

Sat and ate the fish tacos from the bar menu, chased by water and an occasional sip of the bourbon. They don’t serve at the bar until after 4, but I had spent enough money there that the ladies would occasionally make an exception. The lunch-time crowd was busy and noisy, but I was starting to itch again and had lost the mood to be around people.

Limped back down the stairs to my truck, picking up the four-lane south on Route 11 to Port Republic Road and home.

\* \* \*

It took another two days for the welts to lose their redness. I spent one of those days gingerly working out, a combination of tai chi chih and weights for the right arm, which had taken the brunt of the shotgun blast.

Actually, my backside had taken the brunt of it, but there don't seem to be any weights I could use to work those muscles in any meaningful way. And doing squat-thrusts just made the itch worse.

I guess sex might have been helpful, but as I was no longer on speaking terms with Cat and had no other likely prospects in the offing, I made do with just suffering.

Tammy Wynette once sang that it is hard to be a woman, and I will not begrudge her that. But being a man isn't always easy, either.

Concentrated on my workout.

Tai chi chih is a westernized form of the ancient martial art carried over to New Mexico by Justin Stone in the Seventies, and is now widely practiced in the US and other countries. It is similar to the more common tai chi chuan, but focuses less on the martial arts than on circulation, balance and the flow of qi, or chi as some call it. Qi is the life force, a kind of spiritual energy that exists in every living thing.

Control of qi is essential to harmony and to self-defense, and is used in combination with meditation and focus. Tai chi chih is an art built on nineteen movements and one pose, and my work for the healing on these two days was on the Cosmic Consciousness Pose.

Relaxed and centered, flexing the right knee, placing my left heel just above the right ankle. Hands in front of my face, with fingers and forearms parallel to the ground, viewing the world over my fingers.



Qi supporting my arms, breathing slowly, holding the pose for nearly ten minutes to let the calm and renewed energy move into my mind and body, then relaxing.

Showered in hot water, then cold, and went out to face the day.

In years past, as assignments for the Air Force Office of Special Investigations took me around the world, I had learned to love the taste of freshly-brewed coffees from different regions, and gained the habit of eating fresh fruit with a cup of good coffee in the mornings. So on this day of healing it was a bowl of blackberries with fresh cream and a Mexican organic coffee that had strong hints of chocolate. Then time to catch up on some television and reading.

Peaceful, easy day. Early to bed and early to rise isn't just a saying, it is a way of life in farm country. Only city people lay in bed after the sun is up.

Woke on Sunday with cable news, checking to see that the weather would again consist of clear skies, warm temperatures and high humidity. Basically the same forecast as every day since the Fourth of July. Another morning in the Valley, and I only watched for a half hour to catch the headlines.

Then another long, peaceful day, much of it on the hammock in the side yard, listening to the crickets of mid-August, feeling the brutal heat and sipping lemonade.

I take one day a week for a lazy day. I watch old movies, lay in the hammock, or go to

church. I am mostly United Methodist, with a touch of Buddhism.

People don't understand religion as part of the southern way of life, but then they do not understand Dixie, either.

The southern states are the heart and soul of America. More churches per square mile than in any other part of America. The land of barbeque, flatlands and highlands, moonshine and NASCAR. The South gave America its independence, through patriots like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. More presidents than any other region. Inventions like blood transfusions, the air conditioner, and the modem. Our Southern accent is a derivative of the languages of England and Scotland, especially the language of the Court of St. James. Our food is a fusion of the finest culinary traditions of Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa.

And yet, somehow, other regions of the US look down on the south as some haven of dumb, redneck hillbillies. They laugh at our twang, our mannerisms, our catfish wrestling and our culture of hunting and fishing.

We don't mind. It keeps them safely bottled up in places like Boston and Manhattan, where they are comfortable. And leave us alone in the peace and comfort of Dixie.

## Chapter 3

### John Mosby

The insanity at the rendezvous had to have been a double cross, someone who knew the dead couple was going to be there. The idea that the killings were a coincidence stretched the bounds of probability.

Working through how it had happened.

Assume the dead man and woman were the ones who had broken into the museum at the New Market Battlefield Museum, where the flag had been on loan, and stolen it.

Might not be true, but they were the ones who came to the exchange point.

This is Virginia, where the epic American confrontation called “the Civil War” began and ended. You can call it a civil war, but it was anything but civil. It was brother against brother for reasons misunderstood on both sides. Still misunderstood today.

Abolitionists, mainly in the North, believed it was about slavery, ignoring the complicated questions of economics, state’s

rights and a way of life they could not comprehend. Southerners believed it was about state's rights and their rights under the Constitution, setting aside the obscenity of slavery, an institution that even many of the leaders of the Confederacy had abhorred. Here in the valley, we had been trapped by both sets of beliefs, though when it finally came to war we stood to arms with our native Virginia. Robert E. Lee and Thomas Jonathan Jackson had hated the institution of slavery, but had fought for their homelands.

From the beauty of the mountains and the lazy flow of water down the Shenandoah, it is hard to believe that 150 years ago thousands of men had bled and died in just about every town and field in this valley.

Historians talk about Bull Run, and Gettysburg, and the burning of Atlanta.

But it was here that Stonewall Jackson had formed the Army of Northern Virginia, taking his headquarters in the northern part of the central valley at Winchester. And here, east of Harrisonburg, that two of the first critical battles took place.

Cross Keys. Port Republic.

The exchange point they had picked for me to ransom the flag had been at the intersection of Battlefield Road and Retreat Lane, on the site of the battle of Cross Keys. The dark SUV had gone through the fence and come to rest in the field below, on private land

near a little pond. Across the road from the corn fields of August.

It was a site less than five miles from my farmhouse.

Had they picked this site because they knew I would be the go-between?

No.

The site was already selected before I took the job.

Why that site?

The flag carried by the Gray Ghost, Colonel John S. Mosby. Cross Keys Battlefield. If they had anything in common, it wasn't obvious. And did it have something to do with the Battle of New Market, in which Mosby also had no part?

This was the work of someone who seriously knew their Civil War history, but the clues were hidden from me.

\* \* \*

The New Market Battlefield Museum occupies a stone building and acres of field with a farmhouse, offering the history of the battle and of the war itself. It is located just off Interstate 81, on a site famous in the valley for the courageous defense against Grant's plan to take the valley for the Union by force.

It happened late in the war, in the early summer of 1864, and was marked by the fact that the Union army was repulsed not by hardened troops alone but by 257 schoolboys,

cadets of the Virginia Military Institute, who had marched the 81 miles in four days to defend the Confederacy.

Ten students died that day. Another 48 were wounded. Every year, the cadets at VMI celebrate that four-day march, in which schoolboys grew to be heroes, even though many of them were exhausted and foot-weary.

Here at New Market, Virginia.

It had not helped, in the long run. Phil Sheridan had swept through the valley later that year, in what residents here still call “The Burning.” He destroyed or seized every crop, farm animal, farmhouse, mill and store in his path to deny the Confederacy any food or support, leaving more than 400 square miles of valley farmland uninhabitable.

I wanted to know how the flag had been stolen.

So early on Monday, I took the trek up Interstate 81, eighteen miles north of Harrisonburg to the Museum of the Civil War. Turned out to be a very nice place, filled with the history of the war here, the valley campaigns, and the lives of people caught up in its violence.

The only person available to talk to was a small, elderly man with bright eyes who wanted to be helpful but didn’t have much to offer about the theft itself.

“I’m not the director of the museum, you know. Our director got an offer from a larger

museum, and they are still looking for a replacement.”

Odds were it would not be this little man.

“We got the flag on loan, and it was part of a major exhibit for the museum over our annual re-enactment weekend.” Looked at me.

“You are familiar with our re-enactment, happens every year over the Fourth of July? After all, we’re one of the big battlefields, like Winchester and Manassas. This is the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Civil War, you know.”

Knew that.

Every Southern schoolboy knows that. We may not be able to name every president, and struggle with the state capitals, but we know the Civil War.

“We were just astounded when someone broke in and stole it.”

“So how was it done?”

Long sigh.

“We have an alarm system, but for some reason it failed to work that night. During the week, when no one expected, they simply bypassed the alarm system, walked in and took it.”

“What else was taken?”

He looked startled.

“Why nothing, actually. Just the flag.”

Curiouser and curiouser, as the Red Queen said to Alice. But perhaps there was nothing else to steal.

Said so.

“But there was. Ours is one of the best collections outside of Richmond.”

I'd insulted him.

Nodded sheepishly to make it better.

"We were mortified, of course. The Museum of the Confederacy, the big one in Richmond, had insisted that we take out an insurance policy for a quarter of a million dollars on the flag, and we did, but now our insurance company is threatening to cancel all of our policies. We are just beside ourselves."

I'm sure they were.

Flashback to the night in the field, and the couple in the SUV. These had not been crash-and-dash thieves.

The thieves had known alarm systems, and known the schedule of the museum staff.

Inside job, or had they staked it out?

What would they want with a flag of only minor historical significance that even the insurance company was willing to discount?

And why hold it for a several days and then try to sell it back to the insurance company? They went to too much trouble to steal it, and too much trouble to bring it back.

I was missing something.

\* \* \*

"Mosby was like many of the people of Virginia," said Doc, "He owned no slaves, and was vehemently against secession, but when war came he sided with his state against what he saw as a federal government that had grown too large and powerful. Enlisted as a private."



I have no idea where Doc gets his knowledge, but he has an encyclopedic mind and I have yet to catch him in a factual error.

We sat on the south verandah of my place, where I keep the grill. Dinner had been tuna steaks grilled in teriyaki sauce, served with fingerling Yukon Gold potatoes and rings of summer squash, all grilled to the point where they just started to blacken and washed down with a fine bottle of Niagara wine from the Horton Vineyards over the Blue Ridge in Orange County.

Doc was a neighbor who had first formed a bond with the Old Man. I suspect it was the bond of old war-horses, men who had known danger and difficulty, surviving both to eventually retire. Though it had been a question of generations. Doc could have been a son to the Old Man.

They'd spent many nights over the years when I was growing up, huddled around a fire down by the pond, listening to the Pittsburgh Pirates on the radio, drinking beer and swapping stories.

When I was a teen, Doc had swindled me out of just about every dollar I earned, cheating me at cards with bottom deals and stacked decks, until the Old Man made him stop it and instead teach me how to play poker and how to spot the cheats.

He was nearly 25 years my senior, but we were friends. A time or two, we had sat by

the fire together, after I had gone away and served my years in places around the world.

With a case that made no sense, I had turned first to him.

His wife of nearly thirty years, Mary, had died four years ago, leaving him rattling around his big old house with little to do but ponder retirement and drink the moonshine I suspect he makes himself in a grove of trees up behind the house.

He'd gotten drifty in those four years, the purpose gone out of his life. Neglected to shave some days. Drank too much and slept too little. Left the rat-tail at the back of his head loose and unbraided.

Until Jeannie Dovel fell into his life.

In the seven months they had known each other, they were almost never apart.

She called him Arthur. No one else called him by his given name, not even his former wife, but somehow he did not seem to mind.

"So," I said, swirling the last of the sweetish wine in my glass. I normally prefer the drier wines, like a sauvignon or claret, but this hit the spot with the tuna.

"What makes this battle flag, symbol of a relatively small band of guerilla fighters, important enough that someone would steal it, Doc?"

"Who knows? Don't get me wrong, Mosby was very impressive. It was Mosby who

was tasked with stealing food, medicine and money from the Union to send to the Confederacy.”

“And he was crafty, Jack. For months they tried to find how he disappeared so easily up in the northern part of Virginia. It was why they called him a ghost. He could be there one moment, with twenty or more men. Then he was gone, like they had become fog.

One day, when the Yanks were tearing down a farmer’s barn in the north, a rider and his horse fell through a trap door in the floor of the barn and discovered that Mosby had used one of the limestone caves that dot the Blue Ridge Mountains as a stable. They found a small entrance, barely big enough to get a horse through, and behind it stalls and food. And campfires for his men. Crafty.”

“Still, it may not be the flag itself. It’s the symbolism involved. Mosby was a legend, and it could be that his battle flag has personal significance. After all, Mosby survived the war and was a big political figure afterward in the Republican party. Might be someone connected to his later life. Or someone hooked on the legend.”

“So we are looking for a history professor? Not likely, Doc.”

Shook his head.

“Maybe just someone who feels that connection. Or a collector. You know there are people throughout the South who still believe

that they should have the right, given under the Constitution, to secede from the Union.”

“Doc, that’s crazy. No state is going to secede from the Union in this day and age. The federal government wouldn’t allow it. Isn’t that what the Civil War was all about?”

Doc snorted.

“The war of aggression against the southern states,” he said, “only proved that they could force us to stay in the Union 150 years ago. The rest of the matter is still up for discussion.”

“Save your Dixie Cups, the South will rise again?”

“Don’t laugh, Jack. The Constitution of the United States never gave the federal government the right of sovereignty over the states. And as badly managed as the government is today, a lot of states are looking at their hole cards and wondering if they should secede.”

“It’s no different anywhere else,” said Doc. “Up in Canada, the Quebecoise movement is trying to take the province of Quebec away for themselves. Scotland fought to become semi-independent of England. And Texas had a bill to secede introduced in its legislature just this year. So did South Carolina.”

“This flag could be a strong rallying point for people who want to bring the secession movement up again. A symbol that would be worth much more than its value as an artifact.”

“To who? Some militia groups? The Daughters of the Confederacy? A little too far-fetched for me, Doc.”

“A lot less crazy than you think, Jack. They don’t talk about it much, and they are not quite organized into a formal society, but there are people right here in the valley who have never forgotten The Cause.”

“Who?”

“Ever hear of the Knights of the Golden Circle?”

In grade school, we used to shoot baskets over behind the school in Port Republic, a brick structure that is now a Slavic Christian Church, then wander through the woods for an hour or two until it was time to get home for supper.

In the woods after school we would talk about the War, and the battles that were fought in the fields and crossroads all around us.

Archie Nolen, the one we called Shifty all the way through school because his eyes always moved back and forth, said his great-grand-daddy was a Knight, and was forever talking about the grand and glorious cause of the South. Shifty is the president of some Bible college down in South Carolina these days, and for all I know is still a believer in The Cause.

“Knights of the Golden Circle. Doc, you need to cut back on your consumption of moonshine. They died out a hundred and fifty years ago, right after Jeff Davis left Richmond.”

“There was a lot more to the Knights of the Golden Circle than most people know, just

like there is a lot more to the Ku Klux Klan than a bunch of idiots running around wearing sheets and burning crosses.”

The Klan. An organization of racists, anti-Catholics, anti-Semites and terrorists who had managed to draw in a surprising number of otherwise sane and upstanding citizens with their promises to protect Southern families from a world of rapid change and upheaval. I had not known the KKK in the old days, when they enjoyed a reputation that was almost clean, if you ignored the cross burnings and the hangings.

But I had known that the Old Man hated the Klanners with every bone in his body. While not particularly fond of people of color, he had nonetheless stood for their rights, including support in 1950 when the University of Virginia was integrated. He stood on the steps in his best suit, glaring at the protesters when blacks first entered the University, and took some pleasure as Gregory Swanson became the first black man to win a law degree from UVA.

The Knights of the Golden Circle were different, though the Klanners tried to make use of their good name. The “Ku Klux” part of their name came from the Greek meaning “Circle,” and they called themselves Knights.

The KGC were a group of businessmen who were also Confederate sympathizers, but as best I knew they had been disbanded before the Civil War had even ended. Jesse James was said

to have been KGC, and to have robbed stagecoaches later in order to help fund the return of the Confederacy. But that was long, long ago, out west.

Gray Ghosts and Confederate sympathizers were fine and good for discussion on a summer night, but I could still feel the dull, aching pain of the shotgun blasts in my chest and back.

With a full stomach, a nice glass of wine and the long day past, I was starting to feel myself drift away.

Worse yet, the scars over where the pellets had hit were no longer painful. They itched. Like a thousand demons. I had taken one of the pain pills after dinner to ease the symptoms, but all it did was make me drowsy.

Jeannie suddenly stood up.

“Well, I am ready to go home.

Goodnight, Jack. Doc, you old rebel, take me home and put me to bed.”

Bless her heart.

\* \* \*

I cleaned up the glasses and took them to the kitchen. Then to bed, the TV on the wall tuned to Fox News and the volume turned low in the background.

I lay on top of the quilt, wrapped around a pillow, listening to the sounds of the night and breathing the warm, humid air of the central valley as I drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 4

# Loose End

For the ten years I served in the Air Force, I was a part of the massive federal law enforcement machine. While the Office of Special Investigations didn't carry the same cachet as the FBI or one of the other alphabet agencies, it did and still does handle cases ranging from fraud investigations and national security work to drug interdiction.

The point is that I understand the feds, and while I'm not crazy about some of their tactics I do understand how they work. And maybe how they think.

So I was neither surprised nor shocked when two of them showed up on my doorstep at precisely 8:30 on Tuesday morning. Wondered how long they sat behind the trees at the end of my lane before pulling up the driveway to arrive precisely at that time.

Black suits. White shirts. Blue ties. Hair neither long nor short. Dark sunglasses. Flat affect.



“Mr. MacLeod?”

Nodded.

“My name is Special Agent Andrew McCoy of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Do you mind if we talk to you for a few minutes?”

Curiouser and curiouser. McCoy knew perfectly well who I was, and I knew him. We’d gotten entangled in a case of ATM robberies a while back that left the Bureau looking good but required McCoy to bend a few rules to make it that way.

“Agent McCoy.”

Two can play that game, if we both know what the game is. All I knew was that McCoy either had short-term memory loss or was pretending not to know me.

Looked at the other man, who was amazingly nondescript. Not tall, not short. Hair a medium brown, neither long nor short. You could walk past him a dozen times and never notice him, which marked him for a federal spook of some kind.

\* \* \*

I took them back to the kitchen, where the big old farmhouse windows keep it cool in the August heat. And where they would not see the files Michael Freed had given me to work on.

None of their business.

Puttered around, mixing my own blend of mild Kona and stronger coffees, grinding them in the old, rough country kitchen grinder. Dropped the grounds into the French press with a teaspoon of cinnamon, poured the hot water in and left it to steep. Turned and gave them my attention.

They looked unhappy. Perhaps because I had made them take their shoes off at the door. Maw-Maw, the grandmother who had raised me in this old house, was adamant about the rules. And though she had passed many years ago, the rules stayed unchanged. You didn't track dirt into her house.

It's a rule, but also a great equalizer. It is amazing how many pompous jerks can't function when they are left in their socks. Perhaps why the Japanese used to also demand that shoes be left at the door.

Poured coffee and settled back in a chair.

"Mr. MacLeod, you seem to be involved in a situation that is very sensitive. A matter related to national security."

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"You can call me Mr. Smith."

I wanted so badly to groan, but settled for a quick glance at McCoy, who actually had the good manners to wince.

"Alright, Mr. Smith. What situation would that be?"

Perfect innocence. People dead in the moonlight.

If he was annoyed, he did not show it. And the little corner in my mind that is supposed to detect stuff suddenly started paying attention to him.

Professional.

“The man who was killed in the truck where you were shot was working for us.”

“Who’s us?”

“Let’s just say we are an agency of the federal government.”

Put a confused look on my face.

“The federal government is stealing confederate flags for ransom? Boy, the budget must really be in bad shape.”

He ignored me, kept talking.

“That was a very small part of something much larger, and we need your help in a couple of areas. First, we need you to stay out of any further involvement.”

“No problem. I work for the company, and they have moved me to other cases. They made it pretty clear that they have no further interest in this.”

That part, at least, was the truth.

Smith looked at McCoy, just a little side glance that told me that Michael Freed or his company had gotten one of those friendly little calls to ask them to back off.

Explained why Freed had been convoluted in his conversation with me. They had told him to lay off, but he wasn’t happy about it.

“Second, I need to know if you saw anything that night that could help us. We have lost one of our own, and we’d like to finish the job he started as quickly and quietly as possible.”

“To be honest, Mr. Smith, I don’t remember much about that night. I saw them sitting dead in the SUV, and then I was attacked. I don’t have much of a memory after that.”

He nodded. Seemed to weigh the thought for a moment.

“Mr. MacLeod,” said the FBI’s McCoy, “The dead man was working under deep cover on a case, and we need to close that case out. If you can remember anything, I would ask you to contact me at the Charlottesville office of the FBI.”

Nodded.

He was communicating to me, and I got it.

“And equally important, we need to be able to work this case with the minimum of interference,” said Smith. “If you have some idea of pursuing this, I need to know it now.”

“No sir. I’ve had a belly full of this thing, and no one is paying me to look into it any further. You can count on me. I have other work to do, and have no interest in your situation.”

\* \* \*

The black SUV rolled down the driveway, and I sat in my office and watched.

It was a moral dilemma for me.

The Old Man had two ways of punishing me for transgressions. Once, and only once, I incurred his wrath when I closed the door on the chicken coop so I could chase the hens around the yard for fun. Then wandered off in search of other interesting things to do. Leaving the door closed, so that when darkness fell the chickens had no place to go. And in the manner of chickens, probably the most stupid animals on earth, they ran in circles until they died of fright.

That night, in my eighth year of life, I got a beating with The Old Man's belt. Never happened again. Didn't need to. One look from those hard blue eyes was enough to make me quake in my shoes. Well into my thirties.

Maw-Maw was different. Her looks were softer, almost wistful, when I disappointed her. She only had one punishment, and that was that if you lied she would wash your mouth out with soap. I never saw her do it to anyone but me, and then only twicet in my life.

As I watched them roll down the driveway, I could taste the soap. Even if I didn't actually have to eat it this time, Maw-Maw had made me do it a few times, and that taste stays with you for a lifetime, like the sweetness of your first kiss or that first hard sip of moonshine.

Was tempted to pour a shot of Wild Turkey 101 to wash out the taste, but the truth

was that I deserved the soap. Said a silent  
apology to my grandmother.

Stay out of this?

When pigs fly.

Not without my flag and money back.

\* \* \*

Recovery from a wound is a matter of  
both body and soul. I had never been shot  
before, but I once took a knife across the  
abdomen that laid me up for weeks with a nasty  
gash that still casts a thin white line that I try not  
to show anyone.

I ended up in the hospital at Yokota Air  
Base, a two-story building in the western part of  
Tokyo. My nurse had been Japanese, a friendly  
woman named Norimoto whose Buddhist faith  
intrigued me in those weeks I lay in bed  
recovering.

When I got out of the hospital I was put  
on three months recuperation at home, which  
since I had no home in Asia meant a room at the  
Bachelor Officers Quarters in Yokota. Out of  
boredom I sought out a Buddhist temple and  
immersed myself in its teachings. That turned  
into a study of tai chi, the combination of  
exercise, spiritualism and the martial arts. And  
meditation.

Now I fell back on the routine. The  
stitches had been cut away, the welts healed  
over. I spent a week working in tai chi chuan  
and meditation, the scent of incense filling the

house even with the windows open for the breeze.

The following Tuesday afternoon, the Shenandoah Valley and much of the rest of the state was hit by an earthquake. 5.9 on the scale, the biggest in the state's recent history. I had felt a tremor in the early morning hours the Friday before, and had wondered. I had experienced them often in Japan and Alaska, and once in the south of Thailand, but never here at home. The old farmhouse shook the tiniest bit on Friday.

Forgot about it until the big one hit over to the east of us that Tuesday.

While every state has a fault line or two, I had never remembered an earthquake of any size here in Port Republic. But this one shook for a good 45 seconds, and in the following days we felt another dozen or more aftershocks.

No one was killed, the damage was minimal, and I paid it little attention as I focused on healing.

Often, Doc and Jeannie would come by. Doc would sit quietly in a corner of my workout room while Jeannie puttered in the kitchen making something or other. He watched as I pushed through the forms and the exercises, sweat pouring from me, punishing muscle and mind until I was exhausted.

Now it was Thursday, and after my workout Doc walked downstairs and headed back home to give me time to go to work.

Promised to come back in the late afternoon for dinner.

Showered in water as hot as I could stand it, and then as cold as I could take it. In my house, that is pretty cold – 55 degrees, as it comes fresh out of the ground from my well.

Shaved.

Made coffee, going through the motions as my body settled down from the workout. It was mid-morning when I finished breakfast and went into my office to dive into the two files Michael Freed had given me.

There truly is nothing new under the sun when it comes to insurance fraud. The general idea is that insurance is designed to pay for damage or loss, and to defraud the company you either have to fake the loss or exaggerate the damage. Most fraud cases are turned over pretty easily – the parties have a history of similar frauds, or they screw up the details so that the investigators catch on quickly.

The first case was textbook. A grocery store over near Williamsburg had a little old lady slip on a wet floor and damage her hip. She claimed to be in severe pain with a broken hip, and likely she was. The insurer wanted to settle quietly and in a lump sum to avoid a drawn out mess and the specter of having to care for the little old lady for the rest of her days.

It could have been a real accident, or the standard Slip and Sue, a ruse just about as old as Doc was. I mean, she could have actually fallen, and for all I know she was in pain. But



when times get tough, as they were in this economy, you tend to see an up-tick in the amount of fraud. It was just as likely this was a little old lady who had lost her life savings in the double-dip recession, and was looking for a quick way to supplement her retirement and Medicare. So I would need to drive over to Williamsburg to look over the store and the old lady.

Call it four hours each way, if the traffic was good.

The second case was about half the distance away, north toward Washington, DC, in the fine city of Manassas. Manassas is a sprawling mess that will soon be just another suburb to the big city, though Southerners remember it as the site of two major battles in which the Union was soundly whipped.

Just an hour or so west of Washington by horse and carriage, the north and south had met there for the first time in July of 1861. Both sides had fervently believed that the war, begun in April of that year with the siege of Fort Sumter in South Carolina, would be decided quickly in a single battle, and that everything would then be settled.

Everyone shake hands and go home, the matter done.

Rich folks from DC had loaded up their wagons with family and picnic lunch to go watch the south get their comeuppance. They even brought their servants, so as not to be

inconvenienced while they watched the war.  
And had fled in horror as the north got routed.

For the Union, which named battles after the nearest geographic feature, they called this battle, and the one that followed at the same site in 1862, the battles of Bull Run. In the south, we call them the Battles of Manassas, for the town nearest the killing grounds.

In the heat of the first battle of 1861, the Confederate lines began to buckle under the press of the Union forces. A desperate General Barnard Bee rallied his troops to stand firm against the Union troops by pointing to a small band of soldiers holding back the Yankees almost single-handed. "There is Jackson standing like a stone wall," he called out, and the troops responded. The name for Thomas Jonathan Jackson stuck.

My second case was not as noble as the battle. A dentist had performed extensive dental work for some children in a poor family, capping their teeth with metal. The mother had sued for malpractice, claiming the work did not need to be done. It was a strange case, because people with little money often had poor dental health. Heck, in many parts of the valley it is not unusual to see people who have only one or two teeth left, and no dentures.

If the doctor had, as alleged, helped the kids out by capping bad teeth, he did not deserve to be sued.

Pondered over both cases, trying to decide which to tackle first and doing cursory

online research. The old lady did not have a FaceBook page, but the dental case mother did. A not unattractive but plumpish woman in her mid-thirties, named Carol Whist. The pictures made her look older than her listed age, but the camera often adds ten pounds and five years to anyone. Not married, or no man in the pictures anyway.

\* \* \*

In the late afternoon, Doc and Jeannie showed up. Doc and I went out to the verandah to give Jeannie command of the kitchen.

I'm a pretty fair cook, but even I am smart enough not to challenge a southern woman when it comes to being in charge of the kitchen.

Even my own kitchen.

Though it was still afternoon, this meal was dinner, not lunch.

"Lunch" was a foreign word to us when I grew up in the Shenandoah Valley. At home we had dinner at noontime and supper in the evening. Supper was a small meal, mostly just bread and milk, with perhaps some bologna and cheese.

Bologna came wrapped in cloth, and had a flavor that was unlike any food on this planet. You would not know that from what they sell as bologna today, a tasteless, chemically-laden product you can barely choke down in a sandwich. Ask anyone in the Valley, and they

will tell you that life started to go to hell in a hand basket when the government made them start adding chemicals to cloth bologna.

Days of my youth.

Breakfast was a big meal, made early, and designed to be eaten when you got done with morning chores, before the walk to school. Dinner was a big meal on a farm, too, rich with meat and vegetables and mashed potatoes, followed by a cobbler or pie served with rich cream from your own cows. I was not a working hand on the farm in those days, so instead of this feast I went to school and got cardboard pizza and fish sticks at a meal they called “lunch” and we called “barf.” These days, only on Sundays can a young country boy get a decent dinner.

In my school days, we believed that the school lunches mandated by the US Department of Education in Washington were so bad that this alone was cause to secede from the Union. I hear they are little better today.

Dinner this day was fine southern fried chicken, fried in lard and then baked with a bit of chicken broth in a cast-iron skillet until it was tender and moist with a crispy skin. Jeannie had hand mashed the potatoes and snapped fresh garden green beans to cook slowly with pieces of fat back and a touch of cider vinegar.

Washed down with sweet tea, that nectar that exists only in the south and could never be understood north of the Mason-Dixon, where

they will give you something called cold tea and pretend it is the same thing.

Afterward we moved to the verandah. In younger couples, men might be allowed to help with the dishes, even in the South.

Jeannie would not hear of it.

Took her only a few minutes and she joined us, with a tray bearing fresh lemonade, made in the southern way with simple sugar. In some parts of the south, they add a touch of bourbon to it, but I have always preferred it without the additional hard taste of liquor.

Sipped at our drinks in the waning heat of the afternoon, watching the sunlight turning purple on the fields below us. As it did most every afternoon, there was a cool, soft breeze from the south that kept the heat from being unbearable.

“Sure is hot,” said Jeannie.

“Supposed to stay this way all week,”

Doc agreed.

“Look, if I am now consigned to sitting on the front porch to talk about the weather with the old folks, just kill me now and get it over with, Doc.”

He smiled.

“Really. No need to get grouchy about it.”

“There is a hurricane coming,” said Jeannie.

“Did your tarot cards tell you that?” I asked skeptically.

“No, the National Weather Service. Supposed to hit Saturday, and could come right up the valley.”

We all remembered 1985, when the South River had overflowed and much of the Valley was under water. Bridges washed out, people died, and it took weeks to clean up. There had been another one in 2004 that kept us without electric for days on end. And without gasoline. When the power is off, there is no way to pump gas.

That’s why Doc and I both keep our own gas reserves, like farms used to do decades ago. And small generators in the garage. And a good supply of food and water tucked away.

I had not been watching the news this week, since the earthquake.

“We just had the biggest quake in recorded history, and now a hurricane. What the heck is going on?”

Doc shrugged.

“Just weather. I’m not ready to start predicting the End of Days, like the Bible says.”

As night finally began to close in Jeannie indicated she was getting chilled, and we moved back into the kitchen.

We settled in, and Doc and Jeannie exchanged glances.

“Jack, you can’t do this thing alone,” Doc said.

Didn’t answer.

“I’ve been talking to Jeff Mason, and we think we both should go with you.”

Mason was a neighbor, a country man even older than Doc who nonetheless had seen three wars and had hunted the mountains of our valley land for most of his seventy-some years. He also was the produce man at the Food Lion over on US 33, one of the local byways. Without Jeff, I might never have venison or the right cukes for my famous bread-and-butter pickles.

“I don’t even know how I am going to do this, Doc. Or whether it will come to gun work. How about if I scout it out a bit, and then let you guys know?”

He shook his head.

“Bet a lot of guys would be fooled by that. You’re going hunting, and Jeff and I are coming along.”

But as I looked up at him a shadow moved across the window, and it was all that I could do to push Doc over in the wooden kitchen chair as the shotgun blast ripped through the window and shattered the chair I had been sitting in.

Saw Jeannie rolling out of her chair and Doc struggling to reach her as the bearded, leering face appeared where the window had been and raised the shotgun again.

But I had been worried something might happen, and as the barrels rose the Glock 9mm slid into my hand and I put a double tap into him just below the shotgun, punching him backward into the yard.

A second face appeared in the window and I shifted easily to the left and double-tapped the white face that showed in the kitchen light.

Kitchen filled with too much light, and I rolled to the wall and snapped the switch down to kill the overhead fixture.

Only the moonlight now, which was still too much light for me.

Heard Doc moving across the floor, and I rose to my feet and out the back door, rolling to my right, seeking targets.

Two of them down. The first one was the ugly, bearded man who had shot-gunned me at the ransom sight, wheezing for breath and trying to get the shotgun up to take another shot. Kicked it out of his hands and moved to the second man.

Whoever he might have been, I would not recognize him. My first shot had taken him through the right eye, turning his head so that the second shattered most of his face. Patted him down. No wallet, no papers. No clues from his dress of blue jeans and a tee shirt. His build marked him for a younger man, as did the crude tattoos on both arms. But that and his longish hair were all I could go by.

Doc had moved to the other man's side and was probing his wounds.

"He might have a chance, if we call the squad now."

"Like hell. I'm going to sit and watch him bleed to death if I don't get some answers."



Doc looked at me hard, but sat back on his haunches and waited for me.

“Listen to me, laughing boy,” I said to the bearded man.

His eyes opened, but they were unfocused and I knew Doc was wrong. This guy was dying in my hands. Calling the squad would make no difference at all.

Slapped him, hard.

“Who sent you?”

Hesitation, and I pulled him up into a sitting position.

“Make your peace before you die, boy. Give me that name,” I rasped.

“Emerson. Mr. Emerson.”

Wheezing last breath.

Another dead in the moonlight.

\* \* \*

I had no idea who this Emerson was. But the kid had put a “Mr.” in front of the name, which meant it should be a name I knew.

Left the two of them in the back yard and stepped into the kitchen, surprised to find that Jeannie had swept up the broken glass and restored the table to order. She also knew what we needed – there were small tumblers of peach shine and Wild Turkey 101 poured, no need for the niceties of ice or water.

Amazingly, the stained glass light fixture over the table had suffered no damage. I had brought it home for Maw-Maw on my first leave

after Air Force Officer Candidate School at Maxwell AFB in Alabama, and it had hung in the kitchen ever since.

If he had broken it, I would have gone out and killed the little sonuvabitch again.

Doc came in and sat with us.

Felt the warm glow of fire as the bourbon slid down my throat. Doc and I sipped while we looked into our souls without speaking.

Doc finally broke the silence.

“You are a hard man.”

“Didn’t mean to be, but I needed that name.”

We sat in silence, sipping the liquor.

“Had to know who sent them.”

“You’re not as hard as your grand-daddy. That man could make a cow fall over dead just by staring at it.”

I smiled. He likely could have.

The Old Man was one of the original agents for the OSI in World War Two, sent behind the lines in occupied Europe to wreak havoc with the Nazis. Stayed on for the early days of the CIA, retiring here to his family’s farm in the mid-Sixties. I have never met a more caring man, but never one so hard, either.

Doc was a hard man in his own right. He’d slogged through the paddies and waterways of Vietnam as a Navy SEAL, and had done his share of both saving lives and taking them.

People who have done that kind of work don't much talk about their kills.

I've not killed many men, and never without nightmares afterward. And even though this one had tried to kill me, I felt my hands start to shake.

Doc noticed.

Poured me another shot.

"Emerson," he said. "This undercover federal guy steals the flag, for some reason we don't know. When he tries to sell it back to you, two guys who work for someone named Emerson kill him and the woman, and bushwhack you."

"We don't know what the feds were working on, and we don't know who the woman was. But we do know that they took the money and the flag, and that Emerson must have both of them now."

Sat back, patting all of his pockets in search of the cigarettes he had not carried in years. Then leaned forward.

"They were supposed to kill you that night, Jack. And likely set it up so that you would be blamed for killing the man and woman. Only you don't die, and you killed one of his guys and wounded another."

"So he sends these two guys to tie up the loose end."

We sat quietly for a while, sipping.

"We have three of his guys, dead. He has your money and your flag," Doc summarized.

“So what do you do now, Jack?” Jeannie entered the conversation for the first time since dinner.

“Go get them back.”

“You plan to just walk up to the front door and ask him to give them back to you?”

“I’ll be polite,” I said, lying through my teeth.

## Chapter 5

# Justice

If this were the movies, I would have slept like a baby, secure in the knowledge that I was in the right. But in real life, it is different.

Ask any cop. He or she will tell you that you remember every single person you draw on, and every one you kill. Their faces, their eyes, the sick feeling in your soul when they die. I suppose if you didn't, you shouldn't carry a gun in the first place.

This night, I sat in my home office, staring in the late August moonlight at the mountains and sipping bourbon and branch water late into the night. Avoiding the dreams I knew would come. Avoiding the horrible, regretful feeling you get when you take another's life.

I don't ever get drunk. I like my alcohol as well as any country boy, but I do not enjoy the feeling of being drunk, or the fact that I can sometimes be a complete ass when I pass my

limit. Do not like being dehydrated and sick the next morning.

And I only drink for pleasure and to be social. You can't drink away bad memories or old hurts, but that lesson seemed lost on me tonight.

Broke my own rule.

Very tired and slightly drunk, I went to bed.

Could not escape the dreams.

\* \* \*

Friday I woke late, and stumbled out of bed and up the stairs to work out, just to escape the doldrums of the night. Twenty minutes of tai chi, then another 20 of meditation.

Whatever their powers of spiritual nourishment, neither whiskey nor water had much value as food. So I went down to the kitchen with a raging hunger and hands still a little shaky from the adrenaline that had coursed through my system for most of the night.

This morning I added a tablespoon of unrefined brown sugar to my coffee, and ate several peaches that had come into season this month from the trees on the south edge of my property. Needed both for their sugar, to restore the depleted energy in my system. Stood and ate them at the kitchen counter, then took a second cup of coffee and headed down the hall to my home office.

I keep a real office over in Harrisonburg,  
but had not been there for a few weeks.

Note to self. Go to the office.

No big deal, since there was no one  
waiting for me there.

Needed to know more about Emerson.

Fired up my new desktop computer and  
began the search for his name.

The news was full of Hurricane Irene,  
the path of the storm tracking up the east coast.  
If it turned the least bit to the west, we would  
have a time of it. But I couldn't help believing  
that they were making a mountain out of a mole  
hill.

Keep focused.

Emerson. It was a slow search, because I  
had no idea where to look. Started in the five  
counties of the central Shenandoah Valley, on  
the theory that the people I had been tangled up  
with would not have bothered to drive hundreds  
of miles if this was not about the central valley.

No luck.

So I delved into adjacent counties in  
every direction. It took a while, but I found a  
likely candidate. A big fish over in Rockbridge  
County to the south, near the mountain town of  
Goshen, Virginia.

There wasn't much, but by all accounts  
James Tyree Emerson owned thousands of acres  
of prime farm land around the small town of  
Goshen, population less than 500 on a good day.  
Google Earth brought up a nice satellite view of

his home, a big old farmhouse surrounded by nearly a dozen barns and out-buildings.

Nothing to do but take my own look-see at the place. So I drove nearly an hour to sit in the woods high up above Goshen, overlooking his farm.

I had not wanted to do this so quickly. In case the feds were watching me to see what I might do, I had wanted to work the two insurance fraud cases first. But if they were watching, they would have already witnessed last night's gun work.

Or seen Doc and Jeff Mason hauling the bodies away this morning.

\* \* \*

Cradled the Winchester .44 Magnum in my hands, looking down at the main house through the scope with the sun at my back to the west. You never want to use the kind of scope they put on a hunting rifle with the sun in front of you, because the sun will shine off the lens and tip people to the faced that they are being looked at.

Goshen is a little mountain town over by the West Virginia border, where the Maury River runs past Lake Merriweather, tall Appalachian country broken by sweeping meadows of hay and cattle.

It is a place of rare beauty, with the sun shining down on the sparkling fresh waters as



they cut through the hills on their way to join the James River to the south.

His was a big house, white in color, with fences running in every direction, also white. Must have cost a fortune to maintain, but I supposed Emerson could afford it. His family, from what I had read, had played a major role in Virginia politics since before the Revolutionary War. They were cousins to Martha Eustace Washington, and one of his direct forebears had served in the House of Delegates with Patrick Henry. Another rode with Turner Ashby, the dashing Black Knight of the Confederacy, who died on the first day of the Battle of Cross Keys at the end of Jackson's Valley Campaign.

There was a lot of traffic on this hot, sunny morning. I could see the lines of cars over on US 39, heading into West Virginia. On the Emerson estate, there were collections of trucks and All-Terrain Vehicles coming and going as workers fed stock and checked the crops.

Lots of new buildings not shown on the satellite pictures.

Had planned to watch for the entire day, because there seemed to be a lot of people moving about. Wanted to get an idea about security, travel patterns and the like.

But as the sun began to pass behind me to the west, realized I had to get a closer look. Need to see his face, take the measure of the man.

Hiked back to my truck, put the rifle away behind the back seat and took the winding country road down to his farmhouse.

Surprised myself by keeping my promise to Jeannie Dovel.

I knocked politely.

Waited on the wide verandah. Several of what I assumed were farm hands stopped their work to watch me. Curious, because few farmers I know hire people to just stand around and gawk. And stranger yet, because they were dressed alike in pants and bloused shirts of a light gray color. Paramilitary.

It took a few minutes, but then the door was opened by a young woman dressed in black and white like some kind of French maid, who asked my business. I gave her one of my phony business cards, the one that proclaims me to be a vice president of the First Bank of Harrisonburg.

For some reason, it is not against the law to impersonate a banker.

A moment later I was in his study, or library, or whatever it is that wealthy people call the room where they leave uninvited guests to cool their heels until they are sufficiently in awe of how important the person is that they are meeting.

I'd spent my share of waiting in this game, usually in the little admin space outside of the office of some Air Force General or another, and I simply sat and looked the room over. There were a number of oil paintings of what I assumed were relatives, in uniforms and

suits. Lots of men in uniforms, including a large one of a Confederate officer with his left hand on an upright sword, dark eyes gleaming.

Dark oak wood for library shelves lined with books.

He walked into the room, a big man with silver hair and the ramrod stance of someone who might once have been military. But he had gone to fat, with flabby jowls and hard, unfriendly eyes that made him look vaguely like a root hog.

“Mr. Stevens?”

I nodded.

“I am a little confused. I do not bank with um...First Bank, and have no interest in changing from my present bank. So what is your business here?”

He made an effort to smile, in a friendly enough fashion, but there was nothing smiling in his eyes. They looked like black aggies, and were aimed directly at me.

“It’s really nothing, Mr. Emerson. It just that I run the anti-fraud operations for the bank, and there was a transaction that...”

If I had not spent so many years doing interrogations, I would have missed it, so quickly did it pass. Just that shift in the eyes, the smile faltering before he brought it back under control.

The fake smile back into place.

“Fraud? That sounds serious.” He turned toward the bar along the wall under the painting of an old guy sitting with his sword. Opened a

hand toward the bar in invitation, but I shook my head.

Being polite.

“Not involving you, sir. No, by all means. But it may have to do with one of the companies you buy supplies from. Again, not related to you, but there may be some false credit card charges involved, and we need to talk to your accountant to get a look at a couple of transactions.”

Couldn’t tell what he felt because his back was still toward me.

He poured a small splash of bourbon over ice from a decanter, no way to tell what brand but I bet it was top shelf. He poured in a tablespoon or so of water and took a long sip before he answered.

“So why are you here? If it has nothing to do with me. My time is valuable, and I don’t see any reason to waste it.”

I have never met an honest man whose time is too valuable to talk to an investigator. Only stupid criminals say things like that.

“Your accountant, sir. We didn’t want to talk to him without your permission.”

Stood, sipping his drink.

Stalling.

Finally, he looked at the card, tossed it on an end table, and walked toward the door. Stopped in the doorway.

Didn’t even turn around.

“I don’t think so.”

Walked out.

\* \* \*

“So the guy was a Federal agent working on some federal case related to a guy named Emerson. Who was the girl?”

Special Agent In Charge Andrew McCoy of the Charlottesville office of the FBI didn’t actually groan, but he did make a face and looked away from me toward his window. It wasn’t much of a view, but I have no reason to gripe about that – my own office has a less-than-perfect view, too.

“You said you were out of this, MacLeod. Why not just keep it that way?”

“Emerson sent two guys to kill me.”

“They weren’t there to kill you, they just happened to be there when you brought the ransom.”

“Not those guys. Two he sent to my house last night. He apparently thought I was an annoying detail.”

He looked at me for a long minute.

“You have information?”

“Not much,” I lied.

“You have bodies this time?”

“No.”

Not a lie. Doc and Jeff Mason, my neighbor and friendly grocer, had hauled the bodies away before dawn. I had no idea where they were.

“MacLeod, I can’t help you. All I know is that James Emerson is some cheap politician

in a rural mountain county. In this part of the world, these big-fish-in-a-little-pond guys are a dime a dozen, and not one of them is worth spit.”

“He’s apparently got some sort of militia group that has the attention of the ATF, but no one can figure out why he would need a small army, or what he is up to. Other than that, I know nothing about this.”

“Who was the girl?”

McCoy actually sighed this time.

“Her name was Linda Wills. We don’t know much about her, either, except that she had a doctoral degree in history. Her dissertation was on the last meeting of the Confederate Cabinet in 1865, held by President Jefferson Davis after he fled Virginia to a farmhouse in Georgia.”

“What’s that got to do with any of this?”

“Beats me,” said McCoy.

“So we don’t know what she was doing with Emerson. And I’m betting that ATF isn’t telling you what their guy was doing with Emerson.”

He nodded. Rueful look.

“They have not been inclined to share information,” he admitted. “But none of this, still, involves you. You should simply go home. We’ll put a couple of people to watch over you for a while and see what it takes for the ATF guys to run their operation.”

Sat for a long time watching me.

“You’re not going to do that, are you?”

Not hardly.

“So what, you just walk up to Emerson and ask him for your precious flag back?”

Nodded.

“I’ll be polite,” I repeated.

“Look, MacLeod, whatever dealings we may have had in the past, I can’t have you screwing up the work of another agency out of some over-developed sense of revenge.”

“They tried to kill Doc and Jeannie, too.”

I don’t know what the connection is between Doc and McCoy, but his lips grew thin. Then he nodded.

“Short of jailing you while we investigate this mess, I can’t stop you. But you’re not on your own, Rambo. I want you to clear everything you do with me, and make sure you tell me everything you know so I can liaise properly with the ATF.”

Liaise?

Why were people around me suddenly talking like this was a Scrabble game?

“I promise,” I said. But I had to reach up and touch my nose just to make sure it was not growing.

\* \* \*

Doc’s house is a mile plus a tad away from mine, sitting high on a hill just off Port Republic Road in Rockingham County.

It’s a fine old farmhouse built just after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, with a front of stone

in shades of blue and gray. It is easily one of the most beautiful houses in the county, though trees hide it from the road so that you might never even know it was there.

We were sitting at the kitchen table, and as always Doc had small shots of moonshine, ice cold from the freezer. Moonshine is a tradition in the Shenandoah Valley, and if the federal government and their Revenuers were smart they would simply legalize the home production of shine for personal consumption, the way they have wine and beer.

Our government, however, is not known for making wise or even obvious decisions about matters of alcohol. I know, because my forbears from middle Pennsylvania had fought the government in 1797 in the Great Whiskey Rebellion. Our side lost, or this country would be a lot less uptight.

“So Emerson lied to you.”

Shrugged. Not sure.

“He reacted badly when I said I was a fraud investigator for a bank. But that may not prove anything. Could be he bounced some checks one time. Or doesn’t like bankers.”

“Or maybe is involved in something shady,” Doc said.

Jeannie began shuffling her tarot cards, laying them out in the Celtic Cross, one of the most common layouts for a reading. I had finally made her stop trying to tell my future, not because she was wrong as much as I just didn’t want to know. But Jeannie liked the



cards, and believed that they somehow could be helpful.

Tarot doesn't really tell the future, anyway. More like tells you of some things that have the potential to happen. On the other hand, they hadn't told any of us that some guy might be lurking in the night with a shotgun, which might have actually been useful information. So I take the tarot cards with a big grain of sea salt.

"We're not even sure this is the same Emerson, right?"

"I am now. Your friendly FBI guy revealed that when I talked to him. I mentioned Emerson's name to him and told him I was going over to Goshen. He didn't blink, or tell me I had the wrong guy. And he brought up Emerson's first name, James."

"So what do we do now?"

"Nothing, Doc. We sit tight for a while, let things calm down. I'll follow up on those two other cases. Then see if there is another way to approach Emerson and shake him into making a mistake."

"Like trying to kill you again?"

"Yeah, like that."

Doc took a sip of coffee, mulling it over.

"Look for the woman," Jeannie said.

Doc and I turned to look at her, sitting there with the cards turned up.

Finally, I had to ask.

"What woman?"

"There is a woman involved in this."

"She's dead, sweetie," said Doc.

“Not her. Another one.”

Thought of the young woman in the maid’s outfit at Emerson’s place, but that seemed an unlikely fit.

“Athena,” said Jeannie, brandishing a card. “Justice.”

Doc and I looked at her.

“Jack, there is a woman involved somewhere. That’s what the cards say.”

I wanted to wince. The tarot cards.

“Sweetie,” said Doc, “that’s just a card game.”

“Still, Doc, you and Jack look for the woman. If the cards are right, she is somewhere near us. She is...important.”

“Important to the case?”

She did not answer, but gave me a long look.

Hated that.

The Gift has been with us for as long as the Celtic people have existed, passed from mother to daughter and to son. You can make fun of it if you wish, but only at your own risk. The Celtic people, no matter where they now live in the world, brought their belief in the Gift with them. The mountain people of the Shenandoah Valley believe in the Gift, and the power it imparts, as surely as they do in the power of God.

They see ghosts, and commune with them. They talk with their family who have passed, and see them in dreams, and premonition is a powerful force. It is especially

strong in the women, who seem to have a sense of intuition stronger than that of men. I have often witnessed elderly women who could see events in the future, or know when someone is about to die.

Before you scoff at that, remember that only in the past decade have we figured out a lot of stuff that we used to scoff at. Like the possibility of teleportation, which was first conjured up by Gene Roddenberry for the “*Star Trek*” television series of the Sixties. Or the experiences of people who die and are brought back. Or the possibility of time travel.

Doc is a medical man, and I know he believes. I myself spent years listening to my Grandmother talk of the mountain people and their ability to see future events. Nor is it just mountain and Celtic folks. I have been out in the world, and I know that in the cities of New York and Paris and Tokyo, you will also find sane and sophisticated people who believe in the Gift. Among the tribes of the Andes, and the aborigines of Australia.

Was there a woman involved in this mess with Emerson? Perhaps even the hunter goddess Athena?

I would have to return to the hills of Goshen and see for myself.

\* \* \*

Flipped over to Channel 3 for the late night news, where I learned that Yuna Lee, the

Eurasian newscaster on the Daybreak morning news, had moved to Dayton and a new job. Change is inevitable, and I wished her well in the Miami Valley of Ohio.

Too much on my mind.

Sleep finally came, but brought with it dreams of children with bad teeth and little old ladies sliding across a wet floor in Aisle Seven.

There is no rest for the wicked, as Maw-Maw used to say. And perhaps it is true, though I was grateful to finally let go and drift into the night.

## Chapter 6

# Manassas

Saturday morning came with the sound of songbirds and the none-too-gentle stench of chicken manure. The fall spreading of manure on the fields only lasts a day or so, but when the smell is high it is enough to make you move to the city.

The hundreds of poultry operations up and down the valley produce thousands of tons of manure each year, which farmers use on their fields. In spite of the fact that there is growing evidence that this is one of the major causes of pollution and fish kills in the Shenandoah River.

There was a plan a few years ago to burn the manure to produce energy, using the remnants of the burn as fertilizer and substantially cleaning up both the smell and pollution of the land. The poultry producers were all for it, as were the farmers. But people who owned retirement and weekend homes along the river wanted no part of a new

smokestack in the central valley, and the project died.

As did more fish.

If you live in the valley a hundred years, you will never grow to like the smell. But I had work to do, and little time to waste. This was Saturday, an exercise day, but I dawdled a bit in the shower, took time to trim my hair a bit around the ears, and did the other personal grooming things that private eyes never have to do in the movies. I have yet to figure out if their nails and hair just don't grow, or if they have special dispensation from the Pope that allows them not to do it.

For breakfast I walked out to the little garden I had planted back in May to retrieve one of the Big Ugly tomatoes that were growing faster than I could eat them, and picked a couple more for Doc and Jeannie.

I plant herbs, tomatoes and peppers. I don't bother with squash, or beans, or cucumbers. By the end of summer, people who plant those things have gardens so overgrown that they are desperate to give them away, so I avoid the work and simply accept these as gifts.

Best way to garden.

Toasted two pieces of whole wheat bread, sliced the tomato, and made a sandwich. A little mayo on one side, fresh butter on the other, some salt and pepper, fresh tomato and a little bouquet garni and you have a breakfast fit for a king. I buy my bouquet garni, a blend of spices, from a mail order place called Penzey's.

And a few other herbs it doesn't pay to grow and dry myself.

Brewed coffee and cinnamon, ground fresh and pressed.

Flipped a mental coin to decide which direction to go, and tails said it was up north to Manassas.

You can get there by going up country roads, either US 340 to Front Royal and from there to the east on Interstate 66 to Manassas. Or over the mountain on US 33 to catch US 29 up to Manassas from the south. But the truth is that the fastest way is to drive ten miles to the west, catching Interstate 81 up to 66 and east from there. So that was the way I chose slightly after sunrise.

It's not ten miles directly, but I took the route up Lawyer Road to US 33 to the west so I could stop in at the 7-11. It is a tradition held over from the days when the towns along the Shenandoah River were just trading posts. Farmers, workers and gypsy contractors would meet each morning for coffee and gossip, and still do.

The chain of 7-11s have become the progeny of the old general stores.

Henry Stiles, a local farmer and neighbor, was as usual holding court at this one. He had a coffee in one hand, a donut in the other, both waving frantically as they argued amiably about what kind of winter was coming. And whether we would get the hurricane, which

at this point seemed to be tracking farther to the east of us.

The wooly bears, the fuzzy brown and black caterpillars that are said to foretell the winter by the length of their fur, were apparently calling for a colder than normal winter. There was no word yet from the other source in the argument, the Farmer's Almanac, but most of the pundits seemed to think winter would be cold, with snow.

Wish I were a weather forecaster. Seems like an easy job, all in all. On the other hand, I am told that the most successful corporate executive is one who is right 51 percent of the time, just enough to beat the odds. So perhaps weather forecasters are successful in their own right.

I got a cup of the 7-11 coffee, which is second only to mine for quality, and settled in to listen to the argument. This may sound frivolous, but it is deadly serious to the parties involved. Contractors who go out of the valley looking for work can't do construction in the snow. Farmers need to know how to plan their needs for feed and firewood.

The raging subject was whether the summer heat meant an equally cold winter, which with fuel and electric bills rising would mean a harder time for cash-strapped country people.

Eventually the subject waned, and people drifted out to their work for the day, as a new group came in. These were the retirees, who



slept in a bit later and made up the “second shift” at the 7-11 in the mornings.

I moved out the door to work, and up the highway.

\* \* \*

Sat comfortably in the left lane, pushing traffic as I passed the trucks on their way north. Traffic was heavy but not unbearable, and everyone was moving at a steady clip, so it took a while before I sensed that the silver car half a mile back might be on my tail.

There is no super-detective ESP that tells you when you are being followed, but there are ways to figure it out. As we came up on the exit for Edinburgh, I signaled to exit and watched as he also slipped in to the right lane.

Took the exit, straight through the light and back up onto the Interstate, watching to see what he would do. He would either continue on his way, or have to follow me back up the ramp and give away the fact that he was tailing me.

Sloppy work on his part. He came back up behind me.

Grinned in the mirror, though he could not see it, and kept on my way.

As we hit the 300 mile marker I took the exit on to Interstate 66 and cruised easily down toward exit 47 and the turn into Manassas. Sudley Road to the south, past the sprawling shopping malls and car lots, following the GPS system until it wove in and around and back to

dump me into the parking lot of an apartment complex.

Not exactly upscale, but not poverty row, either. Tall multi-unit buildings with central areas for mailboxes, landscaping about average. I parked the car and sat there, feeling uncomfortable.

This time of day, the parking lot was mostly empty, the residents off at their jobs in Washington, DC, or here in the suburbs, or perhaps just taking Saturday off to shop. I stuck out like a sore thumb, so I went over to the mailboxes and studied them for a moment.

Rewarded by seeing the woman from the Facebook page come out of one of the entry ways, followed by a succession of a half-dozen kids in swim suits, boys and girls ages roughly seven to fifteen. Heading for the pool in the center of the apartment complex, though the skies were already clouding up.

Got in the truck and back-tracked the five miles or so to where I had seen the sign for a Walmart, bought trunks and a beach towel.

And sunscreen.

Back to the apartments, parking near the pool this time.

Waved to the driver of the silver car, who had frantically followed me up to the store and back. I really felt sorry for him in a way. I mean, they do give them pretty good training, but there is just no way you can follow someone closely enough to see what they are doing without giving yourself away. That kind of

surveillance takes four-to-six cars, which is labor intensive and expensive.

Guess I did not rate that highly.

Went through the entrance to a small desk, where a teen in a shirt marked “lifeguard” was checking in two kids, taking their identification. Waited until she turned to me.

“Can I help you?” Almost surly, in the manner of teens bored with their jobs, and with grown-ups.

“I am supposed to meet Mrs. Petersen here. She told me to give you her name in case she was running late.”

Name from the mail boxes.

“What apartment is she in?”

No number on the boxes, had to guess based on the relative position to the woman I had come to watch.

“I think its 5010-C, or something like that.”

She was on the computer.

“Close enough. 5010-B, actually. You have to pay five dollars to get in.”

Gave her the money and went to change into the suit.

“Is this taken?”

Sat in the lounge chair next to Mrs. Carol Whist, sunglasses on, rubbing the white gooey mess of sunscreen over every inch of my body that was exposed.

Pasty white and cancer free, that’s my motto.

Laid back to watch, waiting to see what developed.

Watched the kids around the pool, and the adults. Most of the adults were overweight, but then most were seniors who tend to put on a few pounds as they grow older.

More surprising were the children, especially the girls. They stood in tiny two-piece suits with distended bellies, looking for all the world like the first trimester of pregnancy. But they were not pregnant. They were obese. There were exceptions, of course, but I was shocked.

It had been a while since I had been around children of any age, and even when I was it generally was at a sports meet when I went over to Spotswood High for old time's sake. The athletes there, boys and girls, were mostly in good shape.

These kids were not in good shape. They were fat.

"Mom, can I go off the diving board?" Boy of 12 or so. He held his mouth closed, in the self-conscious way that kids with braces do, and I could see the gleam of metal in his mouth.

"Be careful, and watch out for your brothers and sisters," the Whist woman answered.

The boy smiled and turned away, but not before I saw the gleam of metal across the teeth in his mouth.

The boy whose teeth had been capped in metal.

All of them.

Laid and pondered that. It is unusual for someone that young to need caps on all of their teeth, but I was not privy to the dentist's records yet. So I lay in the hot sun and waited.

A ruckus erupted in the water, and a smaller girl, seven or so, went flying toward Whist complaining bitterly about her abuse at the hands of an older sibling, alternately outraged and tearful in the way that children can be.

Did not hear the words.

Watching in fascination that slowly turned to horror as she started crying, trying to gain justice from her mother. With the sun glinting off of a full mouth of metal teeth. Perfect little girl with a perfect little mouth full of metal.

Girls her age are supposed to have missing teeth. This is the age when baby teeth fall out, and in the next few years would be replaced by permanent teeth. I know. I went through the whole tooth fairy thing, a process that did not make me measurably richer but took most of the years from ages six through nine.

But this girl had no missing teeth. Hers were perfect and shiny metal.

As were the teeth of the oldest girl, who tried her best to keep them hidden as she talked, embarrassed by them at the age where teens are desperately trying to fit in with their peers. She saw me looking and turned away.

In the society of ninth grade, being different can be socially deadly. No dates for little miss Metal Mouth. Shunned for being different. I felt my ire growing, but lay in the plastic lounge chair and counted until all of the kids had checked in.

Six kids. Six sets of metal teeth.

No wonder she was suing.

The Whist family was at the pool to stay, but I had seen enough. Clouds had moved in from the impending storm, and the lifeguards were busy trying to pack up all their stuff and get it inside before the wind and rains came. Picked up the towel and lotion and walked out to my truck. The teen at the desk did not even notice my passing.

I logged the mileage to Manassas, along with the five dollar entry fee to the pool. In part because you can't get reimbursed if you do not make note of the expenses. But even more because seeing the entry fee for a swimming pool on a hot afternoon on my expense report would drive the old ladies in the accounting department of National Underwriting out of their beady little minds.

I have a hate-hate kind of relationship with the ladies in accounting, built up over years of seeing hundreds of unusual expenses on my reports. Like earlier in the year, when I bought a hot water heater and had it installed in Jeff Mason's house in an attempt to prove that a plumber claiming to be disabled was not. Or a few years ago, when I had needed to fly to

Bermuda for a weekend to find a man whose wife stood to collect a half million dollars if he were declared dead.

Drove out, waving at the silver car to follow me, and headed back toward home.

The front edge of the hurricane struck as I left Manassas.

The clouds and wind had been building all day, as Irene moved up the coast from North Carolina, sweeping up trees and power poles, swelling rivers and streams. I drove through the first of the rains headed southwest, finally escaping the major force of the storm as I passed Warrenton on my way back home down the Mosby Memorial Highway.

Where Mosby's Rangers used to play hell with the Union forces.

The rain and winds came up at my house late on Saturday night and stretched into Sunday, but for us the force was gone from the hurricane. I lay awake in the night, hearing the raindrops pounding on the old tin washtub on the side porch and the wind whistling through the trees.

It was more peaceful than threatening, though the storm would do a lot of damage after it passed north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

\* \* \*

"You have to use metal, particularly with baby teeth," said Karen Amatelmassih. She's an Egyptian woman whose parents had emigrated

to the US and seen her through college and then dental school.

I have never asked if she was Muslim or Christian, but could probably have figured it out from her surname if I wanted to put the time into it. In the Arab world, names are complicated matters often evoking centuries of tradition and religious conviction.

I mostly cared that she was an excellent dentist, so after my meditation on Monday morning I had wandered over to her office to do a quick consultation.

“You don’t know how much dental hygiene these kids have had, and the nerve tissue in baby teeth can be easily breached by dental decay. If the decay sets in, you may have to remove the nerve in the affected tooth, then cap it with metal.”

“Why not just fill the cavities?”

“Because the filling leaves the tooth prone to fractures. It just works out better for the child if we use a metal cap. And metal is a very good restoration medium, less costly than enamel. Though I have to tell you, Jack, I have never heard of a child needing caps on every tooth.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

“And with the older kids?”

“That’s a tougher call. I mean, metal is a very good medium. It is low cost, lasts longer than most other restorations, and puts less stress on the other teeth.”



“But again, Jack, the idea that six kids in one family would need to have every single tooth capped...”

Tilted her head.

“I’d want to know why,” she said quietly.

Professional courtesy, being cautious, or might she sometime do the same? No way to tell.

I was meeting Michael Freed for lunch over at Hams, but I had a couple of hours to kill and felt the gentle tug of my conscience telling me to clear out my mailbox at the office.

It’s a third-floor office in the Granary, a grand old converted feed mill near downtown Harrisonburg. The mailbox was not very full, but did have a couple of checks, so I wandered into the rickety old elevator to make the long ascent to the third floor.

My office is to the left when you exit the elevator. The number is 311, a two-room broom closet in the corner with a fine view of the street below and little else. I unlocked the door and stepped into the main office. There is a second room, but I use it for storage.

No secretary.

Wondered briefly what Sam Spade would say if he knew I managed to wander through my investigations without a Girl Friday like his secretary, Effie. Probably demand that I turn in my license.

On the other hand, if there was an Effie she would likely have not left rings from my coffee cup on the desk for all these weeks. Or

let the spider plant I had so carefully nurtured after my last plant died look so pitiful.

It wasn't dead, of course. Even I have trouble killing a spider plant, and I personally believe that the last inhabitants of Planet Earth will be this plant, the cockroaches, and whatever that bush is in my front yard that comes back every year in spite of my best efforts to kill it.

I poured water in the plant, threw most of the mail in the trash can, then endorsed the checks and filled out the deposit slip for the bank. I have made every effort over the years to get National Underwriters and my other clients to pay me electronically, sparing me the hassle of deposit slips and bank visits, but they simply won't.

It has nothing to do with security. It has to do with a paper trail so the auditors have something to look at each year.

"Hey, Jack, how are ya?"

Missy. The current office manager in the import office down the hall in 342.

"Did Aunt Jeannie come with you?"

Missy was a niece of Jeannie Dovel, a pleasant if somewhat vapid woman on the long side of 30. Jeannie had started the import business and run it for many years, until she met Doc. Nowadays she let her niece run the place. In truth, I did not know her well enough to know if she ran it well or not.

"No such luck, Missy. Last I heard she was helping Doc fix his antique tractor."

“Did you guys survive the hurricane okay?”

“Missy, there was no hurricane here. It hit the coastline, but here it was just a little wind and rain here.”

“But they made all those people leave their homes.”

Indeed they did. For some reason, our government had decreed that staying in your own home to protect it was a crime punishable by arrest and prosecution.

It’s a judgment call. If they fail to tell people to leave, thousands could die. If they force people to evacuate for little or nothing, they look foolish.

Flip a coin.

“I protected all the chairs on my deck, which were the only thing at risk at my house, Missy.”

“Jeannie isn’t with you?”

Not unless she was hiding behind the door.

Jeannie was happy to be retired, but had hoped that the business would give a boost to Missy. From what I could see, it would not.

“Well, tell her I have some questions when you see her, will you?”

Nodded, and headed for the bank and then to lunch.

Michael was sitting in a booth up in the bar at Hams, a cross between a sports lounge and a sandwich place that holds down the center of University Boulevard near the shopping malls

and theaters. He was watching a re-run of the weekend's NASCAR race, swirling the spoon in his iced tea.

Slipped into the booth, and he waited while I got some tea and we ordered.

"Jack, it is still August out there, and you are walking around in a denim jacket. Have you lost your mind?"

"Hard to explain. An old habit."

Freed has never been a country boy, or he would know. In the summer months teenage boys work the fields. From May to September, you wear a jacket because one minute you will be sitting on the tractor to prep and plant the fields, the next you will be slopping the hogs. In July and August, you are pulling in the early corn and the hay. In September, it is the second planting of corn and crops.

In the hay field, a boy foolish enough not to wear a denim jacket will soon find a hundred cuts on his forearms from the sharp ends of the hay bales. Same problem with the corn fields, where sharp leaves can cut. They hurt like the dickens. And the next day you will have to go out and do it again, whether your arms hurt or not.

I still have faint scars on my forearms from the summer I was fifteen and foolish.

Was tempted to ask why he still wore a bow tie, when they were at least five decades out of fashion. Suspected he would give the same answer I had.

‘We may have a problem with the dentist file.’

He nodded.

“As best I can tell, the dentist acted within the range of normal, capping teeth for a family on a limited income with metal. Cheaper for them, and very effective, I am told, especially for the younger kids. A bit extreme, perhaps, doing all of the teeth. And it is bothersome that he did all the teeth of all six kids.”

“I agree. We likely would win this on the peer review, but if it goes to a jury it could get iffy, particularly for the older kids.”

“I agree, but that is not what bothers me.”

Cocked his head, waiting.

“If he did all the kids in this family, how many others are out there? When the case hits the news, we could have a hundred lawsuits on our hands. What then?”

“Plus,” I added, “September is coming. And more families that ignored it all summer will bring their kids in for dental work at the start of school.”

“That’s our business, Jack, not yours. And while I would not be happy about it, the facts are what the facts are.”

“My question for you is whether you want me to look and see how great the liability is. In case there are other litigants.”

Litigants.

Holding my own with the big words.  
Eleven Scrabble points.

“Not necessary. All we have to do is request his records of all other tooth restorations performed in the past two years. He has to give them to us.”

Sat for a minute chewing on my sandwich.

“You do that, and he’ll get rid of the records if he is running a scam.”

Silence.

“The police could watch him.”

“Too manpower intensive on just a possibility.”

“You want to watch the dentist after we ask for the records,” Michael asked.

“Seems prudent.”

He nodded.

\* \* \*

It wasn’t fair.

He was just a young guy, trying to work his way up the government service schedule to where he could make a reasonable salary and raise a family. But his silver car in my rear view mirror was an irritant.

So I led him back down the two blocks to the center of Harrisonburg, the historic old district, and pulled into the parking garage there, shooting the loop to come around so that he was blocked against the front bumper of my Ford F-150 looking foolish.

“See that place across the street?” I asked, pointing.

A restaurant called Beyond.

“Park it and come in for lunch.”

If he were halfway smart, he would have realized that I just ate lunch at Hams. But he was fixated on the job of following me. It would occur to him tomorrow.

I parked the truck and ambled across the street, taking a moment to appreciate the ladies walking down the street. Dressed for the weather, which was edging back toward a more moderate mid-Eighties. Short shorts. Tees with sports bras. Even the ladies of my age and older showing why it is that nature gives men a healthy dose of testosterone.

To cope.

God, how I love women.

Let the greeter take me to a table, ordered a nice meritage blend of three good red wines, and waited.

They don’t call the blended wines “meritage” as much anymore. Originally the term was used to designate burgundy wines, because their blended nature did not allow them to qualify as a “varietal” brand like cabernet or zinfandel.

Now, the Meritage Association requires red meritage wines to consist of a blend of two or more varieties: Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Malbec, Petit Verdot or Carmenère, with no varietal comprising more than 90% of the blend. A white Meritage must

be made from a blend of two or more of the varietals Sauvignon Blanc, Sémillon or Muscadelle du Bordelais.

Either way, the right to be called a “meritage” also comes with a fee per case sold, so most blends simply use a different name and often different wines.

Shadow in the doorway.

He hesitated a minute, then came to the table and sat.

He was a good-sized guy, looked like a former halfback for some Midwestern college, friendly face under a blond crew-cut.

Looked at me with baleful eyes, like a calf in the spring.

“I know you have to follow me, but you are getting on my nerves.”

Silence.

“Okay, I know that you work for the ATF, and your job is to bird-dog me to see where I go, but the truth is that it is nearly impossible to do well with one car, and you look foolish sitting in a government car in this heat.”

“FBI,” he said. “Not ATF.” Said it proudly.

“McCoy sent you?”

Nodded.

Be damned.

“Well, I am not going anywhere unusual, and we seem to be stuck with each other. So we may as well get to know one another.”

Nodded.

“Can I buy you a drink?”



He hesitated, then said, “Scotch.”

Ordered the drink, then I excused myself to find the men’s room. Straight out the door, across the street to the parking garage, stopping to use the front edge of my house key to let the air out of the front tire on the driver’s side.

Left the garage, whistling a George Straight tune whose name I could not remember as I went home. Something about a chair.

I know. It was mean.

But I don’t like being followed.

Called it a day, and went home to follow up a few things on the Internet.

## **Chapter 7**

# **Williamsburg**

It was wet.

The record-breaking temperatures in nearly every major city that had marked August were gone, and the east coast temperatures more modest. The peaches on my trees had been smaller than usual due to the lack of rain, but were sweeter.

If there are two constants in the life of a country boy, they are church on Sunday and the county fair in August. I submitted my jellies and pickles every year, and generally won a half-dozen or so blue ribbons. This year had been an exception.

During fair week, I was still trying to figure out how to sit down without pain.

Now it was nearing September, so the berries were all gone, safely stored in the cupboard in the form of jellies, jams and pie filling for the winter. The county fair was over, and Labor Day was coming next week on Monday, for whatever that was worth.

Labor Day was originally a celebration of labor unions, but had become in these days just another federal holiday, all meaning lost except perhaps the end of summer and the beginning of the fall.

In the meantime, there was the aftermath of Hurricane Irene, and the normal thunderstorms of late summer. Not to mention another crop of tropical storms sending waves of warm and humid weather up from the South.

The only plus for this September was that it was football season again.

I wasn't optimistic about the Steelers this fall, even though they were my team of choice. Roethlisberger hadn't looked particularly strong during the August pre-season. He had gotten married over the summer. Might be that, like Samson without his hair, he was weaker now. Only the season would tell.

My local carpenter and handyman Jerry Blaine and one of his carpenters had replaced the broken kitchen window, allowing me to run the cross-breezes to keep the old house cooler. Jerry's a contractor who has taken care of the major projects on the property since the days when the Old Man had run it.

He's a valley man who once did work with the CIA. He has never volunteered what he did in those days, and I did not ask. He was part of the Old Retired Spook Network, which the Old Man had been a part of and I did not want to disrupt. He did nice work on my house, and that's all I wanted to know.

I sat on the verandah on this last Monday morning of August with a pitcher of tea on the side table and the case files laid out on the table in front of me.

Thinking.

Fraud and theft investigations are the oddest type of detective work. Unlike homicide or treason, we know the motivations for fraud and theft.

Money.

And we generally know who did the crime.

The person looking to collect, or the one who will benefit. Hard to hide that.

So we know who, and we know why, and it is usually pretty easy to see what was done. What I have to figure out is how it was done, and whether it was done for fraudulent reasons.

But if that seems too easy, remember that I don't get the case until it is already cold. There are no forensics. Law enforcement has already passed on the case. And in many cases, there was no fraud to begin with. Just a whisper of something that could be nothing

To solve fraud cases, you have to be part medical man, part accountant, part hound dog and part alchemist.

Doesn't hurt to drink a good bourbon, either. Or a touch of shine.

The way to solve it is to research. Run the odds. Read the accounting ledgers, and talk to people. Sometimes, simply opening the investigation makes people nervous enough to

withdraw the claim. Sometimes you are up against an attorney, who can either be interested in justice or just interested in a fee. Thankfully, not many of the latter.

So this morning I pondered a little old lady, 78 years of age, who had slipped on the wet floor of a supermarket and broken her hip.

On the surface, it was hard to see how she had gained any benefit. At her age, a broken hip will take forever to heal, if it ever does. It often reduces the life spans of the people who fall, and there is usually some pain for the rest of their lives. Not to mention trouble walking, if they are strong enough ever to walk again.

A broken hip is the most common injury in the elderly, and about one in four die within a year of the break. Another one in four recover the ability to walk normally. The other fifty percent live in misery, often with a walker and some severe pain.

The risk seemed too high for any reward, even the half million the suit demanded.

Who benefits in this case?

Went to work through the files, stopping now and then to check what I could through the databases accessible over the Internet.

The only kin she had left was a distant grandson who lived in Texas not a party to the suit and not involved. The suit had been filed by a family lawyer who would receive only a standard fee, and probably less. The courts these days try to give more of the money to the victims.

Was the broken hip a fake?

Scans said it was real. And not simple.

No one to benefit, no reason for fraud,  
and no way to prove it was anything less than a  
horrible accident to an old lady.

Except for one thing.

If this was a scam, the usual way it  
worked was that an accomplice would knock  
something off the shelf – a jug of milk, or a  
bottle of fruit juice, or some other fluid. That  
person would then exit the store, totally  
uninvolved with the second part of the scam, in  
which the older person falls.

Rescue squad is called, old lady or man  
crying in pain, panic-stricken store manager,  
money paid quickly to avoid an embarrassing  
trial.

In this case, it was a simple open-and-  
shut accident.

Except that she had slipped on one of  
those high-sugar, high-carb athletic drinks that  
had spread across the aisle in a blue puddle.  
One of those drinks meant for soccer players on  
the field, or people who wanted to delude  
themselves into thinking that they were athletes.

You can buy them in any grocery store,  
in their plastic bottles, in a variety of colors and  
flavors.

And in this case, the flavor was berry,  
and it was blue, and the accident happened right  
in front of the shelves carrying energy drinks.

The clerk had cleaned up the mess, but was bothered by a small detail that made no sense.

No empty plastic bottle.

\* \* \*

Reclined in the hammock in the shade of an oak that had been planted only a few years after the end of the Civil War. The afternoon heat was a temperate eighties, which made it easier for me to strip down to just cotton gym shorts.

It had been hot for so long back in August that I didn't have to worry about mosquitos. There was not enough standing water in which to breed this summer, so they were not much of a nuisance.

That might change in the wake of the hurricane and the couple inches of rain it had dumped on us over the weekend. But so far, no bites.

Drowsy from the sun and lack of any breeze, I dozed in a half-dream state, listening to the infrequent car or truck along Lawyer Road, to the birds and the now-and-then whistle of a train running north toward the Miller Coors Bottling Plant.

Steal a flag and sell it back.

Quick profit for a few days of work, and less chance of jail time if you could carry it off. Once the flag was given back, the insurance company would have some small interest in

finding their money, but it was not as strong an incentive as it would have been otherwise.

There were at least two groups at work, and maybe three. The thieves who had taken the flag and held it for nearly a week before calling to offer it back. Assume that was the dead man and woman.

ATF guy and a historian named Linda Wills.

What had given me the impression of lovers?

Pondered that for a while, with no answer. Still, it had been my first, if fleeting impression of the two, and I have learned to pay attention to the subconscious when it is trying to tell me something.

The second group consisted of the double-crossers. Somewhere or how, they had learned of the plan to bring the flag back for ransom, and had stepped in steal the flag and the money. Were they part of the plan, or did they follow the thieves to Cross Keys to meet with me?

No way to know.

And where was Emerson in all of this?

I had not liked the man the one time we met, but I may have just caught him at a bad time. Or spooked him with the question of banking operations. Or maybe the pollen allergies of late August made him cranky.

He was wealthy. Even in today's economy, you cannot run that big a farming operation, with that many people and vehicles,



without serious cash reserves. Likely he could pull up a hundred thousand dollars simply by signing his name.

The Wills woman had been working for him, so he had some interest in history. But there seemed no connection between him and John Mosby, or to the battlefield at New Market. There was a connection between Emerson and Cross Keys, but it was thin.

Very thin.

Somewhere in the middle of it all I drifted off.

Awoke to find the sun settling in the western sky, casting long streams of orange and gold across the peaks of the Massanutten mountains. I had slept longer than I intended, and was hungry.

I use a big gas range to cook on, mostly because I have trouble making electric ranges work right with my collection of cast-iron cookware.

I really do not know how old the cast iron stuff is, but there must be a hundred different pieces – skillets of every size, a bunch of Dutch ovens and molds for various breads and pastries.

In southern families, these are the most important part of any dowry or inheritance, and are passed from mother to daughter, generation to generation.

My grandmother, whose name was Rebeccah but was called Maw-Maw all of my life, had only one girl child, and she had died at

the age of 10. With my father dead over the skies of Vietnam, she had only one relative to whom she could leave her cookware.

Good choice on her part. I love to cook.

I put the skillet on the stove and fried two thick slabs of bacon. On the side I cut a tomato into paper-thin slices and prepared a fresh avocado, still green on the inside but ripe.

I don't have any ESP about when avocados are ripe, any more than I can tell when someone is following me. I just ask Jeff Mason out at the Food Lion to find me avocados that are within two days of being ripe, and he does. I don't know how people think they can cook without a good produce man and a food butcher to help them. Fortunately, finding both is just a matter of checking a few grocery stores and asking for help.

Jeff also turned me on to making my own fresh butter and buttermilk in a food processor. It takes only some cream from the dairy, a little patience and the desire to eat food without chemicals.

Plus, I am trying to learn to like buttermilk.

Trying.

The Old Man drank buttermilk, loving the taste of the acid cream on a country day and laughing at the faces I made when I took a sip. I guess it is like bourbon, an acquired taste, but to be honest I have learned to love bourbon more than buttermilk.

So I buttered two pieces of thick sourdough and layered the bacon, tomato and avocado onto the bread with a sprinkle of salt, then placed it between the skillet and a heated cast iron sandwich press. Five minutes and it was grilled to perfection.

Quartered and served up on a paper plate with a glass of cold sauvignon blanc from California, and life was good.

\* \* \*

Dawn on Tuesday found me on Interstate 64, traveling east toward Richmond. Passed Charlottesville, then tracking the Interstate through the heart of the capital to come out the other side. Drifted past the airport and on toward Williamsburg.

The accident had happened on a Saturday, but I wanted to look the place over at a less busy time.

Williamsburg proper is a tourist destination, a colonial village that was once the capital of Virginia. It was restored beginning in 1924 with the help of John D. Rockefeller to show a representation of what life was like in the American Colonies of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

It's a pleasant enough place, and a big draw for students and families looking for an interesting if sanitized version of what life was like in the American colonies.

For example, you don't see a single white slave in Colonial Williamsburg, though up until the early 1700's they were the dominant slaves in Virginia. After the Irish uprising of 1641, as many as 100,000 men, women and children judged to be disloyal to England were shipped to the American colonies as slaves. This enslavement of poor Scots and Irish and their shipment to the colonies continued for nearly 170 years, until the American Revolution made the markets for slaves from Britain untenable.

Historians have tried to whitewash the existence of these slaves by labeling their status "indentured servitude." But most of the servants were forced into bondage, and many ended up indentured for life. Children born to such an indentured white was considered to be indentured for life as well. While some earned enough to buy out their contracts, most white slaves found it easier to simply escape to the western lands and live as pioneers.

When white slaves proved to be too escape-prone to hold in bondage – and could not be differentiated from free men once they escaped – the gentlemen landowners began to import black African slaves instead. And in order to support their claim that slaves did not deserve the same rights as their white owners, based on the color of their skin, buried the history of America's white slaves forever.

Up until 1700 virtually all the slaves in the American colonies were white. Today, we pretend they never existed.

It is the politically correct thing to do.

I wasn't going to the restored tourist attraction, but to a small town east of there.

It was nearly ten in the morning before I reached the store, surprised to find that it was one of the more basic chains. In recent years, the gourmet supermarkets had proliferated across the suburban countryside, and we had our share even in a small city like Harrisonburg. Still, older folks and many country people prefer the smaller food chains, where the selection may be more restricted but the prices are lower.

This one was doing a good trade on Tuesday morning.

I walked through the door but did not take a cart. I'm not normally squeamish about germs, but there is a bunch of research showing that about seventy-eight percent of grocery cart handles test positive for fecal material and other contaminants. That means they are basically covered in shit and bacteria. When the stories first hit the news, stores rushed to provide sanitary wipes for their customers. Now the containers sit empty or dried up, and customers have been forced to provide their own wipes. Or live with the filth.

I wasn't grocery shopping, anyway.

It was well lit and reasonably clean, with a sheen on the aisle floors that showed attention by the buffing machine earlier that day. The

people shopping were mostly middle and lower class – a Whole Foods up the street likely took the gourmet crowd.

The manager was named Al, and I disliked him from the instant I met him. The first time I saw him he was raising a ruckus with one of the checkout clerks, raging at her and strongly implying she was stupid.

Life is too short to work for people like that.

I did it for some of my ten years in the Air Force, without a choice, and the day I left I vowed that I would never work for anyone like that ever again, even if I had to starve. The only Article 15 reprimand in my folder as an officer was for striking another officer. An ineffective light colonel with the Sky Cops who stepped into the middle of an arrest at the last minute to try to tell my sergeant how to conduct himself as we took a suspect to a cell. A bad moment that cost me two teeth when our suspect grabbed a truncheon and smacked me in the face.

Four days later I caught my sergeant waiting for the colonel outside the Officer's Club, and to keep him from doing something stupid I did it myself. Knocked the colonel flat on his ass and told him to not ever cross me again.

Took the punishment. Courts-martial downgraded to an Article 15 reprimand in my permanent record. One of the reasons I did not stay for a career in the Air Force.

Supermarket manager Al was a jerk who had trouble keeping employees, and sooner or later the grocery chain would realize there was a correlation. Or not. Companies are not very good at weeding out abusive managers. And at the same time, they wonder why they have such high employee turnover.

Went back to the produce department and asked the woman there where I would find Anton Burris, who had cleaned up Aisle Seven and could not find the plastic bottle. No longer working here, but was still around town.

My exceptional detecting skills led me to the phone book, which gave his address.

Camped out there, waiting.

\* \* \*

It was nearly three before he left his apartment. I would have just knocked on the door much earlier, but the woman who had followed him into the apartment seemed friendly, and I didn't want to interrupt his day. The two of them turned left out of the apartments when they finally emerged, and down the street to what looked like a bar.

Wandered in behind them.

Sat at their table, and looked into two sets of curious eyes.

"Do I know you?" Anton asked.

"No. I work for the insurance company, looking at that old lady who fell in your store a few months ago. Buy you a drink?"

They looked at each other, and Anton nodded.

“Not my store, man. I just worked there, and that was months ago.”

“You know the old woman?”

Shook his head.

“Seemed like a nice lady. I seen her there before, and she was always sweet. Though she did have some trouble.”

“Like what?”

“Couldn’t remember where things were. Lost her shopping list. Couldn’t remember where her debit card was. Just simple stuff.”

“Anything different that day?”

He stopped to think, while the server came to take our order. They ordered beer. I ordered Wild Turkey 101 with bottled water.

Two fingers in a glass, two ice cubes, splash of water.

“Nothing was different. I mean, we are usually busy on a Saturday, and the boss had me restocking like a crazy man. I didn’t even see the bottle fall in the aisle, I was back stocking salad dressings.”

“Anything unusual about the day other than with her?”

“Well, Al actually was nice to me that morning.” Looked at his girl and laughed.

“What about the bottle?”

He looked serious.

“It was weird with a capital D, man.”

Didn’t correct him.



“I mean, I looked everywhere and there was no bottle. Even if it got kicked down the aisle, I would have seen it.”

“Maybe some other patron picked it up.”

“I was down that aisle just a few seconds after she yelled.”

“Could the lady have poured it on the floor?”

“No, she didn’t have a coat on. No place for her to hide it.”

The accident was in April. Chilly weather for an old lady with no coat. Too chilly.

BGO moment. Blinding Glimpse of the Obvious.

Someone drove her to the store.

“Did you see anyone with her at the store?”

“She was alone when I saw her.”

“Anyone with her after she fell?”

“No one I saw. It was mostly me, Irene from the office, and Al. Then the rescue guys showed up and took her away.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

“So is she in some kind of trouble?”

“No, these things usually work out to be just what they seem. But I am a little concerned about the missing plastic bottle. And I would like to know how she got to the store in the first place.”

“Dunno.”

Waited while he thought.

“I heard she’s in Mount View, that nursing home south of town.”

\* \* \*

She sat in a rocker in her room, looking quite vibrant and alert in spite of her 78 years. Her hair had been done, makeup applied, and she was cheerful if confused.

Thought I was someone named Roger, and after three attempts to correct her I gave up.

“All those years, Roger, and you would think that your mother would at least call about the garden. Bless your heart, it is simply too much for one person to keep up with, and I don’t get around as easily as I once did.”

Hip replacement after the fall.

The nurse had told me that she was not recuperating well, mentally or physically.

“The roses need to be trimmed back or they will be a mess come spring. You have to promise me that you will tend to the roses, Roger.”

A command to me, but the roses were at a house that had been sold when she signed the agreement to move here. Like many women of her generation, she had only minimal funds to live on for the rest of her life, and the cost of the care here alone would drain that rather quickly.

Still, it had all of the earmarks of a well-run facility, and it seemed as though they were doing everything they could for her.

Even if she got a settlement from the fall, it would take that and more if she lived more than a few years.

“Sunny, do you remember your accident?”

Nodded. Her name was Samantha, but she answered to Sunny.

“I wanted some juice, but I couldn’t decide between the cranberry apple and the cranberry plain.”

The tyranny of her mental decline. She remembered events from four months or forty years ago clearly, but could not remember what she ate for lunch.

“Who took you to the grocery store that day?”

“I wanted to stay in my house, you know.”

“Do you remember going to the grocery store that day?”

“Melody got a television.”

Dear God. This was not going to be easy.

“Sunny, did you see the blue water on the floor?”

“I saw the sky,” she said wistfully. “It doesn’t hurt if you look at the blue sky.”

No answer for that.

I stayed with her another half hour, but she gradually withdrew into herself until the silence stretched too far. I stood and kissed her on the cheek.

“Thank you, Roger. I will expect you again next Tuesday as usual.”

Hoped Roger was there, because I would likely not be.

Walked to the doorway.

“And tell them I want my television.”

Long white hallway back to the nurse’s station.

“Only a few of the residents have their own television sets,” said Ms. Jardine, the head nurse. “In her case, I am afraid there will barely be enough to pay for basic care. Thank god for the Angel Foundation, or she wouldn’t be able to afford that.”

“Angel Foundation?”

“It’s a charity fund that can help to cover the costs of care for those who can’t afford it. There is never enough, but they make do as best they can.”

“This place seems to be in good condition.”

“We are very proud of our facility, Mr. MacLeod. We work hard to keep it up.”

I walked out to an evening with a moon just starting to rise in the east and a long drive home.

Spent the drive thinking, but came to no conclusions.

The case had questions, but none I could easily answer.

And perhaps it didn’t matter in the long run.

Whatever bad things she may have done in her life, Sunny was paying for it now. No one deserves that kind of punishment.

## Chapter 8

# Trouble

Sat with Doc in the morning, watching a thick morning fog.

None of the rains that had marked the previous week, or the afternoon thunderstorms and the hurricane, had done much for my tomato plants.

The thunderstorms are good for pounding the ground, blowing shingles off of the roof, and occasionally pelting everything with hail. But the water tends to be sparse, barely soaking into the ground.

I had awakened early on this Wednesday to my usual Daybreak News over on Channel 3. With Yuna and Mallory Brook both gone, the news seemed less interesting. It would take time to grow accustomed to their replacements.

People who live in the city, with hundreds of channels and a dozen cable news operations to choose from, cannot appreciate what it is like to have a single television station. One local news team. One general manager,

who is part of the community and cares what happens there. That's what I had grown up with, and in spite of all of the choices that had become available in recent years, I still started my day with WHSV out of Harrisonburg.

The news team of your local station is like a part of your family, and when the newscasters leave for a better job you suffer a bit of the empty nest syndrome. It happens every couple of years, but is always disconcerting.

I shuffled down the hallway feeling maudlin, but there was nothing emotional about my morning workout, which was the first hard, fine practice since the shooting. It was not my usual Tuesday-Thursday-Saturday routine -- I felt the need to burn energy and work on the infinite shades of precision. Tai Chi Chuan is slower than many of the karate schools of the martial arts, and can be practiced in a smaller space than the hundreds of square feet demanded by most karate forms. But it suffers from the same general bias toward right-side techniques.

This day I worked on both right and left, particularly balance and hand block-and-strike.

Twenty minutes may seem paltry to those who bicycle or run, but it quickly burned through the sugar in my system and the strength in my muscles, and when I detected a small quiver in the leg muscles I called it a morning and headed to the shower.

Very hot water to open the pores and cleanse the system, then back to icy cold to refresh and close the pores.

Shaved and went down to the kitchen, scooping up fresh peaches and some pineapple for breakfast. I ground the coffee in Maw-Maw's ancient, hand-cranked coffee grinder that for all I knew had been around since the house was built. It cut the beans coarsely, so that a fine grind took a couple of times through, but I liked it better than the stainless-steel blades of today's electronic gizmos.

Grinds into the French press, along with a teensy pinch of salt, a hand-measured teaspoon of cinnamon, and four cups of boiling water. Ate while it steeped, then pressed on the plunger to trap the grinds and poured a big country cup of fresh coffee.

Perfect timing.

As I walked outside with my coffee, Doc was climbing down off of his converted golf cart. He's been working on it, putting on lights and turn signals. Augusta County to the south and the town of Elkton to the north had both recently passed regulations allowing electric carts to run on town roads or back country byways. Doc has been running country roads in his for some years now, but seemed to be preparing to do it legally.

"Dementia is not uncommon in a case like that, Jack."

"Are you talking about you or me, Doc?"

But he had listened while I described Sunny.

“What often happens is that dementia sets in, but family members write it off to age or stress. Just because mom can’t remember what happened yesterday, or that she went to the grocery store just this morning, doesn’t mean that she is failing. It is just overlooked.”

“What about things that happened months ago?”

“Hard to say without her medical records. But very often an unrelated event, like a bad fall, forces the elderly person into full-time care and rehabilitation. That’s when the dementia can’t be overlooked anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Dementia patients can be testy. Refuse to follow directions from the physical therapist. Refuse to exercise. Their families get used to it gradually, and don’t notice how bad it has gotten. But once they move to a new environment, it is very obvious. And it affects their treatment. If the patient doesn’t show progress in physical therapy, Medicare will eventually cut off funding for it. That leaves the patient without the ability to walk or move, stuck in the world of dementia.”

“So what’s the prognosis?”

Shook his head.

“How much time?”

“Not much.”

The rain was still falling gently, no wind to drive it, soaking my garden and bringing life



back to the tomato plants. A little. I would have to weed the garden again, as the rain benefits weeds as well, or better than, the plants.

Thought about Sunny, and wondered if it hurt when she couldn't see blue skies.

Dammit.

Who benefits?

\* \* \*

Morning stretched to afternoon, and I fried some filets of white fish in a mix of egg wash and panko crumbs until golden brown, serving them up on rolls with lettuce, tomato and a home-made tartar sauce.

On the cooking shows these days, they like to call it a remoulade any time you mix flavors with mayonnaise, but to me a mix of shallots, pickle, mayo and a touch of Old Bay seasoning is tartar sauce. Remoulade, my ass.

Cooking can get too fancy if you're not careful.

Doc wolfed down his sandwich, then carried the dishes to the kitchen.

When he came back out, he carried a tray with a pint of his peach moonshine, glasses for two, a pitcher of ice water and a bucket of cubes.

Some people like to drink peach moonshine just like it comes off the still, but I prefer to take the finished product and place it in a glass jar with four or five fresh peaches, peeled and sliced, with a cup of sugar. After a

couple of months, the result is smoother and has a better flavor. Doc has taken to doing some of his that way as well.

City people can do the same thing with vodka.

We settled in with a drink, watching the rain and hearing its rhythm against the roof of the verandah.

Took a long time before I could put my finger on it.

Something wrong.

“Doc, where’s Jeannie?”

Silence.

“Doc?”

“She went to her place.”

Jeannie owned a house over in Bridgewater, a little south of Harrisonburg, but last I had heard she was thinking of selling it.

“Getting some of her stuff?”

Silence. Long silence.

“Doc, what in the hell is going on?”

“She just walked out on me, boy. She started saying crazy things to me, and accusing me of stuff, and the next thing I know she’s gone.”

“When was this?”

“Day before yesterday.”

“And?”

“And nothing. I’m a grown up man and don’t need no woman to tell me what to do. She can just stay over there for all I care.”

He was miserable.

I nodded.

“Doc, you know as well as I do that people aren’t worth a damn by themselves. They need to have other people to look after, and to look after them.”

He harrumphed. It actually sounded like that.

So much for existential philosophy.

Tried the more direct route.

“Doc, quit being an ass and go over there and make up with her. You can take some of the flowers out of the garden.”

“Well if you’re just going to take her side, the hell with you, too.”

Smacked his glass down on the table so hard I thought it would crack, stomped down to his cart and roared away into the rain.

Sat there feeling helpless.

\* \* \*

In a way, though, I was relieved.

You can’t suddenly throw two very different people together and expect them to be together forever and ever without an argument or two to spice things up.

I’ve heard people say that they have never argued with their lover about anything, but mostly those are people who haven’t yet checked out of the honeymoon hotel. Or people who are delusional.

Arguments clear the air, help to define a relationship. In the same way that Clausewitz said that the goal of war was to achieve a better

state of peace, allowing your partner to see your anger and understand your hurts can only help them to understand you and your inner pains. Understand who you are and why you act the way you do.

But whatever it took to drive a wedge between Doc and Jeannie must have been a doozy.

Waited until evening to drive to Bridgewater.

Rang the bell, and waited until she answered the door. She looked as though she had been crying, and the expression on her face would have turned a mere mortal to stone.

Then she slammed the door in my face.  
Stunned.

I went back to the truck and sat there, listening to music in the background.

In years of investigative work, I have learned patience. Strangely, I never was able to master that skill in all the times the Old Man took me hunting. He would sit there like stone for hour after intolerable hour, while I shifted, fidgeted, scared away any wildlife within a three mile radius, and generally made his efforts at hunting worthless.

The one time I actually had a deer in my sights, it turned and looked at me with its turquoise eyes. I could not shoot it.

Never hunted animals again.

Did hunt humans, but that was different.

Hunting is an important part of the culture, and we have learned the hard way that it

is necessary both for food and for animal control. We have killed off many of the natural predators with our housing developments and suburban sprawl. Without hunting, the deer and other animals begin to clog our highways and towns, causing accidents and forcing them into disease and starvation.

It is not just an American problem, though our non-hunting do-gooders have tried to make it seem so. A lodge owner I met on an airplane told me they have the same problem in Namibia, in southern Africa. The elephant, protected because people believe they are dying out, have become so populous that they are now a nuisance, unable to feed themselves off the land and with few natural predators left. The government now encourages the hunting of elephants, though the United Nations still disapproves.

So I do not oppose hunting for meat, just don't do it myself.

Sat and listened to the radio.

It was nearly midnight when her door opened, and she walked in her housecoat to the curb. I rolled down the window.

"Jack, do you plan to sit out here all night, because if you do..."

Closed the window in her face.

Two can play that game.

"Jack, damn you, roll this window down or I swear I will break it!"

Got out of the truck, and when she turned on her heel I followed.

Hard to look dignified in the middle of the night wearing just a house coat.

We sat in the kitchen, the way country folks do.

"I can put up with a lot, Jack. I put up with the fact that even after all these months he stutters when he says he loves me. I don't even mind the pictures of his dead wife all over the house. But I won't put up with him insulting me in front of other women."

Doc?

"Jeannie, I don't think..."

"Oh shut up. You men always stick together."

You men? This could be more serious than I thought.

"Jeannie, what happened?"

"Well, you know that women are always looking at him, as handsome as he is."

Oh. My. God. Jealousy.

"Jeannie, do you have anything to drink?"

This was going to take a while.

She poured some moonshine, though I would have preferred Wild Turkey.

"Okay. Now tell me."

"Well, you know about how women..."

"Yeah, okay, he's handsome. I get it. But how did he insult you?"

"Well, you know how he takes pride in that antique John Deere of his, and how he takes it every year for the Tractor Pull and the judging?"

I did.

“Well, I’ve been telling him forever that it would look better, even with the original paint job, if he just replaced a few of the engine parts with chrome, the way the antique car people do. But he gets so stubborn that he won’t listen to me, keeps mumbling about how he has to keep it original parts and tractors never came with chrome engines.”

Women think in context. Ask a man about a shooting, and he will tell you what kind of gun was used, the time of day and the trajectory of the bullet. Women will tell you who was in the room, what they were wearing, how they felt about the crime, and whether the room was clean or dirty. It is not that their recollection is any less valuable. It is that they put things in context rather than simply reciting the facts.

It drives men nuts.

“So we go to the contest, and all night long this cheap hussy in shorts that are way too tight for the cellulite on the backs of her legs is leaning over his tractor, putting her hands all over his arm and mooning at him with those big blue cow eyes and telling him how he is such a genius to restore the tractor by himself.”

Paused to sip at her liquor.

“And she was way too young for Doc. Looked ridiculous.”

Nodded.

“And then. Then,” finger wagging in the air. “Then she tells him how much better it

would look if he put some of those chrome covers on the engine. And do you know what he said?"

Had the feeling I was going to.

"He said, 'Well lady, I don't need you to tell me how to fix my tractor. If I needed a woman to nag at me, that's what I have her for.'"

"And he pointed right at me!"

I don't get headaches, but if ever there were a time for one this would be it.

Didn't know what to say.

And still didn't much later, when I left for home.

Stuck in the middle.

\* \* \*

Oddly enough, diverting my mind with Doc and Jeannie's little spat did my own thoughts some good, as I turned back to the issue of the stolen flag.

Lay awake in bed, turning it over again in my head.

I don't sleep under the covers, prompting my very infrequent bed mates to wonder why I bothered with sheets at all. Tradition, I suppose, or the fact that women always seem to get colder than I do. I can settle with just laying on top of the bed with a throw blanket for temperature extremes, and prefer as little cloth against my skin as I can get.

I wear soft cotton clothes, which don't hold a crease worth a damn but don't irritate my



skin, either. I don't wear ties unless forced under duress.

So tonight I lay in my gym shorts wondering how all of the Emerson thing fit together.

Steal a flag, then try to send it home.  
Then kill to get it back, and steal the money.  
Then send two not very competent assassins to finish me off.

Or had he?

I had gone to his house, and he had not recognized me. Didn't know my face from Adam, which means either he didn't know me at all, or that something else was at work. What if the ugly guy had come to kill me on his own, without Emerson's approval?

No.

When he was dying, he clearly said  
Emerson sent him.

Could not sleep.

Went to the office and looked at the clock.

3 AM.

Poured a glass of red wine, a Spanish temperanillo, and sat down at the computer to do some research.

Google Search. Expanded over my initial search, which had simply been to find someone named Emerson.

This time it was Emerson+Civil War+Shenandoah+Goshen.

The list of responses kept me up well until after dawn.

## Chapter 9

# Land of Goshen

The search for Emerson did not yield much more than I already had.

His family had been major landholders in Rockbridge County for generations. Emerson himself had been a county supervisor over there for the better part of two decades. Not a big deal. Big fish in a small pond, as McCoy had said.

The fact that he was from Virginia meant little, and of itself had nothing to do with militia groups. The militias had been a strong part of Virginia history, the forerunners of modern police forces as in most states, but had died out when the units were conscripted for service in the Civil War. And even then, many in the valley had refused to go.

While a majority of the Shenandoah Valley did vote for secession from the Union, the sentiment was not universal. After all, this was a relatively isolated mountain valley area,

largely out of the mainstream of fashion or political movements.

Slavery existed here, but there was a strong German influence from Pennsylvania that was decidedly against it. And many of the early settlers were Scots-Irish who themselves had escaped slavery in the colonial settlements before the Revolutionary War. In fact, West Virginia was formed from the counties that split away from Virginia, joining the Union as a border state in June of 1863, just before the battle at Gettysburg.

Virginians in the Shenandoah Valley were split on the issue in funny ways. Virginia seceded from the Union in May of 1861; weeks later, the city of Harrisonburg celebrated the Fourth of July.

There were no generals named Emerson, Union or Confederate. Wikipedia has a complete list, and it had taken nearly an hour to search through all the links.

No connection at all, until it came to the rolls of the 7<sup>th</sup> Virginia, the regiment that was commanded by General Turner Ashby, the dashing cavalry officer known as the “Black Knight of the Confederacy.”

A Captain Emerson of Rockbridge County was referenced only twice in the papers of the 7<sup>th</sup> Virginia, once during the efforts to hide Confederate movements leading up to the first battle of Manassas, and the second in the fighting against Union General John Fremont as

Stonewall Jackson withdrew toward Port Republic.

Two days prior to the battle at Cross Keys.

Emerson himself survived the battle of Cross Keys, as his unit of the 7<sup>th</sup> was thrown into the fray to help repulse Fremont's efforts to flank the Confederate lines.

He had apparently been decorated for that action. But that was hardly enough to tie Emerson to the stealing of a Confederate battle flag, or any of the nonsense that had followed.

Checked my own records as I worked, and found no references at all to the MacLeods in the battle, though in fact the infantry of both sides fought their way across great-great-great-grandfather's farmland here on the banks of the South River.

Had he sent sons off to the Cause? Would have to dig through the family Bibles and papers in the old chest in the attic, but didn't have time now.

Looked up to find the first rays of sun breaking through the purple and black of the Blue Ridge at dawn, and got up to make coffee.

Mexican Blue organic, and this time with a pinch of unrefined sugar to help ward off the sleep that was creeping into my joints.

God, if forty makes me ache this much, I don't want to see what fifty feels like.

Vision getting a little blurry as the morning crept on, tapping at the keyboard,

searching across the references and cross-references, checking names.

Almost missed it.

The reference to the year 1862, just after the battle of Cross Keys, when Turner Ashby's division was split up following his death, and units of the 7<sup>th</sup> Virginia were transferred to other units. Some of the cavalry was shifted to the command of none other than the Gray Ghost, Colonel John S. Mosby.

Picked up the phone and woke Doc.

\* \* \*

He looked older, his face a bit drawn and pale, but he was shaved. His gray crew cut was neatly trimmed, and the rat-tail in the back was firmly woven.

He had done his homework, God only knows where.

"Ashby was reckless, and was often at odds with Stonewall Jackson. In fact, Jackson tried his best to keep Turner Ashby from being given the rank of General, but was unsuccessful. Even then, he held the rank only ten days before he was killed."

"But what about Emerson?"

Settled back in his chair, and began patting at his pockets for cigarettes he didn't have.

"Likely he was a political appointee. His family was held in high stead in Virginia, and he was able to get himself elected Captain of a

small group of volunteers from Rockbridge County. Not unusual. In those days people became officers by election, based on their popularity or the wealth of their family.”

“But that didn’t get him into Mosby’s Raiders.”

“Actually, he earned that at Cross Keys. He helped to repulse Fremont’s forces after Turner Ashby fell, and the unit accounted well for itself the following days. You said he won some kind of decoration there. After Ashby died, his regiment was folded onto J.E.B. Stuart’s cavalry, and from there over to one of the other units. In his case, he was likely the Emerson who rode with Mosby.”

“Stuart was initially the commander of Mosby’s raiders, but it grew to be an independent regiment in its own right,” Doc said.

”Would Emerson have wanted that, being in a small unit of guerillas rather than with his own men to command?”

“Depends on what he wanted out of the war.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Like many of the guerilla units on both sides, Mosby was given a letter from President Jefferson Davis that allowed him and his men to keep whatever money they took from the Union.”

“So they were like privateers?”

“Perhaps more like pirates. Though the word is that Mosby himself never took a dime of the money. He split it up among his men.”

“So we have a connection for an Emerson relative with both Cross Keys and with Mosby. That doesn’t explain what this is all about.”

Waived his hand and reached for the coffee.

“This is where it gets interesting, Jack. Because there is a connection.”

“The story is that not all of Mosby’s stolen loot was divided up. In fact, the biggest mystery about Mosby and his years as a guerilla is the legend of the lost treasure.”

“Doc, is this another yarn about lost Confederate Gold?”

There are almost as many stories of lost Confederate gold as theories about who shot John F. Kennedy. Or whether alien abductions are real.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Jack.”  
Sipped his coffee.

“There was a Union General named Edwin Stoughton who had vowed to bring Mosby in and hang him. One night, Stoughton was awakened in his bedroom over in Fairfax, by a man who smacked his bare ass and asked him if he knew who John Mosby was.”

“Stoughton sat up in bed and asked, ‘Why, have you captured him?’”

“And the man said, ‘No, General, I am him.’”

“He captured Stoughton and about 30 other prisoners, as well as a cache of food and medical supplies, and gathered everything he could find to turn over to the Confederates in Culpepper.”

“That’s when he discovered the treasure. Stoughton was holding thousands of dollars in gold, silver and valuables taken from southern families by the Union. Mosby took it back, with the intention of returning it to Richmond. But it proved too much to carry with Union cavalry in pursuit. So they stopped and buried it.”

“You sure you have never heard of this before, Jack?”

“Sure. Every school kid has heard a hundred stories about lost Confederate treasure. There was even a comic book about it.”

“I’m talking about history, Jack.”

“Most of the stories about Confederate gold are about the treasury from Richmond, which was taken by train down to Georgia and disappeared. It was mostly gold, taken from the money the French had loaned the Confederacy near the end of the war, and the reserves from the banks in Richmond.”

“But Jack, there was a lot more lost treasure than that.”

“Down in Danville, Virginia is a cemetery with millions of dollars in silver buried in a plot. It was money from Mexico, the proceeds from selling cotton.”

“And the money train down to Georgia was not the only gold that disappeared. When



the war began to turn against the south after Gettysburg, there were regular gold shipments out of southern vaults. All of it lost now.”

“The idea was that they would deliver the gold to loyalists, to be held until Davis could re-form a Confederate army. But it never happened. It’s said that the members of the Knights of the Golden Circle held the gold. Or spent it. No one knows.”

“But we do know who were supposed to be the keepers of the gold in the west, and would have used it for the Cause if it had ever arrived.”

He paused.

“Two loyal members of the Knights, active even after the war ended.”

Looked at me.

“Their names were Frank and Jesse James.”

“Doc, this has nothing to do with Jesse James. This is about southwestern Virginia. The rest of it doesn’t mean diddly squat to me.”

“I’m just saying, Jack, that these things have connections.”

“Not to me, they don’t. I want my flag back, which has nothing to do with Jesse James or the Knights of the Golden Circle. And then I want a quiet fall to make apple butter and ponder the life of a gentleman farmer.”

“But Goddammit, Jack, this could be worth millions.”

“Doc, you know better than to curse God in Maw-Maw’s house. And I don’t deserve it.

If it offends you that I don't go charging off after the stars and bars of the new Confederacy, or some crazy treasure story, I'm sorry."

"But you have to look at the whole story, Jack."

"Which one? I've heard so many yarns tonight my head is spinning."

"The one about the treasure taken back by Mosby and buried. There were three people involved. Most people know of the first two, which were John Mosby himself and a sergeant named James Ames."

"By the time the war ended, Ames had been hanged by the Union General James Armstrong Custer, and Mosby was on the run with a \$50,000 reward on his head. But one of the others who rode with him in 1863 was a cavalry officer who helped to bury the treasure between two pine trees over near New Baltimore."

"His name was James Pettigrew Emerson," Doc added.

"Emerson was wounded, and was sent home, but it turns out that he was just about the only one who knew where the treasure was buried and had the chance to get it at the war's end. The story is that he moved the treasure for safekeeping."

"What about Mosby? Why didn't he get the treasure?"

"Mosby claimed that he never had time to look for it after the war. More likely he could

not remember where they buried it, or it was already gone.”

“Why didn’t he just ask Emerson?” I asked.

“At the end of the war, Mosby became a Republican, working with the Union government. He thought that would be the best way to help heal the wounds of the war. But it made him a hated man in the south, and Emerson likely was not on speaking terms with him.”

“So where does that leave us, Doc?”

“With the trail of Captain Emerson, a wounded man traveling home in 1863. We can follow his trail from where the treasure was buried, through Warrenton. But then, instead of turning south with Mosby toward Culpepper, he takes the road over the mountains to Luray. There he was forced to hole up at a tavern run by a sympathizer, and was not heard from again until he turned up in Rockbridge County after the war.”

“He just disappeared?”

“No, he stayed at the tavern for a while, and then left. That’s all the record there is.”

“What tavern?”

“I don’t know the name, there were dozens of taverns along that road even in Luray. All I know is the name of the owner of the Tavern.”

“So how does that help us?”

Silence.

“Doc?”

He looked at me, but his mouth was set hard and he didn't want to say it.

"His name was Dovel."

\* \* \*

"You have to, Doc."

"Damned if I will."

"Doc, if she knows anything about this mess, we need to know it right now. I don't care if your tender feelings are hurt, or if you and Jeannie have things to work out between you. This is about the men who tried to kill all three of us."

"I will not apologize to her. Got nothing to apologize for."

"Yes, you do, Doc. You said something stupid, and you are too stiff-necked to apologize, and this has gone on long enough. I need to know what she knows."

"Well, then, you call her."

Sigh.

"I can't do this alone, Doc. If you don't want to help, then just go home and I'll do it by myself. Otherwise, you get in your truck and fetch Jeannie."

Had him.

He'd rather cut out his tongue than apologize, but the old warrior in him could not let me do this case alone.

He slammed the coffee cup on the table and stomped out, but turned in the doorway to give me a rueful grin and shake his head.

He was on his way. I was left with a cracked coffee mug.

If this kept up, I would have to replace all my drinking vessels with metal.

\* \* \*

Doc looked like a bluetick hound that had been kicked by its master, but he had some of his color back and looked less tense. My guess was that he had been given the royal dressing down by his lady, something that no man enjoys. On the other hand, they were holding hands under the table, so I guess they had at least a truce.

“You are talking long ago family lore, Jack.”

“This seems to be all about families. Emerson, and maybe Dovel.”

“All I know is that the Dovel family was once pretty big up in Page County,” said Jeannie. “Back in the late 1890’s, they bought thousands of acres of farmland and ran all kinds of businesses. They were as close as you could get to upper class in the county in those days.”

“But not today?”

“No, the money was all lost, and the businesses failed.”

“What happened to the Dovel that owned the tavern?”

“That wasn’t my part of the family, Jack. We only heard the stories. My part of the family

lived up in Dovel Holler, and didn't have much truck with the town folk."

"Jeannie, what about money. I mean, what about this story of treasure?"

"I always thought the Dovel money was from their farms and investments and such. I mean, after the reconstruction most of the folks were cash poor, but the Dovel family did okay. I just always thought it was from their land and the companies."

"So there is nothing to connect them with the fight at Cross Keys? Or some treasure of Mosby's? I mean, old spooky stories are one thing, but we have to deal in some facts here. And so far nothing in this tavern in Luray with the family in Goshen, Virginia."

"Goshen?" she said. "That's funny."

"What?"

"Could you take a little drive with me?"

Looked at my watch. Exhaustion and noontime were closing in.

"Do I need to?"

"I think so."

Doc drove, in his ancient blue Chevy truck. I sat next to him and Jeannie, head down, dozing as we passed up through Elkton on US 340. Once we got past the town of Shenandoah, the winding road ahead of us was blocked by a car doing no more than 40 in a 55 zone. There were no places to pass as we weaved our way past the Page County Middle School, the turnoff to Stanley and the landfill at Battle Creek.

Took forever.

We finally crossed into the Luray town limits, past Walmart on the left and then up the hill and down toward Hawksbill Creek, which runs through the center of town. We turned left onto Hawksbill Avenue in the middle of town, past where they do the haunted house each October, and past the houses on the left and right, until Jeannie pointed to the right and Doc pulled to the curb in front of a long drive leading to a substantial house on the edge of Hawksbill Creek.

“This house belonged to the Dovels for years,” Jeannie said. “A great-uncle of mine was probably the last one to own it. By then the money had run out, and the county was drying up for business, and my Momma had already moved us out of the holler and down to Rockingham County.”

“So the Dovels had money and lost it, probably in the Great Depression. Nothing unusual in that story.”

“That’s true, Jack, but the story has more to it than family money. You see, we were always told that there was a Dovel fortune that had been buried, money in addition to what the family had.”

“Grandpa used to tell us kids that the money was hidden, and that he was the last one who knew where the gold was. Said it was buried somewhere safe. Momma used to tell us that someday we would find the money and be rich.”

“Why didn’t grandpa just tell you where it was?”

“He went off to war in the trenches in France during World War I, and never came back. No one ever knew anything about the fortune, though people with metal detectors used to come all around this place about thirty years ago, thinking it was buried here.”

“So this is a nice old house, and perhaps your distant relative was one of the men who took some of the money from the Mosby stash. How does that make a difference to what we are working on?”

“Something you said, Jack, about all of the pieces of this. You know how you like to say that there are few real coincidences in life.”

Feeling tired and edgy, not wanting to play with this.

“So what the hell are we here for?”

“This is a grand old house, the house of wealthy people, which is now mostly a bed and breakfast or inn or something.”

Nothing.

“Look over there, at the stones at the entrance.”

Yellow stone columns on either side of the drive.

“Can’t see anything.”

She opened the door, pulling me out and toward the driveway, over to the right corner of the stone pillar at the gate to the drive. Pulled me around to stare at the square stone foundation block.



“What do you think?”

There on the corner entrance to the drive,  
hand-cut into the pillar of stone, was a single  
word and date.

Goshen. 1802.

It had been called the Goshen Tavern.  
Still was.

## **Chapter 10**

# **Athena, The Hunter**

Jeannie and Doc had stayed at my place until late in the evening, and in spite of my lack of sleep I had kept pace with them through the evening, sitting at the kitchen table to mull over the information we had and did not have.

By the time the late news was coming on, I was both wired and exhausted.

Jeannie and Doc had left for his place, though neither would indicate the current state of their relationship.

The least of my problems.

Whatever the two of them got up to, they could sort it out without any help from an old refugee from heartbreaks like me. And I needed to focus on a single, more interesting situation.

In June of 1862, at a critical point in the battle to fend off Union troops, a Captain named Emerson fought and survived. He was then transferred to the command of J.E.B. Stuart and assigned to be one of Mosby's Raiders, attacking the Union to get food and other

supplies for the Confederacy. Was wounded in action in the daring kidnapping of Union General Stoughton, but helped Mosby to hide a hoard of coins and jewelry taken from southern families in Virginia.

At some point back in 1863, Emerson had crossed over the Blue Ridge on his way home to recuperate, and was not heard of again in any of the records of the Confederacy. Likely by the time he recovered the war was waning and he took one of the pardons offered by the US Government. Many former Confederates did.

Cross Keys. Mosby. Goshen. Three pieces tied together in the past that were now tied to the present.

It was time to go re-visit Mr. Emerson.

Too tired for this night, and I could barely get my clothes off before tumbling onto the bed. Tried to put CNN news on the screen, but was just too tired to deal with the remote control.

Fell into a long and dreamless sleep, until thirst and the morning sun forced me awake on Saturday morning.

\* \* \*

There was little I could do on a holiday weekend, so I spent the morning meditating and thinking about my cases. A couple of cups of good dark coffee helped, as did sitting at my desk and looking up at the mountains.

Every human should spend time looking up at the mountains. There is just something about the majestic rise of land up into the sunlight, the air crisp and clean as the water from a mountain brook. Clouds hanging across the peaks, green leaves that would soon turn to hues of gold and red.

Restless and bored.

I'm a social creature, but on this day everyone I knew had somewhere else to be. Doc and Jeannie were somewhere with her family. Michael Freed had the weekend off, and was likely stuck somewhere with his in-laws as well. All of the offices and departments of government were closed until Tuesday, as was the bank.

Spend two restless days, sleeping long at night.

Monday afternoon found me in my truck, weaving down Interstate 81 to Lexington, then up Maury River Road to enter Goshen from the south side. Up Wilhelm Road to the mountains, running trails along the ridge until I found again the spot overlooking Emerson's place.

Emerson's farm was not a part of Goshen proper, living a small distance from the town. The town itself had been nothing more than a collection of farms until the 1890s, when the Goshen Improvement Company had built a grand hotel and train station, converting the tiny town to a tourist destination.

There are historical markers around that part of Rockbridge County and in Goshen, but

none of them contained the Emerson name. He wasn't listed on the plaque that gave the names of the investors in Goshen, either.

It did not matter much. Business had eventually waned, and what was left of the major investments in Goshen had ended in a fire that took the grand hotel and much of the town in 1922.

These days it has fewer than 500 residents, but it is a friendly country town that I otherwise might have visited just to dip my feet in the Maury River and wander through the shops.

Farmhouse was busy as I studied it in the afternoon light.

There were more men there than before, and I wondered what Emerson might be doing that required that much manpower. If the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives was investigating, it was likely something illegal.

I didn't care.

I just wanted the flag and the money, and the feds could do what they wanted with him. He had been terse and unpleasant in person, and it would be no loss to me if he were put away.

Watched the house and the activity around it.

Hours passed, but were tolerable. Watching and waiting are a part of the game, and I had learned to be patient on a stakeout even if I couldn't seem to do that in the rest of my life. Later afternoon came, and with it a

movement by the men over to one of the buildings that must serve as a dining room. Thinking about it made my stomach rumble. Had not eaten lunch, and I was getting hungry.

After dinner, a few of the men drifted toward the big house and entered, staying there for a little more than an hour before stepping back down the wide front steps. They stood chatting in the front yard as the light began to grow dimmer.

I was holding the Winchester, sizing up each of the men so I could recognize them if I saw them again. Sitting position, the rifle nestled against my cheek and elbows on my knees, just the way we do it on the range.

It was getting harder to pick out detail, but impossible to miss Emerson when he stepped out onto the porch. He was still fat, wearing a whitish suit that made him stand out against the shadows as he talked to the men in the yard, his hands making wide sweeping gestures.

Reminded me of the TV character, Boss Hogg.

The crack of the rifle shot echoed against the mountains as Emerson jumped like he'd been bee stung, and for a crazy second I thought I had fired the shot myself by mistake, it sounded so close.

But my hand had been nowhere near the trigger, and a second later I could make out the shooter far below, rifle held in both hands as he scrambled to get up the hill into the safety of the

trees. In the farmyard, Emerson was bellowing orders, and men were running up the hill to my right to try to cut the shooter off.

From where I sat, it was easy to see what went wrong. The shooter had been aiming at Emerson, but a downhill shot from even that distance can be tricky, and it did not help that the light was less than optimal. He'd have been better off picking a more level place to shoot from, or waiting until another day.

It was interesting, for a number of reasons.

The bad setup, the hurried shot and the panic to escape marked him as an amateur. A professional would have taken the shot at another time, and would have had at least two good escape routes mapped out. Or a hidey-hole somewhere that could not be found. And a professional would not have missed from that range.

Even I would not have missed at that range.

I watched him sliding among the trees, and he might have actually made it if it had not been for the big pine that had fallen, effectively blocking the path upward. By the time he realized the problem, they were on top of him, wrenching the rifle out of his hands and knocking him to the ground.

Interesting that someone else disliked Emerson enough to shoot at him, but none of my concern. People have to take responsibility for themselves, and for all I knew this guy was just

as bad as Emerson. Best to sit tight, stay out of it, and make my way home in the dark.

Down below, the shooter was having a bad time of it. They were knocking him around, throwing him down the hill as they followed like an old west lynch mob. He'd have some bruises, if not a broken bone or two.

Followed them without much interest, using the scope as they crossed the farm yard and shoved the shooter to Emerson's feet. He grabbed an arm and dragged the shooter up the steps and into the house.

By the porch light I got one good glimpse as the shooter when they went through the doorway. Just a glimpse, but enough to see a tangle of blonde hair that confirmed what my subconscious had been trying to tell me.

Wrong way of walking. Wrong body shape.

A woman, not a man, and I silently cursed Jeannie Dovel and her damned tarot cards. And the luck that made me a southern man genetically inclined to rescue damsels in distress. The code that required me to get involved in this.

\* \* \*

Worse yet, I had lied to McCoy. I wasn't in the least bit polite.

I pulled the truck into the farmyard, which had emptied out suddenly.

Sloppy on Emerson's part.



Assuming they already had the shooter, they had let down their guard and were sitting in their bunkhouse talking about their exploits instead of standing guard in case the shot was a diversion. Even farm hands should know better than that.

I went up the porch steps and through the front door, closing it quietly behind me. The rifle was stored away in the truck, but I had tucked my trusty Glock in the small of my back, where it was a little harder to get to but might survive a cursory search.

I had gotten used to having it in the belt holster at my back, but some troubles a while back taught me this might not allow me to get to it quickly, so I had mostly shifted to a side holster, butt forward on the left. Faster draw that way, but harder to conceal.

So the Glock was out of sight, and with a little luck I would not need it, anyway.

Walked down the hall on little cat's feet toward the voices in the library. There was a lot of shouting, which did little but make it easier for me to slip into the room before anyone saw me.

The woman was thirty-something, with shoulder-length blonde hair tied back, and the kind of figure that looked good in a pair of jeans. The jeans seemed a bit tight to me, but women seem to favor clothes that look as though they were painted on. It seldom impinged on my sense of fashion, as long as the woman looks good that way.

This one did.

They'd roughed her up a bit, and in a few hours she would have a fair number of bruises to show for it, but the group of men in the middle of the room still had their eyes on her, which just goes to show you that it isn't makeup that makes the woman.

She was standing, defiant.

Angry.

Emerson was so red I thought he might have a stroke, shouting at her and waving his big hands like windmills. Stopped to take a breath, or maybe to bark an order, but he must have caught sight of me from the corner of his eye, because his jaw dropped, jowls shaking as his head turned toward me.

"Stevens, what in the hell are you doing here?"

Took me a moment to remember the name from the phony card I had given him.

"Hi, there, Mr. Emerson."

They looked like kids caught stealing from a cookie jar, which they should have, given that no man with the spine God gave him would take pride in beating up on a woman.

"Get out of this house right now, Stevens, or I will have you thrown out."

Smiled at him.

I would like that.

"You going to do that yourself, Emerson?"

Raised an eyebrow at him.

You can't do that without practice, raising an eyebrow on one side without the other. I practice it in the mirror when I am bored, or in the doctor's waiting room.

"Please, sir, I am being held against my will, and would like to leave now. Would you escort me out of here?" she asked.

Her voice tinkled like chimes in the wind, and we all looked at her.

She waited.

How very Southern.

"It would be my pleasure, ma'am."

If things weren't so tense, I would have laughed at our formality.

Like Rhett and Scarlett.

She stepped lightly toward me, hand outstretched for me to take it, and the whole room seemed mesmerized by our little dance.

Then Emerson snapped out of it and bellowed.

"Captain Timmons!"

"Sir!"

Timmons was the tall, stringy man with some kind of pistol strapped to his hip, and I swear to God he came to attention when Emerson called him."

"Timmons, this woman tried to kill me, and this man is likely in on it with her. Stop them."

Put a different spin on things.

"Emerson, don't be stupid. You're in trouble enough with the Feds, not to mention the two people you killed over at Cross Keys."

“You can’t prove that,” he said.

Stopped, realizing he had just admitted to murder in front of witnesses.

“What Feds are we in trouble with?” asked Timmons.

“None, you idiot. He’s just stalling. Now take care of them.”

“The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. They just added the Explosives part.” I said, trying to be helpful.

“If the Feds know about this, we could have trouble.”

Timmons looked worried.

I moved the woman behind me with my left arm, using the movement to pull the Glock from behind my back, holding it close to my leg.

Cocked and Locked, and I slid the safety off.

I was backing out of the room, the woman behind me.

“Timmons, Goddammit!”

Timmons jumped like a scalded frog and turned toward me, as did the other three, and I took that moment to put two rounds into the desk in front of Emerson.

Hated to ruin a fine desk, but my options were limited. I didn’t want to actually shoot anyone if I didn’t have to. Firing through the ceiling might hit someone upstairs, same with the walls. The maid in black and white, for instance.

MacLeod’s Third Law: never shoot a good looking woman unless she deserves it.

Shooting into the floor risked a ricochet that might kill someone by accident.

So the desk took two rounds to save them all, and in the confusion and lost hearing that followed, we ducked out the door and I slammed it shut.

Out front were the rest of the farm hands, and it was risky trying to make it to my truck. On the other hand, I didn't want to leave it. Decided to take the risk, and hauled her by the hand out through the front door, running and weaving across the short yard.

Wonder of modern electronics, the auto start and door unlock buttons worked just fine and I pushed her into the truck before bolting around to the driver's side.

Could hear the shouts as they started to come for us, but the moon was just a sliver in the clouds, less than a quarter moon, and not enough light for them to see us easily as I pulled out of the yard and down his drive.

Along the road she had me pull up and retrieve a bicycle, answering the question of how she had gotten here. Her rifle was still at Emerson's, and I didn't want to go back for it.

Fear and adrenaline kept me going, and I steered to the right, away from the farmhouse and back down toward Lexington. Past the area near Lake Merriweather where the Boy Scouts have a bunch of permanent campgrounds.

We were running along the ridge overlooking the Maury River. I didn't know how many men Emerson had, but it was a good

bet that at least some of them could hunt and track. And that meant that we were better off getting out of the county, lost in the traffic of the Interstate until I could get us home.

What was Emerson up to?

Why would he risk an investigation?

Risk killing a Federal agent?

And speaking of homicidal tendencies,  
who was the blonde in the truck beside me?

\* \* \*

“I’m Jack MacLeod.”

We were resting at a pull-in along the banks of the South River, the adrenaline running out and exhaustion starting to creep in. Though it was still shy of full night, we had had a hard evening. And it was likely that somewhere in the Shenandoah Valley, they were looking for us. I didn’t want to be caught by those guys.

“Lauren Wills.”

Wills. The dead woman had been named Wills, according to FBI agent McCoy.

“Are you kin to Linda Wills?”

“She was my little sister. Before Emerson murdered her.”

“So what is this all about?”

“Emerson hired her to do some work, and when the job was done he killed her.”

“Work like stealing old artifacts from a museum?”

“She wouldn’t steal from a museum. She worked for one.”

Looked at her, raised eyebrow.

“Linda was just nuts about the Civil War. Even went to school and got a doctoral degree in history to study it more. She was working for UNC in their history department, and loved her work. She even got some side work, now and then, consulting on projects for The History Channel on TV. She wrote three books.”

Proud of her sister. Assistant Professor, University of North Carolina.

“What about Emerson?”

“All I know is that back in January she got hired to do some work for this guy Emerson, who wanted to know all about some stuff that happened in the Civil War. The money was good, and it wasn’t far to go, so she was able to keep up with her schedule at the University and still make some good money.”

“They don’t pay assistant professors very much, you know.”

They don’t pay fraud investigators all that well, either, but I didn’t mention it.

“So here she is doing this work, and she must have been busy because I hardly heard from her all during the spring, which was strange because we always used to go down to Momma’s on Sunday to sit with her, and she just kept making excuses.

Country people visit their kin after church on Sundays. You visit your parents, and your wife’s parents, and you visit brothers and sisters. If you are going to live in the country in the south, you’d best adjust to it.

Saddened that I had been overseas those years before Maw-Maw died.

I had missed ten years of Sundays.

By the time I returned, the Old Man had already taken sick, and I sat with him for day after day, listening to him talk about the old days, of raids on the Nazis, of fighting communism, and the degradation of the CIA after the resignation of its leader, Allen Welsh Dulles. Sat while he rambled about conspiracies and spies, but sat alone.

The Old Man had no other family that I knew of.

“You still listening?”

Had drifted off into my own thoughts.

“So she was working for Emerson, and things were busy.”

“It wasn’t just that, Sam.”

“Jack.”

“Right. Jack. Look it wasn’t just that she was busy. She was excited, more excited than I have ever seen her.”

“About the work, about Emerson, what?”

“Well, there seemed to have been a guy in their somewhere, someone named Bill, though I never heard a last name.”

Would not have mattered. It was a cover name, anyway.

“But somewhere it must have gone wrong. I got a phone call from her, in July, and she said she was scared.”

“Of what?”



“She wouldn’t say. She talked about her job, and about this Bill. She didn’t like Emerson nearly as much, and kept saying that he was doing things that she disagreed with.”

“Did she say anything about what Emerson was doing, or why?”

“No. She kept talking about history, and about the Confederate war in this area.”

“What did she say?”

“Apparently this Emerson hired her to do some research into some relative of his that fought in the Civil War. Why anyone would care now, I can’t figure. But Emerson really wanted it, and Linda said it was interesting.”

“For genealogy?”

“And some other stuff.”

Waited.

“Did you ever hear of any lost Confederate treasure around here?”

# Chapter 11

## Cabbages and Kings

*The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things. Of shoes and ships and Sealing wax; of cabbages and kings.*

That may not have made much sense when Lewis Carroll wrote it in *Through the Looking Glass*, but it perfectly fit what we were trying to do.

We sat in my kitchen, the maroon pickup truck safely concealed in the garage, and Doc and Jeannie lounging in the old wooden kitchen chairs.

Jeannie and Lauren had their heads together, weaving some social order out of their lives as country women from the same mountains but different states, talking about people known in common past histories. The number of kinfolk, marriages and the like.

Doc and I were working our way through a bottle of my red claret, catching up on things like what I had done and why.

I sat in the replacement chair, which had come from the attic to replace the one shattered when the gargoyle tried to shoot me through the window.

Finally both camps came to the end of their conversations, and it was time to get down to it.

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings, Ms. Wills, but you did a piss poor job of being an assassin. You should find another line of work,” I said.

Hard words, but true.

“I almost got him.”

“Close only counts in horseshoes, and not even in horseshoes since they changed the rules. You didn’t know what you were doing.”

She was starting to get mad, and I didn’t blame her. But facts are facts.

“First, you haven’t done enough shooting to compensate for the drop of the bullet when making a downhill shot. You should have fired a second or third shot to compensate, once you knew the elevation was wrong. Heck, he stood there waiting.”

“You didn’t have an escape plan, and you didn’t have any idea what you would do once you took the shot,” added Doc.

“What are you guys, professional assassins?”

Doc looked at me. We had not been assassins, but we had both trained at taking the shots, at times in our careers.

No point in going into that.

“Point is, Lauren, what the heck were you doing there in the first place?”

She looked at me.

“He killed my sister.”

“Then call the cops.”

“I did. They said there was no evidence connecting her death to Emerson.”

The victims never get justice.

“I can’t expect you guys to care, but she was my sister, and I want some justice for her.”

Jeannie leaned over and patted her shoulder.

“Honey, if there ever was a Department of Justice in this world, you are looking at it.”

Glared at her.

“Look, Ms. Wills, this is complicated. Emerson was probably involved with your sister’s death, and with her boyfriend Bill’s as well. But knowing and proving are two different things. Right now, we have no proof. We have their bodies in the morgue, but nothing to tie it to Emerson.”

Started tasting Maw-Maw’s soap again. We had the proof, buried somewhere up in Shenandoah National Park. The two men who tried to bushwhack me here at home.

“As far as law enforcement is concerned, they are two thieves who were double-crossed by their partners, identities unknown.”

“So we just forget about it?” She was showing anger again.

“No,” said Doc. “We figure it out. There are just too many unanswered questions

in this whole mess. If we want to know the truth, we have to know the facts.”

She glared at me.

“The facts are that she is dead, and that you had something to do with it.”

Glared at me.

Jeannie leaned over.

“Take it easy, Sis. He took two loads of buckshot at close range that night.”

“But he is still here, and my sister is gone. I haven’t even thought of a way to tell Mom yet.”

“On the surface, it looks as though your sister was part of a robbery. She and this Bill broke into a museum and stole an artifact, then tried to sell it back to the insurance company.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Sam.”

“Jack.” Jeannie and Doc had answered at the same time as I had.

“It doesn’t make sense, whatever your name is.”

\* \* \*

Doc, always the teacher, took center stage.

“What we have is four sets of facts. First, we have the riddle of the flag. It once was the battle ensign of Colonel John S. Mosby, a cavalryman for the South. The flag was stolen at a break-in at the New Market Battlefield Museum in July,” he started.

“Then we have your sister and this Bill, who try to sell it back to the insurance company. The site they picked for the exchange is one of the most underappreciated battlegrounds of the Civil War, over at Cross Keys.”

“Only they get killed before the exchange takes place, Jack is ambushed, and both the flag and the ransom money stolen. Jack fights back, and someone cleans up the site pretty damn quick. Before the cops can arrive. That means either that the people behind the ambush were local, or that they had additional manpower nearby. Which indicates more manpower than your average hit-and-run team.

I had missed that point. Had been out of it.

“Second, we have the selection of Cross Keys itself. It is almost impossible to believe that the location was a coincidence. Especially given that an ancestor of Emerson’s was tied both to that battle and to Mosby.”

“Then we have the whole question of what Emerson is up to. He seems to have a lot of men, a lot of weapons, and the attention of the Feds. Don’t know what that all adds up to.”

“But whatever it is, it has something to do with the legend of lost treasure.” Lauren.

“Look, the treasure is not some crazy legend, it is a matter of fact.” Doc said. “The fact is that it was buried over on the other side of the Blue Ridge by three men. Of them, one is the same Emerson who fought at Cross Keys.”

“Doc, I don’t care.” My two cents worth.  
“I want what was taken from me. Nothing more  
and nothing less.”

Jeannie started shuffling the tarot cards.  
Seemed like she was never without them.

“Jeannie, if you don’t put those cards  
away, I am going to wring your lovely neck.”

Looked at me.

Sighed a long sigh, but put the cards  
away.

“Jack, you know that the cards are  
mostly right. They brought Lauren here.”

“I brought Lauren here, and I don’t need  
your prognostications right now.”

“You need something.”

“I’m already spooked enough with Doc’s  
nonsense about old Civil War stuff, I don’t need  
you conjuring up spooks and spells.”

“But Jack, you’re missing something.”

Knew that.

“I mean, something ties all of these  
things together.”

“No, Jeannie. These are all just facts.  
They are not some great big conspiracy, there is  
no grand scheme, and I’ll be damned if I will  
waste time running around looking for some  
gold lost a century and a half ago.”

“It has to be somewhere.”

“It was stolen. You yourself said that the  
Dovels suddenly had money to buy land and  
start businesses. And Emerson’s family  
suddenly bought up a bunch of prime farm land,  
and likely helped put up money for the Goshen

Improvement Company. There is your treasure. Spent.”

“But that doesn’t make sense, Jack.” Doc again.

“Why not? People are basically greedy and self-centered. They took the gold and made their lives better. And they both laughed their heads off, calling their ventures Goshen after the land of milk and honey.”

“So why steal the flag, Jack? Why so many people dead?”

“Those are just random facts, Doc. Don’t go reading anything into them.”

“But what is that you always say, Jack,” interrupted Jeannie.

“If the facts don’t make sense, turn them upside down to see if they fit then.” Doc said it first.

“So how do we do that with these facts?”

“We’ve been looking at everything as it fits Civil War history, and the things that happened during the war.”

“So?”

“Turn it upside down, Jack. What if it wasn’t about the war at all?”

Sigh.

“What if it was just about money, and greed, and the Emerson family?”

War doesn’t create just heroes. It creates some villains as well. Still, in some way this had to be tied to the war of a hundred and fifty years ago.



\* \* \*

1862 had brought a long summer. Robert E. Lee had not yet taken command of the Army of Northern Virginia, but was off somewhere in Georgia commanding shore defenses. There were only five generals in the Confederate army, and one of them was Thomas Jonathan Jackson.

Jackson had come through the first battle of Manassas, which the Yankees call Bull Run, with a stunning victory against the union forces. But now union General George McLellan had moved his army down the Potomac to threaten Richmond from the east. Had he been able to attack from there, with General Fremont attacking from the west, the Confederacy would have ended in that year.

What stood between McLellan and his victory was a brilliant, if somewhat quirky, university professor. Stonewall Jackson was born with one arm longer than the other, and always rode with the longer arm pointed into the air. To “equalize his circulation.” He ate lemons raw, slept constantly, and has been speculated to have suffered from an autism-spectrum disorder.

Nonetheless, Jackson in 1861 and 1862 had mounted campaigns up and down the Shenandoah Valley that are still considered some of the greatest military strategies of all time. Required reading at military strategy academies the world over.

Using the cover of the Blue Ridge, the Appalachian and the Massanutten mountains, he bedeviled the Union forces, making them pull critical resources away from the assault on Richmond. He campaigned north to the border of Maryland, then pulled back down to the southern part of the Valley.

Having suffered at his hands, the Union army under Generals Fremont and Shields devised a plan to catch Jackson's army in a pincer movement near Winchester, in the north part of the Valley. But Jackson drove his men to march 36 miles in under 40 hours to escape the Union trap, and moved southward.

They would come to call Jackson's army "the cavalry on foot" for its rapid movements. In the years after the war, a young man named George Patton would listen to first-hand accounts of Jackson's strategy from an old friend of the Patton family, a former Confederate named John S. Mosby. Patton spent years listening to the tales of the civil war. In World War II, General George S. Patton would repeat Jackson's strategy of moving fast for long distances to rescue the US Army at the Battle of the Bulge in 1944.

For Jackson, the trap was set again. This time, General Fremont would come from the west, down through West Virginia to the city of Harrisonburg, Virginia. Shields would travel through the eastern valley, through Page County down to what would someday become the town of Elkton. The two would combine to destroy

Jackson's army, then turn eastward to ravage Richmond with the forces of McLellan.

It was not to be.

In a campaign that is almost ignored in the history books, Jackson split the union forces and smashed them. On June 8 of 1862, Confederate forces under General Ewell engaged Fremont and pushed him back at the battle of Cross Keys, fighting across corn fields and streams.

The next day, Shields pushed his forces against Jackson, in a battle which featured cannon barrages across the south fork of the Shenandoah River. Jackson, despite being nearly killed by cannon shot as he escaped across a bridge of the river, pummeled Shields and took his victory at the battle of Port Republic. The Union forces withdrew from the Shenandoah Valley, and McClellan was forced to withdraw from his assault on Richmond.

In the days that followed, Robert E. Lee took command of the Army of Northern Virginia, due mainly to his political connections to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. His strong right hand was General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

"If the number of the dead were greater," Doc said, "this would have been another Gettysburg. But the fact is that, with fewer than 17,000 men, Jackson held off a Union army four times that size. If the people in the Valley were not so modest, Americans would know that this was one of the most critical fights of the Civil

War. Or two fights, one at Cross Keys and the other on the next day at Port Republic.”

“And an ancestor of Emerson was here for the battle.”

“Doc, nearly everyone in Rockingham County was part of that battle, whether they wanted to be or not. Houses and businesses were shelled, crops were destroyed, and boys from the county died here.”

I had grown up with the stories of these battles, which had so raged across the fields and farms of the people here in my homeland. We used to find the minie ball bullets used by both sides in fields all over the county, and some of the stone and brick houses from that era still show the pock marks of bullets.

“So Emerson, scion of a noble Virginia family, gets elected a Captain and raises a force to fight under Jackson. And then under Mosby,” said Doc.

“A tad unusual. After all, most of the young men from this area were trying to get exemptions from military duty by saying they were Germans who belonged to the Church of the Brethren.”

“So with everyone saying the war would only last weeks, or a few months, this Emerson decides to jump in to gain a little quick glory on the winning side.”

“Okay, Doc, so let’s play that through. He gets assigned to Turner Ashby, but Ashby is killed. So he goes looking for someone else whose coattails he can ride.”

“And he hears about the Raiders, and the reputation Mosby is building.”

“So he finagles an assignment to Mosby, and fights until the raid on Fairfax Courthouse. He ends up the survivor of a cavalry engagement, but gets himself wounded. Sent home to recover, and never does make it back to his unit. In essence, he is AWOL from 1863 to the end of the war.”

“But,” Doc noted, “he knew where the treasure was buried. And with Mosby on the run at the end of the war, it would have been a fairly easy matter to travel over, dig up the treasure, and move it somewhere closer.”

“Interesting to conjecture, but doesn’t bring us any closer to the present Mr. Emerson. And there is no evidence that they got the treasure until the 1890s, when both the Dovel and Emerson families suddenly invested in land and businesses.”

“But that makes sense, Jack,” said Doc. “They had to wait until they were sure that no one would come and ask for the money back. After all, if you believe that Frank and Jesse James were part of the post-war conspiracies, Jesse wasn’t dead until 1892, and Frank lived for years after that.”

“Oh, Doc, not the Jesse James nonsense again.”

We sat for a while longer arguing it back and forth, until we finally called it a night and sent Doc and Jeannie on their way.

Put Lauren up in the guest room upstairs, and poured a glass of Wild Turkey and branch water for myself as I waited for the last of the adrenaline to work its way out of my system.

Sat in the dark, watching a few lights of cabins up on the side of the Blue Ridge, and thought about Cross Keys.

Michael Freed had told me that the thieves had selected the transfer point for the flag and money. It was not random, it was not well known, and it was smack in the middle of the battlefield. To the north was Fremont's army, to the south was Ewell's, and Cross Keys Tavern was just to the west. The transfer point was located just off the old Port Republic Road, what is now called Battlefield Road.

Who actually picked that point. What did it mean?

It was very low on the list of a hundred questions I had for Emerson.

\* \* \*

I finally went to bed, flipping on the all night news on ABC to get me through the long hours with some background noise. Slept on top of the quilt in my cotton shorts, happy to get some rest.

# Chapter 12

## Last Warning

Country boys are awake with the dawn, but on this morning I lazed in bed watching the news shows until nearly nine, a new record in personal sloth.

I follow my personal rituals very closely, when I can, but on this day I was concerned that the pounding of a workout might wake my guest. So I showered and shaved in the downstairs bath, made sure Lauren had fresh towels in the upstairs bath, and settled for steeply brewed green tea, strong incense of sandalwood, and 20 minutes of meditation.

I prefer not to chant when I meditate, though that custom is not completely unfamiliar and sometimes proves more helpful in clearing the mind. This day I focused on one of the peaks of the Blue Ridge, sitting on top of my desk in the lotus position.

Twenty minutes and I was done, feeling calm and refreshed, and realizing for the first

time that Lauren was sitting in the chair across from the desk.

“You do some kind of yoga thing?”

Shook my head.

“I meditate, and practice a little Tai Chi?”

Looked at me for a moment.

“I don’t want to seem rude, but is there anything to eat? I’m starved.”

Led her to the kitchen, where she seemed interested in the antique coffee grinder and the convoluted process I use to brew coffee. In deference to my guest, I left the cinnamon out of the coffee, adding it to my own cup instead. She took cream.

Food was a different matter, since I seldom do more than toast and fruit for breakfast. While she was skinny enough to probably like that, I was in the mood for something a tad more ambitious.

“Anything you don’t eat?”

She smiled.

“Tofu, animal innards, and pickled herring. Trying serving any of those for breakfast, and I’m leaving to find a McDonalds.”

Hard pressed to find one of those in this locale, but I didn’t tell her.

Instead I rooted around in the refrigerator until I found a roll of canned biscuits, eggs, ham, and cheese. Patted out and combined the biscuits by hand until I had five, and pressed them into the cups of a muffin tin.



Topped each with a pat of butter and a round of ham, then cracked an egg into each. Two drops of hot sauce and a sprinkle of chopped basil, then covered in grated cheese.

350 degrees for 20 minutes.

Ate on the verandah, enjoying the fact that with September had come temperatures nearer to the eighties than triple digits. The morning was clear and bright, though the afternoon would likely bring thunderstorms.

“I talked to Momma this morning, and told her Linda was dead.”

Looked at her, waiting.

“I told her that I would bring the body home for burial.

“Not until after it is released by the coroner.”

Details.

She nodded.

“I don’t plan to leave this county with her murderer still walking around.”

“Then let the law handle it.”

“Jeannie told me you don’t have much faith in that.”

“She is wrong. I have a lot of respect for law enforcement. And while they have procedures that make things take more time than we might like, they generally get things done, and in a way that can build a good conviction in court.”

“But Jack, a lot of crimes never get solved. And this one certainly won’t by the time

I need to get back home. I'm only on two weeks leave from work."

"What kind of work?"

"I'm a loan officer for a bank, same as you."

"Lauren, I'm no loan officer. I am a fraud investigator for an insurance company."

Her laughter tinkled like wind chimes again. She had been picking on me.

"Seriously, Jack, what are we going to do next?"

Thought before I answered.

"The dishes."

\* \* \*

Just finishing up when the doorbell chimed, and I left the kitchen to answer. Was not expecting visitors, but one never knows. Still, I was not ready for Agent Smith of the Bureau of ATF(&E) and a couple of his black-suited cohorts, waving their IDs at me and pushing in the door.

Retreated down the hallway, with Smith in pursuit at a slow walk, yelling at me like a bad caricature of a drill sergeant.

"MacLeod, just what in the name of holy hell did you think you were doing last night?"

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you are in, Mister?"

"I am going to lock you up to keep you out of our investigation."

Pushed his index finger into my chest to punctuate his sentences, and I had an urge to break it. Don't like being poked.

"You have a warrant, Agent Smith?" I asked.

"I don't need a warrant for an asshole like you."

"Smith, watch your dirty mouth. You don't swear like that in the presence of a lady!"

He noticed Wills for the first time, who gave him a charming smile and said, "Potty mouth."

He started to turn red, and looked back to me.

I took the momentum.

"And what are you doing with shoes on in Maw-Maw's house. Get back to the front door and take your shoes off, all three of you.

Lauren Wills picked up a broom and shooshed them back to the front door, bringing them back down the hallway in their socks.

They looked like chastened boys, in spite of their toughness.

Behind every hard man there is still a boy.

"Now what is this all about?"

"You know damned well what this is about."

Nervous glance toward Lauren.

"You went out to the Emerson place last night and blew our entire operation."

Shrugged.

“You blew our cover, and let them know they were under investigation. I have people in there, dammit, and you blew it for us. Plus, who the hell shot at Emerson?”

“Potty mouth again,” repeated Lauren, smiling at him.

“Settle down, Smith. If you’ll stop pretending you have a reason to be upset, I’ll stop pretending I don’t know what you are talking about. Let’s start with the fact that you have no reason to be on my property, and no warrant for my arrest.”

He had not shown me one, and his expression said I was right.

These guys don’t like to get warrants for anything that might force them to open their operations to the public in court.

“I went into Emerson’s place last night when he placed this lady at risk.”

“And who exactly is she?”

“Lauren Wills. The sister of the woman your agent got killed, Linda Wills.”

To his credit, he nodded in recognition.

“What are you doing here, Ms. Wills?”

“Apparently, the job you were supposed to do.”

He actually flinched. Miserable again.

“But in busting into the middle of the Emerson place, you put our agents at risk.”

Looked at me.

“Your agents didn’t lift a finger when they were beating up on me, Mr. Smith.”

She turned to show her bruises, which were turning a wicked shade of blue.

Smith thought about it.

“Not to mention the fact that they already knew about your operation,” I said.

“They already killed one of your agents to prove the point.”

“And my sister, who was not involved in your operation.” Lauren said.

The two other agents were standing in their sock feet, not sure what to do.

“Gentlemen, let’s sit down. Lauren, would you get the other chair from the parlor?”

A regular southern gentleman, I was.

While she was gone, I poured small shots of Doc’s peach shine for all of us. Set a shot glass in front of each, then lifted my own glass.

“To fallen comrades.”

They were veterans, you could see from their reaction. Most of these federal guys are. They do their 20 in military service, then retire and sell their skills to a federal agency to finally make enough money to support a family.

Hard to believe, in a year in which Congress is trying to cut the benefits for military people to balance the budget, but many military people still exist on a salary close to the poverty line. When they retire after 20 years, they get half their pay or less in retirement compensation. So they take a second job, to put their kids through school and make enough to retire on.

A sheriff's patrol officer here in Rockingham County can make \$50,000 a year in salary. An army sergeant in law enforcement makes half that.

So these guys knew. If there is a universal toast among warriors in today's military, it is to honor our friends and brothers who have died in the line of duty.

"Fallen comrades," they said, and drank down the shot.

Smith choked on the harsh alcohol.

"That's moonshine," Smith gasped.

"Can you prove that?"

"I could arrest you for it, MacLeod."

"Nope. You can be arrested for making it, or for selling it. Maybe even for buying it. But there is no law against drinking it."

Turned to one of the agents.

"What's the penalty for serving illegal moonshine to a federal ATF officer?"

He gave me a hard look but with a twinkle in his eye.

"I would have to consult our attorney, sir."

Looked at his empty glass.

"Actually, I'm not certain this is moonshine," he said. "I believe I will need to sample it again to make sure."

Smith stared at him, but I refilled our glasses, and to his credit when we raised our glasses again he made the toast.

"To the United States of America."

Drank to that. I would have done a third shot, to the Confederate States of America, but Yankees don't have a very strong sense of humor.

\* \* \*

"Alright, Mr. Smith. Let's work this through."

Looked at me. Nodded.

"You start," I coaxed.

He thought a minute.

"We are running an operation to shut down what appears to be a violent militia group headed by Emerson," Smith said.

"What's Emerson up to?"

"That just it. We have people in his organization, but we are having trouble getting a handle on it."

"Something alerted your attention."

"Firearms, MacLeod. He is buying large numbers of automatic weapons, drilling troops on his farm in western Virginia. It was enough to raise a red flag for us."

Nodded.

"But no laws have actually been broken, no reason to arrest him."

"James Emerson is a scumbag, any way you look at it. My apologies, ma'am."

To Lauren.

"He's been involved in almost every shady deal in western Virginia for the past forty years, from his one term in the state legislature

to three terms on the Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors, until the voters threw him out. He has had his greedy fingers into almost every bit of corruption, and is one of the major reasons the county has never gotten any decent jobs or economic growth.”

“Nothing new there,” I said. “That’s the story with politicians in much of the rest of the Shenandoah Valley, too.”

“But this time it is a Federal concern, because he is buying so many weapons. We could have another attack on a Federal building.”

“Or another whatever. If he is buying the guns legally, you don’t have a reason to interfere.”

“Exactly,” he agreed.

“So what do you need from me.”

“Get out of our way and let us do our jobs. We have guys inside his organization. We will bust open his ring, and put him on trial. For the murder of our agent, as well as...”

Took a breath.

“As well as Ms. Wills’s sister.”

There it was.

“How long?”

“One week. No more.”

Nodded.

“So we sit tight for a week, while you finish your operation.”

“That’s right.”

“If you don’t do it, I am going to get my stuff back on my own.”



“If you give us a week, I’ll bring it to you.”

Fair enough.

“But, Jack.”

Waited.

“If you get in the middle again. Well, this is your last warning. Stay out of our way, for your own good.”

They left.

Lauren was angry with me.

“So we just sit around for a week, waiting,” she hissed. “I don’t have that long. And I’m not waiting.”

“Relax, Lauren. He may not take all that time. By the looks of those boys last night, things are heading toward something.”

“And what do we do in the mean time?”

“Bide our time.”

## **Chapter 13**

# **Business As Usual**

The Feds had departed, but for us this was still Tuesday.

We were fairly full from breakfast, so Lauren decided it was time to head over to the Coroner's Office for Rockingham County to identify her sister and start making arrangements to get her home for burial.

The Coroner's Office is on Cantrell Avenue in Harrisonburg. Jeannie knew to take the southern turn onto Cantrell toward the Coroner's Office, and I went to my office.

Checked the mail, watered the spider plant, and sat in the chair trying to refocus on my casework instead of Emerson.

Not much to do on the case of the dentist; still waiting for Michael Freed to indicate they were ready to request records. National Underwriters is not a large company, but since it is run by attorneys and actuaries, seldom moves quickly on anything. They are meticulous about the details, which makes them

both easy to work for and difficult to get my expense accounts paid.

Went through the case of Samantha Anderson again, the poor old lady nicknamed Sunny. Step by step, all of the reports, the filing by her attorney for damages, the estimated settlement the primary insurers wanted to offer.

The facts of the case were clear. But there was also something wrong.

I needed to talk to the lawyer. Needed to know what would become of her assets now that she was in the home. Needed to know who Roger was, and why Sunny had one day lived independently in a house surrounded by flowers; the next was in a nursing home where her prognosis was not good.

It would be nice if I had the ability to peek at her finances and will, but it would be very tricky with today's privacy laws. The nursing home could not disclose what they had, and the lawyer would likely refuse as well.

Investigators on television always seemed to have secret ways to hack into the computers, or informants who could give them the information they need. Usually it is some tiny piece of information, an overlooked clue, a trail of bread crumbs leading to the solution.

In the real world, it is a lot more plodding than that. It more resembles a jigsaw puzzle, in which all of the clues are lying on the table in front of you. You have to find the corner clue, and then place each of the others where they belong until the picture reveals

itself. Sometimes a piece needs to be turned around to fit. Sometimes it needs to be set aside until later.

There is a lot of guesswork and intuition as well as just rote placement of pieces. But unlike a jigsaw puzzle, you don't have a picture on the front of the box to tell you what the final piece will look like.

Sometimes, it can surprise you.

I was still nagged by the thought that something was wrong in Sunny's case, that there should have been no reason for her to be where she was. On the other hand, given her condition at the moment she seemed to be in the best place possible, getting the care she needed.

I had decided to travel back there and root around a bit when my cell phone rang. I have one of the new jobs that does hundreds of things, none of them well. Including working as a phone.

I fumbled trying to hear the caller until I realized it was routing the call to the Bluetooth headset in my pocket. Finally got it out and in my ear to find the caller had hung up.

Pressed and fumbled with the screen to find the last caller and return the call.

Michael Freed, over at National Underwriters, and I had been wrong. It had not taken them long at all.

"Jack, I am told that the request for files will be served on our dentist tomorrow, and that we will have someone at his office to collect the files the day after. That would make it..."

Thursday.

“Um, Thursday. Is that enough time?”

It was.

\* \* \*

The day got long after that. Jeannie called to say they were done at the morgue, but that it had been tough on Lauren and she was in no mood to go home and sit. The two of them were headed up to the Valley Mall, and then would meet me somewhere.

Looked at the cell phone for the time.  
2:30.

Sat for a while looking down at the street below. There was a steady stream of students up and down the street, heading to or from the eateries and their jobs. It was a nice, sunny day still, and I watched the coeds on the street below with some appreciation. For their lithe bodies, perhaps. For their enthusiasm and laughter. Or maybe just for their youth.

I would never actually want to be twenty again, but have fond memories of myself in those years, in the times when life was easy and the toughest challenge was how to scrape up money for a few beers on Friday night.

Was at a loss for something to do, so I drifted out of the office and took the truck up Main Street until it crossed Interstate 81 and pointed east toward the Martins grocery store. It's an upscale grocer, and while I didn't

actually need much it was a pleasant way to kill an hour.

Wandered the aisles, looking for new stuff. One noticeable change was that the selection of latino foods had dwindled. Of course, Martins was not a big hangout for the latino population in Harrisonburg. But the other reason the selection was smaller is that the population was smaller.

Harrisonburg has weathered the recession better than most small cities, thanks to good management and a strong business base in industries other than manufacturing. Nonetheless, construction was at a standstill, taking day laborer jobs.

And then there was the crackdown.

The I-81 corridor for several years now had been the route by which drug cartels, mostly Mexican, had moved their wares from the southern ports and border states up to New England. With the death toll rising both on the borders and in the major cities, however, the feds were finally forced to move to stop it.

That and the tepid economy have done what no immigration laws have achieved. Illegal immigrants are going home to find work. Illegal immigration is at its lowest level in 60 years, and Mexico is facing the crisis of how to handle a small flood of returnees who have no jobs and no means of support.

I wandered the linoleum byways of the store, checking on the prices of king crab legs

(outrageous), fresh pacific salmon (equally ridiculous) and oysters.

I remember when oysters were the food of the poor. Something no wealthy landowner would ever serve at his table, disregarded as a scavenger that was pulled from the waters of the Potomac or the Chesapeake Bay and carried by wagon for as long as they could be kept fresh. It wasn't all that long ago.

Now they are two bucks each or more, and you can't afford more than just enough for an appetizer.

I finally settled on fresh asparagus, a pound of the crab legs, some sharp white cheddar and a loaf of good sourdough bread. Not exactly cheap, but my favorites. Had the legs steamed in Old Bay so they would store well on the ride home.

Phone rang, but this time I had fooled the system by wearing my headset while I shopped.

Jeannie let me know they were leaving the mall, just a few doors away, and were heading to Hams.

"And Jack, she could use some cheering up."

\* \* \*

Hams was just a few blocks away, and as I pulled into the parking lot I saw Jeannie's car.

Through the door and up the short stairs to the right to the bar, and found the two of them

sitting at a booth sipping something pink in a martini glass.

Opted for bourbon. Wild Turkey 101.

The waitress was a bit confused when I asked for bottled water, but the truth is that if you don't use bottled water from a stream you get the taste of chlorine and fluoride. Ruins the taste of the bourbon.

We sat and chatted about our respective shopping, watching re-runs of sports games and talking heads on the half dozen monitors around the bar. Sipped our drinks, not wanting to consume much before traveling home.

Carefully avoided the subject of the morgue.

Eventually conversation ran down, and the hour was getting later, and I enlisted Lauren's assistance in making a light dinner for the four of us. Jeannie promised to recruit Doc and meet us at my place.

Lauren transferred a few bags of her purchases to my truck and we wove our way through rush hour to the turnoff for Lawyer Road, cruising up into the driveway as the sun began to set in the west.

We got started almost as soon as we got home.

Led Lauren down to the root cellar off the basement, where I still store some root vegetables, canned goods and a few good Virginia hams over the fall and winter months. And where I keep my wines.



For tonight, the wines posed a problem. Serving crab, you wanted something to complement the sweet and mild flavor of the crabmeat, but also something to balance out the tart flavor of the sourdough bread.

And I have a rule that prevents me from paying more than \$20 for a bottle of wine. Which of late ruled out my favorite Coppola Clarets, which had skyrocketed above that level.

We settled on four bottles, two of a Chianti and two of a mild, dry Riesling.

Sliced the sourdough to serve up with fresh butter I had churned in the food processor back in August, stirring it with a touch of salt and garlic for flavor.

I don't normally feel the need to salt food, but other people are different.

Next came a salad of fresh grape tomatoes cut in half, stirred with slices of red onion and pickling cucumbers, all tossed in olive oil and a touch of balsamic vinegar.

The crab meat and asparagus were a bit trickier, but I blanched the asparagus in hot water for a few minutes, then chopped it and the crab. Laid a piece of the sourdough in the bottoms of four good-sized ramekins while I tossed the crab and veggies in a mix of cream cheese, mayonnaise and a dab of fresh cream. With ground nutmeg, chopped shallots, chives and tarragon from the garden. Finished with a touch of sherry.

We were done and dishes wrapped up in less than an hour, with the crab mixtures

sprinkled with panko crumbs and popped in the oven to bake.

We popped the corks on the chianti.

\* \* \*

The night would be too chilly to eat outside this late, so we opted for the kitchen table. The conversation was as light as the Reisling, with a combination of stories from childhood, Doc's history lessons about the Valley, tall tales and laughter.

The Chianti did a good job with salads and sourdough, and by the time the crab was ready we still had hearty appetites. The Riesling was crisp, and the conversation flowed nicely.

Then dinner was over, and Doc and I cleared the table while the women did dishes and tidied up.

The women made coffee, dark and steaming in large kitchen cups that we sipped at as the mellow buzz of the wine from dinner dissipated.

Continued our conversation, making more coffee as we needed.

We continued that way, talking in high spirits until Lauren started a story about growing up in North Carolina and chasing through the woods in her neighborhood with her sister. Skinned knees and feet dangling in a little creek out back.

Her voice caught in a little sob as she remembered, and we grew quiet.

“Alright then, Jack,” she said. “Tell me how she died.”

## **Chapter 14**

# **Crimes By Moonlight**

“I don’t know all of it,” I started.

“What you know.”

“Okay, you said she came up here to do work for Emerson in January, which obviously had something to do with her work at UNC.”

“She told me that it had something to do with his family, and its role in the Civil War. She was doing research about a relative who fought in the Valley Campaign in 1862.”

“That would be Captain James Pettigrew Emerson, who would later found the Emerson holdings near Goshen, and likely contributed funding to the Goshen Improvement Company.”

She shrugged.

“And she came home to visit?”

She looked at me.

“Yes. She came back to visit Momma and me about every two or three weeks, and to

check in on the project she was doing at the University.”

“Any idea if that was related?”

“Not that I can see. Apparently with the anniversary of the civil war coming up, there has been a lot of talk about lost Confederate treasures, and where they went, and whether any of it was still around. Mostly she said it was about debunking all of the crazy stories, like Jesse James hoarding all the gold out in Arizona. She said that was dumb, because they even dug up his body in 1995 and the DNA tests proved it was Jesse James in the grave in Missouri.”

Glared at Doc. For the first time in my life, I may have caught him being less than accurate.

“Well, that was unnecessary,” said Doc. “No historian worth his salt ever believed Jesse James went to Arizona.”

Grinned at me. The old goat.

“So when did she start talking about this Bill?” I asked.

“Not until the spring. And then only casually. I finally had to press her about it, and she didn’t say much then.”

“Jack, she married young, and it was not a good marriage. Ellis was a drunkard and a louse, and it was all that Momma and I could do to keep her sane until she could end the marriage. Then she went just years without dating anyone, without any interest. So when

she started talking about this Bill guy, I wanted to know all about him.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Nothing. That’s just it. In fact, I think she was sneaking around like he was married or something, because she always stopped talking when I asked about him.”

Because she didn’t know. Or did she?

“Did she mention he was a federal officer, working undercover?”

Hesitated.

“No, not quite. But she said he was doing really important stuff, and that after he was done she might stay up here, or transfer to another job to be closer to him.”

Doc and I exchanged glances.

Just telling her the truth may have been enough to blow his cover and get them both killed.

You just can’t ever tell what will blow a good cover story. The wrong tag in your jacket, the wrong accent, a misstep of any kind. I had listened to the Old Man talking about being undercover, and the stress it created, and how he was watching every second of every minute to maintain his cover, both for his own safety and to protect the mission.

Had lived that more than once in my own life.

Bill had blown his own cover. Maybe over a romance that should not have happened. No way to know.

“So in July, one or both of them broke into the museum at the New Market and stole the Mosby battle flag. Why, or what they intended to do with it, is hard to say. But only a few weeks later, they tried to ransom it back for \$100,000. That’s where I came in.”

“She was scared, Jack. I talked to her on the phone and asked when she was coming home for a visit, because Momma had been sick with the flu because she wouldn’t ever take the flu shots. And she said that things were really bad. She was scared of Emerson, and said that she and Bill might have to disappear for a while.”

“Did she say why, or what had changed?”

“No. But she did tell me one thing.”

“She said that if she didn’t call or get in touch with me she was likely dead, and that it was Emerson who likely did it.”

“Then there was...nothing. There was just no sign of her. Her cell phone didn’t answer, and neither did her email. When I got here and there was no sign of her or her car, I decided to go find Emerson.”

“I missed him on purpose, Jack. I wanted to scare him so that he would tell me where Linda had gone.”

Men like Emerson don’t scare easy.

But then, men like me don’t either.

She had waited three weeks after her sister stopped answering before she came looking. I asked her why.

“Momma had a heart attack, Jack. She’s not in good health, and then when Linda just disappeared it hit her hard. Very hard. She called me in the middle of the night three days after Linda went missing and sounded so weak that I went to her little house. Found her lying on the floor trying to breathe. She just got home from the hospital last week when I left to come up here.”

“I think she knew that Linda was dead, Jack. I think she knew it without being told.”

“If it helps her any, Linda died quickly, and with little pain.”

Not true at all, and I avoided looking at Doc.

“She and Bill were holding hands when I found them. Like they had reached out to one another before they died.”

Another less-than-truthful statement. When your throat is slit, your body exerts all of its energy in a wasted effort to keep blood flowing to the brain, to keep the heart pumping. You know you are dying, but the organism is paralyzed. Either they were extraordinary people, or someone had positioned them after death.

Creepy thought.

\* \* \*

Wednesday morning, I left for Manassas. It would have been my choice to go alone, but Lauren would not hear of it.



“I’m not sitting around a big old empty house while you run off to another place, and Doc and Jeannie are busy.”

Busy trying to play matchmakers, if I had my guess.

“Look, this is a stakeout. Long hours of sitting in a car watching a door. No television. No newspapers. Junk food. No sleep all night. Uncomfortable, tiring, and no bathroom breaks.”

“Sound like fun.” Her voice tinkled.

Took a position up the hill from the dentist’s office building, close enough not to need binoculars but far enough away to have some cover.

I timed her.

It took eleven minutes, almost to the second.

“So what do we do now?”

“What we are doing right now. Watching.”

“Can I play the radio?”

“No, I need to be able to hear.”

“Can I talk to you?”

“About what?”

“About things. You know. Movies you’ve seen. Books you’ve read. All your past loves and heartbreaks.”

Past loves?

“There aren’t enough hours to cover all my past heartbreaks.”

To her credit, she held up pretty well. Six hours later, the afternoon sun was making

the truck miserable even in September's moderate temperatures, but she did not complain a bit.

She did hike up the road to the fast food place on the corner, about a half mile away, returning with a bag of burgers and cardboard containers of coffee. The coffee was good; the burgers tasted like recycled paper.

Another hour, and people began to stream out of the building. Picked up the camera and waited, though this was unlikely to be when the dentist did whatever he planned to do.

Hours more, and then something interesting.

A woman began moving files out of the office and putting them in the back of her SUV. It did not seem a large number of boxes, but it was interesting. If she was taking files from the dentist's office.

Dilemma.

Did I follow the woman with the files, which could just be a no-longer-employed person lugging home her personal stuff, and risk missing what might happen here? Or did I sit here, and miss the files.

Decided to follow her.

\* \* \*

In rush hour traffic, there is no way to finesse it. I held back a couple of cars and

risked being spotted, trusting that she was a lot more interested in getting home than in looking for a tail.

I was wrong.

As we weaved down Dumphries Road, she suddenly began to speed up, then shifted around cars and whipped into a gas station. I could not change lanes quickly enough to follow, and did not want to risk it, so I continued down the road until I could find a place to pull in behind the cover of a hedge.

It took nearly 15 minutes, but she came down the road again.

This time I knew she would be looking for me, so I kept my distance until she turned off onto State Route 642 and I lost her.

It took nearly an hour of combing side roads, cruising housing developments by the hundreds, looking for the SUV with the right license plate. But there it sat, and the woman was still trying to unload the boxes as I pulled into the space beside her.

“Who are you? I have a right to have these files.”

Looked her over. Forty-something, not unattractive, with beautiful teeth. Probably did not pay for her dental work, a perk of the job.

“I’m with the insurance company, and these files have been requested as part of a formal investigation.”

Watched as the emotions played off across her face. Outrage, guilt, loyalty to the boss, concern about what might happen next.

“Look, I’m not looking to make trouble for you. I just want to talk.”

She weighed it over, then reached up and slammed the back door of the SUV.

“Come on in,” she said.

My unofficial assistant followed us into a townhouse behind the parking space, and to her credit kept her mouth shut.

She made coffee, which stalled for long enough for her to decide which version of the truth she wanted to tell.

“I’ve worked for Doctor Greenwood for more than ten years now, and he is a very good dentist.”

Nodded. She wanted to establish loyalty first.

“He does a lot of charity work, and does free dentistry for poor families, and I don’t think it is right that you are putting him through all this just because some women don’t like the work he does on their kids.”

Women. Their kids. More than one complaint.

“So I don’t know what more I can tell you.”

“Let’s start with why you have removed files from the office when they are supposed to be picked up tomorrow for review.”

“Oh, heavens, these aren’t those files. These are files for other clients, the paying clients who are current and active. The doctor asked me to hold them for safekeeping so they didn’t get confused with the others and lost.”

“Well, I’m sorry to have bothered you. Obviously I was wrong. Please let the doctor know that we will be there to see him sometime tomorrow.

Left.

“She was lying to you, wasn’t she?”

Nodded.

“She is caught between the doctor and us, and siding with us would mean losing her job. But we learned some important stuff. First, that we were right, and this business of doing too much metal work is more than just one complaint. Second, that there is a financial angle to this that we haven’t seen yet, with the proof somewhere in the files she took home.”

“And third that the doctor is crooked?” she asked.

Nodded.

“That I was right. Something is likely to happen to the patient files before they are picked up tomorrow.”

“I know something else, too,” she said. “She’s in love with the doctor.”

Something to think about, but not my concern. I don’t do divorce work, and if his wife had a beef over an inter-office romance, it would just improve the chances she would rat him out for any illegal activities.

We could stay to see what happened next, either at the dental clinic or back at the woman’s house. But in truth I already knew what we had come here to confirm.

There was more than one family whose kids had seen metal caps on all their teeth.

High exposure for my client at National Underwriters.

Called it a day and went home.

\* \* \*

Sat on the front verandah in the darkness, clouds obscuring whatever moon there might have been. Lauren was somewhere in the house, and I was trying to decide whether I liked having a houseguest.

When you spend a lot of years alone, you develop a comfort with it. Not with being alone, exactly, but with moving through life not having to be responsible for anyone else. Not having to coordinate schedules, or figure out how to get through a stakeout without listening to the radio.

Always thought that when I met the right person I would know it right away, and would just gently slide back into the routine of being a couple. But the years pass, and it hadn't happened yet.

There were dates, of course, and occasionally a randy weekend, but the big "L" didn't seem to come my way. Wonder if I had grown too comfortable being alone.

It was pleasant enough, having a woman around the house. And after a little grumpiness on my part, I was growing accustomed to things

like opening doors and putting the toilet seat back down.

“I called to check on Momma, and told her I would be home soon.”

She had moved around from the side of the house, and for the first time I noticed a hint of perfume in the air. Musky, with flowers of some kind. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I could get used to having a woman around.

But I’ve watched every Sam Spade movie ever made, and I don’t ever recall Humphrey Bogart having to put the toilet seat back down.

## Chapter 15

### Rainy Day

Tuesday morning the rains came, a stalled front on the other side of the mountains sucking wet air up from the south and dropping it over the Valley in torrential slabs that made rivers swell and crossings wash away.

I was awake early, but the news held little appeal. With most of the news teams on vacation for the weekend, there was little to talk about other than the standard stories of the month.

The economy was not getting any better.

The presidential race was now up to 13 Republicans against the incumbent.

The government was concerned Al Qaeda might try to attack us on September 11.

Rain through the whole day.

The only football to watch was Friday night footage from the local high schools, including the Spotswood High loss to William Monroe in the season opener.

I worked out.



Tai Chi Chuan, the martial form of self-defense. Working through the solo forms; fast-slow, small circle-large circle, square-round to work on the joints, low-sitting-high sitting with knees bent.

The bending reed will defeat the stronger wind.

Like the Japanese martial art of Aikido, the core concept of Tai Chi Chuan is to avoid meeting force with force, which will only result in both parties being injured. Instead, brute force is redirected, maintaining physical contact but not opposing it. Wait for the force to exhaust itself so it can be directed away.

It takes time and attention to work through the forms, and I was aware when she slipped through the doorway and sat in the corner of the room but did not break the flow of the forms. Worked another 15 minutes before I slowed and moved back to the center of balance, breathing slowly.

“What is that?” she asked.

“A form of exercise called Tai Chi. Something I learned a long time ago when I lived in Asia.”

“It looks like karate.”

Shook my head.

“Karate is a martial art. Force against force. This is more basic. Balance, and good posture. Abdominal breathing and natural motions.”

“Can you teach me?”

Shook my head.

“You need a certified teacher, and I am not one. But you can look it up when you get home. Most cities have Tai Chi centers, and nearly all universities offer it as an elective.”

Showered in hot water and cold, then dressed in my standard house attire of cotton gym shorts and a tee shirt. Padded down the hall to the kitchen.

Lauren had made coffee, whole wheat toast and some yogurt.

Ate in the kitchen, no conversation because we were both too hungry. I made a second press of coffee, and we watched the clouds against the western mountains as we sipped at it.

“Does it hurt when you work out? The scar, I mean.”

I had forgotten. Shirtless to work out, the long gash across my abdomen stood out in stark relief, white and jagged from the knife and the stitches. Long ago.

“No.”

“Are you sensitive about it?”

“Yes.”

Drank coffee in silence.

\* \* \*

“Our request doesn’t carry the weight of a court order, though I am surprised that he would take the radical step of removing records, Jack.”

I was on the phone with Michael Freed.

“I’m curious, Michael, how she came to our attention in the first place. Aren’t the kids covered by the state under Medicaid?”

“They are, but she also had the last of the medical coverage from her last job, and if the kids are covered by both the private insurance is the primary. Our client was the primary, hence our interest.”

“We found out what we wanted, anyway. The dentist has had more than one complaint. So why is this the first case to come our way?”

“They may have just settled the earlier ones. Or it didn’t reach the stage of a suit against him.”

Something slipped into my brain.

“Or maybe the other women had their kids on Medicaid, with no one to sue unless they can show actual malpractice.”

“The state takes a dim view on patterns of malpractice. They would consider that a form of Medicaid fraud.”

“So do we tip the Medicaid folks? What do we do from here?”

“Nothing. Our case is over.”

“So he goes free to keep doing it?”

“I can do a few things. I can tip the Medicaid people to keep a closer eye on his submissions for tooth restorations. And we will recommend that the insurance company review his coverage. If he is engaged in Medicaid fraud or other malpractice on a wider scale, they may want to adjust his premiums or cancel their coverage altogether. And I will recommend that

the company consider withdrawing as the secondary insurer.”

Sometimes there is just nothing else to be done.

Didn’t like it, but that’s what I get for trying to do business on a rainy day.

“What about the other case, Jack?”

Had to think how I wanted to phrase it.

“On the surface, just another sad story. But my instincts tell me something is wrong.”

“It’s not worth chasing much longer, Jack.”

“I’ll meet with the lawyer this week, and if I can’t pin it down any better I will let you know.”

This day was getting worse by the second. Jobs getting cut short, and my pay with them. May have to reconsider that greeter’s job at Walmart if this continues.

“Still no interest in recovering the flag, Michael?”

“Less than none. We have no interest in the matter, and as of this morning you should have no interest, either.”

His way of telling me things had changed.

“You getting pressure from someone?”

Agent Smith, for example.

“As of this morning, we have been notified that this will be a matter for the FBI to investigate. That takes us completely out of it.”

FBI? McCoy?

“What on earth makes this an FBI case? There are no state lines involved, no injuries, should be no federal jurisdiction.”

“Jack, you surprise me. I thought you would have known that under the Theft of Major Artwork law passed in 1994, it is a federal offense to steal art or artifacts from any museum or library. So we are out of it, once and for all.”

Damn, damn, double damn, triple damn and dammit all to hell.

\* \* \*

“You said it was near here.”

My foul mood interrupted by Lauren, who had been until now, sitting on the front porch reading.

“What’s that?”

“Where she died.”

Cross Keys battlefield. Didn’t really want to make that trip, but could not think of any reason not to, either. We took the truck, nosing up Lawyer Road to Port Republic Road, then the left turn onto Battlefield Road. The whole trip took a dozen minutes, and then we were there again.

Fresh in my mind, just as it had been that night. Pulled to the side of the road on Retreat Lane, looking down at the field and the pond below. The rain fell softly against the windshield, wipers off.

She got out.

“Down there?”

Nodded, pointing to just in front of the pond. She climbed over the fence, freshly repaired, and started down the hill through the mud of the small field.

“That’s private property. They may not want you down there.”

“Then let them have me arrested. I need to see it.”

Nodded.

Looked at the corn fields across Battlefield Road, and the sweeping fields beyond. Tried to imagine the roar of the cannons, the thousands of men in blue and gray firing in columns, in some places fighting hand to hand, the officers on horseback with sabers raised in the hot sun of early June.

Looked to the east and west, imagining the skirmishers in lines as far as the eye could see. Jackson below, in Port Republic, biding his time.

Could not concentrate.

Something nagging at me.

Something not right.

Tried again, turning from the battle field to the houses around me, the fence where the SUV had smashed through, Lauren standing in the field below.

The angle.

They had pulled into Retreat Lane early for the meet, wanting to have the advantage of watching me arrive. But it was a double-cross, and as they sat there with the engine idling for

the air conditioning the ugly little bearded man had leaned forward and slit his throat, then hers. Neither saw it coming.

No defensive wounds on her hands.

Just the quick grab of hair, the slash across the carotid arteries, blood spurting across the front of the dash and down their fronts.

Had he put their hands together, or had fate?

He had taken the flag, gotten out, opened the front door and shifted it into gear. A turn of the wheel and a quick press on the man's leg so the SUV had leapt backward, through the fence and down toward the pond.

SNAFU.

It's a military term created by cynical GIs in the Second World War. Situation Normal -- All Fouled Up.

You could see it clearly from up here, if you stood by the fence rail.

The SUV had been slammed backward through the rail fence, nose pointed upward as it rolled in reverse down to the pond. To sink and be lost forever.

This had not been an ambush for me. There was no grand plan, just a quick execution. Bill and Linda disappear forever without a trace. I get to the rendezvous and find nothing. All they needed to do was put the fence rail back in place and I would have assumed that they balked, decided against the ransom.

But in one of those quirks of nature, the hill did not flow evenly down to the pond. It

had natural ruts running north to south, and along one of them the truck took a turn, ending up sitting parallel to the pond.

They must have raced down the hill to figure how to move the SUV and put it into the pond, but I had arrived a little early.

They had no choice but to improvise.

I came down the hill.

A witness.

They panicked at that point, tried to eliminate me as well. Because I had seen the corpses, seen that the flag was missing. So their plan was to kill me, put me and my truck into the pond as well. Or drive it away.

We might all have been found, someday.

Or not.

But I had failed to die, and with one of them dead and one wounded, they couldn't finish the job. The survivor grabbed the money, pulled his comrade and went back up the hill, not able to stage the scene any better and leaving a mess.

That, and one pissed-off fraud investigator.

"None of that night makes any sense now that we've seen it. This wasn't a double cross. It was an execution gone wrong, with me stuck in the middle."

Sitting in the kitchen, dinner over and coffee sitting in front of the four of us.

I had fried shrimp, onion and green peppers in butter and canola oil, then added cream and a bit of sherry. Let it simmer and



reduce while the fettuccine cooked al dente in salted water. Drained the pasta, then added the shrimp and sauce.

Served simply with crusts of sourdough and a nice dry pinot grigio wine.

Doc sat, pondering.

“This thing was not planned. The killers must have followed Bill and Linda to the site, surprised them, and killed them. They must have been under orders to get rid of the evidence, so they took the flag and decided the little pond there would work just fine.”

“Bad decision on their part, Jack. The pond is too small. Might have been deep enough to cover the SUV, but not by much.”

“That guy I killed did not strike me as a rocket scientist.”

“So there they are, trying to ditch the evidence, when you show up early.”

“They likely had just hidden when I started down the field toward the pond, and their efforts to kill me were just a knee-jerk reaction. Just cleaning up the crime scene.”

“If they had succeeded,” Jeannie interjected, “they could have simply ditched your truck and no one would have known the difference.”

“Not quite. I mean, Michael Freed knew the details, and would have demanded a search. Sooner or later they would have found all of us, and an investigation would have been launched.”

“But with no tie to Emerson.”

“And maybe, Doc, long after this event that the ATF seems to be moving to head off.”

“The mysterious event that is now five days away.”

“That nobody seems to want to talk about.”

An hour later we still had no answers, and called it a night.

\* \* \*

Delayed stress syndrome.

It's easy to pretend that we know what those words mean, with all the media coverage of Post-Traumatic Delayed Stress Syndrome after the Vietnam War. After all, just about anyone who fought there or in any war since has been tagged with the label, as if somehow we could believe that everyone who served in the military would be driven insane by the experience. In truth, it struck only a tiny percentage of fighters in that or any other war.

PTDSS is the effort by the mind to cope with a physical trauma so great that the memories are suppressed until years later. It strikes those wounded in combat. Children savaged by physical and sexual abuse. Accident victims. The mind closes away the pain, but for a few cannot hold it away in the months or years that follow.

The bad cases bring hallucinations, night sweats, horrid dreams, depression and fatigue.

Mine brings the dreams and the jolting feeling of unnamed terror as I wake. Awake and alert against a threat that no longer exists, feeling the burning pain of the slash across the abdomen that healed long ago.

Padded across the hall to the kitchen, the clock on the stove glowing 4:16, and turned on the burner to heat water. The tea was blackberry, taken straight without cream or sugar.

The dreams still come, now and then, striking at night when I least need or want them. But at least I understand where they come from, and what they mean.

Heard the rustle of fabric as she came through the kitchen doorway. Did not reach for the light, but sat in one of the high-back wooden chairs, her blonde hair glistening in the last of the moonlight.

“Is there any more of that?”

Nodded, and got a cup to fill with boiling water and a tea bag, placing it on the table in front of her.

“I can’t seem to stay asleep. I keep thinking about Linda, and how she died.”

Nodded.

“Did you ever feel like your life was just slipping away from you, Jack?”

Looked at her.

“After Daddy died, we were all so tore up over it. Momma would just cry for days and days at a time, and Linda and me just walked around like we were drunk or stupid.

Sometimes we would all just sit and cry together, and it hurt so bad that it seemed like we just wouldn't be able to go on."

I did know about that. Not from when my parents died, because I was young. Two year old boys can feel the loss of parents, but loss is even harder in the later years. I had been out of the country, unable to get back even for the funeral when the only mother I had known, my grandmother, had died.

I had felt that loss, and grieved her. But it was nothing compared to sitting day after day as the Old Man drifted away from me. I had felt so powerless, so completely unable to cope for even another day. And when we laid him in his fine coffin up on the hill beside Maw-Maw, it felt worse because in many ways I was relieved. As terrible as it felt to have him pass, I also felt the release of knowing that I would not spend any more days watching, waiting for him to die. Knowing that he had let go, and that I could now let go as well. And felt the terrible anguish of guilt for feeling that way.

Tears ran down her cheeks, glistening in the moonlight, and I stepped to her and took her up in my arms as the great heaving sobs started, swept her up and took over her body and soul.

You don't talk then. You just stand, and give them someone to hold on to while the pain and grief takes them. The heaving sobs turned to little whispers and gentle cries as she sagged into my chest, her tears running down my skin.

“It was the three of us, and we got through it together. But now Momma is dying, and Linda is...is...”

And the sobs came again, with a long, terrible howl of despair that only comes from deep within a broken heart.

“I can’t do this alone. I can’t,” her mantra, chanted over and over in a hoarse whisper as her voice began to fail and I swept her up in my arms.

No way I could carry her up the stairs, even on my best day, so I carried her into my room and laid her on the bed. Lay beside her and held her while she cried herself out, and her breathing slowly turned deeper and softer. She drifted off in exhaustion, breathing turned to a faint snore.

Kissed her gently on soft red lips, then climbed out of bed and covered her with the blanket I keep for the colder nights.

For the first time I could remember, I had been banished from my own bed. It was an awkward feeling, since I really didn’t have a spare bedroom for me.

Settled for the couch in the library.  
But couldn’t sleep.

## Chapter 16

# The Lawyer

I was still up when she emerged from the bedroom. I'd been gripped by one of those insane nesting urges after I put her to bed, driven to clean the kitchen, mop the floors and dust everything in my office before finally settling in to make some coffee and try to make sense of the day.

I had to get back to the east of Richmond and sort things out with Samantha Anderson's lawyer. The more I thought about her and the accident, the more obvious it was that she had in some way been coerced to participate. If I knew which family member would benefit from that, or from her will, then I would have a good idea how to crack this loose.

Call it three hours each way, so I would be gone most of the day.

Lauren bounced into the kitchen, full of such energy and good spirits that I could only grin at her. She grinned back, but it was clear

that she was feeling somewhat sheepish about what had happened a few hours ago.

“Well, when I fantasized about being in your bed, that wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” she said teasingly.

Then more serious.

“Thank you, Jack.”

“Welcome.”

I set to cooking. As expected, she was ravenous. Wolfed her way through fruit, toast, a three-egg omelet and fried potatoes without a break, and kept the coffee press working for the better part of an hour before she pushed back a bit, set her fork down and looked at the plate in front of her. I thought she was considering licking it clean, but instead she looked up at me through a mop of tousled hair and gave me a rueful grin.

“I must have been hungry.”

“I love to cook for an appreciative guest. I thought once that I might turn this place into a Bed and Breakfast, and get to spend every morning cooking breakfast for the guests.”

“What stopped you? Money?”

“No, I just need more stimulation than that. I figured that I could stay excited about breakfast recipes for six months or so, then it would become a routine that bored me to death. I need more to do than that.”

“Speaking of which...what am I supposed to do?”

“Today?”

“For the next four days. I can’t just sit here, Jack.”

Thought it over. I really could not have her following after me like some kind of lost puppy, but wanted to give her something meaningful to do to keep her mind off of the pain in her heart.

“Emerson.”

“Kill him?”

Looked at her, but she was smiling.

“No, help me figure out what he is up to. You have resources of your own, and whatever your sister left behind may include some clues just for you.”

“I looked through most of her stuff.”

“But you were in a hurry to get here. Try going back and talking to her friends. You’ll find a phone and computer in there. I have looked him up online, but you’re a banker. Perhaps you can find out more than I have.”

“Tax records and such?”

“Yes, but be careful. You don’t want to make an inquiry anywhere it might get back to him.”

“But doesn’t he already know how to find us?”

Thought about it.

“Maybe, but maybe not. As far as he knows, you left with a banker named Stevens, not me. He may have put the two of us together, but bad guys don’t have ESP any more than you or I. So let’s not make the connection for him if we don’t have to.



\* \* \*

The rain was from the north, and that means one of those great, circular frontal systems that drag colder weather down from Canada. The wind was up a bit, the rain driving in sheets, and the windshield wipers on the Ford truck were hard put to keep up with it at times.

The traffic was heavy heading east on I-64, and it was impossible to make decent time on the trek over to Williamsburg.

The lawyer's name was Milton, and he operated from an old two-story house not far from the courthouse in Yorktown. My appointment was for eleven, but his secretary informed me that he was still in court and would likely be a little late.

Sat on the overstuffed couch in his small, cluttered anteroom while the secretary ignored me. I retaliated by eating several of the chocolates in the glass dish in front of me. I had been so busy cooking this morning I had forgotten to eat, and the dish held my favorite chocolates.

Lawyer Milton arrived before I could polish off the last of them, and waved me down the hall to his office. He was a big, bearish man with a full head of dark hair and a beard to match. Big, black-rimmed glasses perched on his nose, and his eyes gave me a steady look as I dropped into the chair across the desk from him.

“So you are here about Samantha Anderson?”

“Yes, Sunny,” I said, to show that this was more than a casual business interest. “I work for one of the insurers, trying to clear the way to some kind of settlement.”

“I’m her attorney. I am not aware of any settlement negotiations.”

“Can’t go there until we get a determination on the accident,” I explained, keeping my tone helpful.

Head cocked at me, eyes sharp under black, bushy eyebrows.

“That sounds as though there are questions.”

Thought about how best to handle this. He would likely be negotiating for the Anderson family in this litigation against the grocery store, and in that regard I didn’t want to give him any undue leverage. I was, after all, working for the insurer, not the insured.

But I needed his help to sort this all out, and he did not look like a man that would appreciate any level of subterfuge.

“When was the last time you saw Mrs. Anderson?”

“Sunny,” he asked? “Sunday.”

“Then you know she can’t be very helpful in all of this.”

He nodded.

“And there are questions. She arrived at the store on a cold day with no coat, and had obviously not walked there. She was taken.

When she arrived, she slipped on a liquid that seemingly came from nowhere, with no bottle found anywhere to account for it. But she broke her hip badly, is not doing well in rehab, and is not likely to have inflicted this pain on herself unless she was in really dire straits.”

He nodded.

“So the question is, who benefits from this? Who stands to inherit when she is gone?”

He tipped back in his chair, hands folded with the index fingers upright under his chin. Thought about it for a few minutes, came to a decision.

“I suppose I can tell you without violating any confidences, since the information is all a matter of public record. No one inherits, no one benefits. Everything she gets will go directly to her care.”

“What if she dies before the money is gone?”

“Charity. Every cent of it.”

“Isn’t there a nephew down in Texas?”

“Totally uninvolved. He’s from a...disenfranchised branch of the family.”

Not in the will.

“What about...” struggled to remember the name she had given me on my one and only visit. “What about Roger and his mother?”

He pondered that.

“Roger Oppelheimer and his mother, Olivia.”

“Oppelheimer?”

“Married name. She was Samantha’s daughter. She and Roger helped the old lady care for her house, did the grocery shopping, and took her to appointments. Good people. Two years ago, just about a mile down the road from here, they swerved across the median and hit a tree. They were both killed instantly. Roger was driving, and he had been drinking.”

“It was a sad day for Mrs. Anderson, and she has never really recovered.”

“Sunny called me Roger,” I said.

“Yes, me, too,” he responded.

I left in a less than happy mood. The cornerstone of my theory about the accident has just wilted away like cotton candy, and I was left wondering if I would have two cases go south on me in just a week.

I did manage to liberate the last dark chocolate from the bowl in the lawyer’s office, but even that didn’t raise my spirits. So much for the uplifting power of chocolate.

\* \* \*

Driving over to the nursing home didn’t improve my mood, but it seemed a waste to come this way and not check in on Sunny. I found her outside today, sitting in a small garden in the back of the facility with a group of other seniors, under the watchful eye of a caretaker.

The rain had stopped here, and a bit of blue was creeping into the sky in the east.

She was sitting in a wheelchair, and while not exactly lively she did look up an express some interest when I sat on a bench across from her.

“May I help you,” she asked?

“We’ve met, Sunny. You called me Roger.”

Eyes piercing at me.

“You are not Roger. Roger is dead.”

More lucid today.

“My name is Jack, Mrs. Anderson. Jack MacLeod.”

“You’re the insurance man.”

Lawyer Milton had called her.

“Yes, ma’am. I am just trying to clear up a few details so the company can work on your claim.”

“I really don’t remember the accident all that well, young man.”

Looked at her feet. She was wearing shoes with a small heel, laced across the top. Her nylons were anklets, rolled down to the top of the shoes.

“Are those the same shoes you wore that day?”

Had noticed the shiny leather soles. Might have been slippery.

“Do you think I own only one pair of shoes? That’s insulting!”

Petulant, and Southern to a tee.

She looked down at them.

“But then, perhaps these are the ones.”

“Mrs. Anderson, may I call you Sunny?”

"I hardly think so. I am not in the habit of being familiar with tradesmen."

Well, I had wanted her more lucid, so I guessed I would have to start over.

"Of course, ma'am. Please forgive me."

"Ask your questions, and then we will be done with this."

Granted, I had gotten off to a bad footing with her, but I found myself liking this slender, bird-like woman less when she was lucid.

"Where did the liquid come from. I mean, did someone knock the bottle off of the shelf?"

"I have no idea. I started doing my shopping, and it was there, and I never saw it until I started sliding. The cart slid, too, and the next thing I knew I was in the hospital."

She looked up at the sky as if looking there for answers.

Waited.

"Mrs. Anderson, how did you get to the store?"

"Why, my good friend Miriam drove me there on her way to the library."

"She didn't wait for you, or help you shop?"

"She had to go to the library. And I don't need help shopping."

"How long were you in the store before you fell?"

"I started doing my shopping, and it was there, and I never saw it until I started sliding.

The cart slid, too, and the next thing I knew I was in the hospital.”

Squinting up at the sun.

I started to get a creepy feeling.

Something about the way she answered.

Tried again.

“Mrs. Anderson, what did you put in your shopping cart?”

Eyes clouding in confusion, then she looked up at the sky and in a thin, reedy voice said, “I started doing my shopping, and it was there, and I never saw it until I started sliding. The cart slid, too, and the next thing I knew I was in the hospital.”

Same words to different questions.

Rehearsed. The lawyer?

“I don’t want to talk anymore.”

I nodded.

“Is there anything I can get you, Mrs. Anderson? Anything you need?”

“Oh Roger, the only thing I need is for your mother to call me.”

The shift was so fast, it threw me off. We were back in whatever private world she lived in, and I wondered whether the discomfort over my questions had thrown her there, or if she drifted in and out.

I patted her hand, but she did not seem to notice. She was gone into her private world and I likely would not bring her back.

“Have a good day, Sunny. I’ll come back and visit you soon.”

“Melody got a television.”

\* \* \*

Stopped by the nurse's office on the way out and let the woman there know of the sudden shift in Sunny's demeanor. Ms. Jardine was nowhere in sight, and the pleasant woman in the office said that this was her day off.

Told her about the sudden change in Mrs. Anderson's speech and thoughts.

"You get used to the shift, Mr. MacLeod. It is part of the disease. I know it is disconcerting, but it causes no real damage. It a symptom, you know, not a disease in itself."

Turned to leave, but thought of it.

"Who is Melody?"

"Melody?"

"Someone that Sunny knows."

"Oh, you must mean Mrs. Lewis. I'm so sorry, but she passed several months ago."

"She was here?"

"Yes, for more than two years. Sadly, she was another case of a broken hip. It's the most common cause of decline in elderly people, you know. We make them as comfortable as we can, and try to get them to take the rehabilitation, but sometimes we just can't bring them back."

"She had a television?"

"Yes, one she bought for herself. We let her bring it in for her room. But you know, so many of our residents just can't afford a television for their own room. And to tell the



truth, we think it is better if they come out to the activity room to watch television. It gets them to move, and gives them a chance to interact socially.”

I wonder what it must feel like to be that age. To suffer a fall, and a hard surgery, and then to have to fall into a regimented life not much unlike that of prison. Go where you are told, when you are told, no exceptions, no privileges.

I left a note asking the Medical Director to call me, and got into my truck for the ride home.

\* \* \*

I was frustrated.

This is a business where you take what comes. The bad guys don't always lose, the cowboy almost never gets the girl, and good people sometimes get hurt. But I had been leaning on these two cases to take my mind off of the craziness surrounding the Confederate flag and Emerson, and now both of them were falling apart in my hands.

Kids would continue to have mouths full of metal. Sunny Anderson would live and die in a short time, with no one to grieve her. And no television.

Decided to buy her a television. If I could find a way to put it on National's expense account, so much the better. If I could not fight with the dentist, the system or the private army

in Goshen, I would settle for the little old ladies in accounting.

The sun was setting as I came across Swift Run Gap. I'd turned north just before Charlottesville to have a different view on the way home, and was glad that I had. The clouds hung lower over the Massanutters, and the sky was painted in magnificent hues of orange and purple.

The road twists and turns on both sides of the Gap, making this one of the most dangerous stretches of road in the state for motorcyclists. I rode behind a line of semis both going up the Blue Ridge and down the other side toward Elkton.

At the intersection, I turned south on US 340, the trucks continuing due west toward Harrisonburg and Interstate 81. It takes just twelve minutes then to get to the bridge on Lynnwood Road and up to Lawyer Road and home.

Dark was falling as I pulled up the drive, but the place was lit up and Doc's golf cart was sitting in the drive. It would soon be too cold to use it, but Doc was stubborn about giving it up until he absolutely had to.

I found them in the kitchen, with supper of sorts underway. Not exactly a farm supper of skim milk and bread, but the table was set with a couple of bottles of my wine, some bread and cheeses, and a small selection of crudités from the garden. The wines were from our own Cross Keys Vineyard. The red was a classic Meritage

from 2008, a blend of 43% Merlot, 30% Cabernet Franc & 27% Petit Verdot grapes that was fruity and pleasant but lacked the body I like in my reds. The white, their oak barrel Chardonnay from 2009 was crisp and buttery, a perfect companion to the selection of semi-soft cheeses.

I was obviously coming in late, as half of the wine was gone and the conversation was well underway. I poured a glass of the red and took a chair at the table across from Doc. Lauren, who had apparently been talking about developments prior to my arrival, gave me a quick look, then cast eyes downward.

Whatever they had been discussing made them look grim.

Looked from Doc to Lauren, waiting.

“We went back up to Goshen today,”

Doc started.

“Doc, you know we were warned off from that. The ATF is watching that place, and if we get in the way they’ll just clap us in jail for obstruction of justice.”

“We had to, Jack,” said Lauren. “You came down to Emerson’s place from the back, down the mountain. But I didn’t. I went to the front of the ranch first, where there is an arch naming the place. And I remembered the uniforms the Emerson’s men were wearing.”

I remembered. Gray tactical uniforms, with tactical style belts. Paramilitary dress, with black boots.

"I saw the patches on their uniforms, Jack. We went back up and looked at them today at Emerson's place."

"I'm not surprised that the federal government is spooked by these guys," added Doc. "Their crest is a Maltese cross, with the words *Deo Vindice* underneath."

Deo Vindice.

The motto of the Confederacy.

*God Will Vindicate.*

"Emerson's farm is called the Goshen Castle, Jack."

"Castle seems a big presumptuous for a bunch of farm houses."

"Castle was the name given local chapters of the people I told you about. The people who were the core of the Confederacy. The people who were given the mission to carry on after Jefferson Davis surrendered. A castle was a lodge or unit of the organization, and their crest was...still is today...the Maltese cross with the motto of the Confederacy."

"It's the Knights, Jack. The Knights of the Golden Circle. And that's what this thing has been about. From the beginning. Linda Wills stumbled onto something in that house, and they killed her for it. They tried to kill you to protect it."

"We're talking Jesse James again, now?"

Doc nodded.

"And a few other people you might recognize. John Wilkes Booth. Texas president Sam Houston. And Captain James Pettigrew

Emerson, who won the Southern Cross of Honor  
at the battle of Cross Keys.”

## **Chapter 17**

# **Southern Cross**

The roots of the Civil War were laid by two events in 1830, some thirty years before the first shot was fired. The first was the Petticoat Affair within the cabinet of President Andrew Jackson, a vicious fight between Jackson's Vice President, John S. Calhoun, and Secretary of War John Eaton.

Jackson ended the fight, and with it the presidential aspirations of John Calhoun. Calhoun, for his part, turned his back on the Union and began to advocate a political platform based on state's rights and nullification – the right of the states under the US Constitution to reject any federal law with which they disagreed. He also became a fierce advocate for slavery.

When the war came, following Lincoln's election in 1860, Calhoun had been dead for ten years. But his teachings formed the basis for the Confederacy, and followers in his native South Carolina pushed that state to become the first to secede.

The second event was the formation of a small circle of business people, north and south, with financial interests in the slave trade and southern agriculture. This group imagined a new world order that would bring together the slave nations in the Caribbean, Latin America and Mexico, joining them to the United States and tipping the balance of power in the Congress to favor the continuation of slavery in the US.

This loose organization planned to base itself in Cuba, and the countries they would target to bring into their fold would exist within a circle drawn around Cuba and stretching from Virginia in the north to Nicaragua in the south.

Originally founded around 1830 by Ohio businessman George. W. L. Bickley, it was known as the Southern Rights Club (SRC). Over the next two decades, this small group would grow and evolve into the secret society known as the Knights of the Golden Circle.

As the nation tipped closer to war, and the followers of Calhoun rallied the south to leave the Union. The KGC got organized, formed lodges they called “castles,” and began recruiting members for what would become a new and powerful secret society.

In the wake of the Mexican-American War, which saw Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California become part of the United States, KGC president George Bickley began advocating the full-scale invasion of Mexico.

But the Civil War happened first.

“They never were a big organization, and the war forced them to set aside their dreams of a new, larger United States,” said Doc. “Most of the more active members were called up to fight for their states and the Confederacy. But the KGC did not die with the Confederacy. That part is not true.”

Toward the end of the Civil War, a splinter group of the KGC developed a desperate, last-ditch effort to prevent the abolition of slavery. Led by conspirators out of a “castle” in Baltimore and a prominent actor named Booth, they assassinated President Lincoln. And late in 1865, after the Confederacy came to an end with the arrest of Jefferson Davis, the KGC sent armed men into Texas in two failed attempts to invade Mexico. The invasions never drew enough support to even cross the border.

“Still, the Knights of the Golden Circle didn’t go away after the war. They went underground,” said Doc. “The war ended, and they went home and rebuilt. You have to remember that the KGC itself was not interested in a war with the north. They only wanted to strengthen the institution of slavery. In fact, most of the members of the KGC, in the north and the south, were passionate advocates of peace. They were business people, and war cut into their profits.”

“So what has this to do with Emerson?”

“Hard to tell, except that his headquarters over in Goshen is called a “castle.”



And the KGC symbol, the Southern Cross of Honor, is all over his property.”

“I thought the Southern Cross of Honor was a military decoration. The Confederate equivalent of the Congressional Medal of Honor.”

“It was in the beginning, Jack. But in later years, in the 1890s, the United Daughters of the Confederacy handed them out by the hundreds. It is as much a symbol of the Confederacy as the stars and bars.”

“But you said the KGC was a Confederate order,” I pointed out. “Why adopt a Confederate symbol?”

Doc shrugged.

“There’s been so much nonsense written about the KGC, it’s hard to sort out some of the facts,” he said.

“You mean like the part about how Jesse James was the treasurer and hid all kinds of gold in Arizona,” I teased.

“Actually, that part may be true. We do know that members of the KGC continued to operate in the western states, holding up trains and payroll shipments in the name of the order.”

Thought about it.

“Look, let’s just for a moment suppose all of that is true. That there was this big secret society called the Knights of the Golden Circle.”

“There was,” said Lauren.

“And that this Emerson is somehow trying to bring it back to life, and paying guys to march around in gray uniforms wearing a

Southern Cross of Honor. How does that change anything for us?"

"It means that we should go and get that Mosby flag back, Jack," said Doc. "And that we should confront Emerson about the murder of Lauren's sister."

"We're not the police, or the FBI. Let's let the federal guys do their jobs, and get the flag back for me, and arrest Emerson for the murders of their agent and Linda. That's what they do. All we have to do is sit tight and let this unfold in four days, and we all get what we want."

*This isn't about right or wrong, and no one appointed you the Marshall of Dodge City, the instructor had said. We expect you to do a thorough and credible job of investigating the facts, and then put those facts into a coherent report that will result in either a conviction or no conviction. You are in the Office of Special Investigations, not the office of final judgments. If you think you want to arrest people or pass judgment, you should be in the Security Police or Judge Advocate's Office.*

Good advice, given long ago and far away at the Air Force Special Investigations Academy.

The other three stared at me.

Unhappy.

I went to bed.

\* \* \*

Lay awake in the dark, television off to give me quiet to think. It wasn't easy, because I could smell her scent on the bed and on the pillows, and it had been a long time since I had lain in a bed where a woman had been and felt that long, dreadful, aching need for intimacy and connection.

She was just upstairs, and I could easily enough go up there and propose it to her. At the very least that would give her some option to agree or disagree. That would be the democratic thing to do, like giving her a vote in the matter.

2 am.

Still awake, still wondering why it is that women leave a scent on the pillow, whereas I use the same pillow every night and can't smell a thing on the pillow.

Quit.

Got out of bed and padded down the hall to the office.

Computer on, while I got two ice cubes from the kitchen, poured two fingers of Wild Turkey 101 into the glass and topped it with a dollop of fresh spring water.

The moon was gone, over the top of the house, leaving only the shadows of light across the front yard and up along the elevations of the Blue Ridge.

Didn't know what I was looking for, and spent the first half hour looking up Samantha Anderson (nothing but a church membership list that was more than a year old), lawyer Milton (a long list of references to cases, judgments, and

the occasional amicus brief in county matters), and Mount View Home (the requisite promotional site, filled with photos of happy people and clean, bright rooms).

Read through my email.

Checked a couple of forums for news and information.

Finally decided that I was being ridiculous, and reached for the mouse to shut the system back down and go to bed when the whim struck to look at the Angel Foundation, which was paying Sunny Anderson's bills at Mount View.

A very basic web site. A handful of photos, most of which seem to have been of same scenes as the Mount View site. Not surprising, if they were primarily supporting people from York County and thereabouts.

Looked over the menu at the top. Mission statement. How to apply. Contact information. Sponsors and contributors. Normal stuff for a charitable non-profit.

I would have liked to have seen more information, like a public posting of the IRS Form 990, the annual report required of all non-profits and charities, but most of them do not make their finances public.

You have to ask.

At this point, that would likely be more trouble than it was worth.

Sunny Anderson had a tough life. Her family dead, her house sold, living her last years in a nursing home with no one but a busted

down old fraud investigator and her lawyer to visit her.

There is no justice for the victims.

Not even with the small amount of money she would get from settling with the grocery store.

Clicked on the “About” button, and then on staff, just to see how many people it took to run an organization such as this. Surprised to find a staff of just three people, including the executive director, Miriam Burnett. A director of charitable giving and an office manager.

Shut off the computer, drained the last of the bourbon from my glass, and was halfway down the hall to the bedroom when it popped back into my head.

*“Mrs. Anderson, how did you get to the store?”*

*“Why, my good friend Miriam drove me there on her way to the library.”*

Miriam drove her to the store. Miriam was executive director of the Angel Foundation. The Angel Foundation was the beneficiary of all of Sunny’s financial resources. Would be the beneficiary of any settlement with the grocery store.

Who benefits from the accident?

An Angel. Angel Foundation.

Fired up the computer again, and spent the minutes while it booted up refilling my glass with another two fingers of Wild Turkey. Temperance be damned, I was on the hunt.

Wished again that I could see the Form 990 for the Angel Foundation, which would have given at least the total payroll numbers for the three people who worked there. And a record of other outside expenses. Went over to the Foundation Center, and the Foundation Directory Online, but had no luck. Charitable foundations are required to make their three most recent Form 990s available to the public, but that often means that you have to request them directly from the organization.

Went looking for Miriam Burnett, and got the usual pitches from the business sites that want you to join or pay to get information. Then found a link from the local York newspaper noting that Dr. Lucas and Mrs. Miriam Burnett had been the highest bidders at the charity silent auction for the Angel Foundation, winning an original painting by a celebrated Yorktown artist.

Back to the Mount View site, to find that that itchy little feeling in the back of my neck had been telling me. Dr. Lucas Burnett, medical director of Mount View Home.

Miriam takes Sunny to the store. Sunny falls down. Dr. Burnett admits Sunny to the Mount View Home to recuperate from her surgery, taking in compensation for her medical bills and care all of her present and future assets.

*Thank god for the Angel Foundation, or she wouldn't be able to afford that."*

*"Angel Foundation?"*

*"It's a charity fund we run to cover the costs of care for those who can't afford it. There is never enough, but we make do as best we can."*

Creepy feeling.

Remembering Sunny.

*It doesn't hurt if you look at the blue sky.*

Blue sky. Look up, not down. Don't look at the blue liquid on the floor, look at the blue sky out the windows in the front of the store.

Take the fall, Sunny, so we can make your life better.

*Melody got a television.*

Oh. My. God.

There was suddenly a lot more I needed to know. Whether Burnett was the doctor who performed the surgery. Or was in the same practice. Or had any affiliation at all.

How many other patients at Mount View had suffered broken limbs or other accidents in recent years?

How many had given all of their assets to the Angel Foundation?

They would have had to pick their victims carefully. People with no other families, or perhaps an estranged family that would be just as happy to see mom or dad in a home. Particularly after such a terrible accident.

Remembered the smiling people on the Mount View website. Remembered the

numbers, how only one in four people really recover from a broken hip.

They would have to pick people who were already suffering the onset of dementia, so that memory is shaky. So that the dementia is pushed forward by the trauma of the accident.

It would not have been a sure thing. Occasionally, there would be a patient who did recover, or at least was able to go home. But you play the odds, and go for the most likely ones.

The most vulnerable ones.

Thought about Sunny, with her small, bird-like body and high, reedy voice, lecturing me like a schoolboy and being for all the world like a proper southern lady. Thought about what it would take for a doctor, a healer, to deliberately put a patient into harm's way for profit.

The doctor who would set the prices for her care. The executive director whose salary would not be questioned, due to all of her good deeds.

Lucas coached her, and promised her a better life if she could just do this thing. Befuddled and wanting only a television in her own room, Sunny let Miriam drive her to the store, and she walked down the aisle where Miriam or someone else had poured the bottle of juice. Looking up at the sky to avoid thinking about the pain. The fall. The surgery.

But they had failed to keep their promises. It didn't get better.



There was no television.

It was fraud, and maybe even murder.

It was wrong.

*This isn't about right or wrong, and no  
one appointed you the Marshal of Dodge City,  
the instructor had said.*

The hell it wasn't.

And I appointed me.

## Chapter 18

# Sunny's Day

Felt like I had all of it, but knowing and proving are two different things.

Dawn found me back on Interstate 64, pushing east into the rising sun, the visor down to cut the glare. Called Jeannie once the morning got to a reasonable hour to look in on Lauren, who had seemed chilly toward me after our conversation about the Emerson situation.

Understood why she was unhappy. She wanted retribution for her sister's death, and punishment for Emerson and anyone else involved. But it didn't make sense to tackle thirty or so armed men head on, and even less sense to blunder into the middle of a federal operation involving both the Treasury and Justice Departments. Three more days, or four at the outside, and she would have what she wanted.

Meanwhile, I had work to do.

Michael Freed interrupted my drive as I swung around the beltway at Richmond, not

wanting to cut through the city and waste time on rush hour traffic.

“Jack, you might be interested to know that neither the dentist or his office manager showed up for work this morning.

“Running?”

“Too early to tell, until someone looks for them.”

“They may have had a romantic interest in one another.”

“Or they may be partners in a fraud. The files you saw in her townhouse are, apparently, also missing.”

“What would you like me to do?”

He sighed.

“Nothing really that you can do. We can cancel his coverage, of course. And the state is going to have an interest in him, if not the federal government, over the fraud issues.”

“Not for using metal caps on teeth,” I said. “For doing all the teeth when only one or two was needed.”

Waited.

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait until he shows again, and the company can decide whether they wish to sue to recover.”

“The more serious question would be what happens when they have their first falling out,” I said, turning it over in my mind.

“The state will freeze his accounts and assets, and it is not much fun being on the run, even if you are lovers, when you have no money and no place to go. Won’t be long before they

argue, and the lady gets dumped by the side of the road. Then she'll lead the investigators to him just out of spite."

"Likely, I suppose," Freed agreed.

"Anything more that I can do?"

"I understand his wife may be looking for someone who does divorce work."

Not likely.

"Beyond that, how is the case over in eastern Virginia coming?"

"Should have it wrapped up today."

\* \* \*

Sunny got her television.

A 42-inch wall mount model I had picked up at Walmart and tipped one of the orderlies to install for her. Her world was now complete.

Then it was up to the courthouse. There are any number of documents that are a matter of public record once they are finalized, and I went first to the coroner's office. In the past 10 years, there had been thirty-seven deaths in York County that were related to dementia. Of these, a little over half were among people whose last address was Mount View. But while the death certificates were a matter of public record, autopsies and other information were not. So no way to know how many had suffered a fall in the year prior to their deaths.

There was no easy way to know how many of these had won settlements with local

businesses over falls or injuries. If the business was actually sued, the suit should be recorded and a copy available in the court files. There were such records for three of the deceased, but that was not necessarily an indication of anything out of place.

Old people fall and injure themselves. Those with dementia often have other ailments, including impaired balance.

And there might be no records. If the case was settled, out of court, the settlement may have never been publicly recorded.

So I went through the records of each of them, searching for whatever I could find, and as I did the pieces fell into place.

Could not get the medical records, thanks to federal laws protecting people from snoop investigators. But I had enough.

The prosecution of crimes in Virginia, from traffic offenses to felonies, is handled by the county office of the Commonwealth's Attorney. It is an office that falls under the jurisdiction of the state, with the commonwealth's attorney elected locally every four years. The office in York County is not large, but does have six attorneys and four secretaries in addition to the elected officer.

At a little past eleven, I was able to get in to see one of them. He was young, dressed casually in khaki pants and a light blue shirt, with dark blue suspenders and a fashionably wide tie. He had the kind of short hair that

reminded me of the military, which was a possibility.

With the Gulf War now in its tenth year, lots of the early vets were out and using their GI Bill benefits to go back to school.

It took the better part of two hours to go through it all, and about half an hour into it he had called in one of the secretaries to set me up for a formal deposition and start making a list of documents to be pulled and subpoenaed.

When we had it mostly wrapped he stepped out of his office and returned with the Commonwealth's Attorney herself, and we went through the major outline of it.

"As best I can tell, Attorney Milton is the spotter and handler of the legal affairs. He identifies elderly clients with no real heirs, who are beginning to show signs of memory loss or dementia. He sets it up so that Lucas Burnett, as the Medical Director, could give them the physical exam and set them up for an eventual transition to the home. They have plenty of time. They may wait until the victim has an illness – pneumonia or the like – and then bring them into Mount View home."

"That's where Miriam Burnett becomes their new best friend. Taking them for outings, visiting every day, working on them to change their will to leave everything to the Angel Foundation."

"Eventually, the three of them meet to convince her that she does not have enough to live on. That's nearly always the case with

elderly women in counties like this. They leave her confused and frightened, then a day or two later Miriam suggests that there might be a way out of the dilemma, if the victim is willing to take a little risk.”

“What if the victim doesn’t go for it,” asked the Commonwealth’s Attorney?

Shrugged.

“Maybe they wait to see what happens next, or just drop it. I would guess you can find enough patients of Mount View who might remember that kind of conversation.”

“But with a few, they find someone willing to slip and fall in order to get the kind of care they need.”

Or a television.

“They pick small independent chains, where security is a little more lax and the owners are anxious to avoid a lawsuit.”

“Who pours out the liquid?”

Shrugged.

“My guess is that Miriam drives them there, and probably gives them some kind of painkiller to keep it tolerable. The good doctor stays at Mount View to be ready for the call when the victim is brought to the hospital. So that means either the lawyer does the pouring, or someone else is in the ring. Anyway, you have enough to do your own investigation.”

“But there are audits, and other safeguards. How can they get away with it?”

People who live within the bureaucracy believe in the rules. I gave up believing shortly after my first fraud case.

Just after I lost all hope for the Tooth Fairy.

“Who checks? The lawyer gets a good chunk for managing the transition to the nursing home, and again when the estate is settled. I’d be willing to bet that good lawyer Milton also does legal work for the Angel Foundation, and is paid very well by them. As for Miriam, have a look at her salary and perks as executive director. And the doctor doesn’t have to account for how the money is spent, as long as everyone is cared for and gets the medication they need. It’s not like these people have families that would complain. And if they do, Milton is there to smooth it over.”

\* \* \*

Sunny sat in her chair, watching one of the afternoon talk shows that had cropped up to replace Oprah when she went off the air. She looked tidy and alert, if a little annoyed by the interruption.

“I told you yesterday to go away. I don’t know what you want or who you are, but please respect my privacy.”

“Knock off the crap, Sunny, or your next room will be a cell at Deerfield.”

She couldn’t have reacted more had I slapped her.



Deerfield was a correctional work facility for women.

“Now listen, you have a pretty good deal here, Sunny. You have a nice place to live, and people to care for you. But if you want to keep it, you are going to have to talk to the police about your accident.”

Eyes shifted to the TV and back again.

“No, the television will stay. That was a gift from me.”

“But what about Miriam, and Doctor Luke? What about Mr. Milton?”

“They will have to take care of themselves. It is you I am concerned about.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. Keep taking your medications. And work a little harder on your rehab from the fall. It won’t help any of us if you die young.”

She nodded slowly.

“Do I still get the money?”

Shook my head.

“That would be fraud. And you wouldn’t want to be mixed up in anything like that, would you?”

Slowly shook her head.

I stood and headed for the door.

“Young man.”

Paused.

“What is your name?”

Thought a minute.

“Roger.”

Heard her laugh as I went out the door.

\* \* \*

I was under no illusions. Twice in two days, Mrs. Anderson had seemed lucid and able to remember immediate things. But that could disappear in a single heartbeat, leaving her to slide down the long path toward death.

Started to take the drive toward the Interstate when I realized that I could not leave this with so many loose ends.

Turned back toward the courthouse, where there did not seem to be much happening. Drove past, down the street to the law firm of Milton & Graves, pulling past and into an open spot up the street.

Up the wooden steps of the old house, through the front door, across the foyer and pulled open the door to Milton's office before the secretary could even protest.

Closed the door quietly behind me and sat in the same chair as yesterday.

He was talking on the phone, and my appearance annoyed him.

"I don't have time to talk to you now. Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

"Call them back."

"Go wait in the foyer. When I am done with this, if I have time, I will talk to you. Not until."

"Sunny Anderson. Melody Lewis. David Armbruster," I said.

For an attorney, he should have been better at it. Had this been a poker game, I would

already own all of his chips. Eyes shifted, color turning pale, tighter grip on the phone.

“Sam, let me call you back in about half an hour, can I? Something has come up.”

The secretary finally made it across the foyer and opened the door, but he waived her away.

Took a moment to compose himself.

“So what is it that you want, Mr. MacLeod?”

“I figure you got an hour, maybe less, before you are arrested for conspiracy to commit fraud, conspiracy to commit murder, and a bunch of other things the seven lawyers over at the Commonwealth’s Attorney’s office are working up for the judge.”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you are talking about.”

You got sloppy, Milton. One of those stores had video footage, and it’s pretty easy to make out the fat, bearded lawyer pouring liquid on the floor.”

Could taste Maw-Maw’s soap. Did you still have to wash your mouth out if the lie is for a good cause? Likely. Maw-Maw was pretty stringent about stuff like that.

“And Sunny isn’t quite as confused as she sometimes makes out to be. Right now she is talking her head off. You should have made your life easier and just bought her the damned television.”

Smiled at him.

He sat back, regained his composure.

“I’m sure we can reach some kind of accommodation on this. What would it take for you to drop the whole thing?”

Lawyers. It’s always the negotiation, the deal.

Shook my head.

“Too late for that. The Burnetts are going down, and you are going down. The whole sordid mess will hit the papers. You lose everything. With a good lawyer, there’s a small chance that you might get off with a bunch of consecutive life sentences. On the other hand, this state does the death penalty, and what you have done is going to make you seem a monster to most of your friends and peers.”

“So what is it you expect me to do? Run?”

Shook my head.

“They are likely waiting for that.”

“If you’re like most lawyers, you keep your gun in the right hand drawer, second from the top. I suggest you write out a nice confession, then either wait for them to come to arrest you or use the gun.”

“Confess?”

He looked surprised at the very thought.

“It’s good for the soul.”

I waited up the street in the truck.

Couldn’t feel happy about what I had done, but sometimes doing the right thing is hard. Still, he had options about his life, which was more than you could say for Samantha

Anderson, or any of the other elderly clients whose lives he had ruined.

He wouldn't use the gun. People like him never did. Nor would he write a confession to make it easier on him. He would sit at his desk and plot and plan and spin the situation the way it would work best in front of a jury. He would protest, to cop a plea bargain, and try to spend a few years in minimum detention as an accessory to felony fraud rather than going to Death Row as an accessory to murder.

To do that, though, he would have to pin the actual planning and execution on the doctor. Who would likewise be trying to spin his involvement.

An hour passed, with no sign of the police.

Didn't want to sit here all day, but didn't want to leave without seeing it through.

Patience. Focus. Center.

Whatever happened, there would be no lawsuit against the grocery store, and the "slip and sue" scam would be over. For this group, anyway. Another attorney would be brought in to handle Sunny's affairs, the state would swoop in on the Angel Foundation, and the nursing home would gain a new medical director. I would follow up with the new administration there in a month or two to see if we could do anything further, though there wasn't much to be done that the witches in National Underwriter's accounting department would agree to.

Cop cars. Two of them.

They pulled to the curve outside lawyer Milton's office, no lights or sirens. The young guy from the Commonwealth's Attorney's office stepped out of one of the cruisers, face grim.

They took only about three minutes before opening the door and escorting Milton down the walk and into the car.

Milton was not handcuffed. He walked to the police cruiser, and in the seconds before ducking down to sit in the back seat, scanned the neighborhood to see who might be watching.

I waved at him.

I waited until they left before putting the truck into gear and sliding out to head back home.

Put in a quick call to Michael Freed to let him know that the case was wrapped, that the three were being arrested for fraud and medical malpractice. Let him know that the suit would be dropped, and that our client would not be accountable for Mrs. Anderson's injuries.

"You don't sound terrible happy, Jack."

"It's not what I would have wished for the lady. I would hope there would be some outcome that would undo the damage. After all, she was as much a victim as she was an accessory."

"But she knew what she was doing, which makes her more than a little guilty. "

Knew that. Didn't make me feel any better.

"I should have the report done and ready to hand to you next week. Tuesday."

“What about your other little issue?”

“I’ve agreed to wait and let the FBI assist with that. They seem to have a clearer view of what is going on, and how best to recover our property.”

## Chapter 19

### Captives

It was dark by the time I jumped off the Interstate down through Weyer's Cave and on to Lawyer Road. The moon would have been bright enough, but it was hidden by a cloud layer that hung thickly over the valley and made visibility tricky on an unlighted country road.

The house was completely dark when I pulled into the drive, so I changed my mind and turned around to head to Doc's place about a mile away. Expected to find Doc, Jeannie and Lauren sitting around the kitchen there, swapping lies or reading the tarot cards.

Which is what they were doing, except that it was only Doc and Jeannie.

Jeannie paused with a hand in mid-air, waiting to place the tenth and final card of the Celtic cross in its place. Smiled up at me.

"Hello, Jack. Where's Lauren?"

Chest squeezed tight.

"I was hoping you knew. There's no one home at my place."



Doc slid to his feet with a grace I often wished I had, turning lightly on his feet as he pulled his light jacket over his shoulders.

“Jeannie, saddle up. Let’s go have a look.”

I took my Ford truck, with Doc’s electric cart close behind, and we skidded down Lawyer Road at speeds that jolted my fillings with every pothole and bump. Took the turn up into the driveway and up to the garage.

Expecting to feel absolutely silly when we checked the house and found her sound asleep somewhere. Only she wasn’t. Doc and Jeannie checked the first floor and moved back to the kitchen, while I took the second floor. And on a hunch looked at the third as well.

Empty.

Not quite empty, as her things were packed and stacked neatly on top of the bed upstairs. The sheets had been washed and the bed made, her scent on the pillow replaced by the fake flowery smell of the detergent.

She had prepared and then left.

Downstairs to the kitchen, where I found Doc in the process of pouring drinks. I took the bourbon and branch from him and took a long swallow, feeling the burn of the liquor in my throat as it blossomed into warmth in my belly.

“She’s gone.”

Doc nodded. Thought a minute.

“I figure the best time would be about dawn.”

We both knew where she had gone.

“If they were going to do something to her fast, or if she’s already made her play and lost, we’re already too late. If she did it and got away, we need to sit tight for the next few hours to help her when she gets back here.”

“If she’s already dead, or captured, a few hours won’t make any difference.”

“Dawn,” I said. “Gives us about six hours before we leave.”

“I’m going to get Jeff Mason and a few of the boys. We may need some help.”

“Just get Jeff. If we need more than that, we’ll call in the FBI.”

Didn’t need to tell him what we all knew, that she had in a fit of pique put her things in order and then gone back to Goshen to kill James Tyree Emerson. He was already working through the logistics of getting there and getting out.

I printed off the Google Earth view of the property, drew in the changes as I remembered them. Jeff Mason arrived as we were discussing the approaches to the property, and he added shadings based on the cloud cover this night and the likelihood of rain.

We took a straight-in approach. We would bring the truck to within a half mile of the gate of the Emerson “Castle,” and I would take it from there on a path more or less straight to the house, while Doc and Jeff took positions to cover our exit.

Had to avoid the watchers, if they were there. This close to their own deadline, they may have withdrawn all but a minimal presence.

I would find Lauren, if she was alive and I could find her, and bring her out the same way I came in. We would hit the truck and get back here, then alert the FBI so that they could act.

Simple plans work the best.

Even at that, there were a thousand things that could go wrong.

Empty the mind. Find calmness. Center. Focus.

The arts of war.

\* \* \*

It was dark enough that I could barely make out the metal poles of the front gate. We had assumed that the gate would be wired in some way, so I crawled a hundred feet down the fence to a point where rabbits or a dog had dug their way under the fence, leaving an eroded area beneath that was big enough for me to get through.

Dark clothes, the Glock strapped safely to my left hip, butt forward, a round chambered.

The pre-dawn was chilly, and I had worn only thin clothing to keep the bulk from hindering movements.

Doc had tapped on my foot a little after 3 am, and I had gotten out of bed, splashed water on my face and laced up my boots. Black, with

the gloss long worn off of them so that they were suitable for combat.

Jeannie had coffee ready in the Thermoses, and we checked our weapons and ammunition for a final time before heading out into the night. I wished we had a little more for firepower, but I could not carry much of anything in. Doc had his trusty hunting rifle, with a five-round clip and mounted scope. Jeff preferred the heft of an automatic shotgun, carrying 12-gauge shot and holding five rounds, with an ammo belt for extras should he need it.

Rode in silence.

In all the old war movies I saw as a kid, the soldiers talked constantly as they rode toward the battle. About their wives and kids, what they were going to do when the war was over. About how they would spend their pay.

I've gone into battle more than once, as have Jeff and Doc. You don't talk. You think. Quietly. You ponder what you have to do when your feet hit the ground, go over the plan in your head. You wonder if this will be the day that you die. Or if you are going to come back some maimed piece of meat that is fed through hoses and strapped to a bed until you die.

You don't talk.

Halfway across Emerson's broad lawn, paused in the shadow of a storage shed as a guard slogged across the yard on his patrol. Rolled onto my back to signal Doc, who nodded, then wiggled my way forward.

Slowly.

Wondered if I would find her dead.  
Wondered if she would be in any shape to travel  
back across the yard.

Wondered why there had not been more  
electronic surveillance, or brighter lights.

Were they that cocky?

Moved to the porch, then back to the  
right.

Staircase.

This was the worst part of it, with the  
muted light from the door illuminating the  
porch. Waited for guards, but none came.

Struck me as odd, again.

If Lauren had gotten here, even if she  
failed, there should have been a heavier guard.  
They should have been armed to the teeth, ready  
and waiting for...

Me.

This was a simple trap.

They knew I would be coming, and they  
were making it easier for me to get in. They  
aimed to capture me, either as a bargaining chip  
with the ATF or for something else they thought  
I had.

Rolled under the porch, and stripped my  
arsenal. Glock and holster, hunting knife, rope,  
flare. Extra clips. Stashed them under the  
porch.

If they were waiting for me, no sense in  
making it any harder than it had to be.

Walked up the porch and knocked on the  
front door.

\* \* \*

It took them a while.

Finally the door opened, and I found myself confronted not by neo-Confederate soldiers armed to the teeth, but with the pretty little brunette in the French maid's uniform.

Classy.

I liked that, even at 4 am.

They were waiting in the library, Emerson himself sitting behind the desk I had put two bullets into on my last visit. No sign of the holes, and whoever had patched the work did it well. Was tempted to ask Emerson for his name.

Could feel them moving in around and behind me.

To the right of the desk, Lauren was tied in a chair, head down. I could see her breathing, but that was the only way to tell she was alive. She had been beaten badly, and was bleeding from the nose and mouth. She was completely naked, and from the looks of the bruises and marks had been whipped. God knows what else.

Anger creeping up, the Berserker legacy of my Viking ancestors, and I had to fight hard to put it back in the recesses of my mind..

Empty the mind. Center. Focus.

I had one mission, and that was to get Lauren out alive and deliver her into the hands of Doc and Jeff outside the gate.

Stick to the plan.

Emerson waited.

I looked around the room, noting the paintings of his ancestors, seeing some resemblance. Looked above his head to the painting of the one that must be James Pettigrew Emerson, seeing it in a new light. Classic pose, arm in front of his body, glove balancing the sword under his outstretched hand. Around his neck the ribbon and Maltese cross, the Southern Cross of Honor won at Cross Keys. The turned-aside body concealing the empty right sleeve tucked into a uniform pocket.

The amputated arm, the reason why he missed the rest of the war.

Pieces falling into place now.

A wounded Emerson leaves Mosby after the raid on Fairfax Courthouse, one of three men who knew where the stolen treasure had been buried. Pursued, he holes up in a little Tavern in Luray, called Goshen.

Looked into Emerson's eyes. Black, hard eyes set deep in his bloated face.

Nodded at him.

Emerson the Confederate had been too badly wounded, had lost an arm. In those days, the loss of a limb was usually a death sentence, between the infection and loss of blood. But the elder Emerson had somehow survived, had recuperated, had gone home to his land along the Maury River.

"How delightful to have you back, Mr. MacLeod. It is MacLeod, isn't it?"

Nodded.

“In a few hours it will be dawn, Mr. MacLeod. I hope you enjoy it, because it will be the last one that you and Ms. Wills will ever see. Come the dawn in two days, agents of the FBI, aided by some treasury agents, will come roaring up the road with their guns blazing. They won’t meet much resistance, but a few of our gallant men will be killed, along with a few civilians who just happened to be caught in the crossfire.”

His plan, not mine.

Tried to picture it. Emerson arrives at Goshen Tavern, half dead, and over the next month is bedridden until he can travel home. Even then, the war is over before he is able to do much. And with it comes The Burning.

The Reconstruction.

Hard times, when the entire valley had suffered.

Why had they not gone back to get the treasure?

“Don’t you have anything to say, MacLeod?”

Thought about it.

“I know what Goshen means.”

\* \* \*

Emerson had cleared the room of everyone except the two of us, Captain Timmons and Lauren.



I stepped over to his liquor cabinet and picked up the decanter of bourbon, holding it up with a quizzical eyebrow. He waved a hand.

Whatever.

I poured a shot into a glass and took it to Lauren, lifting her chin and pouring a little at a time into her mouth until she sputtered and jerked violently backward.

“Godammit, that hurts!”

Had forgotten the cuts on her lip.

Emerson looked annoyed.

I poured one for me. Two fingers of bourbon, two ice cubes, splash of ice.

Set it on the desk, noting the slight irregularities in the surface where the two bullet holes had been repaired.

Stepped in front of Timmons.

“Captain, your jacket.”

He stood for a second, not sure what to do, then shrugged off the gray officer’s coat. I used it to cover Lauren.

“Now, where were we?”

“You said something,” Emerson said harshly, “about the town of Goshen.”

Took a sip of the smooth bourbon. Not my Wild Turkey, but not bad. Something distilled in a small batch, along the lines of Maker’s Mark or Brooks.

“Not the town. Not at first.”

“You see,” talking to Timmons, “the designation for the town of Goshen came later. First, there was the tavern in Luray.

“When Pettigrew...the original James Emerson...came crawling over Thornton Gap and down into Luray, he was more dead than alive. A tavern owner named Dovel took him in, hid him, and nursed him back to health. He got home, to his family farm here. A few months later, when he was able to travel, Emerson went back to Luray, met up with Dovel, and the two of them went over the mountain to a set of twin pines east of new Baltimore. They dug up the treasure from the raid on Fairfax Courthouse, took it back to Luray, and split it up.”

“How am I doing?” Aimed at Emerson.

Waved a fat hand at me.

“They buried it, some on the grounds of the tavern, some on the grounds of the home castle here in Rockbridge County.”

“Here, in Goshen?” asked Timmons.

“There was no Goshen then. The Goshen name came later. Likely taken from the name of the tavern in Luray, and the name of the conspiracy to steal the treasure. Remember that Emerson rode for Mosby, and Mosby had a letter of marque from Jefferson Davis to take Union plunder and divide it with his men.”

“But this is Goshen now,” Timmons said.

Nodded.

‘A whimsy on the part of Emerson’s great-grandfather. In 1890, all of a sudden, the Dovel family in Luray created businesses, bought up farmland, and started down the road to riches. At almost the same time, the Emerson family invested heavily, though not publicly, in

the Goshen Land and Development Company. They built a train station, a grand hotel, and a bunch of other stuff. It was the culmination of the Goshen conspiracy, just like money stolen from the Union and the Confederacy all across the nation was suddenly invested to build wealth."

Emerson's eyes never changed, but I knew I was on the right path.

"But it all meant nothing. They were big fish in a small pond, and when the Crash of '29 came they lost nearly everything. By then the hotel and most of the town of Goshen had burned in a raging fire. The Dovels lost most of their wealth. In the end, all that was left was one small tavern on the banks of the Hawksbill River and a farm in the tiny town of Goshen."

"Dovel was supposed to have kept some of it in reserve," said Emerson. "Curse his miserable soul for not doing it."

"Still," Timmons asked, "Why did they wait so long? Why did the treasure sit there for nearly 25 years before they dipped in and used it? After all, most of the other people who stole money from the Confederacy had long since spent it."

"Because they were cowards," I answered.

"You shut up," demanded Emerson., rising to his feet and looking for all of the world like an aged copy of the painting on the wall. "You shut your filthy mouth."

“Look it up for yourself. I did. They had to wait until they were sure that none of their Confederate buddies would come looking for them. Wait until Mosby was safely retired and no longer interested. Wait for Jesse James, and John Wilkes Booth, and all of the other members of the great, grand Confederates were dead. Until Jefferson Davis was dead. Waited for the dream of a resurrected Confederacy to die. Then no one could blame them for spending the money on themselves.”

“Jefferson Davis died in 1889. They dug the money up and began to spend it in 1890.”

“Goshen,” I said to Timmons, “was just the code word they used between them for the treasure. The code word for a cheap theft pulled off by a tavern owner and a cripple, to enrich themselves. This whole place...”

Waved my hand toward the rest of the ranch.

“Was built on theft and fraud.”

## **Chapter 20**

# **Knights of the Golden Circle**

Given Emerson's rage, it could have been a lot worse. There had been a couple of beatings, the cold water drenching, and a lot of threats. Came out the other side having told them nothing new and with most of my skin intact.

They had not been looking for information. They had been an instrument of Emerson's rage, for diminishing one of his heroes in front of the troops.

Still, through all of it, I had three things going for me. The first is that I knew I could take them. Or at least had a decent chance of doing so. The guys who did the beatings were muscle, but they were sloppy. In any of a half dozen times, I could have pulled loose and had at least a 50-50 chance of taking them. The second was that they didn't want or need anything from me. This was just punishment,

and while it meant a lot of bruises it did not mean any permanent damage.

The third was that this whole setup made no sense at all.

I could buy the whole neo-Confederate thing, or I could buy the Knights of the Golden Circle, but I had trouble buying them both together. After all, they had not really been partners in 1860 or the war years, so why would they be now?

Kept my mind occupied during the worst of it.

Woke in a room lit by a single, high window. Basement room.

Across the room Lauren sat in a chair, watching me. She was dressed again, if only in jeans and a shirt. Still looked like something the cat had dragged in.

On a cot beside her was a man I didn't know.

"Who's he?"

"Don't know. They said he is some kind of informer for the ATF, but he was here when they brought us down. Are you alright?"

"I'll get by. How about you?"

"I could use a shower and a little makeup. Other than that I guess I'll get by."

Nodded.

Went to the window, trying to judge the time. The sun was up, but I could not see the sky or the mountains through the small portal.

"I wonder how much time until the ATF makes their move?"

For the third person in the room. Lauren and I knew already.

No answer.

I walked over to the man, a cleancut young man in his mid-thirties lying face down on the cot. He was breathing, but showed no signs of being conscious. Only one way to tell.

Kicked him in the ass.

There are a lot of ways to fake being asleep or unconscious. But there are autonomic reflexes no human can control. One of them is the reaction of the muscles in the gluteus maximus. Kick an unconscious person in the butt and the muscles will remain soft. Kick someone who is awake, and the muscles will tense.

Can't help themselves.

Our friend was faking. Likely a plant, put in to see what we would talk about.

Waited.

He groaned, and sat up to put his feet on the floor. Held his head for a moment, and then looked around.

Nice performance, but I wasn't buying.

\* \* \*

"Our best bet is to sit tight. This is what, Friday? I can't remember any longer."

"Friday," said our third member.

"So day after tomorrow, the ATF will come through the gates, end all of this nonsense, arrest the bad guys and set us free."

Lauren looked at me. We had discussed this, in one of the long sessions with Doc and Jeannie. It would not be the ATF. It would be the FBI. And they might not attack on a Sunday. Not since the Branch Davidian fiasco. They might wait until Monday, when the attack would not be perceived as an assault on religion.

Turned my head away from him, and gave Lauren a wink.

The door opened, and four men entered. Armed.

Our third member walked to the door, paused.

“They know something.”

He walked out the door, and the others grabbed Lauren and me and pulled us along.

Wanted to fight. I had a little less than even chance of taking them, but even if I did there would be the matter of getting up the stairs and out of the house. Across the yard in broad daylight. Even if Doc and Jeff were still in place, no way to make it that far without getting shot.

Focus. The mission was to get Lauren out alive. Deep, slow breathing. Center.

Let them take me.

Sat in a room in the upstairs of the house, tied to a sturdy wooden chair. My feet and hands were bare, strapped to the arms and legs.

“You know I have Cherokee blood, Mr. MacLeod.”

Didn’t until then.



“The Cherokee usually left the torture of their prisoners to their women. The women were very good at it. The victim usually begged for death long before the end.”

“But the men. They were inventive as well. What they liked to do was to place live embers on the hands and feet of their captives, to see if they would cry like a woman or stay silent like a man. We are a little short of charcoal, but I am sure this propane torch will do as well.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“I am not convinced. You are a man who likes to play games. You are...too smart for your own good.”

“There is nothing to tell. I won’t talk.”

“I don’t expect you to talk, Jack.”

Looked at Lauren.

“I expect her to.”

I wish I could say it was easy, or that in some way that I was able to meditate my way through it, but the truth is that I screamed until I could not make sounds any more. Several times I lost consciousness, and I was aware that they injected me with something to keep me awake.

Woke on the cot in the basement, hearing the sound of Lauren weeping and feeling the throbbing pain in my hands and feet. Tried to sit up, but found I was tied to the cot.

“Ummm nt.” Mouth dry, words would not come.

She came over, putting her arm under my head and dribbling a little water onto my tongue.

“Don’t talk.”

“Ummm...unn. Un tie.” Came out as a gasp.

“You’ll hurt yourself.”

Shook my head, angry.

“Untie me.”

She looked around the room, and then slowly untied my arms and legs.

“Jack, I told them everything.”

Everything she knew. Not everything I knew.

“Did I talk?”

“You screamed. I couldn’t stand it, Jack. I wanted to help you, or tell them something to make them stop, but they wouldn’t.”

He wouldn’t. There was something bent about Emerson.

Hard to talk. More water.

“Time?”

“I don’t know. Night sometime. You’ve been out for a long, long time.”

Lifted up, so that my head could grasp what my body had been trying to tell me. He had done it wrong. The Cherokee would have put coals on the bottoms of my feet. Palms of the hand. More sensitive there.

They had burned the backs of my hands and the tops of my feet. I could still walk.

Swung my legs over the cot to the floor, gasping at the pain.

“Time to leave.”

“Jack, you’re in no shape to go anywhere. If we just wait another day, the FBI will be here, and all of this will be over.”

Looked at her.

“They don’t plan for us to survive that attack, even if it does happen tomorrow. They’ll kill us before then. Or worse. There is something going on here that is not at all what it seems. This whole nonsense of another Confederate army rising up to challenge the Union is stupid. Thirty men against the FBI?”

“We’re leaving, and we’re leaving now.”

Watched her as she struggled with it, weighing the relative safety of this room against what it would take to get out and free. This was early Saturday morning, and in one day or two the cavalry might burst through the gates. But much could happen between now and then, and I wasn’t willing to trust my life to the FBI.

They had come for me the last time.  
Had been ready for me.

This time we would do it on my terms.

The mission. Get her out. Focus, center.

\* \* \*

There is nothing easy about getting out of a box. The window was too small, the walls concrete. Nothing but to go through the door, and that meant brute force and violence.

Sat in the lotus position, meditating.  
Lauren didn’t know what to do, so I got her to

sit on the floor near me, legs crossed and hands resting on her thighs.

We used the moonlight through the window as a focal point, and I began to chant slowly. I am not Zen, but the chant of the Zen Buddhists helped me to focus through the pain, to calm and focus.

It was impossible to leave the pain behind. I know there are priests who are able to do that, who are able to set themselves on fire in protest and endure the pain. I tried to let go of my pain and could not. But finally, eventually, came to terms with the pain. Felt it in the background as my mind cleared, and I let go of the things of this world for long enough to gain peace. Said a silent prayer as well, thankful for the comfort both of my God and my Buddhist beliefs.

Let go of it, and instead began to summon the anger of Olaf the Black, the Viking king who had conquered the western coast of Scotland. Of the Berserker who raised an empire on the Isle of Skye, and of the Clan MacLeod, and of my ancestors who slew their enemies and drank their blood. Felt the pain, and used it to stir my blood to rage.

Rose and walked to the door, pounding on it.

“I need to talk to Emerson. Open the door.”

It took them a while, but finally they organized a guard to escort me. One man on

each side, holding my arms. One in front, and in back.

Foolish, untrained men.

Never put yourself within the reach of a dangerous man.

First thing they train us about prisoner transport.

We went into the hallway, and they locked the door behind me, holding Lauren in.

In a small, enclosed space, four men get in each other's way. Fighting against four gave me the advantage. They could not strike or shoot without the risk of hitting one of their own me.

I had no one in the small hallway but enemies. If it moves, kill it.

I let them take four steps, then raised my right foot just a little higher than usual, as if stepping over something, and brought it down at an angle against the side of the knee of the man to my right. Heard the crack as his leg broke, scream of pain, but I was already spinning, right hand curling into a chisel fist, the fingers curled, thumb against the index finger, smashing into his throat just half an inch above the adams apple.

Did not pull the punch. He would choke to death on his own blood, if he did not asphyxiate first. Shoved him into the man behind.

Screaming pain in the hand I had used, driving me to an insane level of violence and blood lust.

The man in front of me was just starting to turn when I took him from behind, hand under chin and at back of the head to snap his neck. Turned to the back to strike the man behind me with a clenched fist over the heart, feeling bone snap at the sternum and the shock put him unconscious before he even began to fall.

Two of the four might live.

I no longer cared.

Mission. Center. Focus.

Unbolted the door and dragged Lauren into the hallway. She tried to stop to look at the bodies but that wasn't getting us any closer to home, and I pushed her up the stairs toward the lights of the main floor.

I held her hand in the upstairs hallway, and pondered. There were two ways we could go. Through the front door, across the lawn and out the gate, where hopefully Doc and Jeff would still be waiting for us.

But I couldn't tell how many people were in the house. And in the yard between the house and the gate were twenty-some armed men. And couldn't be sure that Doc and Jeff had not had to depart, which would leave us without cover.

Decided we would go out the back and up the hill toward the mountains, moving until we could find a road and connect with Doc and Jeff.

We crept down the hallway to the back door, out onto the verandah.

“Wait here,” I said.

Crawled the forty feet or so under the verandah to the front steps, to retrieve the stuff I had left there earlier. Slipped the knife sheath into the small of my back, the Glock on my left side in the fast-draw rig. Then back down the length of the verandah.

The moon was high, but the landscape was empty and we didn't have far to go before we could use the cover of the trees.

Took her hand and we ran.

## **Chapter 21**

# **National Forest**

Dawn came, and I was out of ideas. We had trudged through the forest for the better part of the night, and we seemed to be making no headway.

This part of the forest is wild, with few real trails. Not like the Blue Ridge, where there are hundreds of marked trails and tourists. This was virgin forest, and while it was beautiful to walk through and fairly easy if you follow the deer trails, it was nonetheless hard walking on earth made dry by the long, hot summer.

The paths we walked were too far east for the Seneca Trail, and just a little too west for the fabled Warrior's Path. Both were trails of war and commerce that stretched from New England to Alabama, and both would have been easier than our path.

Worse yet, we were being followed very closely. All through the night I could hear them moving toward us, following us to the north. I figured we had walked close to ten miles



overnight, a pretty aggressive pace, and I could tell that Lauren was done in. To keep going would be madness; to stop might mean death.

The pain in my hands and feet throbbed constantly, but I didn't know what to do about it but to keep moving. Once we crossed a stream, and I took the time to soak my bare feet and hands in the icy water. It helped some.

I couldn't stand the thought of boots on my feet, but this early in September the nights were still warm. And I had been walking barefoot in the mountains since I was barely a tadpole.

Got by.

Hiked between the trees about three-quarters of the way up the ridge. It was harder going here, but this is what they teach in the Escape and Evasion part of Air Force Survival School. They do the school in the mountains, up above Fairchild Air Force Base, just a bit southwest of Spokane, Washington.

I had attended the school in 1994 as part of an effort to track drug use among air crews at remote air bases. Had been there awaiting orders when Dean Mellberg, an airman discharged for mental problems, went on a spree, killing people in the base hospital. Including his two doctors, a woman and an eight-year-old girl.

I wasn't there to see it when Senior Airman Andy Brown, a security policeman, ordered Mellberg to put down his weapon. When Mellberg refused, Brown went into the

kneeling position and from 70 yards away put two of four rounds into Mellberg, killing him with a head shot. Brown received a decoration for saving lives. He should have won a marksmanship medal as well, because hitting a target at that distance with an automatic pistol is almost unheard of.

Nearly three quarters of the length of a football field. The best of pistols, the ones with the twelve-inch barrels, were not accurate at that range. His had a four-inch barrel.

Now we were in the woods, practicing escape and evasion for real. They had redesigned the course after Vietnam, of course, learning from the experiences of downed air crews. And they had integrated information about E&E in the Soviet bloc countries, as well as from the first and second Gulf Wars.

They don't teach you how to escape a bunch of neo-Confederates lead by a crazy man in a white suit, but the principles are the same nonetheless.

Problem is, I doubted that the woman with me would be willing to live off the land, eating grubs and roots to survive. Despite the dirt and the bruises, she looked more like a meat-and-potatoes country girl to me. Or a champagne and caviar girl, which may be just as bad, since I had neither.

Found a likely spot under a large tree, with branches almost to the ground, and pushed her into it. She slumped to the ground, too tired to speak.

“I have to go get a look. You stay here and rest, and I will be back in a little while.”

She nodded.

Random thoughts. That was almost exactly what Kevin McCarthy said to Dana Wynter in the original 1956 version of *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. While he was gone, the alien pods had stolen her mind in the movie version. At this point, I would trade alien seed pods for the bunch that was trailing us.

Alien Pods?

Wondered if I was hallucinating from the pain in my hands and feet.

I went back down the trail, as quietly as I could.

I make no claim to being a great woodsman, but I have done my share of hunting both animals and humans, and have learned enough to tread lightly and be patient. Have also learned how to navigate in the woods, which is easier than city folks think once you know how. Not all the trees look the same, and there are some markers.

Watch where you step, careful not to walk on sticks and grasses that make noise. Move between the branches, not through them. Breathe lightly.

In spite of the breaking dawn, I felt better as the hours passed. We were away from Emerson, no longer in direct threat of being caught, and had managed to navigate through the worst of the forest. There was a road above us on the hills, but I could hear the ATVs up

there, running back and forth. To the north of us, perhaps just a mile or two away, lay US 250.

That road was a major thoroughfare between Staunton, Virginia and the Monongahela National Forest to the west. The road meant cars, and law enforcement, and a chance to be found by someone who could get us home.

If we could get to the road. There were a lot of men behind us, and a lot of forest in front.

The sun was dancing across the valley to the east, lighting up Staunton and Waynesboro beyond it. In the clear cool air of morning, you could see that far.

“Got you!” I heard behind me.

Turned slowly to find a grizzled man of medium age with a shotgun pointed at me.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re them that Emerson sent us to fetch, and I aim to collect on you.”

He was standing on a rock ledge just behind me, dressed in gray camouflage.

“I think you have the wrong person.”

“Where’s the girl?”

Looked confused.

“What girl?”

“The girl you was with. Now don’t play stupid with me.”

“There’s no girl here.”

These days, it is hard to find mountain people this rough. The schools have gotten better, and television and the Internet had encroached on their isolation, so that you really

did not have the kind of Deliverance moments you used to, even here in Appalachia. Mostly mountain folk are just like country people, perhaps not quite the same as those in the big cities but not dumb, either.

And you would be surprised how sophisticated mountain people could be. I once hiked in the hills just over the line in West Virginia, and stopped at a little home to get directions. The old man went into his run-down single-wide trailer and returned with an iPad, which he used to give me directions.

Most mountain people are like us, but have different customs.

This one was the exception.

Walked toward him, hands up and a disarming look on my face, until I was just about to the barrels of the gun.

“I ought to shoot you right here and find the girl myself.”

“Mr. Emerson wouldn’t like that.”

He had to think about it, which took his attention from me, and from the fact that I had just admitted I was the person he was searching for, but it didn’t matter because I grabbed the barrel of the gun and used it to push him back and over the ledge.

He was gone, but the scream that he gave falling the sixty or so feet, coupled with the roar of the shotgun as he pulled the trigger, too late, would have everyone within a mile headed this way in a matter of minutes.

Ran.

Up the trail, things looking different in the growing light, and almost missed the tree as I went past.

She was lying there, sound asleep, and it took several minutes before I could wake her; she'd been awake all night, and now had barely had a half hour of rest.

"Listen to me. They are close, just behind us. We have about a mile to get to a road where there are people, but we have to go now."

Took her a second, then she climbed to her feet and held out her hand.

Grabbed it and we began our run.

\* \* \*

Didn't make it.

We kept our pace, but somehow a mile went by and we did not hit the road. I had been counting paces. My stride is about three feet, counting my size 12-duck splayed feet, so a mile should have been less than 1800 paces. I had counted them in groups of 100, and we were not near the road.

Began moving to the west, thinking we could get to higher ground and perhaps see the road from a better vantage point, but we had barely gone thirty yards when I pulled up short and grabbed her arm.

Oh, hell.

Marijuana.

Everywhere you could turn or see, the plants were five feet or better, massive plants heavy with buds.

Bad news.

I pulled her to the ground, but already I could hear people moving about above us. Below us were the Emerson gang. Above us were the marijuana farmers. Either way, we were in trouble.

Marijuana has been grown in the United States since before there was a United States. Most of the founding fathers, including Washington and Jefferson, grew the plant for its hemp and smoked the stuff with their tobacco, a trick they learned from the Cherokee and the Iroquois.

For most of American history, it was smoked freely both by the Indians and by the settlers. But in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, William Randolph Hearst decided that hemp was a threat to his paper companies, and convinced Congress to ban the growing of hemp.

Not hemp directly. Instead, Hearst and his cronies convinced the Congress that smoking the bud of the hemp plant would make black men go crazy and rape white women. Or make the women want to have sex with black men.

Point was, Congress banned the stuff, and it has only been grown, used and sold illegally ever since. With the exception of a few clinics in disparate states. Never mind that marijuana has an extensive list of health benefits. And never mind that the US

government, while claiming the stuff has no medicinal value, claimed the patent for medical marijuana for itself in 2003.

Never mind that Gallup polls now show more than half the US population favors legalizing it.

As use has skyrocketed among aging baby boomers, the market has exploded. It's not just the Mexican cartels bringing in the stuff, but people growing it. In our Valley, a district court judge was caught with a shed full of plants. The shed had caught fire, and he was forced to call the fire department. Apparently the volunteer firemen were very familiar with the smell of burning weed.

In Iowa, marijuana is the second biggest cash crop, behind corn. They grow it between the corn rows to hide it from prying eyes. Nationally, it has surpassed corn and wheat to become the number one cash crop in America.

And it grows in our national parks.

Out of sight of the tourists, marijuana farmers have largely replaced moonshiners as the bad boys of the mountains. With the weed selling for upwards of \$400 an ounce in the major eastern cities, it is a profitable trade.

The Mexican cartels have sent their members into all of the states that have national parks to plant the stuff as well. It grows so well, the Drug Enforcement Agency says that pot plants grow as tall as 15 feet, with buds the size of ears of corn.

And they kill to protect the plants.



The National Park Service this year took the unprecedented step of warning visitors and hikers to avoid parts of the park where the stuff grows. If you find yourself in a thicket of pot plants, they advise that you get out as quickly as possible.

People have died for hiking in the wrong places.

Our situation was even worse. We were stuck between a pot forest and a hard place, with both sides likely to shoot us on sight.

Looked around for a solution.

Nothing.

Could hear them closing in, down through the plants and up from the mountainside, and I knew we had only a minute or two left.

Desperate measures.

I saw a shallow area under a fallen tree and pushed her into it, giving her the index-finger-over-the-lips sign to be quiet. Then made my call. As loud as I could.

“Federal Agents. Lay down your weapons and surrender.”

Waited three seconds, then fired three rounds from the Glock up into the forest of pot plants. Another three down the hill toward Emerson’s men.

The world exploded.

I dove under the fallen tree, covering Lauren with my body as Armageddon sprouted around us. The pot farmers, looking for all the world like Mexicans and mountaineers, were

blazing away with automatic weapons, while Emerson's army of boys fired back with equal enthusiasm.

Neither could see what they were shooting at; both assumed they were fighting the Feds.

The forest grew thick with gun smoke, and people started yelling back and forth at one another, both vowing never to surrender.

I grabbed the girl and pulled her through the underbrush, bringing her up and around the pot farm.

Then we ran through the mountain war, bullets smacking the leaves and trees around us.

At some point, the gunfire settled down to an infrequent shot or two, but we were well beyond it.

Thirsty, hungry and exhausted, we stumbled up toward the crest, but Lauren was having trouble moving and I slowed the pace to give her a break. She was breathing hard, and it wasn't until she went to her knees and began to fall backward that I realized how exhausted she was.

Her eyes rolled back as she went over, and I got my arms around her, the two of us falling heavily to the ground.

Lay there, cuddling her like a child, but when I shifted to make her more comfortable my hand came away bloody.

Panicked, pulling her body up and against me, as my fingers ran up and down her back until I found the small entry wound high

up between the shoulder blades. A hold so small  
she might not even have known she was shot.  
Would have just felt a hard punch in the back.

“Lauren.”

My voice strangled.

Her eyes opened, but they were cloudy  
and unfocused.

“Jack, are we there now?”

Looked up the hill. A few hundred yards.

“Almost, baby. You just rest now.”

Pulled off my tee shirt and used it as a  
compress against the wound. I needed to get up  
to the road, to get help.

Didn’t want to leave her alone.

“Jack, I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“I told him. I told him everything. Who  
you were, where you live. Doc and Jeannie.  
The FBI. Everything I could.”

“It’s okay. Nothing he can use.”

“He was hurting you, Jack. I couldn’t  
take it.”

He had counted on that.

Felt bleak, bitter anger at the fat man in  
the white suit.

“Jack,” coughed, and a trickle of blood  
ran down her chin.

Shot had penetrated a lung.

“I’m cold, Jack.”

The sun was up, the air warm, and I  
knew in that moment that I could not leave her,  
would never leave her.

“I’m...”

And she was gone.

Kissed her, gently, but her lips were cold.

Too late for all the things I wanted to say.

A terrible, sick sadness. A rage so deep,  
so red that all I could do was sit with her in my  
arms, tears running down, staring into the  
morning sun and vowing before Odin and  
Forseti, the Norse God of Justice, before Olaf  
the Black and Clan MacLeod that this man  
Emerson would die a painful death.

Don't know how long we sat there.

Eventually, I got to my feet, and bent  
over to lift her from the ground. I could not  
carry her for long, and had to stop every thirty  
feet or so to rest.

Took the better part of the day to make it  
up the hill to the road we had set out for hours  
ago.

Lay her in the trees by the side of the  
road, hidden from site so that Emerson's men  
would not find us.

Sat beside her, sick with grief and pain  
and exhaustion, weaving in and out of  
consciousness as the afternoon wore on.

It was there that Jeff Mason found us,  
and took us home.

## Chapter 22

# Reckoning

We sat on the front porch in the late morning sun, fingers curled around mugs of coffee that had started as steaming but were now cold. Drank it anyway.

“I cleaned the burn wounds. Your hands aren’t hurt much at all, but your feet are going to need some time to heal. They’re burns, so it’s best to leave them open to the air and keep taking antibiotics.”

“I got her killed, Doc. It was my job to get her out, and I didn’t get the job done.”

Lauren lay on the table in the library, wrapped in a plastic body bag of Doc’s. Jeannie had done what she could to make her look less like she had been dragged through the woods. Nothing else to be done for now, but I could feel her presence in the house.

“You were in a war, Jack. You know you can’t always tell where the bullets are going to go. And you two were caught in the middle. Nothing to blame yourself for.”

“Doesn’t feel like that to me.”

“She would have been just as dead if you hadn’t gone in. Emerson would have had her killed as part of whatever crazy scheme he has.”

Sat in silence for a while.

“We’ve got some choices to make, Jack.”

Nodded.

“Seems that if we just sit tight another 24 hours, the FBI and the ATF will move on Emerson. Then we can reveal everything we know and try to ride it out. The only thing they can charge us for is keeping Lauren’s body a secret, and even that may not be an issue if we take her somewhere for a private burial.”

Shook my head.

“There’s a mother who has now lost her only daughters to Emerson’s crazy plot. I couldn’t face her and tell her that only one daughter is coming home to be buried. We have to take her back to Emerson’s, to be found there when the FBI strikes.”

He nodded slowly.

“Plus, I can’t see leaving the job undone, Doc. If we just sit back, Emerson gets his way. Whatever he is scheming succeeds. And I still don’t have my flag and money back. We haven’t finished the job, and we need to.”

“We’ve got about 17 hours, if we are going to do something. I figure the FBI will hit them just at dawn tomorrow.”

“He may be insane, at some level, but he’s not a fool. He’s trying to run a program, and that program somehow includes getting the

federal government to move against him in force. He's willing to sacrifice men to get that confrontation."

"So we call Special Agent in Charge McCoy and tell him everything we know. Convince him to call off the confrontation."

Shook my head.

"They might not. And even if they did, Emerson would find another way to goad them. That's why he let the ATF guy talk him into taking the flag in the first place. Up until that point, he hadn't broken any laws. He bought a bunch of guns, and drew the attention of the ATF guys. But it's not illegal to buy guns. No, the ATF took the flag to give to him because it's a federal crime to steal a museum artifact. He wanted the FBI to come in, even if they could not prove he was behind the museum theft. And the presence of the ATF and the number of guns he had would make them come in force."

"So how do we jam him up? How do we make all of his plans worth nothing?"

Doc was quiet for a while.

Then.

"We could hit him first. Start a ruckus big enough, and the FBI would hold off until they could determine what was going on. If we create enough damage, Emerson would have to let emergency crews come in. Fire trucks, ambulances, even local law enforcement. We could tie Emerson up for long enough that the Feds could slip in with the emergency crews without firing a shot."

“What, the three of us? Those aren’t good odds, Doc. I’m not keen to go up against thirty well-armed men plus the FBI. And that still doesn’t get us to Emerson.”

“We go in first and secure the house,” he said. “Make it fast, take care of our business, and be out before dawn. Raise as much hell as we can on the way out, and bolt back up the mountain.”

Thought about it.

“We’re good, but I don’t know that we’re good enough to get through the FBI lines. They have that place on lockdown until they make their move. At this point, I would be very surprised if anyone can get in or out.”

We pulled out the topographical maps, standard issue for anyone who hunts or hikes in these mountains. Spent the next hour studying them, looking for ways in and ways out. Retraced the route that Lauren and I had taken, and identified the location of the pot crop.

“For sure, they will have spotters up above the house,” said Doc. “It wouldn’t make sense any other way.”

“But I’ve been up there just this week and didn’t see anyone.”

“Figure that they were keeping very general surveillance up until yesterday or today. Remember, federal agents stick out like a sore thumb up here. This is moonshine country, and pot country. If they had more than two people anywhere near Goshen proper, the word would be all over the county in less than a day.”



“Be different tonight,” I said.

He nodded, and we went back to the map, trying to figure the most likely places for spotters or snipers, and how we could best infiltrate their lines without being seen.

Early afternoon and we had a plan, of sorts.

It wasn’t much of a plan, but it was all that we could put together.

\* \* \*

Sat in the library, wondering how it could be that less than twelve hours before she had been alive.

Tried to sort out how I felt. My earlier rage had subsided, replaced by just a sad longing. Jeannie came into the room, put a cup of coffee on the table beside me and sat in a chair opposite.

“Did you love her?”

Shook my head.

“It was nice having the companionship, and I think if we had been together longer we might have been friends. It probably would have gotten physical, but there was no strong feeling of attraction. Either way, I think.”

*“Did you ever feel like your life was just slipping away from you, Jack?”* she had asked. Not any longer for her. Sometimes for me.

Jeannie leaned closer.

“When I did the cards,” she began.

“When I did the cards that night, when it turned

up the card of Justice, it also called up the card of Death.”

“The tarot doesn’t tell the future, Jeannie.”

“No, but it can lead us to look for other possibilities. And one of those possibilities would be that Lauren’s quest for justice for her sister would lead her to do rash things.”

“She wasn’t being rash when she was shot.”

“No, but she was when she went there without telling you, and that led directly or indirectly to her death.”

“Either way, I have to take her and her sister home for burial.”

“First, you have to get her accounted for in a way that doesn’t implicate you.”

Nodded.

\* \* \*

They say the third time’s the charm, but I wasn’t feeling lucky. This would be my fourth journey into the Emerson place, and my luck had not held much the last time. There was no way to put things right at this point, with two ladies dead and my flag still missing. All I could do was try to learn what it was that Emerson was doing, and do my best to help him fail.

Our initial idea was to cut it as close as we could, but the more we talked it over the trickier it seemed. There was no particular

reason to press ourselves for time, since the FBI would likely have a perimeter set up around the place by now and it would take time to get through their lines.

At midnight we were pulling the truck into a short lane in the National Forest that looked like it saw little use, and beginning the move down the mountain toward Goshen. Doc and Jeff both carried rifles, but I preferred just the Glock. If I needed more firepower than that, I would take it from someone else.

We wore dark clothing, faces and hands covered with standard camouflage paint so our pale skin would not reflect the moonlight.

And I carried Lauren, her stiffened body still wrapped in the body bag and balanced across my shoulders. We had argued how to do this, and the only way to see her death avenged would be to directly implicate Emerson.

The full moon had come and gone for the month, leaving just enough moonlight to make our way quietly through the forest. We had parked off Big River Road, and crossed the river over big rocks, getting our boots wet but not much else, and were now only about a mile above the Emerson place.

We had passed through two places on the road where dark cars sat, giving them wide berth. They would eventually move into position around their target, but with a little luck we would be gone by the time they moved.

On a trail leading from the road to the hill overlooking the farm, we found her bicycle.

The one she had used on Saturday, to ride over here. Decided to leave it untouched for the FBI.

The last quarter mile was the easiest, because I had seen this stretch first-hand and mapped much of it out in my mind. It was also the most difficult stretch, moving in tiny increments through the shadows so that we would not be seen from the road.

We sat in the shadows of the back porch, and I looked at the faint dial of my watch. 1:10 in the morning. An hour gone.

It took another 30 minutes for Jeff to find the alarm system on the back door and put a jumper across the terminals, then pick the lock so we could enter. Moved down the dark hallway, a thin strip of light illuminating the dark wood floor.

We paused just inside the back door to make sure the kitchen was empty, then Doc and I carried Lauren down into the basement while Jeff watched the stairs. We peeled the body bag off of her and laid her flat on the cot where I had lain 24 hours ago. Tried to smooth out her blouse and jeans, and I looked at her face.

It was empty. No longer soft, and no animation in her eyes. I kissed the first two fingers of my right hand and pressed them to her lips, then felt Doc's hand on my shoulder and we went back up the stairs to where Jeff waited.

Now we had to wing it. I had no idea what room we would find Emerson in, or how many others would be guarding him. It was inconceivable that he would be arrogant enough

to be alone in the house when they were expecting a major action in just a few hours.

Did it by the numbers, room by room. My biggest fear was the wide staircase leading to the second floor.

Some 400 years ago the first Shogun of Japan, Tokugawa Ieyasu, had built a fine castle to defend the city of Kyoto. One of its chief features was the “Nightingale Floor,” designed so that each board produced a sound of its own. Enemies that tried to cross the floor and enter the inner parts of the castle could not only be heard, but the notes from the wood told defenders exactly where the enemy was standing.

Many of the old houses dating from the Civil War have staircases that work the same way.

This one did as well, but we worked around it by standing at the edge of each stair where the nails did not permit the board to flex and squeak.

We didn’t have to wonder where Emerson was. A guard sat in a chair outside his door.

Sound asleep.

The skull is very thin at the temples, and striking someone there can easily send a shock wave through the brain to cause instant death. So I used the barrel of the Glock to clip him just behind the ear. Here, the thick ridge of bone transmits the shock, causing instant

unconsciousness without death. Eased him to the floor.

Might have to kill him before this night was out, but you never take a killing lightly, and the body count on this case was nine or more already.

Emerson's door was locked from the inside, and took all of Jeff's skill to open it without dislodging the key from the lock. When the bolt slid aside, my watch read nearly a quarter after two. This was taking too long.

Emerson lay in his bed, asleep in his pajamas.

*Do you know who Mosby is, General?*

There was no thought to it. I simply grabbed a handful of his silver hair, jerked him upright in bed, and hit him hard enough to break his nose. He roared in anger and outrage, arms flailing to break free of the bed covers, so I hit him again.

Pulled him back up and two rifles were in his face. Even with the blood streaming down his lips and the watery eyes from the pain, he could see that. I hauled him out of the bed and pushed him down the hall. He paused at the top of the stairs so I kicked him, his body twisting against the hand rail as he fell heavily down the steps.

There were a lot of steps.

He tried to get a footing and bolt for the door, but I had followed him down the staircase and pushed him heavily into a wall, then man-

handled him into the study, to the big chair behind his desk.

Jeff and Doc were busy closing the curtains, and when they were done I flipped on the desk light.

Emerson looked up at me, and it took a second through the camouflage.

“You!”

His voice a mixture of shock and disdain.

“Emerson, whether you live through the next few minutes will depend on you doing exactly what I ask.”

He leaned back. Started to reach for a humidior on the corner of the desk, stopped when he saw the Glock come up in my hand.

“May I offer you a cigar, MacLeod?”

Shook my head, but he seemed a little too calm for someone whose nose would require reconstructive surgery.

He reached into the case, selecting a long, dark cigar.

“Cubans. I have them flown up specially from Havana.”

Went through the lighting ritual, clipping the end, using a wooden match, rolling the end of the cigar in the flame until the harsh stench of tobacco filled the air. He leaned back and puffed.

“So what is it you want?”

“Let’s start with Goshen.”

He waved a hand.

“You already know most of it. James Pettigrew Emerson, hero of the Confederacy and

winner of the Southern Cross of Honor when it still meant something, went back after the War with a close friend from Luray. They dug up Mosby's treasure, and when it became clear that there was no immediate need to hold on to the money, invested it in ventures that were meant to increase the value of the treasure. There was no question of their right to do it. I have in my files a letter from Mosby entitling him to the full amount of the treasure for his project."

"Goshen was the name of the tavern where the first James Emerson came back to life and began his career as a Knight of the Golden Circle. They used that as the name for their venture here in western Virginia. Others had other projects."

"To fund a new Confederacy? To raise a new army in the states out west?" I asked.

The door to the library flew open, knocking Jeff sideways as men burst into the room, guns drawn.

Jeff was knocked down, and Doc and I had our guns in play but there were more of them than us. Didn't like the odds, so I laid the Glock on the desk.

"I could have used you ten minutes ago, Captain Timmons."

"We just got the alarm, General."

General? Who appointed Emerson a general?

"The man who was guarding my door upstairs..." said Emerson.

"Yessir."



“He was sloppy. Find an appropriate punishment. Now, get your men back into position. You can stay here to make our guests behave themselves.”

Timmons dismissed his men, and made the three of us sit on the floor facing Emerson across his large desk.

It’s meant to make you feel smaller.  
Less than the man across the desk.

Doubted it would work with us.

Emerson was back to his former self.  
Hard and arrogant, feeling invulnerable with his little army and his plans.

I could change his mind in less than a heartbeat, could likely get across the desk to him before he or Timmons could stop me. But I needed some things first.

“So their sworn duty was to hold the money, sending it to Arizona when things had calmed down, and then to support the resurgence of the Confederacy out in the southwestern states.”

“A new Confederacy? Is that what you think this is about?”

Pointed to the gray uniforms and the insignia on the chests of his soldiers.

Waved his hand.

“You really are a pedantic little detective, aren’t you? This never was about the Confederacy. It was just a simple business proposition. A hundred and fifty years ago, the southern gentlemen and their incessant babbling about their states’ rights nearly killed our efforts

altogether. As it was, we've had to spend decades waiting for the right time to bring the proposal forward again.

"This isn't about the Confederacy," Doc suddenly said. "It's about the Knights of the Golden Circle."

## Chapter 23

### KGC

Secret societies have always been a part of American business and government, from the Free Masons and Yale's Skull and Bones Society to the Knights of Malta. The Knights of the Golden Circle were no different. Formed by a Cincinnati businessman in the 1830s, the KGC was conceived as a grand scheme to expand the territories of the United States and provide northern factory owners with a new source of cheap labor and profits.

"It's like we discussed, Jack," said Doc. "Through most of America's history, membership in a secret society was essential if you wanted to do business. Heck, for many people in the South, membership in the Klan was required before people would do business with you. It's only been in the past thirty years or so that the societies have lost their power."

"Long before the Civil War, the KGC was pushing for the annexation of Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean. They wanted to

form a new political bloc with the southern states and use their combined political power to keep slavery alive in the United States.”

“Throughout the war, people tried to tie the KGC with the Confederacy because of the issue of slavery,” said Doc. “But in spite of the number of southerners who were members of the KGC, it was always primarily a northern society. They used their membership to support the Confederacy in some ways, but they always had their own agenda.”

“The KGC was a northern society?”

“That shouldn’t surprise you, Jack. After all, the ships that brought the slaves to America were owned by New England businessmen. They often ran the slave auctions on the docks at Savannah and Charleston. And up through the mid-1800s, any number of prominent northern families owned slaves.”

“The War took a very simple issue of inexpensive labor and turned it into some kind of cause celebre,” said Emerson. “Slavery had always been opposed by some people, but most just looked the other way. Suddenly it became socially unacceptable.”

“Instead, the north began to allow unfettered immigration, allowing untold thousands of cheap shanty Irish and even Chinese in to serve as cheap labor. Worse yet, this sudden change of heart diverted some of our best people to help fight an idiotic war that was doomed from the beginning. For years after the Civil War, we were so closely associated with

the Confederacy that people found to have been members of the KGC were hunted down and persecuted.”

“But one of your ‘castles’ in Baltimore was behind the assassination of Lincoln,” said Doc. “How was that part of your plans?”

“It wasn’t just Lincoln,” said Emerson, through a haze of smoke. “It was supposed to have been all three. Lincoln, vice-president Johnson and Secretary of State Seward. Johnson was missed entirely, and was able to carry out the instructions of the Republican Party to free all of the slaves. Seward was wounded, but survived to become one of the architects of the effort to free them. They all should have been dead. In the chaos, we could have completed the circle and insured a source of inexpensive labor for generations to come.”

“This nation,” said Emerson, “would have been a far different place today.”

“A nation of slaves?” I asked. “How is that supposed to work?”

“Not much different from the migrant farm workers who come up from Mexico and Honduras today. Or, for that matter, employees in minimum wage jobs. It’s not about mistreating people, Mr. MacLeod. It is about ensuring a cheap supply of labor for businesses in this country.”

“The people selected to be cheap labor might disagree. They might want to make something better of themselves.”

“Really? Have you taken a hard look at our society today? By taking away the idea of cheap labor performed by lesser people, we’ve created a permanent underclass of people who have no skills but are unwilling to work at low paying jobs. We’ve tainted their minds to believe that even if you have no education, no skills and no willingness to work, someone will provide you with a nice home, a nice car and all the food you want to consume.”

“That’s a generalization. In every generation, we have some people who can’t rise above their beginnings. But we have many more that do.”

“Only a few that do,” snapped Emerson. “The ranks of the permanently unemployable swell every day. Our government gives them up to two years of unemployment payments to keep them from working, plus thousands of dollars each month in free food and medical care. It’s no wonder they don’t want to work.”

I’d heard all of this before. On talk radio stations, and in some of the press.

It may or may not be true, but it isn’t palatable.

“Thanks to NAFTA and other trade agreements,” continued Emerson, “we have been able to make some use of the labor situation in Mexico and Latin America. But the truth is that trying to do business with these corrupt dictators and drug lords is wearisome and expensive. We need to have control of those nations. We need to organize their labor

situation, and bring them into the fold. We need to put our people, our Knights, into their governments to represent them in Congress and in the federal agencies.”

“You’re going to invade Mexico again?” asked Doc.

“Not at all. We don’t have to invade anyone. If we can push a few more banks to fail, the global economy will falter. And when it does, the time will be right for us to extend an invitation to our neighbors to the south to become part of the United States. They will rush to join us, and the circle will be complete without a shot fired.”

“Even Cuba?”

“Fidel is dying, and Raoul has indicated he might be open to...an accommodation.”

“I’m having a little trouble with the idea that the USA would support a return to slavery, some fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement.”

“Forget about slavery, Mr. MacLeod. We are a business organization. We evolve to match the times. A century and a half ago, we supported slavery and the military invasion of Mexico. We saw slavery as the fastest means to achieve our end. We could have slavery again. I would point out to you that slavery still exists in the world today. In Asia and Africa, slave labor is commonplace.”

“But the truth is that we have evolved from the simple vision of the KGC of the last century. Today we advocate jobs for poor

people, with a basic level of subsistence thrown in for good measure. Keep the unions out, and pay what the local economy is already paying them. We can even afford to throw in simple housing and medical care, if the pay scale is reasonable enough.”

“Think about it, MacLeod. The workers get a steady job with steady pay. And a standard of living above what they have now. The profits go back to companies here in the United States, where they can be invested judiciously to promote growth. Taxes go down, investments go up, and people have jobs.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Emerson asked.

I had to hand it to him. If you didn’t look at it too closely, you could win seats in Congress or even the White House with such a simple idea. It sounded so enticing that I might have voted for it myself.

Except for one thing.

“So if this is all so wonderful, why the private army? Why do people have to die? And what do we do with people who don’t have jobs now?”

“Imagine what it would be like if we could harness the energy of those people, MacLeod? If we could send them to live in tropical countries south of the border, where they could live like kings on just a handful of dollars each month. Already, retirees on Social Security have created whole towns in Mexico, in Costa Rica, and any number of Caribbean



islands. We will have a need for overseers for our plantations in those countries. A chance for the chronically unemployed to start over. A new chance.”

Felt sick. Put that way, it almost sounded appealing. Unless you realized that the tropical parts of their Circle were already overcrowded. And that most of Mexico was desert and mountain.

“That doesn’t explain this little army of yours, of what you are doing here.”

“The Knights of the Golden Circle have always had two branches. On the one hand are the business and political members. On the other hand are the soldiers of the order. Some of the greatest Knights have been our soldiers. Men like Jesse James. John Wilkes Booth. Men willing to do the hard things to protect the order.”

“My family” he said, “has had the honor of being among the soldiers of the Circle for more than 160 years.”

“Good thing,” I said. “Based on your record of investments here in Goshen, I’d say you make a piss-poor businessman. Or politician, for that matter.”

His eyes narrowed, his eyes gleaming malice.

“I am not accustomed to being insulted in my own house, Mr. MacLeod.”

“Would it help if I let you call me Jack? Then I could call you Jim, and we could insult each other like old friends.”

Had not forgotten that he called me a pedantic detective. I am not a detective. I am an investigator.

Glanced at my watch. It glowed just a few minutes before 4 am.

“So who dreamed up the idea of putting these guys in pseudo-Confederate uniforms and taking on the FBI and ATF?”

“You don’t pay attention to history, MacLeod. This gentleman,” pointing at Doc, “at least seems to have some appreciation for history.”

“Ruby Ridge,” said Doc.

“Bravo. Yes. Ruby Ridge. Or Waco. Take your pick.”

Ruby Ridge and Waco had involved the FBI, the ATF and the US Marshal Service. Both cases had resulted in the deaths of a number of people who were not known to have actually committed any crime. They shocked the public. In the aftermath, people flocked to join militia organizations, and the government was tied in knots for years investigating itself.

“We are recruiting, Mr. MacLeod. We have set up the ATF and the FBI to attack us, which we expect them to do in...” looked at his watch. “In about two hours. When they attack us, a legitimate organization that has committed no crime, the public outrage will shake Washington to its roots. Especially because people will be killed simply for exercising their constitutional rights. Along with a few civilians.”

Looked at us to make his point.

“We will sue, and will fill our coffers with a few million dollars in federal funds from the settlement. More importantly, we will see volunteers flock to the cause of the KGC. And in the interim, we will tie up the federal enforcement agencies so that they take their attention off of...some other projects we have underway.”

“But you did commit a crime. You sent your people to steal Mosby’s flag.”

“Actually, we didn’t. I have safely locked away the evidence that shows that the ATF was behind the theft in an effort to frame us.”

The ATF had sent their man to steal the flag to draw the FBI into this, but that could well backfire.

“But people died. A member of your staff and an agent of the ATF.”

“Yes, I thought that was a nice touch. When the dust settles, there will be evidence of the complicity of the ATF in stealing the flag, and in the woman’s death as well. The evidence is all carefully stored away in my safe. Before we are done with the ATF and the FBI, there will be resignations all the way to the top. Which will make our work all that much easier in some other projects.”

“How many people will die here?”

“We will have a small number of heroes and martyrs. You among them.” He smiled.

Shook my head.

“I came here to get my flag back. And my money. Truth be known, I don’t think you’re good enough to take me.”

He turned to answer me, and I began to shift my weight to my left leg, body relaxing to wait for him to move so I could direct his qi and put him down from a sitting position.

He stood angrily to stride quickly toward me, hand raised to strike.

You might think that sitting down would make self-defense harder, but you’ve never seen it done. I have practiced with masters who are advanced in years and skills, and I would never be foolish enough to attack them when they sit at rest.

Was hardly in their class, but good enough to take Emerson as he moved around the desk toward me.

It didn’t happen.

At that moment my thigh started to flex to meet him, all of the oxygen was sucked from the room and the windows bowed inward before exploding in a shower of glass and wood.

One thing about these old houses, they don’t have safety glass, and the thousands of shards from the windows drove through Captain Timmons like shrapnel. Had he not been standing between the windows and Emerson, both would have died in that instant.

The concussion from the blast had left me half deaf, but I could make out the sounds of automatic weapons and shotguns blasting around the house. Crab-walked through the

darkened room, finding my Glock on top of the desk and scooting around to check that Emerson was still alive. Stuck the gun in his ribs and he looked at me.

Grabbed his collar and dragged him over against the wall.

His nose was bleeding again.

Wasn't all. He had taken his share of the glass shards, and of the blast concussion as well. A tiny trickle of blood threaded down his cheek from his right ear.

He was trying to form words.

That's what you get for being at the same level of the blast, unprotected by the walls.

Doc rolled over beside me. He had a few cuts, but we had been sitting on the floor below window level. Jeff Mason had his rifle in hand and was watching out the window.

"Quick now, where are the flag and the money?" He would have held them as evidence against the ATF.

Emerson couldn't hear me, couldn't answer.

Tapped his forehead, and said slowly, "Where is the flag?"

He glared at me and shook his head.

The staccato of gunfire all around us would make one more shot unrecognizable. So I put the Glock against Emerson's left knee and pulled the trigger.

He screamed, and I didn't blame him. The destruction of a knee is painful, as is the

knowledge that you will spend the rest of your life walking with a cane.

“Where is it?”

Shook his head, and I put the barrel of the Glock against his right knee.

“Wait,” he yelled, not knowing that we were not as deaf as he was.

“Jack, these guys are focusing on the front yard, but sooner or later they are going to head this way,” said Jeff.

“What do you think, Doc? Just surrender to the FBI and take our chances?”

Emerson was staring at the painting of his distinguished namesake, the one-armed hero of the war.

“Jack, don’t the FBI guys wear like blue jackets with FBI spelled out in big letters?” Jeff Mason asked.

“Yeah, that’s part of the uniform.”

“Well,” said Jeff, “I don’t know who these guys are, but they aren’t FBI. Or ATF. And they seem very intent on killing everyone they find. We need to move.”

I stood and ripped the painting off of the wall. The wall safe was behind it, where you would expect.

Started to ask for the combination, but Emerson was arrogant and lazy, and had left the safe so that I simply had to turn the handle to open it.

Bullets started hitting the walls to my right, one of them smashing a decanter of expensive bourbon, splattering its contents all

over the wall and the wood cabinet that held the bar.

Found a cloth bag in the safe, and rooted through the other papers and bundles there. Found packages of cash, and the small flag wrapped in plastic. Along with an old metal box. Took them all, along with a bloody knife and a few other items, and left the documents sitting open in the safe.

“Got it. Time to get out of Dodge.”

The bullets were smacking the house with some regularity, and both Doc and Jeff crawled along the floor and out the doorway. Our plan called for us to get out the back door and into the mountains, and that was the way they headed.

I sat on the floor. I had the money. I had the flag. I had jammed Emerson’s plans, though not in any meaningful way. He could still make this go badly for the FBI. He could manage to walk away from this a free man.

He knew where I lived. Could at any time come back after me, and after Jeannie and Doc. Could escape to kill other people on other days.

The victims never get justice.

Except when they do.

Didn’t like it, but knew there was only one way to end this.

Played the tenth card of my tarot deck. The final outcome. Death.

Grabbed Emerson by the hair, pulling  
him away from the wall, turning so I was behind  
him, his head against my chest.

Heard his ragged breath, felt him begin  
to struggle.

Held the knife I had taken from the safe.

Likely the one used on Bill and Linda  
near the pond at Cross Keys.

Carbon steel, with a leather handle.

“Lauren asked me to give you this. A  
gift from her sister.”

Slit his throat.

Slid across the floor with my bundle,  
wiped the handle of the knife on Timmons’ coat  
sleeve and pressed his fingers around it.

Left it in his hand.

\* \* \*

We went up the hill slowly, hiding  
behind the rocks and the trees, as close to the  
ground as we could get, looking forward and  
back. At one point, halfway to the trees, Doc  
gave us a closed fist and we froze as two men in  
tactical outfits slid down past us, rifles at the  
ready. Their jackets clearly said “ATF” on the  
back, and I wondered how much it would cost to  
add the “E.” Or if they would even bother.

Watched as they went into position on  
the hill above the house, and quietly continued  
our climb. Their attention was not behind them,



and our only worry was that someone might be waiting for us up in the tree line.

No one was.

As we slid into the trees, I held back to watch what might happen next. Doc and Jeff slid in beside me, Jeff using the scope on his rifle to get a better view. The shots were less frequent now, just a handful of flashes in the darkness of the pre-dawn.

Waited.

The sun was still below the mountains in front of us, just turning the peaks orange and purple. Below us, a convoy of cars and trucks rolled into the farm yard, agents jumping from the vehicles to deploy around the perimeter of the main house and the barracks.

Could see county sheriff's cars in the lead.

Moving in disciplined lines, the deputies and agents of both federal forces crab-walked through the yard. Where they confronted armed men, they apparently held superior numbers, since we heard no shots. A dozen or so men surrendered, about half of them in the grayish uniforms of the Emerson group. The agents began a building by building search, starting first with the barracks. They entered quick and low, but must have found an ugly scene because those who came out looked tired and were standing upright. A few people were led out of the barracks, but no one emerged from the other buildings.

The main house was last, and they went in from front and back, strictly by the book. It looked funny from this angle, like staring down at a film, or some kind of automated computer animation. The people were the size of ants, the sun bright in the sky but the area near the ground still swathed in morning fog.

The doors burst open from the main house, people scrambling and talking into their wrist-pieces, directing and calling.

It took only a few minutes for the coroner and the rescue squad to roll into the yard. Likely they had been waiting on the outside road. The medical teams moved into the house, the EMS guys packing a gurney with their resuscitation equipment.

They would not need it.

The only people left alive from that house were sitting here on the hill.

However it would play out, Emerson had lost. There was no federal siege of the castle. No grand battle to rally people to his flag, and no dramatic court drama to set the stage for whatever they had planned in the months ahead.

And a grand ironic touch to it all. For 180 years the Knights of the Golden Circle had wanted a war with Mexico. This morning they had gotten their wish, in a manner of speaking. And Mexico had once again kicked their butts.

We turned and walked up the hill, taking the long way through the woods to Jeff's truck, stowing the rifles, the empty body bag and my sack behind the back seat. It took about an hour

to make it home. We rolled down the windows to feel the cool mountain air, climbing up Deerfield Valley Road and then across to US 250.

Wondered if they had yet found Lauren's body in the basement.

The fog had mostly burned away as we turned up the drive toward my house, Jeannie standing on the front porch, eyes shaded by one hand against the glare of the morning sun.

She waiting until she could see all three of us clearly in the cab of the truck, then turned back into the house.

Men coming home from the hunt would be hungry.

She fixed us breakfast.

## Chapter 24

# Interesting Times

The rest of Sunday was clear and bright, though there was some threat that the rains would return later in the week. I had lost the ability to tell time, and was not sure even of the date.

We were tired, and each had gone their own way until later in the day. Jeff had gone first, to work his shift at the produce department of the Food Lion in Elkton.

Doc and Jeannie had headed to their place, both of their faces showing the lines and wrinkles that fatigue will put on the faces of middle-aged people. My face didn't show the same lines, but nonetheless was puffy and pale from too many nights without adequate rest.

Tired and numb, knowing that at some point I would have to come to terms with the fact that I had killed Emerson in cold blood. You can justify it, but you can't make it feel right.

I undressed in the mud room off the kitchen, then took the clothes and stuffed them into the washing machine. Walked through the hall to my home office, and stood there naked, feeling the cool September breeze through the window and the smell of a wood fire somewhere in the neighborhood.

Padded upstairs to the bathroom and stood under the big showerhead, the water as cold as I could stand it. I was afraid to use the water too warm or the spray too hard, since both seemed to bother the sensitive skin under the burns.

Shaved in hot water with the water still dripping off of me, then toweled and dressed in cotton shorts and a tee shirt. Back down the stairs, feeling refreshed. Not hungry yet, since Jeannie had cooked a country breakfast of fried pork chops, stacks of hotcakes drenched in butter and maple syrup, fried potatoes, and coffee. Lots and lots of dark roast coffee, more robust than I usually like but tolerable with a little cream and brown sugar.

And cinnamon.

This would not be a normal day, I understood that. But getting back to normal was important.

The day called for a libation, and I happened to have a bottle of fairly expensive Penfolds Bin 707 cabernet. Not your normal everyday drinking wine, at about \$200 a bottle, but perfect for special occasions. I pulled the cork and poured a glass – it really isn't

necessary to go through the whole wine snobbery thing of sniffing and gargling and tiny swallows with a modern wine.

Save that to impress the wine stewards at the restaurant.

Silently toasted Dr. Christopher Rawson Penfold, the English medical doctor who in 1844 emigrated to Australia and began the vineyards. Actually, it was his wife Mary who was responsible for tending the vines, producing a nice Grenache varietal that Rawson gave to his patients in the belief that it promoted good health.

Hoped so.

Raised the glass slightly and toasted, “1844 to evermore.” The mantra of the vineyard. Then wondered if I might have more appropriately changed it to “1862 to evermore.”

The dark red wine was rich with the flavor of oak from its partial finish in barrels of American Oak, with hints of rich berries, mocha and spice. Finished the glass slowly and set it on the kitchen table by the bottle, leaving the rest of it to breathe.

In the mud room I found a pair of garden shears, and spent the next fifteen minutes or so gathering up the last of the summer flowers and some wisps of greenery from the back garden.

Don’t know why I continue to plant flowers in back of the house. It was the way Maw-Maw had done it, and I just let them continue to bloom there. Back in the days before indoor plumbing was common in this

part of the country, the flower beds would lead the way to the outhouse.

Provided a natural scent to cover the privy, and a nice sight for the eyes. In the warm months, anyway.

Carried the flowers into the house and sat at the table, trimming them with a kitchen knife and forming them into three bundles. Wrapped them in ribbons of red and white.

Drank another glass of the wine as I worked, the warmth of the wine in my midsection not enough to really dull the pain in my hands as I struggled to tie bows on the ribbons.

Would have walked the three miles to the Cross Keys Battlefield, but the afternoon was waning and I wanted to be back home before we gathered there for supper.

Took the utility vehicle, a John Deer quad Gator. Powered up the pavement and crossed onto Port Republic, headed west until I could make the left onto Battlefield Road. From there it was just a short drive to the fenced field above the pond.

Tied the three bundles to the fence with red ribbon.

One for Linda. One for Bill, the ATF agent. One for Lauren.

Sat on the UTV in the road, facing north across the corn fields to where the armies had clashed.

Here it had begun, in 1862, when a young cavalry captain stood against the Union

forces of General Fremont and helped drive him back toward Harrisonburg. He had won the Southern Cross of Honor, one of the first awarded in the war.

The Southern Cross was not approved by the Confederate legislature until October of 1862, and even then a shortage of the medals themselves meant that many men never received theirs. Simply had their name recorded in the office of the Adjutant to the Inspector General. Long after the war, the Cross was resurrected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and given not only to veterans of the war but their sons and daughters as well.

But Emerson had won his here, the hard way.

Given their political heritage, it was likely that the Emersons were members of the Knights of the Golden Circle before the war even started. Through the battles up and down the valley, to the service with Mosby, and even in the years after, they had been part of the secret society that lived to advance the business goals of members in both the north and the south.

They hid the gold, as had others, and once the Confederacy was safely dead and gone had taken it to use to rebuild the KGC. Hidden from sight, assumed to be dissolved and gone, the secret society had begun to rebuild its numbers and political power.

Who knows who they had recruited to the cause of business efficiency through cheap



labor? What they had done over the years in the pursuit of inexpensive labor. What political machines they had infiltrated. Who their other members were today.

It must have amused the current James Emerson to evoke that history when he chose the exchange point for the flag. He might even have been amused when he planned to send the two defectors from his cause to make the exchange, and then murdered them to keep both flag and money.

I was far less amused, because his greed and plotting had soiled a place I had always regarded with something approaching respect. For all of the years when I was growing up, the battle at Cross Keys had been a place of great honor. The place where the great Turner Ashby had fallen, mortally wounded.

The place where a badly outnumbered force of southern farm boys had repulsed the mighty and well-trained army of the Union, securing the fate of Richmond and enabling Stonewall Jackson to continue his fight in the valley.

Whatever had followed, and whatever the forces that altered how the war would be perceived in later years, the boys who fought here did so not for slavery, and not for business interests, but in the belief that they were upholding the Constitution of the United States, as ratified by the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1787.

I went to the fence, and knelt down.

Bowed my head, and said goodbye to each of them. Wished them greater happiness in their next life, however and wherever that might be. Said a small prayer for them and their souls.

Went back to sit on the UTV, staring out across the battlefield.

The afternoon was growing chilly.

Started the engine and went home.

\* \* \*

Supper was quiet. I had killed the bottle of Penfolds when I got home, sipping at the last glass of it as I threw together a few simple things for dinner. Fortunately, I had a well-stocked cellar and was able to bring up a couple of bottles of less expensive but decent wines from Chile.

Heated up a quart of rendered pork lard and watched it melt into a clear, hot liquid. Sliced cabbage and onion slaw, mixing it with a sweet and hot mayonnaise dressing. Cracked two eggs in a small bowl and whipped the whites and yolks together with a tiny whisk, carrying the gooey part of the whites into the sink so that I had a smooth egg wash. Coated wonton wrappers in the egg wash, layered in the slaw, a couple of shrimp and a slice of avocado, then rolled them for deep frying.

Sliced the last of the year's cherry tomatoes with cucumber and onion, dousing them with olive oil and balsamic vinaigrette. Dropped a handful of cubed pieces of Italian

bread into the hot oil, plucking them out when they were golden brown. Stirred them into the tomato salad and set it in the refrigerator.

Doc and Jeannie arrived as I was finishing up, and I took the time to uncork the wine and pour. Jeff Mason arrived as we were pouring, bearing a jar of his peaches pickled in vinegar, sugar and cinnamon. Turned back and dropped the first of the wontons into the hot oil, not watching what I was doing.

A small drop of hot oil hit the burn on the back of my hand, searing a tiny spot that made my whole hand feel as though it was on fire, and I felt myself sway on the heels of my feet as the pain seared through my brain.

Felt Doc's hands grab at me and steer me to a chair, while Jeannie gave me a look that seared almost as much as the oil and took over the cooking chores.

Doc pressed a shot glass of Wild Turkey into my hand.

Threw it back and waited until it landed and the red haze started to subside.

"Forgot to tell you. The burn spots are going to be very heat sensitive for a while."

"How long?"

"Dunno," Doc said. "Some people are sensitive the rest of their lives."

We ate in the kitchen, the meal mostly silent. The egg rolls turned out well, and Jeannie had served up some mango, Jeff's pickled peaches and some sharp yellow cheddar

cheese from Wisconsin in addition to the tomato salad.

Dinner over, my guests cleaned up and we refilled wine glasses.

“So,” asked Jeff. “Where do we go from here?”

“I figure that whatever way the feds want to spin this, we’ll hear about it shortly.” I said.

“Too much gunfire and too many bodies to slide it under the carpet. But with a little luck, they will look like the good guys when the dust settles. When it is all done, they’ll likely be at my front door.”

“What will they know?”

“We likely left some fingerprints, but there must be thousands of fingerprints in that house. And I doubt the Department of Defense still has your prints on file after fifty years, either one of you. Anything else that could tie us to anything there?”

They thought it over.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing,” said Jeff.

Nodded.

“Then you two are out of it. As far as anyone knows, you were never there. And if they pull me in, I still haven’t done anything they can tag me with. All they can say for sure was that I was there once or twice last week.”

“Lauren’s body?”

“Look, we gave them a nice scenario there. It works out as some sort of local argument with whoever it was who attacked

him. If they aren't too pushy about the details, they can peg Lauren's death and Emerson's as side casualties of the fight. No need to go looking further."

"Law enforcement knows that simplest scenario is also the most likely. It is not often that someone can fake evidence. If we just sit tight, this should blow over."

"They'll still want to talk to you," Doc said.

Nodded.

"What about Lauren and Linda?" asked Jeannie.

"We will claim the bodies and take them home to North Carolina for burial."

"Do you want me along?"

Thought it over.

"Better if you were. This will be very hard on their mother, and having another woman around might help."

She nodded.

\* \* \*

On Monday, I went back to my work routine.

Up at dawn. Shower and dress.

Down to the kitchen to make coffee in the French press, along with fresh fruit and a little bit of yogurt.

Twenty minutes of meditation.

Then out the door and on my way over to the 7-11 on US 33. I had expected the weather

to be the top item of discussion, now that October was nigh and the weather services were beginning to release their winter forecasts.

Was wrong.

The Daily News Record, the local valley paper published in Harrisonburg, carried a dark black headline:

### **ROCKBRIDGE DRUG WAR.**

The photo underneath was of a large stand of marijuana plants, green and bushy in the photo with a couple of county deputies standing in front of it to show the size of the plants.

Henry Stiles was, as usual, holding the floor to deliver his impassioned opinions. He did it very well, and whatever he lacked in stature or hair was more than compensated by his passion and the waving of his hands.

“I’m no fan of drugs, but this kind of thing just wouldn’t happen if we were just to legalize it.”

I was floored. Henry was, for as long as I had known him, a staunch conservative who opposed almost anything that was not positively mentioned in the Good Book. Was on record as opposing Baptists who danced, Methodists who drank dark liquor, most black people, all gay people and vegans. If I said marijuana should be legalized, they would have simply rolled their eyes. *MacLeod. He wasn’t actually born here. You have to excuse him.*

For Henry to do it was akin to him approving of a Muslim temple in downtown

McGaheysville. If there was actually a downtown McGaheysville.

“Henry, why do you think it should be legalized?” I asked.

“We could tax it and balance the budget in one year, boy! Plus, it would keep those Mexican drug gangs out of our state, and cut down on gang violence!”

“Gang violence?”

He picked up the paper and waved it under my nose, the ad flyers falling out of the middle and scattering on the floor under the donut display.

“Some farmer over in Goshen got himself killed on Saturday, and a lot of his farm hands, too! They accidently stumbled on a field of marijuana on the mountain above his land, and the pot growers came down and shot them all up in the middle of the night. Killed some other people, too.”

The story was spun.

“Mexican gangs, up here?”

“They’re moving up from the border, Jack. Carrying drugs all over the US, making billions of dollars that should be staying here in the US. And they don’t pay taxes.”

“That so?” I raised an eyebrow.

“And now they’re killing innocent people all over the country.”

“Well, they aren’t bothering me, Henry.”  
Not any more, they weren’t.

Waved and turned to walk away. Passed by the woman at the counter, and winked at her as I passed.

Just reached to push open the door.

“Truth is, we’ve had trouble with the Hispanics, all of them, for almost two hundred years. Remember the Maine?” said another member of the group, who looked to be a gypsy construction worker.

Paused.

“Our mistake was not simply sending the army in to take over all of Mexico,” he continued, “and bring them in as the next five states. Take over the government and send good old Americans down to show them how to run the country, like we did in Texas. None of this NAFTA crap, just good cheap labor for factories run by us Caucasians.”

I turned to see a number of heads nodding in assent.

But Henry was not nodding.

His pale blue eyes were curious, as they stared at the speaker.

There are three sayings claimed to be Chinese curses.

*May you find what you are seeking.*

*May you come to the attention of those in power.*

And the third.

*May you live in interesting times.*



Sat in the conference room of National Underwriters.

The secretary at the front desk had tipped me to the fact that after some twenty years with the firm, they had forced Michael to move out of his office for a few weeks while they redecorated. He was not, she assured me, very happy about it.

He had taken the small conference room to heart. Had moved in his massive fish tank, which barely fit, and had expanded his stacks of files to fill even more space than in his office.

His bow tie was a hideous shade of green against his blue shirt.

“Mom help pick out your tie, Michael?”

He grimaced. His mother, as I well knew, is color blind.

Leaned back in the conference chair.

“The police in Jacksonville, Florida, have picked up the dentist. He was attempting to board a flight for Grant Cayman, where one may presume he had money stashed in a hidden account.”

“Alone?”

He nodded.

“The woman was found tied and beaten in a hotel room just up the coast from there.”

“No honor among thieves,” I noted.

“What about the families involved?” I asked.

“Not our issue, though I understand the primary insurer is giving them assistance in locating another dentist. The ones who still

have baby teeth will only have to deal with it for a year or two, and the dentist will make the call as to whether a change from metal to some other material is warranted. The adults, will simply get a replacement set in porcelain. Most of them will end up with the best-looking teeth of their lives.”

“You okay with that?”

“They’re not spending our money, so it is fine by us.”

I nodded.

“As for the problem over in Williamsburg, the threat of a lawsuit has been withdrawn, so we are pleased. Though I am not sure that you needed to get involved to the degree that you did. You could simply have turned over what you knew to the authorities and let them take it from there.”

Nodded. Likely true, but not my style.

“So both cases are resolved satisfactorily. I don’t have any others immediately,” he said. “Unless you want a job doing stadium security for some new rock group playing at JMU in two weeks.”

“God forbid,” I said.

Looked at the piles of file folders and wondered if that were truly the best he could do for me.

Didn’t matter.

I could use a little time off.

“Call me when you have something more interesting.”

He nodded.

The meeting was winding up.

“Oh, and Jack, the accounting department has asked me to return your expense report. They would like for you to provide some justification for the item on line...un...nineteen. Apparently...”

He looked at me with a small grin.

“They are having some trouble understanding why this case in Williamsburg required the purchase of a 42-inch flat-screen TV.”

I took it from him.

“I have a last bit of business for you, as well.”

He arched an eyebrow at me.

Reached into the gym bag on the chair next to me.

“I believe this is the property of National Underwriters,” I said, placing the bundle on the table.

He looked at the square shape covered in newspaper. He pulled loose the tape on one end and pulled the paper open just a bit. Looked at the contents, and his eyes grew wide as he realized what it contained. Looked up.

“That is \$100,000 in hundred dollar bills. One thousand of them, all accounted for. And here is a document you may sign to acknowledge the return of it.”

He reached for the form, and pulled a gold pen from his pocket.

Signed.

He got up and walked to the door.  
Called to the secretary.

“Amity, I need young mister Reuben in here, and someone from security, please.”

Came back into the room, a smile on his face.

I picked up his gold pen, and beside the entry on line 19 I wrote in block letters,

*SECURITY MONITOR NECESSARY  
FOR REVIEW OF SURVEILLANCE TAPES.*

Handed it to him, with his pen. He laughed, and scrawled an approval on the form.

Shapes in the doorway.

“Ah, there you are. Jack MacLeod, this is my new associate, Alex Reuben. Alex, Jack is our best investigator on the strange cases. You will be seeing more of him.”

I hoped so, but wondered what he meant by ‘strange’ cases.

“Alex, please take this down to the vault and have it logged in. Have Mister, um, Reynolds here,” pointed at the security guard, “escort you down. And get me a receipt.”

“Anything else?” Michael said to me.

Nodded.

Pulled the flag from the bag and laid it on the table.

Freed picked it up slowly, looked at the front and back, and then handed it to Alex.

“Log this into the vault as well.”

Watched them leave, and then swiveled in the chair to look at me.

“I think I would like to hear about this.”

Leaned back, but my chair didn't recline like his.

"Not much to say. I knocked on his door, asked for the money and the flag back, and he gave them to me."

"Just like that?"

Nodded.

"It was mostly like that. I mean, we didn't get along very well, and he had a lot of questions about what I knew and what I wanted."

His eyes went to the backs of my hands, where the skin looked a lot better but was still red and peeling.

"Did he tell you why he took the flag, and why he ambushed you?"

"Not in so many words. I got the idea that it was done for him, but that he really wanted to return the money and the flag once he thought about it. His employees disagreed, and in the ensuing action they ended up dead."

Michael looked at me in silence.

"I am delighted," he said, "that you returned intact from the experience. What became of the person behind all of this?"

"He ended up dead, too."

Michael nodded.

\* \* \*

It took a while to clean up at the office. The Postal Service had given up trying to cram more junk mail into my small box, and had

instead left a series of forms instructing me to pick up my mail at the post office.

Took the trek over there, retrieved my mail, and threw away everything except two checks and a letter of invitation from something called the Private Investigators Association of Virginia. Seemed like a nice, upstanding organization, not at all the kind of group that I wanted to be part of.

For one thing, I can't promise to keep everything my client says confidential. And while I try to stay within the law, it just doesn't always work out that way. I keep it moral, according to my rules. Mostly keep it professional. But not always within the letter of the law. Kept the letter of invitation in case I changed my mind, wandered down to the bank to deposit the two checks, then back to the office.

The two checks were the only things that had changed in my bank account, other than the expenses I had just filed. Wrote myself an overdue paycheck, watching the software calculate and electronically file the taxes. God bless technology.

The spider plant was still alive. I considered leaving it alone, seeing exactly what it would take to make this plant join the long string of office plants killed by my lack of attention. Decided at the last minute that there had been enough death this month, and watered it.

Noon was approaching, so I locked up and headed over to Union Station.

The walk up the street was harder than I wanted, the socks and slip-ons rubbing across the tops of my feet no matter how carefully I walked. Finally noticed that people were beginning to notice my up-on-my-toes ballet walking style, and I just suffered with it until I could get to the Wetsel Seed Building. Took the elevator to the second floor to avoid the stairs.

Cassie wasn't there, but David, the manager, stopped to say hello on his way to the kitchen.

Ordered the Beets and Bacon salad, a half order, and the prime rib Havarti crostini, thinly shaved prime rib and Havarti cheese on crusts of bread, served with a horseradish cream.

The restaurant was still experimenting with its wine list, and while not all of their selections of red wine had made me want to cheer, it is hard to do much wrong with a basic cabernet sauvignon. The selection today was crisp and tart across its berry flavors, with a finish of vanilla and cinnamon, just fine for me.

One glass only and I headed the maroon Ford back toward home, grateful to have a quiet afternoon ahead to catch up on my rest.

## Chapter 25

### Aftermath

The next morning found me turning off Interstate 64 and north up into Charlottesville, to the Federal Building on Main Street.

I had awakened just as the sun was peeping over Swift Run Gap, staying up to watch the new Daybreak news team on Channel 3. The new team was not as smooth as the old crew had been this summer, as various new youngsters took a hand at doing news and weather. They blew their lines, sometimes dressed badly, and did not yet have a good sense of how to tell a news story. Still, it was my home station, and I watched with a small prayer that it would get better quickly.

I stay in bed in the mornings long enough to watch the birthdays and anniversaries, which they announce five days a week, usually with pictures. I have threatened to post birthday greetings and a photo of Jeannie, and give her



real age. She has threatened me with a slow and excruciating death if I do.

Made up the bed and went upstairs to exercise, the first time I had done so in what seemed like ages. My body felt flabby, the muscles too tense, so I worked through the series of kata forms for Tai Chi Chih. Took nearly half an hour before the second wind kicked in and the breathing became easier.

Started to push myself, then, moving faster through the intricate positions, blocks and sweeps, transitioning to the more aggressive forms of Tai Chi Chuan to work the kinks out of muscle tissues.

I still had to be careful of hot water in the shower, as the heat made my hands and feet scream in protest. That did not seem to be improving too rapidly, and I prayed that it would not be a permanent condition. I like hot showers.

Shaved and walked downstairs. I would have jogged down the stairs, but the polished wood floors of these old houses can be treacherous on wet feet under the best of circumstances. Even with a thin carpet over them, I didn't want to risk it.

The wind felt different, colder, as I sat on the verandah and ate my breakfast of coffee and fruit. I had coated the burns with aloe vera, much as you would a bad sunburn, and it seemed to help.

September was coming to an end, and with it would come the clouds and rains of early

fall. In October, this cycle of cold nights and hot days, combined with the moisture of the morning fogs, helps to turn the leaves on the mountains to their hues of gold and red and brown.

You don't have to travel to the Skyline Drive to see the leaves – the National Park Service has two Leaf Cams mounted, one on the Pinnacle looking down on Luray, and the other at the lodge house at Big Meadows, looking down on Elkton. Both are positioned so that you can see the leaves without ever getting out of a chair.

But that's not how it is done, and in late October or early November, depending on how fast the temperature changes, the valley would be clogged with visitors, motorcycles and corvettes down from the City to see the leaves. It was a fine time to be in the valley, with the nights turning cold enough to warrant a fire in the library and a little sip of moonshine some evenings. By the first week of November, the apple trees would be heavy with fruit and we would begin to put up jars of apple pie filling and apple butter.

Peaceful, pleasant thoughts interrupted by the telephone.

Special Agent McCoy of the FBI, inviting me to join him at the Federal Building in Charlottesville at noon for a chat.

If this were serious, they would already have me under some kind of surveillance, so I avoided trying to contact Jeff or Doc. Just

pattered around the house for a little while with an eye on the clock so that I was not late for the meeting.

Since I had not seen my follower for some time, I went to the garage on a hunch and began a sweep of the truck. It took nearly half an hour – the new units are small and can be made to look like most anything. This one was hardly bigger than a playing card, and fit under the plastic bed cover of the back hatch.

Took it off and stuck it in my wallet.

They don't need to put a bug on your car, in this day and age. They can simple track you through the GPS feature of your cell phone. But that is expensive and requires a warrant. Nonetheless, cell phones are no longer safe, since the National Security Agency scans all cellular and land line calls in the country. They don't listen in per se – that would also require a warrant. But they scan for certain key words, and when a phone caller seems to be following a recognizable pattern of words they get a warrant and begin to listen in.

I had not made any calls related to anything I had been doing.

\* \* \*

Gave up my keys and wallet at the security desk, and walked through the scanner. Then over to the front desk to sign in and get a security badge.

A large man in a dark suit waited on the other side of the desk, and nodded for me to follow him. Down in the elevator to a sub-floor under the building, then down a long hallway, and we wound through it with a couple of turns until I was sure we were in a different building altogether.

Finally stopped at an unmarked door and he knocked, then entered. The room was a small lab with its own morgue, and sitting on a stool at a table was a young woman in a lab coat and thick-rimmed glasses.

“You’re here to identify the Wills woman?”

Lauren.

Nodded.

She pulled a drawer open on the wall, sliding the small table out so that she could lift the cover and show me Lauren’s face.

Was struck by how pale she was, the bloodless skin and lips making her look like a wax caricature of herself.

“You need to see the rest of her?”

Shook my head.

Didn’t need it to make an identification.

The morgue technician handed me a clipboard, and I scrawled a signature at the bottom. She turned and filed the form in a slotted file on her desk.

“When can Ms. Wills be released for burial?”

She shrugged.

“Tomorrow, probably. Depends on how long it takes for the county morgue to pick it up and transport.”

“Her.”

“Huh?”

“Her, not it. Her name is Lauren.”

She nodded.

Back down the white labyrinth, winding back to the elevator we had come down in. We went up to another nondescript hallway, walking down a short, windowless hallway to stop at the door of a conference room.

He opened the door, and I stepped in to find ATF(E) Agent Smith and SAC McCoy of the FBI.

We went through the formal introductions again, McCoy this time acknowledging that he knew me, and me trying to get Smith to admit that he had a real name.

“Do you mind if we record this session?”

Yes I did. That’s how they trap you.

“No.”

Stated my name and read them my driver’s license number from the holographic card in my wallet.

Smith started it.

“Did you kill Emerson?”

“Emerson’s dead?” I asked, with just a hint of incredulity in my voice.

“What do you know about the attack on the farmhouse?”

“What farmhouse?”

And so it went.

You have to remember that I learned all of this stuff at the Investigations Academy. I had actually taught this stuff to our field units. So it slowly became obvious that they had no idea where I fit into all of this, which was fine with me.

McCoy had a better idea than Smith, but even he let it slip that they knew that my truck had not moved all weekend.

I took the bug device from my wallet and handed it back to him.

“Guess this doesn’t need to be on my truck anymore, then.”

We kept at it for three more iterations of the same questions, me carefully giving them no information, until they began to wind down.

Finally McCoy reached over and turned off the recorder.

“Okay, Mr. MacLeod,” said ATF agent Smith, “that should be enough. Is there anything you want to tell us off the record that might help us?”

Smith had no idea who I was.

Second thought: Smith was gaming me. Or McCoy. Or both.

Gazed up at the fire extinguisher in the ceiling, the most likely place for the bug, and then at McCoy.

He stared back and spoke quietly.

“Well, thank you again for your time, Jack. Is there a way we can reach you if we need more information?”

Nodded and handed him my business card. He glanced at and nodded, tucked it away in his shirt pocket.

I got up and went to the door, opening it to find my escort waiting.

Down the elevator, turned in the ID badge and pushed my way out the front door into the early afternoon.

\* \* \*

Sat at a table at Enoteca, an Italian wine and tapas bar down on the mall area off Water Street. It's a modern, well lit place with long tables and stools if you choose not to sit at the bar. Had walked around the shops of the mall until almost three, then gone into Enoteca and gotten a glass of a nice barbaresco wine made from the nebbiolo grape. It's a red wine sturdy enough to reach up and slap you, with enough tannin to curl your tongue and a strong peppery flavor. I loved it.

At one minute after three, McCoy sat down across from me. When the girl came over, he tried to order water. I told the girl to bring him the same as I had.

"I can't drink on duty."

"Consider this undercover," I said.

Waited until the girl brought his wine and a small plate of bread with olive oil.

"Recording device?" I asked.

Shook his head.

Sat for a moment, wondering where to begin.

He laid the card on the table. The one on which I had written *Enoteca. 3 pm.*

“So what do you want?” he asked.

Sipped at my wine, then started at the beginning.

“We’ve got a serious problem. At least you do. For some reason I can’t yet comprehend, Smith seems to be setting you guys up.”

“I think you read too much into this. Granted, he isn’t as forthcoming with information as we might like, but it’s a good working relationship.”

Shook my head.

Walked him through it, as Emerson had told it to me, with places that Doc’s knowledge had filled in the gaps.

“Why did the FBI become involved in all of this in the first place?”

“You know as well as anyone. The theft of a museum artifact. The killing of a federal agent. That’s what we do, Jack.”

“But the reality is that this isn’t what you do. This situation might have been of interest to you because it is in your territory, but the FBI was dragged into this. On purpose.”

“To accomplish what?”

“Imagine what would have happened yesterday morning if you had gone in the way you were planning to. What was the battle order?”



Knew already, because I had seen it.

“Local law enforcement, then us,  
followed by the ATF.”

“And when you ran into a well-armed  
force that cut your men down in an ambush,  
what then?”

He was silent.

Then reached over and took a sip of his  
wine.

“Ruby Ridge all over again,” I  
suggested. “Your next posting would have been  
to the FBI office in Nome, Alaska. That is, if  
every other hell hole assignment was already  
taken. Heads would roll from here to DC.  
Scandal and resignations.”

He nodded.

“So why did Smith set you up?”

“You haven’t convinced me that he did.”

Sigh.

“Look, it was Smith’s undercover guy  
who stole the flag. He didn’t dream that up on  
his own. You have to wonder who arranged for  
the flag to be taken out of the Richmond  
Museum of the Confederacy, where it was pretty  
safe, and conveniently left sitting almost on  
Emerson’s doorstep in a facility any competent  
thief could get into with a bobby pin. That was  
a setup.”

“Smith’s guy was the one who took the  
idea to Emerson. Emerson was thrilled, because  
it played into his fantasy as the reincarnation of  
the great, dashing cavalry rider James Emerson,

who won the Southern Star of Honor and brought home a treasure.”

“But sooner or later,” I said, “Emerson realized the mistake. Smith had to know that the whole plot would expose his guy Bill. And when it did, Emerson did the logical thing and killed both Bill and his new cohort, Linda Wills. Choosing Cross Keys as the place to do it must have given him some entertainment value.”

“What about trying to kill you?”

“I was nothing to him. Just window dressing. In fact, he was surprised that I survived both attacks. I was an irritant to him.”

“Anything you want to confess in all this?” asked McCoy.

Looked at him over the rim of the wine glass.

“Nothing I will lose sleep over.”

“We’re not convinced the Emerson died the way it looked.”

If he could hang it on me, I would already be in a cell.

Just looked out the window.

He looked at his watch.

“Anything else I need to know?”

Wasn’t getting it.

“Listen, this may sound a little crazy, and I admit I’m not sure of the whole thing. But if there is any truth to what Emerson told me you’ve got a lot of work to do.”

“Chasing down militia guys pretending to be the Army of the Confederacy? Neo-

secessionists chanting that the South will rise again?"

Shook my head.

"A secret society that has been around for more than 180 years, called the Knights of the Golden Circle."

"You been reading comic books again, Jack?"

Smiled.

"Not me. All those big words defeat me."

"You're talking about the guys who are usually portrayed as the die-hard confederates who refused to stop fighting, though, right?"

"That's not what the history shows, McCoy."

"They were formed at a time when whole groups of business organizations started calling themselves Knights. The Knights of the Golden Horseshoe. The Knights of the Golden Trail, the Golden Eagle, the Golden Fleece. All business people caught up in some grand crusade for better business."

"The Knights of the Golden Circle were just like the others. They came together long before the Civil War was even dreamed of. Yes, they got all tied up in the war when it came. Most everyone in the country did, in one way or the other. Hell, even the Indian tribes in the west chose sides in that war. One of the most decorated Confederate war heroes was a Cherokee Chief from Oklahoma."

“The Knights of the Golden Circle were businessmen, from the north and south, who shared a common dream to expand the territory of the United States and secure inexpensive labor for our factories.”

“They were pro-slavery.” said McCoy.  
Shrugged.

“Most everyone was, in their early days. The fact is that the Civil War was very inconvenient for them. Messed up their plans.”

“So what does this have to do with Emerson and his little militia group.”

“Emerson claimed that they were a military unit of the KGC, and that their plan was to lure you into a confrontation you could not win.”

“And why would they want to take on the entire Federal Government?”

“Maybe they were only taking on you, Andy. Maybe the rest of the government, or at least some parts of it, were on Emerson’s side.”

McCoy shook his head.

“You’re asking me to buy into some grand conspiracy involving the government and some shadowy secret society, based on one old tattered flag stolen from a museum? You need to lay off the wine, Jack.”

“These guys are patient, Andy. They waited for twenty five years after the Civil War to spend any of the money. And when they did spend it, it wasn’t for frivolous things. The money was invested in business ventures.”

“So they used plundered money from the Civil War to build new businesses. Jack, in every war people do that. For God’s sake, we have to keep a half-dozen full time offices operating in the middle east, just trying to track all the money stolen during the whole Afghan and Iraq messes.”

“But these guys don’t think in terms of a few years. They plan for decades, maybe even centuries. They want every part of North America to become part of the United States.”

“Except Canada,” McCoy pointed out. “Canada is a part of the British Empire. Not much chance we would fight the British again just to gain control of the Yukon.”

“I don’t think it is war they want. After all, unless I miss my guess, we’ve already tried to invade Mexico at least three times, and Cuba once. No, I think they are trying to do it politically,” I said.

“If you are thinking long term, who’s to say that our immigration problems are just a coincidence? Suppose it was a plan, implemented back at the end of World War II, to bring people from within the Golden Circle into the United States. Cheap labor. And a slow infusion into our culture. In half of our schools, English is now a second language. There isn’t a grocery store in America that isn’t stocking up on Latin foods. We’ve got some 30 million mostly illegal workers from Honduras north already settling in. I don’t believe that much in coincidence.”

“That doesn’t bring Mexico into the US, Jack.”

“That’s another, different situation. Suppose we instigate a problem so great that the Mexican government can no longer function. So terrible that the time comes when Mexico asks us to step in. They petition to become a US territory.”

“The drug cartels,” he said.

“Someone had a cute deal to provide the cartels with weapons, to make the situation worse. It was just by accident that the thing got exposed. But my guess is that some of our ATF guys are part of a hidden agenda they may not even know about.”

“From who, Jack? From some mythical secret society of yours?”

“From the inside, Andy. They would have done it the same way the abolitionists did, leading up to the Civil War. The way the Communists did it in the Fifties. The way the Christian Coalition did it in the Reagan years. They put their own people into the government. Not in the White House, maybe. Not the Congress, except as part of a larger scheme. No, I’d bet they have people all through the agencies. Treasury. Justice. Commerce. People you don’t ever see, can never find.”

“So we arrest them all? All of the government employees?” he laughed.

“For what? They aren’t breaking any laws. They aren’t working to destroy America. From their perspective, they are the patriots who

will unite North America into a single, stronger United States. And in doing so, will bring new resources, new jobs, new prosperity.”

“You really believe in this, don’t you, Jack?”

Our wine glasses were empty. I signaled for another round, and tore off a piece of the bread while I thought.

“I believe that they believe it. After all, how long do you think Mexico can survive without US tourism? Without the ability to move across our borders? And how long after Fidel’s death will it take his brother Raoul to petition for status as a territory?”

She brought the new glasses and took the old.

We stared into the dark burgundy liquid with our own thoughts.

“We can’t,” McCoy said, “arrest people just because their vision of the country is different from ours. That’s guaranteed under the Constitution. Like you said, they may be the patriots. And there may be some casualties. What was it Thomas Jefferson said, that the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots?”

“They tried to kill Doc and me. They tried to kill or disgrace you. That’s not patriotism.”

“I don’t know that it was deliberate in my case, Jack.”

“Really? Which federal agency is it that is investigating the whole Mexican arms fiasco? The Fast and Furious thing?”

His eyes got narrow.

“What do you know, Jack?”

“Nothing. No, something. I know that Emerson told me that there are two parts to the Knights of the Golden Circle. The business and political part, and the military part. He was part of the military part. The others may be patriots and may be legal. But conspiracy, theft and murder are still crimes. And my guess is that they wanted to lure you guys into this to sideline something you are doing to investigate the ATF. Emerson and his ragtag militia were a sacrifice to take someone out of the game. That someone was you, and the FBI.”

He took a large slug of his wine.

Wanted to tell him it was better if it was sipped, like a good moonshine, but his eyes had a faraway thinking look.

Pushed the dish of bread toward him, and he looked up at me.

Hard cast to his eyes, the wrinkles bunched at the corners, mouth set hard.

“I will take this information under advisement,” he said.

He would run it past his superiors over on the Fifth Floor of FBI Headquarters in DC.

He stood.

“You still have to know, Andy. You have to find out why Agent Smith of the ATF and E set you up. That’s not politics, it’s personal.”



He nodded. Threw a twenty on the table to cover the cost of his wine. Sort of. It's a tad more expensive than that, but I let it pass.

"And Special Agent McCoy?"

I could be formal, too.

"You left out part of the quote. Jefferson said that the tree of liberty must be refreshed by the blood of patriots...and tyrants."

## Chapter 26

# Homecoming

On Thursday, they released Lauren's body to the same funeral home that had Linda's, and on a cold and blustery Friday morning we followed the hearse down Interstate 81 toward the small town of Sparta, North Carolina.

The ride down started quietly, both Jeannie and I caught up in remembrances of Lauren. I had my own memories of Linda as well, both the dead woman I had seen in the moonlight and what I learned of her over the course of the last weeks.

We didn't talk much, but neither could we stay silent. You can't, when it is a rainy day and you are stuck in the cab of a small pickup truck doing 75 miles an hour. After a while I turned on the radio, and after spending too much time and effort trying to find a decent news or talk station settled on classic rock from somewhere out of eastern Kentucky.

Heard Jeannie humming the tune from the radio for a while. I focused on driving, since the highway can be tricky in the rain when the big old Caddies down from New York barrel past you doing 85 or better. And there is always some clown who scares him or herself and spends the entire drive hitting the brakes in front of you.

But after a while even I relaxed, and began to hum along with the song, Lynyrd Skynyrd's *Sweet Home Alabama*, and when it hit the chorus we both broke into song. Not good singing, mind you, but enough to break the silence and lift the mood as we finished the two and a half hour journey to the south.

The plan was to get things settled at the funeral home there, then go to talk to the girls' Momma. Stay for the funeral if it would be soon, or come back for it.

Didn't work out that way.

"She died Saturday morning. Another heart attack. She just up and went in her sleep, and nothing to be done for it."

He looked over at the two coffins being unloaded.

"Just as well, I'm thinking. Seeing her two daughters both gone would have broken her heart. She set store by those girls. She was proud of what they had done, what they had become. But they left to go up to Virginia, and I guess her heart just wasn't up to it. Now we will have to bury the whole family. It's just so sad."

He didn't look sad, but in his line of work it must be hard, dealing with the bereaved every day and trying to stay sympathetic.

I couldn't do it.

We made the arrangements. All of the burial plots were paid for, but there were the questions of caskets and viewings, how we wished things to be. I finally paid him a little over \$10,000 to cover the costs and got a receipt.

"Is next Monday alright for the funeral? I mean, their mother has been waiting a while."

Nodded.

"And will you be here?"

Looked at Jeannie.

"No, I think we will not."

\* \* \*

The drive home seemed shorter, though we were quiet most of the way. The radio station out of Kentucky had faded out, and I didn't feel like messing with it. The traffic going up I-81 was heavy, but manageable.

"She knew, didn't she?" I finally asked.

"Yes, she knew. Even if she didn't have The Gift, a mother usually knows. It just opens up this sudden cold empty spot in your heart that wasn't there before. Or they come to you to say goodbye. I'd guess her death didn't follow Lauren's by much."

Paused.

“Guess they’re all together again now, wherever that is.”

Wherever.

“I really thought you two might hit it off, Jack.”

Shrugged.

“No spark. I need to have a spark, or it’s just good times and a little cuddling.”

“No sex?”

Shook my head.

“I won’t say I haven’t had sex without that spark at any time in my life, but the sex isn’t much good without it.”

“But Jack,” she said, “you need to be with someone. You’re too young to spend these years alone. And if you let it go too long, it just gets harder and harder to let someone in.”

Was definitely not having this conversation while trapped in the cab of my own truck. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

“So what about you? I mean, if that’s such good advice why don’t you follow it?”

“Oh, Arthur and I are getting married, over Christmas.”

Hmmm.

“You let Doc know that yet?” I asked, smiling as I stared straight ahead.

“Ah, you men. Of course he knows. I just haven’t told him the date yet.”

I wasn’t surprised that they would marry. They’d been leading up to it for a while, and their lover’s spat was just a way to clear the air

of some issues while they settled down to the business of making a couple out of two people.

Nor was I surprised that she was in control of it. Women always control the important things in life. When to marry. When to have children, and how many. If they can, what gender, though that can be hit and miss. The social calendar. Which other couples you will associate with, and which ones to avoid.

I've known men who claimed to be the ones in charge of all of those things, but they are deluding themselves.

I won't say every man is that simple. I will say that of the two sexes, men are the less complicated, easier to understand. At least, that's what we men think.

Woman are in charge of all of the important things because they are better at it. I can field strip my Glock blindfolded and reassemble it in less than a minute. I cannot for the life of me remember that a woman will be pre-menstrual roughly every 28 days. It always takes me by surprise. Nor do I know exactly how to respond when it happens.

Smiled and looked at Jeannie.

"If I dress in drag, can I be your Maid of Honor?"

Smacked me with her hand on the back of my head.

"My sister Alma will be the Maid of Honor," she said. "Arthur and I were hoping you would be best man."

“Only if I can wear my kilt like a proper Scot.”

“Deal,” she said.

\* \* \*

Saturday night we gathered at the Moose Lodge in Shenandoah to celebrate their engagement. The people there had done a lot to renovate the place since I had been there last, building an attractive dark wood bar and a screen-in deck off of the back.

It was centrally located south of the little town of Shenandoah, on the border of Page and Rockingham Counties, so that the Dovels from all over the valley could attend.

My job as best man was to make sure the celebrants made it home safely, as they were busy drinking, dancing and chatting up the in-laws, most of whom had never met Doc. It did not seem to bother him. He was a country man, and these were country people. He would fit right in, even if he was just about the smartest man on the planet.

They won't let you bring shine into the lodges. Oh, some of the rougher places will let you do so with a wink, but people who do that are mostly no-account anyway. The Moose runs a bottle club, and the bartenders keep a tight rein on what goes in and out. So Doc and I were both nipping at Wild Turkey tonight, mine mixed about half and half with bottled spring water.

Best I could do.

It was, all in all, a pleasant night that I spent reflecting on the day before. I had stopped by the office in Harrisonburg to find my expense check from National Underwriters, plus an unexpected bonus – checks for ten percent of the recovered money and the value of the flag, totaling some \$35,000.

Which would barely cover the hospital and other expenses for what my we-don't-cover-actual-medical-care health insurance had declined to pay. And the various and sundry other expenses.

Didn't get rich, didn't lose any money.

Fair enough.

The expense check did include the cost of the television. Bless Michael Freed's heart.

Friday night I had pulled the rest of the bundle from Emerson's safe out. I had left most of the papers in the safe that night, but there was an accounting ledger I would send anonymously to McCoy for the FBI to sort through. The money had been enough to cover the \$100,000 returned to the insurance company, plus about \$50,000 more of Emerson's.

He would not need it any longer, and had no heirs. So I determined that the four of us should split it evenly. I would share half with Jeff Mason, and Jeannie and Doc could have the other half. Doc refused to accept it, but I figured I would just make a wedding present of it.



The other contents of the bundle were interesting, but not particularly rewarding. There was a small metal box, which when I had picked the simple lock yielded a leather bag and a small box of cardboard. The cardboard box contained a citation and an original of the Southern Star of Honor, one of the first awarded in October of 1862 to Captain James Tyree Emerson.

The leather pouch contained nearly \$100,000 in assorted bills. All of it in Confederate currency.

I put them back in their safe box, to send anonymously to the museum at New Market. Or perhaps hold on to for a while, just in case the folks in Rockingham County ever woke up and built a memorial to the battles at Cross Keys and Port Republic. And to their own heroes of that God-forsaken war.

At the table beside me, Jeannie was giving her kin the story of our adventures. Not the part about Emerson or the flag, but what we had discovered of the battle of Cross Keys and the history of Captain Emerson and John Singleton Mosby, the Gray Ghost.

She went into great detail about the role of their Dovel ancestor at the Goshen Tavern, and our late night trip to look the place over. She recounted how the Mosby treasure had been retrieved, and how it was later invested in businesses in Page County.

“Oh, Jeannie, no!” shouted Donald, an older brother I had only shaken hands with.

“Not the old ‘five paces’ nonsense. If I had a dollar for every time Mother said that, I’d be a rich man today. Do you know how many times we dug holes all around the farm, and all around the cemetery, looking for the ‘five paces?’”

“Five paces from what?” I asked.

“Five paces from where it all started,” chanted the Doves in unison.

They all laughed, and I went to the bar for another round of drinks.

\* \* \*

It was Sunday evening before Doc called.

He and Jeannie had just finished Sunday dinner, which I had been invited to but had declined in deference to my losing battle against the five pounds I had put on while laying around the house recuperating.

“So where did it start?” Doc asked.

“Where did what start?”

“We’ve been sitting here trying to figure where it all started. The treasure and all.”

“It started,” I said, “at Fairfax Courthouse, where Mosby stole it from General Stoughton. Or at the twin pines where it was hidden and dug up by Emerson and Dovel. Of course, since we have no idea where in thirty square miles the right two pine trees might be, that would be a bit hard to find.”

He wanted to argue, so I finally shrugged on my denim jacket and work boots and took the truck over to his place.

The gray and blue rocks of the exterior of his house were clean and shiny, and the lights were on over the door. Made my way to the kitchen.

Doc and Jeannie were waiting. Shot glasses of clear moonshine sat beside a small bottle, the frost on the outside a testament to the fact that the bottle had just been pulled from the freezer.

“Impossible to tell what it meant, and just a mumble about five paces from some starting point isn’t going to give us anything.”

But it was tickling at the back of my head. Something that Emerson had said. Something on that Friday night before the beatings, and the torture, and Lauren’s death.

*“Dovel was supposed to have kept some of it in reserve,”* Emerson had said.

Suppose he had?

We sat and pondered.

‘Where it began’ could have meant anything, but Doc was the one who finally said it.

“Where it all began for Emerson and Dovel, for the whole business of fetching the treasure and making plans for how to use it after the war, began while Emerson was recuperating from the loss of his right arm.”

“At Goshen Tavern.”

“At what part? That must be close to an acre of land,” asked Jeannie. “We can’t be digging up the whole property. It’s owned by someone else now.”

“The thing that began was Goshen. The partnership, not the tavern.”

“The marker out at the front of the drive?” I asked.

“Too new. That thing was clean, with clear edges. Any stone that is 150 years old would be worn down more than that by now.”

“So the sign came later.”

“If it did,” I said, “there would have been an earlier sign, likely of wood. And we’d have a hard time even figuring out where the sign would be. And if it was where the stone one is now, five paces away would have us digging up the pavement in the middle of Hawksbill Street in downtown Luray. Not much of any way that would go unnoticed.”

Jeannie started picking up the shot glasses to wash in the sink.

Doc stood up and started pacing, patting at his shirt pockets for a smoke.

“It had to be something more permanent than that. Why tell your kids to look for a wooden sign, when they don’t last much over 20 years,” he said.

“It would be something more like a cornerstone,” I said.

We turned and looked at one another, frozen.

“Five paces from a cornerstone is a lot of holes to dig,” I said.

“But he likely would have tried to keep it simple. After all, they wanted it to be found some day by a descendent,” said Jeannie.

“I’ll get the shovel,” said Doc.

## Chapter 27

### Five Paces

“I don’t remember hearing it, exactly,” said Jeannie. “By the time I came along, Mother was mostly busy, what with all us kids and her just having gone through all the war years. Donald was older, and spent more time with her.”

*Five paces from where it all started.*

“What are we going to do with it if we find it?” asked Doc.

We were standing in the parking lot of Lancaster Enterprises, the lawn mower place at the corner of North Broad and Mechanic streets in Luray. Up on Main Street, the two-and-three story homes that had lined the street during the Civil War were still there, painted over the years but still recognizable for their block architecture. The Goshen Tavern was just across a grass field from us, surrounded by a fence.

“Do you have any idea what the odds are of finding buried Confederate treasure after all

these years? Especially,” I whispered, “based on just a family legend?”

We had argued about this for most of the evening, and in Doc’s old Chevy truck on the hour-long ride to Luray.

If there was anything there, we could not pay taxes on it without explaining where we got it. We couldn’t easily give it to anyone. The argument was going in circles, Doc and Jeannie taking most of their delight in simply imagining it was there. I was trying to get them to understand that, if there was anything there at all, it was more than likely a wad of worthless Confederate currency or some family’s silverware.

“This was stuff stolen from southern families,” I said. “I don’t know of any families that by 1863 still had any gold or silver.”

They paid me no attention.

Doc handed me the shovel, and gave Jeannie a foothold to go over the fence, then followed. I handed the shovel across, then clambered over myself, feeling awkward even though the fence was not that high.

Tried to decide which corner would yield a cornerstone, and elected to try the front first. For no particular reason, the one on the right.

Cornerstones have been a practice almost since the dawn of stone construction, though in the earliest times it had been a practice to sacrifice an animal or other offering and bury it in the foundation of the building. The Japanese improved on this with the practice of

Hitobashira, in which a maiden was sacrificed and sealed in the foundation for good luck.

We dug quietly at the right corner, trying not to disturb the flower bed that the present owner had planted there. The house was quiet, which was a good thing at nearly three in the morning.

It was just about six inches from the top of the stone foundation of the front verandah, a very worn rock with the words "Goshen" and "1802" inscribed on them, in the same way as the inscription of the sign at the driveway.

Didn't know what to do, so after a few minutes I stood and walked five paces straight out from the stone.

Doc dug down nearly two feet.

Nothing.

"People were shorter then. Maybe your pace is too long," Doc said.

Another hole.

Nothing.

Went out at an angle.

Nothing.

Went perpendicular to the stone.

Nothing.

"This is a waste of time," I said to Jeannie.

"Just one more try," whispered Doc.

Five holes later, I started to get edgy. This was a waste of time.

"Doc, they can sue us for damage to their lawn."

"Only if they catch us," he whispered.



He stepped along the wall for five paces, and began to dig at the foundation on the side of the house..

Down about a foot, and nothing.

“Let’s not dig up the man’s basement,” I said.

“Oh, hell,” said Doc, and brought the shovel down hard in frustration.

We all heard it hit.

Doc looked at me. I looked back. He began digging.

Whatever it was it was hard, and I was betting on a large stone.

Was wrong.

It was a glass jar, fitted with a wooden lid that was once secured with twine.

We dug at it with our hands, not an easy task given the rocky soil of Page County and the depth we were digging.

Almost had it free when the lights went on in the front yard and we heard a screen door slap shut.

Dug furiously, pulling at the top of the jar until it came free, and handed it to Jeannie, who stuck it in her pocket.

“Oh my God!” we heard from just a few feet away. The owner had seen all of the holes in his yard. We took off running as the beam of a flashlight began seeking us.

I fervently hoped he did not have a gun.

Got to the fence and we virtually threw Jeannie over it, Doc and I following. Doc still carried the shovel.

Beam of light crossed us as we scrambled across the grass to the truck, Doc throwing his shovel in the bed and climbing into the cab. I got Jeannie into the seat between us and slammed the door.

“You idiots,” we heard him yelling.  
“There’s nothing here! There’s no treasure!”  
But there had been.

\* \* \*

We sat at the kitchen table at Doc’s with the glass jar in front of us.

Jeannie had washed the dirt off of it, but age and the original color of the glass had made it opaque so that we could not see the contents.

Jeannie had fetched the clear, cold sugar moonshine from Doc’s freezer and we sat with full shot glasses just looking at the jar.

Finally, I reached over and picked it up. Tugged at the wooden lid, which appeared to have been hand-carved by someone who really knew what he or she was doing.

The jar was inscribed with the words, “*patent*” and “1860.”

“You know,” I said, “the jar is likely worth more than what’s in it.”

“Open it and we can see,” said Jeannie.

The lid popped loose, and I turned the contents out onto the table. Out came rings and a few pieces of jewelry. A gold watch that had seen better days. And at the bottom, three gold coins and two of silver.

Double Eagles, minted in 1860.  
We sat and just looked at it.  
All that was left of the Dovel family  
fortune.

All that was left of Mosby's treasure, and  
our adventure with the Knights of the Golden  
Circle.

It wasn't much. I mean, it would likely  
bring a good price, if we could find someone to  
buy it without tipping off the IRS, or otherwise  
complicating our lives. If that was what we  
decided to do at all.

For now, it was enough that we had  
found something. Wasn't sure that it was worth  
all the effort it had taken, given that it would be  
hard to sell or profit from. On the other hand,  
how many people search for treasure all of their  
lives and find none.

Raised my shot glass.  
"To the bride and groom," I toasted.  
"To friends," said Doc.  
We drank.  
"To finding a wife for Jack," said  
Jeannie.

It caught me off guard. I couldn't  
swallow, or answer, or even shake my head.  
Half-strangling, I snorted the shot of moonshine  
out my nose.



A preview of

# South River

Featuring Virginia  
fraud investigator  
Jack MacLeod



# Chapter 1

## Cold Dark Eyes

I didn't like his eyes.

They were dark, smoky obsidian in sunken sockets, something dead and malevolent. But they were the only part of him that was easy to look at. The rest of his features were taut white; the face like a skull of wax, brows of long grey hairs matching the tufts that sprouted from his ears.

He lay in the hospital bed, back slightly elevated, and he might have already been dead except that the eyes moved every now and then from the television mounted on the wall to where I stood in the doorway of his room in Critical Care. Above his head the muted blue and green squiggly lines of the monitors kept pace with his breathing and heartbeat.

Didn't want to be here.

I had already settled in for the evening at home and was ready to toss a match onto the pile of firewood in the hearth when Catherine Gray had called me. Thought about letting it just go to voicemail, because old Henry Stiles had brought over a load of cedar he had cleared off of a back corner of his place, and I love the

smell of cedar burning in the fireplace on a cold winter night.

But then I recognized her voice on the speaker and picked up.

Three years ago, Cat and I had dated for three or four minutes until it became painfully clear that she wasn't yet able to give up the personal ghosts that made her wreck every chance at finding someone nice to settle down with. And that my own schedule just never seemed to match up with hers. It hadn't ended particularly well – who was it who said that all loves end badly; else they would never end at all? Still, she's a smart lady with the looks to match, and it had been a while since I had heard from her.

"How's life in the ER, Cat?" She'd always preferred the pace of the emergency room, and the challenges for nursing there.

"I've moved up in the world," she laughed. "Upstairs to the CCU. Head nurse on the second shift." There had been a lot of shakeups at Rockingham Memorial. Between the recent merger and the move into a sprawling new health campus off Port Republic Road, some of the old staff had been quietly retired or squeezed out, others moved to different departments. It had left some bitter feelings on both sides of the merger, but at least Cat seemed to have emerged happy.

"You still skulking around looking for insurance frauds?"



“Same boring old insurance work. But it pays the bills.” I was pretty sure that Sam Spade would have shot himself rather than be a private investigator today. We had traded the gin joints, broads and smoking guns for a green accountant’s visor, plodding detail, Google searches and paper chases. Still, in my case it seemed better than repossessing cars and serving divorce papers.

She had a deep chuckling laugh that for just a moment brought back memories of good old times. And bad.

“Maybe I can change that. I have an old guy here in CCU who wants to talk to a genuine private eye. I told him I didn’t know any of those, but that I might be able to get you here tonight.”

Looked out the window at the cold. The wind was from the northwest, which always meant a temperature drop. The wind was picking up, whistling around the old farmhouse, making it seem cold even if the insulation and the heat pump kept it pretty cozy.

“I get off at 11. Stick around and I’ll make it worth your time,” she whispered. There hadn’t been anything wrong with that part of the relationship, and in truth it had been a stretch since I had had an offer even close to this. I sighed and went to get my shoes by the door.

\* \* \*

“You’re a private eye,” he rasped.

“Licensed investigator.” There’s a difference, not that anyone seems to care. “And I don’t do the kind of work you want.”

“It is a simple matter.” His voice was irritated. I stood without speaking, listening to the muted hiss of air from the vent and watching the blue and green numbers on the monitor mounted above his bed. I waited for him to say more, watched the shriveled hands with the needles taped to their backs, and listened to his labored breathing.

“I don’t have much time,” he rasped again. “It’s metastasized, stage V. They tell me a matter of two weeks, probably less. It is important that I find her before I die. The nurse tells me you have a good reputation.”

“I do corporate and bank work. Mostly insurance fraud cases. There are companies in Northern Virginia that specialize in the kind of work you need, in finding people.” Soft hiss of air, the slow beeping of the monitors. I was restless, didn’t want to be in this room. It had the hospital smell, disinfectant mixed with death, a place where too many people had passed their last hours.

“I can’t get all the way to the city,” his voice rising, tense and angry. Valley people call DC “the city,” as if it were the only city they had ever heard of. “She needs to be found now, before things happen. I need to tell her what it was all about. Need to warn her.”

They say that if you lean forward to talk to someone, it conveys sincerity or emphasis, so

I moved over toward him and leaned over, hands on the side rail of the bed. Wished I could read something in those cold, black eyes. Wished I was anywhere in the universe but in this artificial room with the artificial lights and the crazy old man with his crazy old story.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not going to work for you. I don’t want to work for you.”

End of it.

\* \* \*

Walked out of the room and down the hall. Almost end of shift, and Cat waved as she looked at the clock, and then the phone started ringing and a minute later the doors burst open at the end of the hall. Bevy of people in their green scrubs huddled around a moving bed, the small form of a boy looking tiny in the center.

I saw Cat’s face as it came past her, her features frozen and tight-lipped with absolutely no expression, and knew that whatever had happened, it was bad. Then Cat was whirling away to get the kid settled into a room, the monitors set up and the family – a half dozen of them huddled into the visitor’s room – safely out of the way.

Children are one of Cat’s demons, in the way that only women who cannot have their own can feel pain about children, and I knew that whatever the rest of the night would bring she would be here by the boy’s side rather than with me. Smiled a gentle smile and lifted a

hand to her in farewell, feeling a small twinge of masculine disappointment. Decided to just walk to the elevators and make my way home rather than trying to interrupt with goodbyes. Maybe there was still time for a cozy fire.

I favor Ford trucks, and my most recent was a deep burgundy F150 with the extended cab and the heavy tow package. It was where I had left it, out the glass doors of Rockingham Memorial and across the entrance road to the visitor's lot. I pushed through the doors, pulling my short denim jacket tighter as the wind whipped and drove small crystals of ice in circles around the night.

The temperature had dropped an easy 30 degrees in the time I had been inside, and there was a hint of freezing rain on the air. Sat in the cab looking up at the modern glass-and-metal face of the hospital and wondered why Ford could build such excellent trucks with such chintzy heaters. Counted the minutes until the heat finally kicked in and the ice crystals across the windshield began to slither away in little legs of water. Kicked the wipers over and pulled out of the near-empty lot.

Home was a left turn, weaving down Port Republic Road past Lakeview and Long's Hill in the waning moonlight to almost the point where the South River meets the North to form the south fork of the Shenandoah. Turned before the double bridges, north to the renovated farmhouse that had been in my family for nearly a century and a half.

I had been born in Texas to a father from Virginia and a mother from Ohio, in the way that wars bring together people from different places to start and end families. Ours started on the western plains of Texas in Lubbock, at an Air Force Base called Reese, where my father learned to fly jets and fell in love with a girl in her senior year at Texas Tech. They had a beautiful wedding and a fine run before he went off to his personal piece of the war in late 1971, leaving her pregnant with me. We were still living there, in the little apartment off 17<sup>th</sup> Street in Lubbock, when they came with the preacher and the officer with a chest full of medals to tell her that her man wasn't coming home.

She lasted the better part of two years while she drank herself to death, crying every night over the pilot she lost in some dark jungle half a world away, until her heart just shrank away to nothing and she was gone forever, too.

The funeral had been in Ohio, a little plot in the cemetery of a little church somewhere near Columbus. I don't remember the service or the grave. I don't remember him, or her, except in faded photographs and occasional disjointed dreams. Never went to his grave site in Lubbock, or hers in Ohio.

They brought me here, to this mountain land of Virginia and a farmhouse that was already old when the Old Man was a boy. I grew up here, in the hills and the mountains, hiking on the Blue Ridge and fishing on the

banks of South River. In time, like most young men, I went out into the world.

And a dozen years later, no longer as young, came home.

\* \* \*

I pulled the truck into the garage, hit the alarm by the door and reset it on the way to the home office I keep in the front room. Shoes off and set by the door, the way I had been taught from the first day I walked into the house. Maw-Maw's rules were law in that house, and still are even though she's buried up on the hill beside the Old Man, under the big twisted oak tree.

My office in the house is supposed to be something else, maybe a family room, with large glass windows giving a view of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the morning when the sun comes up. It's one of the most beautiful views on earth, as the sun peeps over Big Flat Mountain to spread an orange glow across the Valley. But I was irritated tonight and in no mood for the view, even if there was moonlight finally glowing through the swirls of ice.

I am a creature of habit. I padded to the small bar on the counter, measuring out a neat ounce and a half of Wild Turkey 101, filling the glass with precisely three ice cubes and a splash of clear branch water.

Bourbon and branch is a uniquely southern drink, though even in the south you

rarely hear it ordered that way anymore. These days they call it bourbon and water like the Northerners do, but that misses the point altogether since they use chlorinated, fluoridated tap water from some municipal water recycling plant.

Branch water comes from a pure mountain creek, where it flows down the side of the mountain and across rocks that filter out everything but the crisp chill of the water. I hike up to a stream on the Blue Ridge every few weeks to get a few bottles for the house, and it still makes the finest drink a southern man could wish for.

I set the glass on the desk and peeled off my shirt. I'm fairly sensitive to fabrics, so tend to favor soft cottons, blue jeans and denim jackets. Even then, at home I'm most comfortable in a pair of old gym shorts, no shirt or jeans or shoes. Peeled off the shirt and folded it into the hamper near the wash room, then stood bare-chested beside the window staring into darkness. Took a long sip of the drink, feeling the smoky bite of the bourbon as the cold liquid slid down my throat to turn warm and mellow.

Normally I prefer a dry red wine in the evening, but I was still irritated by the old man and his spooky black eyes. And feeling a little male petulance at not being with the lady at the end of the day. The bourbon wouldn't change either feeling, but I needed to sort out the crazy

old man and his story, and that's something you just can't do with a glass of wine.

A long slow sip of the bourbon and water.

I didn't want anything to do with him, or with finding his long-lost progeny. Didn't much care if he died before she was found, just wanted to shake the feeling of someone walking over my grave. I had heard him out, that withered old man with his story and his need and his dead black eyes, but in the end I just couldn't take the work.

Didn't want to.

He'd started off well enough, talking about his long ago wars. How he lied about his age to join the Army the day after Pearl Harbor. Battles whose names I knew only from old movies, like Morocco, and Anzio, and Bastogne, Inchon and Pusan. About the long boat ride home after Korea, to family and farm. It's a pretty common story from all the wars before and since. Not that different from mine.

Somewhere along the way there had been a wife, and a girl child, but he'd stayed away too many times for too long and the last time he came back there was nothing waiting for him but an empty house and divorce papers lying on the kitchen table.

He'd faded out then, weary, his black eyes finally closed. I'd waited a moment or two, then started to turn away when he began talking again. About the letter from a woman claiming to be his daughter. About leaving the



Army. About the jobs as a mercenary during the years after Korea. About his life and the things that he knew that he wanted to pass on to his only living relative.

About a lost grand-daughter.

Last taste of the bourbon, and thought about another but decided on sleep instead. Glass in the sink in the kitchen, then across the foyer and down the hall to the master bedroom in the back, flipping on the television to a news channel for the night, volume low. The world had not turned better, or even more interesting, while I was gone.

I don't sleep under covers, just on top of the sheets and comforter with a blanket at the foot in case the night turns cold. Soft cotton comforter cool against my skin underneath, with a pillow pulled tight in front, another at my back, open ends of the pillowcase pointed toward the foot of the bed. Settled in for the night, watching the headlines scroll by at the bottom of the screen, but my head was still filled with the dying man.

The hours passed, with the low murmur of the television and the wind whispering around the old house. I shifted from one side to another, unable to empty my head or make any sense of what I felt, or why.

I don't much like hospitals, avoid them whenever I can. Didn't like that little room with its harsh fluorescent lights and the beeping machine. Didn't want to meet an old soldier dying of cancer or hear about his family woes.

Didn't want to see his wasted body, smell the scent of death, or hear the thing he wanted his grand-daughter to know before he died.

Didn't want to hear his raspy, hard voice tell me in meticulous detail how, on a sunny November day in 1963, he sat on the sixth floor of the school book repository in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas, and put two bullets through the back and head of the President of the United States...

South River is  
available at  
Amazon.Com, Barnes  
& Noble.Com,  
Books-a-Million.Com  
and select booksellers.