

Wilderness House Literary Review 2/2

Chapter 10

The air was crisp, the sky blue. The breeze caressed Ray, Bacon, and Molly. Mid-stream the water barely moved. Molly perched in the bow alert to every detail, ears twitching, mouth stretched into what looked like a grin. Bacon said, "You mind keeping us on course? Got to update my last edition of the *Guide to Cascade County*."

"You got an old one handy?"

Bacon tossed it over. Ray held his paddle in the air for a moment and watched the drops trail. The boat glided, silently. Molly rested her head on the edge of the canoe. She swiped with her paw at birds that came close, nipped at darning needles that darted off the sides of the boat. Her tongue hung out and the way she was panting reminded him of Sheila, his ex-wife, who had allergies.

He chewed on a blueberry fitness bar, turning to the description of the river.

The Nunotuck River, originating as a confluence of underground springs creates in upper leg of the journey some of the most spectacular white water stretches in the Northeast. Only experienced canoeists with a guide should attempt it. Majestic old growth beauty, as gorgeous a Maine experience as you will ever have awaits you. Hemlocks, oaks, maples, ash, pine – in every season spectacular. Caution. When you experience the first rapid shallows, EXIT immediately to the right side of the river to avoid the Falls. The Falls are a 300 foot drop, impossible to canoe or raft. The portage path on the right bank of the river is

about 300 feet long.

Ray checked the publishing date on the book. "This is five years old. But you want to run the Falls."

Bacon nodded. "I'm not an idiot. I won't change the guidebook. Only pros like you and me will ever do the Falls. Michael had done it a dozen times over the past couple of years. Three times a day every day of the year for the past ten years he charted the changes in current, debris, and water level. I got updates each month. He had it down to a science. That's why I thought you and I could pull it off."

"Right," Ray said. He dragged the word out. "But the guy was schizophrenic."

"Only his parents and one sister think so, that's what he said. He seemed like a nice enough guy. He told me not to try the Falls in high water. He told me how to cut right and portage around if the water was high. We did it exactly the way he said. It worked."

"So why did he go over?"

"Don't we keep asking ourselves the same question?"

"There's three choices – or if you want to get complicated there's a combination of three choices. Suicide. Accident. Murder."

"I'm no detective."

"You're a guide. You know knots. You saw the way he was tied in."

"For Pete's sake, Ray, half the white water canoeists I know do that. If they dunk, they can climb back on the hull or at least hold on to the boat."

"That helps us a lot. We don't know if Michael did that."

"That's what I'm saying. He could have tied himself in, or someone else could have. That wouldn't have made him go

over the Falls. He could still paddle.”

“So it’s like they say in the cop shows: ‘There’s something missing here.’”

“There’s just too much happening at once. Too many pieces that don’t fit.”

“My brain’s tired,” Ray said. “You watch the current for a while.”

“You’re just pissed because you have a thing for Stacy.”

“You have a problem with that?”

“Maybe. Maybe you’re the one with the problem. She said she didn’t know Michael had died when she was at the Nunotuck ceremony. That’s gotta be true, because he died while she was climbing the mountain up to the ceremony. We are out of cell phone range there. I checked her stuff. No walkie-talkie or radio.”

“Snoop.”

“Sure,” Bacon said. “My middle name. But the question is, how did she get the deed?”

“Easy,” Ray said. “Russ came up in the middle of the night. They went out of the clearing together to talk, and she came back later. He must have given it to her. I’m a light sleeper.”

“Okay, wiseass, why did Stacy show Terence the deed? That is weird. She told Terence. She specifically asked us not to tell Carl.”

“You’re stretching the gray matter, here,” Ray said. “The deed and Michael’s death are separate. We’re tying the deed and Michael’s death together because Russ found what looks like a deed in Michael’s pocket. There may be no connection.”

“It is definitely time for some real food. Let’s break out the

trail mix.”

“I’m all set.”

“That blueberry fitness bar you had is a clump of cardboard.”

“Fiber.”

“That’s good, Ray. I hope you had your colonoscopy.”

“Ah, I don’t bother with doctors. They make me sick.”

“They make me sick too.”

“Well, Carl’s going to know by word of mouth about the deed, long before Stacy gets to tell him. She might as well forget about the “poor Carl, I want to be careful about his feelings. I want to be the one to tell him.”

“Stacy might not want us to talk much with Carl because she doesn’t want him to know she socializes with the Nunotucks. And she wouldn’t want him to know that she told Nunotucks about the deed – whatever THOSE reasons were, whatever THAT deed is.”

“That’s for damn sure. Carl will already know about the deed. He just doesn’t want to know that WE know about it.”

Bacon chewed on raisins and peanuts. “I saw Russ take the paper out of Michael’s pocket. I would swear on a bible it was the same one, watermarked, stained, folded – or it looked pretty damn near exactly the same.”

“Maybe Russ already talked with Carl and Stacy is lying. Maybe the Alwyns have been just waiting on the time to pounce on the land and that time has come.”

“That’s a scary thought. Lot of maybes,” Ray said. “Anyhoo, Terence knows about the deed. You have to admit Stacy showed a lot of integrity the way she held a funeral service for Michael with us.”

“Ah, Terence did that. At this point, I wouldn’t trust her to

hit the broad side of a barn with a canon ball. Why doesn't his own family hold the funeral? I don't trust any Alwyn, on principle." Bacon put away his writing, which he hadn't gotten to at all. The water started to shallow out and the canoe took some bumps on rocks. Ray and Bacon went into action, and Molly took her mascot stance. That's what Ray liked about rivers, how they kept changing, how you had to stay alert.

As they navigated around boulders, Ray felt a confusing tug of loyalty that he knew was caused entirely by sexual attraction. He wanted to believe Stacy because he had a lust for her. The rational side of him was suspicious of her because she was an Alwyn, and there were too many dangling ends in the Alwyn drama. The vision of Sage, large and gypsyesque appeared to him large as life. *"Power struggles are brewing in this County. Be careful; be damn careful whose side you're on.* Damn her. How would she know? Well, she was a popular psychic/fortune-teller. She would have insiders' knowledge, like stock traders who knew the right people to tell when to buy and sell. His mother and half of Cascade Country went running to Sage every week to see what they should do – divorce, tell the truth, leave, stay. That gave Sage the gossip advantage.

The growing roar of the water announced riffles ahead, then rips. The canoe slipped wildly from side to side, and plunged up and down as if it were the chewed down rind of a watermelon. It rose up a standing wave that appeared from nowhere, and plunged down a chute he had not been expecting. It shot into a cloud of mist generated by the surprise drop. The drop was only three or four feet high, but it jolted them like beans in a coffee grinder.

"We just got concussions," Bacon said, after his brain settled down.

"When you live up as far north as we do and the population is about 5 and a half people per square mile with no insurance, who knows? Who cares?"

"It's always interesting to hear your point of view, Ray," Beacon said, a laconic guide comment.

In the stretch after that, the river lulled them downstream circling Mount Nunotuck. Interesting that in the deed it had been called Province Mountain. That would be something to research. But not now. Now Ray, appreciated the sun. He had not been able in the preceding gray day to appreciate the colors of the woods. Now, with sunlight glowing on it, it astonished him. The color of the water so blue, the hillsides crimson, purple, yellow, orange. The colors were vast and varied, mixed with the dark green of old growth evergreens. Ray liked to think back to his English high school teacher, when he was in a meditative mood. Now he quoted, from Longfellow, "These are the forests primeval/ the murmuring pines and the hemlocks." He basked in the brilliant display that the woods had assembled for him. He felt an overpowering peace, knowing that these woods were home to lynx, bear, deer, moose, partridges, owls, and the cackling, mocking, soothing, infinitely wise loons, about to leave on their long voyage South for the winter.

As the river turned a corner, the woods on both sides of the river changed from old forest to yellowed sycamores, willows, brilliant reed-leafed sumac, and fall goldenrod, asters, cattails and marsh grass. "They clear-cut in here about five years ago," Bacon said. "We know what you get when you indiscriminately slash."

"PROGRESS! Junk woods. Alder bogs. Destruction of ground water. Or as the lumber companies would say RE-GROWTH."

Bacon said, "You got it, Ray. You know how people like to romanticize a guide. They think he's part Indian, part wild animal. They expect him to shave with his knife, chew tobacco, spit into an empty coffee can dead center from a distance of ten feet, whip up a fire with two sticks and serve squirrel stew. I do all that. And I can put the danger of lumber companies in every single tourist that I meet. I do that real good. When they leave me, they will never again

hear the word 'clear cut' without a shudder of disgust."

As he said it, the red brick buildings of Alwyn Mills appeared around the bend. The buildings extended along the west bank of the river for a good quarter mile. Behind the mill, houses on a hill rose steeply.

Neither of them wanted to stop but they had to know the time the mill released its water. Released water traveled fast. The wave effect built.

They tied Molly in the canoe and tied the canoe to an old barge mooring. At one end of the brick complex, made up of many sections, and separated buildings, two smokestacks spouted white vaporous columns. The huge power plant had turbines, generators, and control equipment. A shift must just be changing, or lunch ending maybe. The mill ran 24/7. Bacon said that Carl worked pretty much 24/7 too, so even though it was a Sunday, he was probably there. Ray and Bacon followed men crossing a metal bridge crossing the road coming from the hill to the entrance of the mill, a door that said **Employees Only**. Ray and Bacon followed the men in. They were in a room a few feet shy of a football field long.

"Jesus, this brings back the bad old days," Bacon said. "You know, when I worked here for a couple of months right after I married Rose. Want me to explain all this stuff to you?"

"Get it all out, buddy."

"The wood chippers are outside, although the mill buys a lot of wood already chipped. Hell, I know one woman pushed her husband into a wood chipper 'cause he was cheatin' on her."

"Ouch."

"Eyeh. The chips go into shredders to make fibers they use for paper. The wood is debarked and turned into pulpy chips. Think of it Ray, a living, magnificent tree, turned into pulpy chips."

"I'm thinking."

"Then water, wood chips and chemicals go into these giant pressure cookers where the cellulose fibers separate. They're called digesters. They have sodium hydroxide and sodium sulfide to remove the gluey lignin that holds wood fibers together. If the paper needs to be white, they add bleach. It's what they call white liquor."

The air smelled like brine and sulfur. Ray's eyes were smarting. Most of the men working here wore goggles.

"Remember when you were trying out engineering school in Boston? I wished I'd gotten the hell out of here too. I was the only Nunotuck. Not that they discriminated against me. They just didn't talk to me and I got the shit jobs, and the Nunotucks gave me Hell because I was working for The Man. It was living Hell anyway without all that. I'd come home with boils on my skin, my vision blurry, my mind a mess from the monotony. Rose and I had just gotten married. I wanted to make steady money. But she told me I better quit or she would. She's the one who encouraged me to become a guide. She made me a hat with salmon flies on it. She taught me how to cook trout, potatoes, oatmeal. Hell, then you came home and you made me my first hunting knife – not just to use. It was a very impressive knife to show off. I mean, a guide has got to have a very showy efficient hunting knife."

Ray said, "I hated the city. I'd learned enough in metallurgy to get a start in knife making. I wanted to be a pioneer, a real American, not a goddamned bureaucrat. Your knife had a carved design of a Victorian woman on the blade, and a fancy sheath and shit. It was the first knife I made. It was also the first time I teamed up with Nance. She still etches designs on my knives. She was just starting her business then. She's done great. She's got a team. I can order Celtic designs, animals, landscapes, whatever a customer wants, if they want a picture etched on the blade. You inspired me with that first knife, my friend."

They kept moving, now through a door, into another

warehouse-sized room with huge tanks. Bacon said, "These vats rinse the chemical/wood solution and carry the chemicals away. The waste chemical is black liquor. It's recycled to energize the plant. A rinsed mush called slurry comes out of the vats and gets pushed into those dryer cans that beat the mush around like clothes in a dryer."

"You know," Ray said, as they passed through a door into another room, "When they made paper by hand, it was about the same process, but on a much smaller scale, and not chemicalized. Instead of overhead conveyor belts, you had a man walking from one workstation to the next, carrying the paper pulp or whatever, shaking it to size it."

"The more things change, the more they stay the same. Some specialized mills do it differently now because they make specialized paper. This is your basic old-fashioned pulp and paper mill. Most of the mills in Maine are like this, they make your toilet paper, napkins, school notebooks. They're polluting everything – rivers, groundwater, water, air, and they are destroying the forest. Lumber companies own 50% of the land. Maine is not pure, untouched, wild and free the way people think it is. That's part of my guide speech. Anyway," Bacon continued in the next football field sized room, "what comes out of the dryers is like pastry. It goes on sizers that strengthen it. The moving screen that passes over the fibers and squeezes the water out is called a Fourdrinier wire. It revolutionized the paper industry. Before, humans had to shake and press the sizers."

They passed rollers and pressers. Bacon said, "Here the fibers are formed into sheets as large as bed sheets. As they do that, they are completely drained of water. Here are the spinning drying cylinders. In the next unit we're going to see the cutting and packaging units."

"Pretty impressive, you have to admit," Ray said.

"It's fast man. It travels a half mile in a minute. Some plants do 45 mph. It can be dangerous. Men have fallen into the vats, been flattened by the rollers. Every machine is an

accident waiting to happen. You have to watch out every minute."

They saw a glowing exit sign and took it. "Perfect," Bacon said. "We're on our way to the administrative wing. This is the back way in. For insurance reasons they don't allow strangers in the production side of a working mill. You got the insider's tour. Sorry you missed the big brass front door to the offices."

"I'll live," Ray said. "It's quiet here. My ears are still ringing. Man, guys who work out there must get hearing loss in a week."

Management always does things like give people earphones, goggles, protective clothing, but some of that stuff interferes with what you have to do, so the men take shortcuts."

"Do any women work on that part?" Ray asked.

"Nah," Bacon said. "They work on this side, typing, filing, that kind of thing."

The business wing of Alwyn Mills was a contrast to the production unit. With thick rugs, paneled walls and mahogany doors, it was too cushy, too quiet. Ray and Bacon passed the brass labels of: Public Relations, Treasurer, Quality Control, Natural Resources, Machinery, Transport Maintenance, Human Resources, Payroll. They didn't see a soul.

"These people must be working real hard. They must have their butts glued to their chairs, and gags on."

"Let's get it over with," Bacon said. "Let's assume Carl wants to meet the canoeists who found Michael's body."

"All we need to know is what time the mill releases water over the dam."

"His secretary can tell us that. I want to meet the man. I want

to size him up.”

The door at the end of the last corridor said Director. Ray thought he would at last see something comparable to what he thought must be happening behind the other doors – a flurry of activity, a babble of voices, telephones, the usual office stuff. He was surprised to find one woman who made up in severity for what was lacking in numbers and noise. Her mousy brown hair was pulled back from her face into a bun, her black-rimmed glasses were just plain ugly, and her blouse and sweater would have been in style thirty years ago. “How may I help you?” she inquired, peering up from a sheaf of papers, aside from which the desk was bare. A computer screen was on, filled with text. An old-fashioned telephone switchboard behind her blinked, showing many occupied lines. The nameplate on her desk read Evelyn Waites.

“First of all, Miss Waites,” Ray said, “We are canoeing the river, and need to know what time you release water from the dam.”

“Ms. Waites,” she corrected. “A release is scheduled at noon. River use is discouraged between then and 2:00, due to high water levels.”

“Thank you, Ms. Waites,” Ray responded. His watch read 11:30.

“I wouldn’t start down now,” Evelyn Waites said. “By the time you get back to your canoe and cast off, it would be cutting it close. The released water travels fast, and effects extend far down stream.”

“Thank you for the tip, Ms. Waites,” Bacon said. “We wouldn’t like to be caught in the current like Michael Alwyn.”

“Oh!” Her face colored. It took her a full minute for her to compose herself. “Yes, we’re all very upset.”

Bacon continued. “Ray and I discovered him in the

whirlpool. We went for help and went back to pull the body out of the river. We want to offer our condolences.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed again. Her hands moved automatically to push behind her ears some strands of fine brown hair that had strayed round her face. “He’s with a Representative.” She tilted her head and seemed to inspect them, to see if they were impressed. “Representative Fielding,” she added. When they said nothing to indicate what an important occasion they had stumbled upon, she said, “I hate to interrupt them, but under these circumstances....” She pressed the intercom button. Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Alwyn, but the two canoeists who discovered your son in the whirlpool are here. They would like to offer their condolences.”

The intercom crackle cut out. It took a full minute for Carl to turn the intercom back on. “Tell the gentlemen I appreciate their stopping by. Give us two minutes. Representative Fielding and I have a few things to tie up. Invite them on the tour, and get the tour materials ready for the press and public.”

Ms. Waites looked at Bacon, who nodded. “They’ll wait, sir,” she said. She sprang up and went to a file cabinet, from which she removed two folders, laying them at geometric angles on her desk, and handing a piece of paper from each to Ray and Bacon. “Mr. Alwyn is taking Representative Fielding on a short tour of the new Alwyn Paper Museum. The press and public have been invited.”

The buzzer at her desk sounded, and Carl Alwyn said, “Show the gentlemen in.” She opened an unobtrusive door and ushered Ray and Bacon into a small, surprisingly cramped dark room. File cabinets lined the walls. A narrow window looked over the Nunotuck River and Mount Nunotuck beyond. There was barely room left for the huge desk behind which Mr. Alwyn sat, and the leather guest chair occupied by Representative Fielding. Mr. Alwyn’s desk, unlike Ms. Waites’, was covered with papers piled and strewn in an order Ray was sure was minutely careful,

although its organization was evident only to Carl, and perhaps Evelyn Waites. The light from the window was dull and left Carl's large head in shadow. A fluorescent lamp illuminated the papers on the desk. A dim overhead light shone on Representative Fielding.

Ray thought that he and Bacon had come in on the tail end of a power conversation. Politicians and industrialists sat in dark offices like this and with a wave of a hand made decrees that decided the fates of ordinary mortals like him. He recalled that Representative Fielding supported a movement that would allow international companies to come into Maine and take over local industries. Fielding had voted against minimum wage hikes. He was against universal health insurance, which bothered Ray, since his self-employed insurance premiums in his field were sky high – his profession was considered high-risk. Fielding's record on environmental rights was terrible. He wanted to give industry free hand to modernize, saying that only in this way could they put non-polluting practices to work. He worked for the lumber industries. Sure, Fielding was buddy to Carl Alwyn. The Maine legislature and the pulp and paper industry, hand in hand. Private airplanes, luxury cruises, liquor parties, the whole shebang. Gangsters.

Both men stood up as Ray, Bacon entered and introduced themselves. Evelyn Waites produced two chairs and left the room. Mr. Alwyn invited everyone to sit. Bacon always thought it best to take initiative, especially when he wasn't in his own territory. He started talking right away." Thank you for taking the time to see us, gentlemen. I know you are busy, and these are not the right circumstances for us to convey our condolences, but we are also busy. We were in your neighborhood. We thought we should introduce ourselves, since we were the ones who discovered Michael in the whirlpool. I knew Michael personally. He was a fine man. He was a loner, but in his sphere of experience, knowledge of ways to survive in, preserve, and enjoy the woods, I have rarely met his equal. I am a certified Maine Guide, which, as both of you must know, requires a wide variety of skills and

is a hard certification to take. I do a lot of tourist work – mostly canoeing and rafting. If ever I had a question, Michael would be the first one I would consult. I’m good. He was better.” Bacon smiled just hint of a smile. “As a colleague, as a friend, I’ll miss him.”

Carl nodded silently, seeming to take the words in, unable to respond. Ray said, “Although I didn’t know your son personally, except for vague school memories, I heard a lot about him. I understand he had canoed the Falls often. It might have been the unusual rains and high water levels that caused his surprising and mysterious death. Untimely, tragic, really awful. The river isn’t visited much at this time of year. We were lucky to find him, to be in the right spot, but unlucky in that we weren’t there in time to try and prevent it from happening.”

Carl said slowly. “Thank you. You are right. This is not the time or place for me to express my personal feelings. Perhaps you will honor our family by having dinner with us in the near future, and we can hear more and get to know each other. I’ll have it arranged. Now I must switch my mind to another topic. It is difficult to command one’s own mind, but one must have discipline, isn’t that right, Mr. Fielding?”

The representative said, “I told Carl that we should reschedule our meeting, but this event was scheduled weeks ago. The press is waiting. The public is waiting. Carl never neglects a business commitment although family comes first. But in this case, the crisis is over, and life goes on. I am sure you men will enjoy Mr. Alwyn’s tour of his new museum.”

Bacon exchanged glances with Ray before nodding. Ray wasn’t sure why Bacon wanted to go on the tour. Ray was dying to get away.

“Thank you,” Before Ray’s eyes, Carl changed from a grieving father to an up-beat go-getter. As they walked out the he said in a low voice to Representative Field, a voice that Ray was sure he wasn’t meant to overhear, “We’re going to show them what tree huggers we are, how well we monitor

water and all the rest of the munchy-crunchy granola crap. That dickhead from the Bangor Review, I'd like to crush his balls."

Ray and Bacon followed the Representative and Carl Alwyn, who talked animatedly as they went down the stairs. Ray tried, but couldn't overhear what they were saying as a gaggle of secretaries streamed out from one of the doors, talking loudly.

Bacon slowed his pace. He said in a low voice, "I think there's more to this than we've seen so far. I have a bad feeling. I always follow my instincts. There was a lot at stake in the deed Michael was carrying. A big slice of the Maine economy and a big hit to the Nunotucks, who are environmental thorns in the lumber industry's side. Michael always knew exactly what he was doing. You have to be constantly aware to stay alive in the wild. There was a reason he had the deed in his pocket and there was a reason he chanced the Falls. He could have gotten out of that current, if he wanted to, and if he had his normal strength. Even tied into the canoe. He could paddle."

Ray said, "I'm open-minded. Zen. Answers come to those who vacate the brain to allow in new perspectives. There's no reason to keep murder in the family."

Bacon nodded. "Yeah, Carl Alwyn has a lot of connections."

A dozen reporters and a handful of onlookers was a mob scene for a Cascade County news release. Russ Alwyn was there, on the fringe of the group. He waved Ray and Bacon towards him. "Welcome to the show. Meet me in my role as the Bob Woodward of Cascade County. But I'm no one trick pony. I go to the little league; I go to Cascade County government committee meetings, write wedding announcements. I get around."

"V.I.P.," Ray said.

Russ shrugged. "Slogging. Footwork. Writing about Michael was the worst thing I've ever done. No matter how he and I

disagreed, he was my big brother. I have five regulars and interns who offered to help when I started to break down. I didn't want to make the article too histrionic. Personal, but not nosy – I had to tiptoe around the edges of the family. Anyway, my team helped. I have a cool job. Edgy right now with the public focus on mill pollution, alternative energy, and the environment. This little show today is a joke – just for show, to reassure the public. Makes me want to change cities, go anywhere – Pittsburgh, Flagstaff, anywhere my family, my trust fund, my beliefs and my conscience aren't in my face every waking minute. Don't mean to talk your ears off, but I've been up all night, so don't quote me, on whatever I just said."

They were in a low-ceilinged room, lit by fluorescent light, carpeted and soundproofed, so that the sounds of mill machinery right next door were unheard. Evelyn Waites clipped a lavalier microphone on the lapel of Carl's suit. "Here comes the pompous spiel." Russ groaned.

"Gentlemen and ladies, Welcome. I'm honored that each of you and Representative Fielding took time out of your busy schedules to attend the opening of the **Alwyn Museum of Paper Making**. As a company, Alwyn always has the public good in mind. We contribute to the economy in many ways that you will see outlined in the exhibits. The legislature keeps its eyes on us, and we conform. Representative Fielding is here to honor the importance of paper mills in Maine. He has been a friend and supporter of economic development. We are very glad to have his support. Now – here's our museum. On this wall, you see samples of the handmade paper the mill made in its early years, before we got the Fourdrinier machine. We used cotton then. People who lived in the area brought us their old clothes, and we converted them into fine linen paper. You can see samples of the handmade papers of the years 1785, 1789, 1793, 1831, and so forth. We stopped making handmade paper in 1886, but we continue to be leaders in recycling efforts to this day. One of our current production lines produces a grade of paper that is eighty per cent recycled material." There was a weak

clap from the audience.

"On the next wall are pictures of the early Alwyns." Ray stepped closer to the wall. Carl's resemblance to his early forebears was uncanny. They all shared what used to be called a noble forehead. They all had prominent features, piercing eyes and slightly flared nostrils. The mouths were generous, greedy. In the pictures that showed the full body, most of the men appeared to have passed on what Ray considered Carl's most striking trait – the head large in comparison with a body, which would have looked spindly and odd, had it not had a strong, compact build. The pictures continued up to present day. Louise had inherited Carl's proportions, although to a less marked degree. Stacy and Russ had their mother's more regular proportions. Michael looked like Eleanor, only he was taller than anyone by a foot.

"On the third wall are pictures that demonstrate our historical connection with our natural resources -- forest and water. Our intention is to go forward into the next century with the same respect for the environment and concern for pollution that has always been our trademark. Here you can see how Alwyn Mills has always been in the forefront of technological progress. We've come a long way from the old vats and screens where paper was hand-pressed! Upgrading technology is the way we can contain and prevent pollution. For example, we recycle much of the black liquor waste from the pulping process back to the energy plant.

"The fourth wall contains pictures selected from our archives of recent members of the Alwyn family who have met with national and internationally known figures. May I point out one of which I am particularly proud -- my and my wife's meetings with Presidents Eisenhower and Ford. And many other distinguished men and women. But lest you think that Alwyns have pretensions to grandeur, let me assure you that we know the Mill could not exist without our valued work force. Most of this wall is devoted to present and past employees. Each month we give an award to the employee of the month who is elected by other employees. We give

awards for longevity with the Mill, for outstanding productivity, for least sick days, for special acts of service. Our employees are our most important resource. This selection is only a small selection of the thousands of good men and women who have shared their talent and energy with us."

"You won't find my mug up there," Bacon murmured.

Carl continued. "Throughout the room you will see the original equipment we used to make paper when we started the mill. There are the vats where we boiled the cotton – we only used cotton people brought us at that time. Here are the sizers. and rollers. We had a watermark machine you can see in this case, and we had printing equipment. We are proud to say that our company was chosen to make the first American currency. Our paper was also used for various important declarations and legal documents. We hand-laid the print, of course. The inks of the time were one man's responsibility. We have his recipe, but—don't ask me for it. It's a family secret almost as important as my wife's clam chowder."

There was general chortling. "Now I'll take a few questions, and then pass the mike to Representative Fielding."

Hands shot up into the air. Carl designated one.

"Sir, I'm sure I speak for all of us in expressing condolences on the death of your son. Would you care to share your thoughts on your family's loss with the public?"

Carl passed a hand over his face. It gave Ray an unsettling, a primal impression of a face passing from light into dark, then back into light. It reminded him of a gesture he'd seen Michael make last summer at the Alwyn bicentennial. The gesture was a glimpse into the troubled depths of a man whose surface was calm. Still Carl managed to maintain an imperturbable façade. It must require discipline, skillful acting ability -- or both.

"On behalf of the family, I thank you for your expression of

sympathy. Of course, we are grieving. Michael's death has been a terrible shock. I'm sure you understand our need for privacy during this time. We want to wait until it's official to release the obituary, citing accidental death. And now, if you don't mind, please restrict your questions to the Mill."

Rustles of paper. Then, "Sir, what is your position on forest clear cutting?"

"Sometimes the lumber companies clear-cut because it's best for the health of the forest. We work with forestry planners. Wood is a renewable source of energy -- the trees grow back!" Carl laughed, and everyone laughed. "Of course these are the big landowners in Cascade County we're talking about. We all buy from each other, depending on supplies and economic conditions. We work with Great Northern, Pacific, International, all the big companies you're familiar with. Essentially, all logging businesses run the same way, based on what has been proved to work, both environmentally and in a business sense."

Bacon elbowed Ray, pointing his thumb at a picture of big logs soaking in a pond by the mill. "Man, that was in the days of the log drives. The logs would just lay there. It stank like Hell."

"How much replanting do the lumber companies do?" someone asked.

"As much as necessary," Carl said, pointing to someone else.

Russ said "Carl hates that guy from Bangor. It's mutual."

"What about the use of bleach in the paper making process? Doesn't that kill fish?"

"We have holding ponds to re-oxygenate the water, and return it to the BOD it needs to be. That's biological oxygen demand. By the time the water gets downstream, it's cleaner than before."

"What about accidental releases from the mill and holding

pond?"

"A public report is available every year. Our record is good."

"What about the rumors that there's at least an accident a month?" Two voices sounded at once. "What about the valve on the bleach vat that broke last month? The holding pond overflowed. I saw fish jumping out of the river with my own eyes."

"In our mill, everything depends on water. Water moves the logs downstream. It's in the baths that dissolve the wood fibers to cellulose, and it provides 25% of the power to run the machines. We have to be concerned with water. The accident was discovered immediately and corrected." Carl nodded sagely, once left, once right, ignoring the hands, and said, "And now, I give you Representative Fielding."

Evelyn Waites repositioned the microphone on the representative's lapel. Representative Fielding was in his element. "Protection of the environment is my first priority. I'm recommending that the state support a bill that will free the paper industry from the constraints that now prevent its modernization. American growth is based on--initiative. Thank you for coming. We have prepared some handouts. Be sure and get them on your way out. And thank you for coming."

The two men smiled on cue, flashbulbs popped, and a blandly smiling security guard ushered out the press people, except for Russ. As they left, Evelyn Waites handed out monographs entitled *Our Forests at Work* and *The Paper Trail*.

Ray and Bacon were about to be herded along with the group, but Evelyn Waites signaled the guard, tapped Ray on the shoulder and said to him, "Carl would like a word with you and Bacon." They joined Russ outside the room and waited while Carl and Representative Fielding parted. Representative Fielding left by the same door all the reporters but Russ had. A black official car was waiting.

“Hey man,” Russ said to Bacon and Ray. “We should keep in touch. I’ll give you a call, have you over to the ranch.”

“Great,” Bacon said.

Ray couldn’t just out of the blue ask Russ about the deed. Carl was walking towards them. Ray shook Russ’ hand, then patted him on the back a few comradely times and said, “Hope you’re doing OK, Russ.” He was thinking how he’d get some answers from Russ next time he saw him. He’d find out if Russ had shown Carl the deed after he found it in Michael’s pocket. If Stacy had been telling the truth when she said she told Terence first. He wondered if Russ or Stacy had known about the deed before Michael died. He was irritated he was thinking about Stacy so much. He wondered if she thought about him too.

Carl stopped beside them, said, “Meet you in my office,” to Russ. Then for the benefit of Ray and Bacon, he lifted his hands in the air in a strangely inappropriate gesture of helplessness. “Thanks for stopping by,” he said. “I’m glad you did.” He seemed overcome with emotion, “You’ve been with us since the beginning of this.”

The outburst, coming from this contained man, seemed like over-acting. Carl pressed Ray’s hand warmly. Ray had a radar feeling of danger. Maybe he’d go see Sage again and ask her to be a little more precise about the troubles brewing in the county and whose side he should be on. Maybe he’d swallow his pride and his habitual doubt of her.

As they left the building, Bacon said, “Carl Alwyn is a hard man to work for. He doesn’t allow unions. If people complain, Carl fires them. There are always men who need work. Americans. Canadians. Illegal aliens marry American women, so they can get green cards. It’s good money. Some people even like it. There are mill families who take pride in how many generations they’ve worked here being here.”

They walked down to the dam, in time to see it lower. Taffy-colored brine rushed over into a pond. The pond in turn,

controlled by a secondary dam, was emptying into the river. Ray checked his watch. "11:30 on the dot," he said. The water levels will be high downstream until 2:00 according to Ms. Perfect Secretary Waites.

"That's where they leave the waste water sit," Bacon said, pointing to the pond. "They want nature do its work and re-energize, of B.O.D. the water before they let it flow downstream. I wouldn't want to put my boat into that shit. If I put my finger in it, it would probably fall off."

Ray pointed to the other side of the dam. "There's a fish way we can take past all this muck."

"Let's find something to eat in this shit hole town," Bacon said. They left the dam, and walked around to the other side of the mill where the footbridge crossed the river just before the dam. Molly strained frantically on her rope as she saw them coming.

Ray untied her and fended off her boisterous jumps. A thin woman in gabardine pants and a sweatshirt advertising "LL Bean" was leaving the mill. "We're looking for a place to eat. Is there a restaurant in town?" Ray asked her. He didn't recall having seen one last time he'd been in Alwyn Mills for the Mill bicentennial. Well, face it; he had come to the bicentennial in hopes of catching Stacy's eye. He had barely seen her since high school, but in high school, she had made quite an impression on him. He hadn't looked for anything in the town but her.

"Just follow the road?" she said. "It's a small town. You can't get lost in Alwyn Mills?" She was one of those people that end sentences, no matter how declarative, as a question.

"My buddy here is a wilderness guide," Ray said. "He can get lost in an elevator."

"Very funny," Bacon said.

But the woman said helpfully, "I'm going that way? Follow

me?"

They passed the block of row houses and entered the business part of town – a couple of blocks of modest but well-constructed brick buildings housing an insurance company, the fire station, a gas station, a convenience store. About halfway down the street, she indicated a narrow passage that smelled of dry-cleaning and popcorn. "Through this alley is Alwyn dry cleaner's and the Alwyn cinema?" She indicated in a vague way.

"Company town," Bacon remarked. "Is everything called Alwyn?"

"Just about," she said, and this time there was no question in her voice.

They continued on the main street to a business decorated with green and white striped awnings. Marigolds resisted the October cold bravely in the window boxes. The sign in front said "Alwyn Diner."

"Ah," Bacon said. "Food! Thank you, ma'am."

"You're welcome?" The woman continued on.

They tied Molly to a lamppost.

"What's fresh today?" Bacon asked the waitress, as they entered the steamy room.

She said, "It's all good."

The food was a long time coming. The waitress was cooking, clearing and serving. When it did arrive, the bread was a little stale on Bacon's bologna sandwich, and the bologna had a rubbery texture. Ray's hamburger bun was stale, and the lettuce wilted. "How's everything?" the waitress asked with a bright smile as she immediately deposited coffee, pushing dishes around to make room on the cramped table.

"Unhh," Ray said.

There was no one else in the restaurant. The waitress put her check pad in her apron pocket, and said, "Usually this place is packed. But Carl cut staffing to the bone for a week to mourn Michael. That makes a lot of ladies going without pay on short notice who didn't even know Michael." She shrugged. "That's life around here. Anyway, we're all sorry about Michael. Even though he was a basket case."

"He was a basket case?" Ray repeated.

"Yeah, he used to come in here with his Dad, and he wouldn't touch the food."

"That's strange," Ray said, trying to make his face look blank and stupid. Bacon cracked up. The waitress pulled out a pack of cigarettes and went to the back of the room to smoke.

"Desert?" she called, after a couple of minutes.

"No thanks," they both said at once.

Bacon consulted his watch. "We have an hour to wait."

When they were outside, Ray gave Molly his hamburger, which he had unobtrusively wrapped in a napkin. Then he saw Bacon had done the same with his bologna sandwich. Molly flung the sandwiches in the air until they fell apart. Then she wolfed them down, including the napkins. "Now I know that dog has no taste buds," Bacon said.

Further down Main Street they saw an old-fashioned barber pole. The sign read **Dave's Barber Shop**. Doleful music issued from the interior. "Why yi yi yi/ did you leave this guy yi yi yi." Molly settled contentedly on the sidewalk. "She needs all her energy to digest the napkins. I bet they tasted better than the meat," Bacon stated.

"Fiber," Ray said.

"Hey," the barber said as they entered.

"Dave," Bacon said.

Dave looked up from the practically bald head of hair he was working on. He had on a faded blue barber coat with short sleeves, and his arms stuck out like round table legs covered with white hair and freckles. Rosy bumps crept around his nose. Although he didn't seem more than sixty, his hair was piled on his head like pure snow. "What can I do you for?" he asked.

"I'm Bacon. I used to work at the Mill. You cut my hair. A long time ago."

"Let's see," Dave said. He lifted his head as though it were a weight and trained his eyes on Bacon. "Yeah. Crew cut." He nodded. "You haven't changed, but your hair has. Step right up." He indicated the second of the two barber chairs posed in front of the skimpy square of window. He left his customer for a moment to settle a white towel around Bacon's shoulders, making sure Bacon couldn't get away. Bacon settled on the porcelain chair, resting his feet on the metal grillwork bumper. Dave half turned his back on him and continued snipping the thin white strands from a man whose ugly face Ray could see in the mirror. It looked as if it had been chewed up a long time ago by an animal with big teeth, and healed by wrinkling into a curly core.

Ray sat down on a bench with a ripped plastic seat, beside a magazine-littered end table.

"I been here fifty years now. This town has changed," Dave resumed his conversation with the man, but included Ray and Bacon, as if the four of them had been there from the start. "They put in the bank. That didn't used to be on the corner. I've been here fifty years, and Al here," he identified the man for the newcomers, has been here a lot longer."

"I remember when the street wasn't paved." Al said knowingly. "One day I woke up and it was paved."

"That's something," Dave said. Every time Dave lifted Al's hair up with a comb he opened his mouth, and closed it at

the same time he snipped the scissors.

Ray leaned back in his chair, and stretched out his legs. The place brought back his marriage, when Sheila used to put a towel around his shoulders, set him on a stool in the kitchen, and cut his hair. She'd ask him about how his day went, and tell him little jokes and stories while his hair fell on the floor like the money she spent, his money, on her clothes, and he didn't even mind. He was proud and happy. Those were the days. He had hair then. The memories still made him happy. "Call me irresponsible," a voice on the radio crooned, the old jazz fitting in with the after rub, hair tonic, and witch hazel astringent lined up in front of the mirror like a barbershop in an old Western.

"Hope all this rain doesn't put a damper on your spirits, Al," Dave commented, swiping Al's neck with a towel, pumping on the foot pedal to let the chair down to the ground.

A length of wrinkled plaid sock appeared as Al paused and hoisted his trousers up over his waist. He handed Dave a five dollar bill as if it were a hundred and said, "I thank you, sir. I have to get to my job now." He shuffled away.

"Must be an easy job," Dave said, glancing at the ticking alarm clock on the shelf. It read 12:05.

Al picked a cap off a hook on the coat rack and settled it on his head.

"Looks like you cut his hair to fit his hat," Ray observed.

"You remember the days of bowl cuts?" Dave asked, brightening.

"I used to have my hair parted down the middle." Al said. He was half way out the door, sliding his feet across the threshold.

"That was a modified Ivy League cut. You cut quite a figure in those days, Al."

As the door shut behind him, Dave called. "Don't go lifting weights. You'll get all tied up like those wrestlers." As Al stepped slowly from view, Dave said, "Al's a rare one. He tore a muscle and they had to put a drain in it. He was doing pull-ups on a tree limb. He has a girlfriend he likes to impress. She's Japanese. Well," he turned his attention to Bacon's head. "What can I do you for?"

"The same as it is only shorter," Bacon said, peering into the mirror at his bushy tuft. "What do you charge for a haircut?"

"My price is eight," Dave said, ringing the cash register drawer open, and depositing Al's five-dollar bill.

"What about me?" Ray asked. "I only have about eight strands. In Majestic Bay, they take twenty-five dollars for a haircut. That's over three dollars a strand."

"Same price for all," Dave asserted. "There's another barber outside town who'll do it for seven. He doesn't see too well. Nicked someone's neck last week, had to give him a discount." Dave placed the comb he had used on Al in an oven-like box labeled "McKay Antiseptic Sterilizer." He did not turn it on. After a second, he took it out again. He slid the comb under some of the black hair that sprang out of Bacon's head as if it were alive, and then stood there without doing anything, scissors poised in the air. He was deep in thought. Bacon ahemed politely, and Dave came back with a start, opened his mouth, snipped, and closed his mouth. "Russ Alwyn was here this morning," he said. The silver radiator beside the mirror hissed. Dave separated another section of hair, and stood deep in meditation again. "That boy Michael knew the river like his own backhand. That was no accident. That's what I said. Foul play."

It didn't hit Ray for a minute. It was because Dave's voice was so even and soothing. He said "Foul play" as if he was watching a baseball game. It was the comforting anonymity of a barbershop, where confidences were uttered, only to fall into a kind of subconscious oblivion, the way the customer's

hair fell onto the floor.

“Why do you think foul play?” Ray asked, when his mind woke up.

Bacon, shrouded in the white towel, scrutinized Dave in the mirror. Dave cut the lock of Bacon's hair he was holding. “Michael broke my son's toe once. Play fighting. I didn't complain. Can't complain about the Alwyns. They own everything around here.”

Maybe Dave was a rambler. Maybe a little age-onset dementia. Maybe he was taking his time getting to the point.

“Foul play,” Ray repeated, to jostle Dave's mental process. Dave wiped Bacon's neck with the same towel he'd used to wipe Al's. So much for hygiene. Dave lifted another lock of Bacon's thick hair. “That family,” Dave continued, as if lifting the strand of hair had initiated another thought process. “All the companies buy wood from each other. Competition up here is tough. So one day, about a year ago or so, Michael comes in. I says, 'Let me trim your beard at least.' At the time, he wasn't letting me or anyone cut his hair. He had a phobia about it. He says 'Cut my beard? Are you crazy?' I say 'Who's crazy?' He says, 'Carl, that's who.'”

“Michael thought Carl was crazy,” Ray said, to encourage Dave. He hoped by the time the haircut was finished, Dave would have gotten back to the foul play.

Dave cut, swiped, and started to cut, but again paused in midair. “So Michael says, 'Talk about hair growth,' he says, 'well what about bamboo that grows a foot a day? Sometimes three feet. It's invasive. It spreads by runners, by rhizomes. Once it takes hold, it just spreads.' I says 'What the hell.' He says 'I heard if from Carl. There are lots of different kinds. Some are cold resistant. Carl said he could plant some here if he wanted, and he'd have a quick renewable raw source of paper. He says it needs to ferment longer than wood, but it makes good paper.' I says, 'Well we don't need no bamboo

up here. If Carl wants to do that, he is crazy."

Dave shook his head, back and forth slowly. He walked around to Bacon's other side and began the same process, lifting, pausing, cutting, swiping. It was maddening. But Ray knew how to wait a person out. He sensed Dave was getting around to what he really wanted to say. Dave was an old fox. Ray knew how to hunt a fox. Use diversionary tactics. He picked up an old *Yankee Magazine* from the side table by his chair and leafed through the worn pages, pretending to have lost interest in anything Dave might have to say. "Moose Mating Calls." "What to do if You're Sprayed by a Skunk." "How to Repair a Stone Wall."

"Yep," Dave said. "Land and bamboo. That's the last thing I heard Michael talk about. Land is a dangerous subject. People will kill for land."

Ray kept his eye on the magazine and tried to keep his facial muscles at rest. In Dave's long tenure, all sorts of secrets must have passed through this room. Dave just let them slide by. He had to concentrate on hair, on making a person relax and feel good, on providing the incentive to come back again.

"Eyeh," Dave said. "That Michael. He had the right instincts. Somebody was afraid of him," Dave said, snapping the scissors shut.

"Who do you think...?" Ray began.

"Well, you're all set," Dave said to Bacon. "You've got a fine head of hair. You know what they say, grass grows where there's no traffic. Ha ha ha. Laughing with ya. I remember you. You didn't last long at..." he gestured down the street to the mill. "You must have something on your noggin besides your hair. Ha ha. Nice talking to you boys. You come back again, anytime."

He pressed the metal keys of the old cash register keys like a typewriter, dollar sign first, then 0.00. The drawer rang open. He laid Bacon's eight dollars in carefully under the metal clip,

and slid the drawer in, snapping his mouth shut at the same time.

Chapter 11

Ray was on his way home. He was pretty fried from the canoe trip. It had seemed a lot longer than two days. He had an unpleasant aftertaste in his mouth after meeting Carl, seeing the mill and smelling the machines and the river water. He had had an encounter with a vague danger he couldn't locate or respond to. He felt a fight brewing. He wanted to get out his .457 magnum and blast the hell out of some beer cans on a target field. Getting ready for Carl's head. Get a grip Ray.

It was dusk as he arrived at the landmarks that showed where his – really his dad's – land began. Ray's headlights highlighted the blue spruce by the road. Just the other day he had seen a ruffed grouse there. His headlights lit the huge birch on the other side of the driveway, its yellow leaves glowing in the headlights. He drove down the dirt driveway about a hundred feet, climbed out of the truck, stretched, and let Molly out.

Ray lived in the garage he had fixed up behind his parents' house. His forge and tools were on the ground floor. He lived in a loft he'd built upstairs. When Ray got divorced, his dad wanted to give him the garage. Ray insisted on buying it. Steward protested he paid them too much. He said he'd build a carport for his parents' Chevy. They said they never used the Chevy. They could park it outside for heaven's sake. They never drove anyway. Then they sold the car. They complained when Ray bought them a vacation packages, but went gladly and had a blast. Ray liked to be able to return some of the kindness they'd showed him growing up. Not that they needed his help. Steward owned the Starlight Grill and Bar, a small place up the road. A bunch of regulars had been showing up for years. Noon and 5:00 p.m., the whistle blew, and Steward's modest income started coming in. Since he retired, he had given the management over to the drummer who headed the Saturday night band the *Starlight bandits*. Saturday night was a big night. People seemed to

crawl out of the woodwork to come and dance to a live band play oldies and the latest hits. It was a party woven into the social structure of Cascade County. Steward and Eileen went every week. More than a few customers had remarked on how awesome it was to see an old couple holding each other close and dancing some pretty hot moves. Eileen and Steward had won some dance contests in the forties. They had been national champions of foxtrot one year. Now in between the exertions of routine bits, they mostly swayed. Ray wasn't the only one moved by their devotion to each other.

Slowly, the sour taste in his mouth melted away. He was home. The familiar forest smells, the smell of his mother cooking dinner. The smoky smell from the garage he called his cabin. the forge smoldered a long time after he shut it down. Just smoke, a wholesome smell. Ray's whole body relaxed. He forgot everything he had been through. It was over.

Molly was having a ball, dashing into the bushes, sniffing intently around the perimeters of the narrow yard. Must be smelling Raffle Ticket, Cindy's dog. Ray unlocked the garage door. A musty odor told him he should have asked his mother to air it out during the rains. He made a quick inventory, to make sure no one had broken in. Not a chance. The crime rate in the Res was practically nil. Ray was paranoid, he knew he had a touch of OCD. Manageable. He could live with it. The choice of things to steal in the cabin was not impressive. Downstairs in the office: a can of loose screws, 10 cans of power drink, a paperback Knifemaker's Bible, an economy size bottle of ibuprofen, swimsuit calendar, Deet insect repellent, leather punch, Band-Aids, ace bandage, adhesive tape, gauze, blister tape, Ben Gay, 5 different pair of hiking boots on newspaper by the heating vent, locked file cabinet, radio, order sheets, telephone, rolodex. Upstairs, in the kitchen was a toaster, tin camping ware, spice rack, 5 cans of potato soup, 6 cans of tuna, empty bread box, odds and ends of silverware and china, 25 boxes

of sports bars and a blender. Home.

He liked the Spartan life. All he needed was a bed, a few chairs, and a kitchen table. The piano was the only grand piece Ray had in his living quarters, and that was because Ray's mother Eileen had bought it for Ray. After the divorce, Eileen had called Sheila and demanded it back. Sheila had tried to protest that Cindy played it all the time, but Eileen dug in her heels. Sheila made her pay for it. That burned Eileen up. "That I won't say the b word made me pay for my own piano." Cindy only played her boom box, and Sheila used the piano as a plant stand. Not that Ray used it any better, but Eileen always had told him it was never too late to take piano lessons. If he never played it, his next wife might.

Ray ignored his mother's frequent, pointed references to his next wife.

He went into the workshop and checked out the tools, supplies and knife products. Everything just as he had left it. He had a phone in here too, with his business number. The answering machine was blinking. Suppliers and customers, a few social calls. As he finished checking the messages, the phone rang. A live person, not a message. He picked up. Stacy Alwyn's voice sounded as life-like as if she were in the room with him. "Ray," she said, then repeated his name, giving what she was saying a certain urgency. Ray was dismayed to find that at the sound of her voice his heart skipped at least a beat. "Ray. I'm calling about the deed."

"What about it?" Ray asked. Never mind that she didn't say hi, hello, or any of those social niceties. Why was she calling him, and talking to him as if they knew each other well. He was suspicious. She was skipping a lot of steps in the getting to know you process. What was she going on about?

"Russ showed the deed to Carl. Russ told him the whole thing, how he took it from Michael's pocket. Carl's going apeshit. He's striding around the library throwing books – valuable books – on the floor. He's kicking chairs

down. He's pulling clothes off their hangars. "Ray," long pause. Ray was in a heightened state that Stacy had called at all and now she had said his name three times! He liked the way she said his name – "Ray" (count four times!) "I called an ambulance. He needs sedation, he needs care, he's not himself. He'll be so angry when the ambulance arrives. He'll hate me. He keeps repeating, 'And don't you go calling anybody. This is too important for that.' He's been like this for hours. Russ had to leave for work, and Eleanor took a sleeping pill."

"Geez." was all Ray could think of to say. "You'd think he'd be glad to find a deed like that. It gives him everything."

"Even your land. That's why I'm calling, in case you're wondering. You probably think I'm crazy but I am worried about all the Nunotuck land and yours too. It's so unlike Carl to react like this. He usually is so controlled. "Even seeing a deed that gives him everything, you'd think that he wouldn't react like that at all. He never has. In an extreme situation like the death of a son, in my wildest imagination he might act like this, but he didn't react much when Michael died. Maybe that's what it is, a delayed reaction, and because he delayed it, it compressed, and now it's an explosion."

"Mmm." Ray repeated. "Now it's an explosion." He was still trying to figure out why Stacy thought she could talk so emotionally to him. They barely knew each other. Sure, they had established that they were attracted to each other, but this was a weird way to follow up on that. Usually, he would invite her to a movie or something, not listen to her rant on the phone.

"Yes! That's exactly what it is! An explosion. This deed is driving us all crazy. I'm going to the Registry of Deeds in Majestic Bay tomorrow. Would you go with me to inspect the original version? You know your land is probably included in this new deed."

"Yes," Ray said, beginning to get Stacy's drift, and the

reason for her urgency. It was not personal. It had nothing to do with him personally. It was a situation that demanded immediate action. Well, okay, he had misunderstood, but now he was with it. Yes, Stacy, I get your drift..” It felt strange to say her name, as if his mind slowed down and he were saying “stay...see.” “I, that is, Bacon and I, have questions about that deed and some of them have to do with you.”

“With me?”

“You were with the Nunotucks when Russ found the deed, and you said you didn’t know while you were climbing up to the festival that Michael had died. Correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then how did you get the deed?”

“God, Ray, you sound as if you’re grilling me in court. As if you’re suspicious of me. Didn’t you hear Russ come up around 3:00 a.m., after you came back from the ginseng hunt? I thought he must have waked everyone up looking for me.”

Ray was relieved. This, at least was the truth. “Yeah, I heard him come. I’m a light sleeper. I heard you two leave the clearing for a while, and then you came back alone.”

“Russ climbed Mount Nunotuck in the middle of the night to consult with me. That’s how much he cares, Ray. He was freaked out. He didn’t want to give the deed to Carl, although Carl is the beneficiary. He doesn’t want Carl to own all this land. Michael certainly wouldn’t. I don’t. Russ asked me if I thought we should keep the deed a secret. He said he couldn’t keep that secret alone, and he thought he and I should be the only ones to know. Brother-sister thing. Blood ties. I said it would be hard. We didn’t know anything about the deed. Other people might be in on it. It’s not the kind of thing you can keep secret. I said I thought we should show it to Terence and ask his advice. I said I was glad he hadn’t shown the deed to Carl first. So Russ gave me the deed to

show Terence. And I'm glad, because, frankly I'd be afraid to have that deed in secret, afraid of the kind of person who might want to act on it, like some of Carl's political or lumber friends. You know they are gangsters. Carl probably already knows about the deed. His lumber buddies might."

"There's always gangsters in government and business. You did the right thing. You protected yourself and you protected the Nunotucks. If you're telling the truth. And Russ was pretty heroic in my opinion. It's brave to climb alone at night."

"What do you mean 'if I'm telling the truth?! Of course I am. What other explanation is there?"

"Oh, that there were two or more identical copies, water-stained crumpled to look like the one Michael had in his jacket."

"You bastard! If we had other copies why would Russ remove the one from Michael's pocket? Besides, experts can tell if something is identical."

"Or that you and Russ had seen the deed before but you didn't have it, and now that you had it you didn't know what to do with it."

"Well," she said really pissed off, "neither Russ nor I knew anything about such a deed. Ask Russ. You'll just have to take my word for it. Which you seem disinclined to do. I'd call you a creep but I don't want to be rude. Don't you realize we're on the same side?"

"Don't get all het up." Ray was pretty het up himself. He didn't want things to take a nasty turn. He didn't want to mention that blood is thicker than water and that maybe Stacy and Russ were just trying to get sympathy from the Nunotucks and were really on Carl's side. If he said anything like that, Stacy would blow a gasket. "At least Russ told Carl about the deed. Bacon and I were wondering when that would happen. It was strange you told Terence first."

“And look what happened. He went postal. Look, Ray, we’re all confused and nobody knows who knows what. Oh! I see red lights coming up the driveway. I think it’s – god forbid – Louise. I’ve got to go. So I’ll see you tomorrow at 11:00?”

“Okay.”

“Thanks, Ray. Bring the deed to your land so we can see the extent of the claim of this deed. You’re a good guy. I don’t want to see anyone get shafted.”

She hung up without saying good bye.

He took a deep breath, shook his head to clear it and went out to collect his mail. Three days worth of the “Cascade County Times.”

There on the front page was a picture of Michael Alwyn’s body, a picture of Ray and Bacon, and one of the rescue party. Ray was starting back to the garage when his mother yoo-hoed him. “You know what day it is?” she called.

“Suppa with the folks day” Ray guessed.

“I made meatloaf...” his mother coaxed.

“Well in that case...” Ray sprinted down the driveway and into his parents’ house.

Right away, Steward, his dad, started in on Michael, and what a hero Ray was, and what was it like. Ray told the story in every small detail. Eleanor put her hand on her heart and said, “What if you hadn’t been able to get out of the stream. Oh we are so lucky! You boys are so brave!”

They knew most of it from the Gazette already. Michael’s death and the recovery of his body were well covered, and Russ had written a moving personal column. There was no mention of a deed. When Ray told his dad that Russ had found a deed from 1789 that gave all the Nunotuck land to the Alwyns, Steward scoffed, “Piss in a pot. I’ll show you the

deed. It's from 1788. I keep it in the safe upstairs. Let's eat."

They settled down to business at hand. "Pass the mashed potatoes." Ray piled them on his plate. Supper at his parents' house was always a variation of potatoes, meat, and a green vegetable.

"I played bridge this afternoon. With Sage." Eileen took a bite of meat loaf.

"That psychic stuff is a bunch of horse shit," Steward said. "Pass the green beans. Sage should have stayed a lunch cashier at the junior high. What do you think, Ray?"

"Something makes me listen, even though I tell myself she's out of her mind."

"You men," Eileen said, in a contented voice. "Who wants ice cream?"

"I'll get it," Ray said. They always had ice cream. He appreciated that reliability, but he got tired of it. He liked to go back and forth, from security to risk. Forty three, living safely right next to his parents. If he had a wife, they'd take care of each other, be secure. Then he'd go hunting, speed across slippery bridges, navigate the Falls on the Nunotuck River, hunt bears, jump high buildings in a single leap. And come home to loving arms and a good fuck.

He took the rose-filigree desert bowls from the shelf. The kitchen had plants on the sills, magnets on the refrigerator door, the Sears calendar, each day past crossed off. He took the ice cream into the living room, and put out the TV tables for his parents.

"Best restaurant in town," Steward said.

"I only wish one thing," Eileen said.

"Don't start on me and my next wife," Ray warned.

Steward said, "I went upstairs and checked my copy of the

deed. Lookee here. 1788. Just like I remembered. There's no deed for 1789. Anything after 1788 is piss and vinegar. Except for you buying the cabin. Got that deed too."

"Let me borrow the deed from 1788," Ray said. "I'm going to the Registry of Deeds tomorrow. I'll check it against the records, make sure everything's OK. Don't worry, Steward. I'll guard it with my life."

"I wouldn't go that far," Steward said. "Pack a .22. That'll do it."

They talked a little more, then Ray said good night and crossed the driveway to his cabin. He went straight into the bedroom, turned out the light and stretched out on one side of the bed. It was good to take up familiar routines, including insomnia, and ways to beat it. Lately he'd been experimenting with dream control. He was having flying dreams, flying higher than ever. He didn't even have to flap his arms any more, just put them by his side and he would soar up in the air. That night, he started with tree height, but he wanted to go higher. After a few tries, he got up over a mile over the countryside, soaring like a raven leaning into the wind. Far below him the Nunotuck River wound its lazy course, and the Alwyn paper mill formed a dark smudge on one of the turns.

Chapter 12

It seemed he'd hardly closed his eyes before the sun rose, a thin crack of dawn. Ray's day began with a familiar sequence of actions. Barefoot, he tested the floor to guess what the temperature outside was – the house was chillingly cold. He raised the shade of the window by his bed -- a quick pull down and let 'er fly. It snapped up on the new day, on the crab apple tree, now in its fall colors, set against the sky. He dressed quickly. In the muted light of the bathroom mirror, he shaved his face. Square and solid as a pit bull.

While coffee dribbled into the Pyrex, he had his first purposeful thought. Half the pleasure of coffee was the aroma. That alone could awaken a man's senses. Maybe he wouldn't even drink it. Slap some low-salt cheese -- no butter -- on the toast, and eat standing up. Sit down breakfasts were for married men. Two Anacin if he felt a twinge of arthritis.

He always savored the first moment of entering his workshop. The smell of smoldering ash and metal. Something new now added to the old and familiar --a dog to fold a blanket for. He had set Molly in the corner of his workshop, not too far from the forge, which, held heat all night and when turned up, provided a tropical heat. The forge, the torch, the ballpeen hammer, the clinch nails, flat head nails, sheets of metal laid systematically out, the array of torches, vises and grips. A coffee can of screws, a band saw, a drill press, a miter saw, a table saw, sixteen kinds of glue, a bench press, a Victoria Secrets catalog weighted down by a sander, arc-joint pliers, ball peen hammer, a world atlas, ratchet sockets and hex keys, 5 broken compasses, cotter-key extractor, adjustable wrench, ratchet-extension bars, old Mother Earth catalog, Phillips and standard screwdrivers in six sizes, staple gun, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, How to Stay Alive in the Woods, universal joint, screw-bit sockets. A lot more than he needed for knife making. He had a penchant for tools. Couldn't help collecting them, and he stored them all in his workshop. You never

could tell when one would come in handy.

The work order he wanted to start that morning was a utility knife for a fellow going out to Montana for big game. He wanted a knife for skinning, quartering, carving, trimming. Ray sketched the shape on stiff cardboard. Curved blade, with a finger guard from where the cutting edge dropped. 2 1/2 inches long, he finally decided and 1/8 inch thick. The handle curved, with a bump at the end for the little finger to push against. He penciled in the finger grips for a molded handle Full tang handle. Strong and sharp enough to cut bone, delicate and thin edged enough to skin without a scratch.

He drew, erased, drew, and measured with his eyes until the shape looked good on the paper. Balanced from front to back. No, not quite. He added a little to the handle length. Better. He cut it out with the band saw, and tried it. The shape was good to hold and moved well with his hand and shoulders. The transfer of the inner impulse to the physical -- magic, that's what he had to have.

Ray cleaned an old saw blade he had rescued from the dump, traced around the cardboard design with soapstone, an eighth of an inch bigger than it would end up. Usually, he worked with L6 steel hammered into sheets, because he could make sure the grain would be straight all the way through. This batch would be backwoods rustic. He marked ten knife blade shapes out on the longitudinal grain. Each one was a little different. He took the occasion of a custom order to make a number of knives, and to vary the details.

He kept getting interrupted by calls -- orders, inquiries, and the usual business bustle. Molly padded around amiably looking for food in her new territory. Ray gave her the canned tuna, made a mental note to buy dog food. He put on his goggles and gloves, and cut out one blade using an acetylene cutting torch. He ground the torch marks off with the grinding wheel, being careful not to grind his fingers too. When he first started the business, he cut himself all the time, till he got sick of looking like an inept schlep -- till he stopped

being an inept schlep. He was careful now. Observant and careful with his tools and his hands. It was a delicate dance. Danger was all around, and you slipped on oil or cut yourself when you least expected it, when you weren't watching. He ground out the steel, using an abrasive belt on the grinder. When it was done, he tested it, grinding where needed until it was balanced, like an extension of his hand. The movement came from the belly. Each knife had a soul. This one needed a thick handle for the customer's thick hand. A stag horn handle would be good. Other customers would want the design. He liked imagining a future life for the knives. He liked to think anyone could look at his knives and recognize his handiwork, even without looking at the R he always signed at the top of the tang, under the handle, like a greeting to people who knew where to look.

The rough-cut blade lay invitingly on Ray's workbench. He straightened it on the anvil, made a hollow grind with the heavy grindstone, then made long passes along the length of the blade, each time with a finer grit belt. He didn't want to go too deep; the knife had to be thick enough not to warp during tempering. It was a matter of feel. He ground the blade wearing his gloves, until almost done -- then took his the gloves off, and felt for the little bumps, dipping the blade in water to cool it.

At 10:00, he fed Molly an extra meal because he felt guilty going off and leaving her alone. After he shut the door, he stood next to it and listened to her whimper a little, then pad to her blanket.

The pigeon population had grown in proportion with the human, and looked as well fed and prosperous -- proof of the trickle down theory also applies to pigeons. A little money circled around locally to small businesses. It didn't trickle into other towns and counties. Majestic Bay was the headquarters for the lumber and paper companies, that owned great tracts of the land in the northern part of the state -- 50%. The general prosperity had drawn people to the area, which hadn't hurt Ray's business. He put ads in the Majestic

Bay papers, and rented a display window in one of the department stores that gave the number to call to order a knife. Mostly, the prosperity stayed in the hands of those who worked for or near government or a lumber business.

He walked past a watch store, a shoe store, a luncheonette. The tough energy of too much concrete in the streets of the town of Majestic Bay made him weary. Something was missing in city rhythms. He felt as though he was skating on thin ice and needed to get back to the woods. It had been the same when he was in Boston. He was a woodsman. Some kind of original settler. He was out of step, out of time, and out of patience with city nonsense. As he drove into the Registry parking lot, the sun was out, and people were eating pizza and hot pretzels on the steps of the Municipal complex. The pigeons knew it was lunch hour too

Stacy waited for him in the lobby. "Oh, am I ever glad to see you!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms around him in a lavish embrace. She was hugging him. He hugged her back. Her body was firm and energetic, electric. In fact, Ray was in shock. He hung on to her, waiting for her to give the cue to let go. It was something like the three second rule in basketball. If you clung longer than that, women creped out.

She let go. He let go. "How's Carl?" he asked.

"In the hospital. He went postal when he saw the ambulance stretcher. It took four men to hold him down to sedate him. I followed the ambulance and got him checked in. They put him in the cardiac unit on a monitor. His heart was racing a mile a second. This morning when I went, he was still sleeping. His heart rate was down. I spent the night back at the house sleeping on the couch in Eleanor and Carl's bedroom. In case she woke up. I didn't want her having a fit. This morning she was fine. She slept through the whole thing. She's into avoidance. She was relieved that Carl was safe and wanted to spend the day with him. I left her at the hospital and came straight here. When Carl wakes up, we can try and find out what set him off. The medics said he might not remember anything from the night before. Louise and I

cleaned up the chaos he made so when he gets home, nothing will jar his memory. Oh God. I feel like a used dishrag. I asked the hospital to beep me when Carl wakes up. I want to be there when he starts to talk. I am so selfish. Here I am going on and on about myself and my family. How are you?"

"Fine," Ray answered. "Had supper with my folks, worked on a knife order this morning. Peaceful."

"You must think our family is aberrant, frantic and bizarre. I can't recall a peaceful, normal evening or day with my family – ever," Stacy said.

"Poor little rich girl," Ray said.

She glared at him. "Don't patronize me, mister. Just because my family is crazy doesn't mean I am."

"Uhnh." They went through the security check and Ray opened the door to the Registry, motioning for Stacy to go ahead.

"Chivalry is not dead, thank goodness," she said. Shivering, she said, "I don't think they need this much air-conditioning." The contrast from the mild weather outside and the chilly room was sudden and unpleasant.

"Probably to preserve the documents," Ray said.

The whole room was hushed khaki -- from the carpet to the spackled ceiling with little punched out lights.

"We have to go back to the beginning," Stacy said. "1788. Did you bring your deed?"

"Yes, ma'm," Ray said. "By now you must have talked with Carl about the new deed."

"Russ and I discussed it again this morning, and I was going to talk about it with Carl last night but he was so wacko, I couldn't. Just as well, since we need to check the Registry. Actually, we're all in shock here, Ray," Stacy said in a sharp

voice, as if he needed to be recalled into reality. "It's not like anyone planned things to be this way."

"You saw your other sister? Louise? Does she know about the deed?"

"It's funny," Stacy said. "I don't know how much or what she knows about anything. She came over last night, but just to talk about what to do with Carl and Eleanor. I told her about the deed. She absolutely would not comment, or talk about the mill. You know Louise is treasurer of the mill, so she's closer to Carl than any of us. She's very guarded with me. But she did promise to meet me for lunch today."

"Never a dull moment," Ray said.

1780-88 was in Book 4, on the first shelf. The pages were newspaper size and canvas-like, and the writing on them like tent stitching. Somehow, Ray felt, even though he knew later records were typed, still later ones on microfilm, and surely the latest on disc -- the whole office had the tangible quality of earth rarified into paper, and then rarified again, into a spiritual connection each owner must have with land. When Ray turned to page one hundred thirty one, he read the fate of over two thousand acres of land disposed of in 1788 with the flourish of the pen of a certain recorder signed proudly at the beginning of the volume, Thomas Hooker had coolly recorded changes of ownership which affected lives irrevocably. In 1788 the Alwyn family had bought land from the Nunotuck Indians. Adjacent to that was Steward's deed for eighteen acres. It matched the original Ray had brought. That year the Nunotuck had divided and sold land to three other early settlers.

Now what about the new deed that Russ found in Michael pocket? "We'll have to go to 1789," Stacy said. "That's when it was dated." That volume was one shelf over.

1789 -- halfway through the book, Ray's land and Nunotuck land were still safe. Page 195, 196. The end of the book. Ray realized he'd been holding his breath. He'd been afraid. The

last deed in the volume was dated Dec. 26, 1789. There were still five days left in the year. "Just to be sure, we better check the next volume. It's marked 1789-1795," Stacy said.

There they discovered something strange. Missing pages. Torn right out of the beginning of the book.

There was a to-do when they showed the volume to the clerk at the desk. Yes, of course, they were in the process of entering everything on disc. Yes, they would check to see if there were back-up records. A half an hour later, flustered, no the entries had only been computerized back to 1910. The computer people had begun at the present, and were working backwards. No back up records for 1789 existed yet. That long ago, he doubted that lawyers would have kept duplicate records. The only back up was the individual deeds, which were kept by landowners. Of course the police would be called. Obviously a crime had been committed. The frayed inner bindings showed five or six pages torn out. They would investigate. No, they had no cameras. It wasn't the Big Apple. It was Majestic Bay. They'd never had a problem.

"You do now," Ray said.

Chapter 13

Stacy asked if Ray wanted to have lunch. Sure," Ray said. "I'm starved. I could use a nice juicy steak, or a hamburger." He looked around to see if there was a decent place that served large portions. Majestic Bay was a city that had seen its beginnings with the first mills. It was beginning to convert to the electronic age. One of the old mills had been bought by a computer company and upscaled to offices. One was a hotel. In between the large red brick mills were small stores. An artisan-hippie place selling batik clothing, a bead make your own necklace store, a used book store, a book store, a gas station, and the Salvation Dharma, a macrobiotic restaurant.

As Ray looked around, Stacy said, "Actually, my intern Neat is meeting us at the Salvation Dharma. He's macrobiotic. He'd probably die if he ate a steak."

"I might die if I have to eat tofu," Ray said.

"I knew that's how you'd feel," Stacy said, "but the atmosphere is serene, and that's what we need now. The food is out of this world."

"Out of this world is not what I want when I eat." It felt like the beginning of an argument.

"Puleeze," she dragged the word out like a child used to getting her own way. "I said I'd meet Neat there. Russ is coming. And I decided to invite Louise, since she's close by, at the hospital with Carl. Wait till they hear about the missing pages in the Registry. I did not invite Eleanor," she said. "Eleanor wouldn't know anything, and she'd just freak out. She should stay on watch with Carl."

"You've already arranged everything," he said, thinking, well, she is an organizer – that's her job.

"Well, yes, I have," she admitted, adding, "Besides, it's good

PR for me to eat there. The Buddhist community has been very supportive of clean water.”

“Well, OK,” Ray capitulated. If the food didn’t satisfy him, he’d pick up a Sub later. “But I get to chose next time.”

Stacy clapped her hands. “Oh good! There will be a next time!”

That gave Ray the courage to give her a very quick kiss on the cheek. She put her hand where he had kissed her and smiled radiantly at him. She was nice when she got her way. He’d hate to think what she’d be like if she was crossed.

Outside the restaurant, Neat shook hands. "How's my dog?" he asked, squeezing anxiously.

“Normal,” Ray said. When Neat let go of his hand, Ray shook his hand in the air to ease the numbness.

When Russ and Louise arrived, they joined the thin stream of people entering the Salvation Dharma—slender longhaired women in skirts made from Indian bedspreads and wispy longhaired men in baggy cotton pants. A dull trend. Russ, in over-size trousers, and vest, fit in, in a ruffled way, but Louise, in her square, office suit did not, and she looked uncomfortable. Stacy, well, she never seemed out of place. She wore velvet stretch pants and a satin blouse and looked streamlined and relaxed at the same time. Neat clanked more than the others. A set of keys hung from a chain around his waist, and banged into a compass.

Inside they were greeted by a coral reef in a fluorescent-lighted fish tank inhabited by one morose goldfish. Perhaps it was macrobiotic. Perhaps it was fasting. People were sitting on the floor on small round pillows at low tables to eat. As they stood by the door, a waiter glided over to them, wearing black cloth slippers. “Speaking or non-speaking section?” He asked.

“We're in a chatty mood,” Stacy confided.

When they were seated in the official eating position, an excruciating cross legged pose which Ray adopted for about 5 seconds before stretching his legs out under the table, the waiter supplied a basket of unleavened bread and crackers. Neat immediately started to munch. "I spent two months in silence at a Buddhist retreat," he said, between chews. "They were the best two months of my life."

Ray could identify with that. He had spent many a weekend in silence in the woods tracking game, although he had often resorted to talking to himself, or at least moving his lips to keep himself company and still not scare away the animals.

Neat picked up a wedge shaped wafer from the breadbasket, waved it in the air and said, "Is this the staff of life I see before me? Or a dagger?"

"Must be the staff. Buddhists are pacifist," Russ said.

"I bet you're into religion," Neat said to Ray, hopefully. He wanted to get into a discussion.

"No," Ray said.

The waiter glided to their table. He poised a pencil over his order pad. His skin was as translucent as if he himself were a shiny grain of rice.

"Give me a nori roll and miso soup," Stacy said.

The waiter approved, "a good balance of yin and yang."

Ray ordered barbecued tofu, hoping the sauce would kill the tofu non-taste. Russ and Louise ordered beans and rice. "You owe me," Louise said. "Next time we go out, I get to choose the restaurant. I could use some protein right now – as in a bloody steak."

Chalk one up for Louise.

"Just give me the biggest dish you have," Neat said.

The waiter hovered in the background. At strategic moments,

he refilled the breadbasket, which Neat kept emptying.

The Alwyns seemed suspended, avoiding talking, as quiet as most of the people in the room, chewing with intense concentration, silently, vigorously.

"So," Louise said finally, "Did you find the deed at the Registry?"

Russ said, "Give it up, Louise. How long have you known about this deed?"

"Carl told me about a year ago. He didn't want to press the issue at the time. The Nunotucks are good neighbors, even though they don't allow logging which Carl could do, if we needed the raw supplies. He said we probably wouldn't need the land in the near future."

"Well, Stacy said, "There is no way of verifying that deed. The original is missing from the records. Not just missing. It's been torn out of the book."

"What the Hell is going on?" Russ exploded. "The deed appears out of nowhere, and now the original in the Records has been vandalized."

Louise sighed, leaned on the table and said, "Carl's not going to like this. Look, he told me he found the deed in one of the old rooms, the old vatting room, I think, when he was making plans for the Alwyn Paper Museums."

"He didn't tell me or Russ. We don't have copies. How did Michael get the deed?" Stacy asked.

"Carl must have given it to him," Louise said getting up from the table. "I've got to get back to work."

"But Louise," Stacy said. "You didn't eat."

"It's not food." Louise took her wallet from her purse and plunked fifteen dollars on the table. "That's my share, including tip, if I remember right from the menu. Call me."

Stacy you know that we Alwyns like to keep things in the family. We should keep this quiet and talk with Carl when he comes to his senses. I'll be at the Mill, but we can meet with you anytime that we're ready to decide what to do. And you, young man," she looked at Neat, "I know the chair of your committee. I can be very influential. You keep your mouth shut. Stick to Nietzsche, subjects that are beneficial to you. If you think that's a threat it is. And if you want to blab it around, blab away. Nobody will take you seriously anyway. And you, Ray, with all due respect, I don't know why you're here. Stacy, you invite people left and right. You have no sense of boundaries. Ray's a Nunotuck. Nice guy, maybe able to keep a secret, maybe doesn't hate the Alwyns like everyone else on the reservation – still – somehow, every single Nunotuck is going to hear about this. Rumors will fly. All about a deed that we never intended to enact and that now can't be verified so isn't even legal. Stacy. Really. We could have kept this mess among ourselves. Could we have found a better way to get worse PR? Well, at least maybe it'll take the focus off the damage Russ is doing to the mill in his investigative environmental reports, and the ones that HUG is doing. Whatever happened to family loyalty? Do you have to always be surrounded by aa.... FAN CLUB? To spread our laundry all over the map? Can't this family ever be alone? What's the matter with you people? If one day, just one day, you could be in my shoes, see how hard we're trying at the mill to satisfy Peter, Paul and Mary, or whoever the triumvirate is, you'd change your tune. I'm ... I'm out of here. I'm speechless." She left, crossing quickly through the room, leaving the restaurant without a backward glance.

Stacy had tears in her eyes, then she giggled.

"Eat," Ray advised.

"I do not get hysterics," she hissed. "I've always hated the way the Alwns seemed to have a closet full of secrets that no one should know about. We had to be private about Michael, about the mill, about logging. I'm an Aquarius. I think in terms of society and groups and political functioning. I can't

be hog-tied and hamstrung and gagged. Jesus, no matter what I say is wrong. Eleanor says we're different, we've got a special role to play, blah blah blah. Actually, we're just like everyone else, only we have a whole lot more money. That doesn't entitle us to secrets. Now I don't even know what these secrets are. They multiply like rabbits."

The food seemed to take forever to chew. Ray conveyed a forkful of barbecued slush to his mouth. The others were using chopsticks. Stacy stirred her brown rice in circles with one. She said, "This family's going to Hell in a hand basket." She put down the chopstick. She wiped her eyes with her napkin, blurring make-up Ray hadn't been aware she was wearing.

After he had swallowed, Ray asked, "Russ, how did you know to go exactly to that hidden pocket that the police missed? How did you know about the pocket? Did you know the deed was there?"

Russ' words tumbled out. "Michael showed me that secret pocket when he was making the coat. He said if ever he died I should look there, 'cause he'd leave a clue, if he could. I thought he might have written a suicide note. The note was covered in waterproof plastic. I took it without knowing what it was because Michael had told me about it. You could have knocked me over with a toothpick when I got it home and looked at it. I couldn't believe it. My first thought was that it had to be one of these play documents, like a phony diploma or I.D. I used to have those. I owned an asteroid too. I have a star named after me. And I was a lay minister. I could perform wedding ceremonies. Of course that didn't mean the state would recognize them. I knew they weren't legal. I didn't know if the deed fell in that category or whether it was real.

"Then I started to think. Why did he risk the Falls? Obviously Michael thought his mission was important if he put it in that pocket when he was about to embark on a very dangerous trip. I didn't know what to make of it. My instinct was that he was bringing it to Terence, because that's the quickest way to

the reservation. He and Terence were like soul-mates. I didn't know where Michael got the deed from. He couldn't have been bringing it to Carl or Stacy or me. He wouldn't have been taking a pleasure trip in weather like that. There had to be a really compelling reason he did the Falls. And I think he took the risk on purpose, trusting that he would live to fulfill his mission. He was a very determined guy."

"I'm sure Michael took that trip because of the deed," Stacy said. "In some way he thought it was crucial – and there was some reason to deliver the deed immediately. Some time element we're missing," Stacy said. "When you came up in the middle of the night on Mount Nunotuck, I agreed that Terence should know about it. Terence didn't say why Michael thought the deed had to be delivered immediately."

"If we fulfilled Michael's wishes," Russ said, "that's guaranteed to piss Carl off. He always hated Michael running to Terence."

"The deed works against two hundred years of this county's history," Stacy said. "Even if it is real, I don't like it. It'll be tied up in the courts forever. It will tear this county apart. Why is it so important to bring it to our attention now? Is something about to happen with this deed that we need to know about and act on?"

Ray said quietly, "Back then, we had a different concept of ownership. Within the tribe, we sold a few acres here and there – nobody's going to quibble about it. Like my land. We've been living with those boundaries for years. I wouldn't even mind if my land went back to the Reservation. Anyhow, in 1789, the tribe wouldn't have sold the whole Reservation. It would have been sharing hunting rights or fishing rights. Or rights to travel through the land. If the tribe was misled or tricked into selling, that should be investigated. Anyway, as it stands now, that deed can't be verified, so it doesn't matter."

"This is a case for the police," Russ summarized, like a TV

newscaster. "They'll have to find out who stole those pages."

"I would like to know who stole those pages," Stacy said. "I would be afraid of that person. That person will find out sooner or later we have the deed, and that person is up to no good. I think it's going to happen soon."

Neat gestured to the waiter, who blew over to them like a seed on the wind. "Waiter, more bread. It seems to be disappearing." He waved his hand in the air as if it helped him pontificate. "Everything about Michael and the deed is a mystery right now. The ending will make sense of everything that went before, but sometimes you have to know what went before to make sense of the ending."

"Neat, shut up," Stacy said.

Russ said soberly, "To change the subject. It looks as if Carl's going to have legal problems over clean water.

"Why?" Stacy asked.

"Read my article in the paper, coming out in the next few days," Russ said, shifting his weight, rearranging his legs.

Stacy stared at him. She took a deep breath and said, sarcastically, "Do you have to build a career as a muckraker over your own father's reputation, Russ? I don't understand you at all. Comin' right back at you, you understand. I mean, I do the same thing, but HUG doesn't target Alwyn Mills."

"Don't get sensational, Stacy. I'm not out to destroy Carl's reputation. The Mill has to modernize. There's new technology to control pollution. Read the article. It doesn't target Alwyn any more than any other of the hundreds of pulp and paper mills. Get tomorrow's paper. I've been researching the subject for months. It's elemental science. All the drinking water in Cascade County comes from the Nunotuck River. Something has to be done."

"I hope all that's happening doesn't break Carl's heart," Stacy

said, softly now.

“The timing is terrible,” Russ admitted, “but the article was planned months ago. All the newspapers are breaking it now. I can’t stop it.”

In the tense atmosphere, Neat winked at a waitress across the room. “This place could use some cheering up,” he said.

“I have to get back to work,” Russ said, uncomfortably.

“Me too, keep the work-study dough coming in,” Neat said.

“Yes, you do,” Stacy said.

Ray watched the lone goldfish circle plastic coral and ferns. Strange that a vegetarian restaurant would have a fish tank. Strange that an organic restaurant would have plastic sea decorations. He watched Neat relentlessly explore the depths of the bread basket. He calculated how much the bill would come to, adding a fifteen percent tip for the waiter, and decided that either dividing by five or paying individually would come to approximately the same amount. He had sufficient cash. Before meeting Stacy, he had stopped at a cash machine. His checking account balance had been satisfying and he had withdrawn a hundred dollars. He touched his back pocket to make sure his wallet was still buttoned in. Five crisp twenties. One sixth the minimum payment he charged for the most basic utility basic knife.

Stacy was looking at him with a puzzled expression on her face, as if she was trying to read his thoughts as he pulled out his wallet, picked a twenty dollar bill as new and crisp as a leaf of lettuce. Russ added a ten and a five. Neat pulled out a frayed billfold and extracted two dollars. “That’s all I have until payday,” he said. The expression on his face was shamelessly abject, like a mournful basset hound. Stacy put in three fives, instructed Ray to take one of them. “We each owe fifteen dollars,” she said. “Louise got her share exactly right. I’ll cover you today, Neat,” she said, adding thirteen dollars to the pile. Ray picked up a five and put it in his

wallet, satisfied that the Alwyns, with all their trust funds, still paid attention to financial detail.

"You put that money in your wallet just the way a cat swallows a mouse," Stacy said to Russ.

He patted his back pocket. "That's the way I feel about money," he said.

"Me too," Neat said.

They left the restaurant, and all headed, gratefully Ray thought, in different directions

On his way back to his car, Ray turned at the sound of running footsteps behind him. Eugene Wiley's face was flushed and his meaty body drawn, as if he were in physical pain. His usually impeccable uniform was wrinkled. He panted with exceptional urgency, "Hey."

"Hay is for horses," Ray said. "What's up?"

"It's worse than we thought, Ray." Wiley took a coke out of a paper bag and gulped rapidly. "There was a gunshot wound." Wiley crushed the can in his hand.

"Shit," Ray said. He watched a late-season hornet circle Wiley's coke. "I remember you said something about a hole in the canoe looking like a bullet puncture. But I didn't see a wound on the body."

"It was hidden by his beard."

"Suicide?"

"No powder burn – he was shot from a distance – not too far away."

In Ray's ears, Dave the barber's 'foul play' resounded.

Wiley brushed away the hornet and sucked some coke. "The coroner referred the case to the higher ups. They added detectives. They're not telling me much. They know I don't

go for fancy protocol. I'm a Reservation cop. I do things my way. I guess they don't think my way is their way."

"You're a good cop, Wiley," Ray said.

"I'm gonna find out who shot him. He was found in the whirlpool -- half of that is on my side of the river." Wiley's eyebrows began their skidding dance, the tic that appeared when he got upset. "Just had a meeting with the Majestic Bay hotshots who have orders. I'm sharing the case with them. Wonder where they get their instructions. They all know each other. But they aren't going to get anywhere in our neck of the woods. We're going to do this our way. We won't let a bunch of gangster politicians get in our way."

Ray said, "Check out the Registry of Deeds. Ask them about recent vandalism. Ask them about a deed selling all Nunotuck land to the Alwyns in 1789. Ask around the Community. See if anybody knows anything."

"What the hell? You're joking."

"Eugene, Michael had the deed in a pocket when he drowned. You missed it when you searched the body. Russ found it." Ray hesitated, "It wasn't your fault. It was a secret pocket only Russ knew about."

Eugene turned on his heels and headed toward the Registry of Deeds.

Ray entered a convenience store to buy dog food, two plastic-wrapped subs, and an energy drink.

When he got back to his truck, he saw Russ, Stacy and Neat gathered near the exit of the Registry parking lot. He tried to unobtrusively drive away. He had had his fill of Alwyns for the day. But Russ spotted him and flagged him down. Ray braked to a stop beside them. Stacy motioned to him to roll down his window.

"You won't believe this," she said.

He didn't tell her he had already heard about Michael and the bullet hole as she recounted in an agitated manner how they had encountered Wiley on his way into the Registry of Deeds and what he had told them.

Neat said, as if he couldn't believe it, "Tied in, shot and drowned. How much do you have to do to kill a guy?"

"Jesus, Ray," Russ said, poking his head in Ray's truck window, "didn't it look like a goddamn accident? Those ropes, they must be wrong about those ropes. Those ropes were just a tangled mess. You were there. Am I right or what?"

"Bacon said white water canoeists tie themselves in for safety. I don't know, man." Ray shrugged helplessly.

Wiley appeared, descending the steps of the Registry. He looked morose. He looked as if he was walking the gauntlet as he made his way over to Ray's truck. "Folks," he said, "this ain't your day. Now we got a Federal offense to deal with – Federal record tampering. We'll have the FBI on our asses. For sure they'll say that investigation is out of my league." He sighed. "Tell you what. I'm gonna help you. The big shots are going to be interrogating everyone about Michael's death. My advice: get the alibis straight. Then we can put our heads together and find the real criminal."

Stacy clutched the rim of Ray's window. Her knuckles were white. "You can't mean they are going to question us!"

"They always start with the family. I want to clear you guys and solve the case. Tell you what, I'll stop by tonight, when hopefully Carl will be home and in his right mind. Get everyone together and we'll go over it, kind of like a practice run of what you're going to get."

An hour later, Ray was back in his workshop to temper the blades, so they would have the right inner flexibility. Tempering kept the interior of the knife metal just soft enough to be flexible so the knife wasn't brittle and didn't

snap. He adjusted the acetylene torch to a clean flame and held the blades in it until the metal was the color of ripe cherry. Long ago, he had learned to keep the room semi-dark for this, to better see the moment when the blade merged with the fire in identical colors. Only then did he remove the blade and immediately plunge it into one of three cooling solutions he kept ready -- water for thick blades, brine for thin ones, rendered lamb's fat for very thin ones. The blade sizzled with shock at its submersion, and immediately developed its outer hardness. For this batch he chose the oil to make the steel cool a little slowly, so its core would be soft. A tool should be soft inside to keep from breaking. If it cooled too fast, it would crack. The work went well. The blade hardened to gray-silver.

Hard was a combination of brittleness, flexibility and sharpness. A spectrum of oven temperatures, length of heating, and alloys chosen. He discovered new things each time he worked on a knife.

How did "hard" apply to people? Russ changed hard/soft on the outside, but soft inside. And he wanted to be harder – on the outside or inside? And which way would he go? Brittle or well tempered? Louise was probably hard all the way through. Carl might be brittle and about to snap, but he was also a mystery. Stacy was soft when she should be soft, hard when she should be hard, with a will of her own, always a surprise. Michael was an odd blade, an alloy Ray didn't know. Knife-making was an endless metaphor. Knives had existed long before guns. Their history was the history of human survival.

He took one blade after another out of the oven, thinking about softness and yielding, like the silent strength of bamboo. By the time each knife had been tempered and hardened, he ate a power bar and fed Molly. He was going to call Bacon with the intention of inviting himself to dinner, but the phone rang.

"We have to talk," Stacy said. "We're at my parents."

Eugene's coming. I kind of thought..."

"I'll be there," Ray sighed.

"Do you think Bacon can too? I don't have his number."

"Your sister Louise was right. You are a herding animal, aren't you?"

"If I were an animal I'd be a sheep dog," Stacy said.

"If you were an animal you'd be a Rhodesian Ridgeback. They herd lions." Stacy laughed.

"Will your family object if we come?"

"Carl's been asking to see you. He wants to hear what the first witnesses have to say."

"Why exactly are you inviting us?"

"Don't you remember Eugene telling us we should all remember we should get our alibis straight?"

"Everybody knows my and Bacon's alibis. Are you going to set me up or involve me in a cover-up?"

"Ray, you are so rude. If I didn't know you, I'd hang up on you. You keep suspecting me and my family. I have an alibi too, remember. We are trying to get to the bottom of this before some gangster from a competing mill or the legislature frames us. Besides, Ray, believe it or not, I am not just thinking of saving my own skin, and afraid that someone will frame me. I know I haven't done anything wrong, and I can prove it. But if someone killed my brother, I want to know who it is. I want to know about Michael's last moments on Earth. About his last day. Why he went out on the river on that particular day. I hadn't seen Michael in over two months when he died. I feel guilty about that. In finding out more about his last moments, I want to find out more about the others. I'm missing something in my life I always thought I'd have time to make up for. I wanted to get to know Michael

better. I had never even been to his camp in the woods. Ray, I want my brother's life and death to be an honorable one. Whatever was driving him out into the cold currents and an awful death – I want to know. I have to know. The rest of the family feels the same, for different reasons and with different emotions. Please believe me. It's not just me inviting you. It's all of us, even Louise. I'm sorry she was so nasty to you. And Ray," the tone of her voice changed from persuasive and passionate to a more seductive and personal, "there's dinner. Eleanor may be kind of out of it in dealing with human relationships, but she is a fantastic cook. She trained with Escoffier in Paris. She is preparing something that smells just fantastic. I wish you could smell it over the phone."

The last argument was the most persuasive. Ray's stomach growled "YES." "I'll call Bacon," he said. With or without him, I'll be there. I'll need directions."

"You're the best," she said. "Russ said he'd meet you in Quebec. It's complicated finding and getting up our driveway."

Ray was annoyed at having to spend more time with Alwyn insanity. He was into this knife project. Other projects were piling up. He had spent time with Stacy's family. She had never once met his. It was all about her world. It was frustrating spending time helping her with one problem after another, and getting nowhere romantically. Was he a cad?

Not when he got what he wanted.

Chapter 14

Russ' truck was an ultra deluxe version with leather seats, swivel-out drink holders, storage pockets on the doors, and surround sound. It drove like an ocean liner cruising through a smooth sea. The liquid wash of Pink Floyd's "The Wall" permeated Ray's body, taking him back to the sixties. He'd never had a sound system this good. It was like hearing every note for the first time. Rain pounded on the roof like another track to the music. The added the hum of the defrost, and the swish of wipers completed a gestalt of luxury. Molly snored in Ray's lap. "I'm an old hippie at heart," Russ said. His hair was wet, matted down, as were his gabardine pants and rain jacket he'd slung across the back of the seat. His sweat shirt read "Yale." Bacon sat in the back seat of the extended cab and Ray rode shotgun.

Ray and Bacon had left their trucks in Quebec. Simpler if one person drove. They crossed the bridge, leaving the reservation, heading toward Majestic Bay. There was only one road, but a lot of lumber roads and smaller dirt roads turned off it. In 2.4 miles, they turned from the main road onto a road marked Private. Ray had brought his outback G.P.S. Never leave home without it, especially going to unknown places under potentially dangerous conditions. Best to always know where you were. He had marked their starting point. Now he checked the turn on the screen and saw they were headed North East. He marked it. A G.P.S. in the woods was like leaving bread crumbs behind you. You could follow the spots you had marked back to your starting point if you needed to. They were getting pretty close to the Canadian border, but then Russ turned West. He shifted on the high beams, and the forest was illuminated. Hemlock, spruce, and pine, mysterious and inviting. Ray opened the window for the fresh-washed scent. He wanted to rest his eyes on green, to breathe in the scent of pinesap and matted down earth, to hear a forest sound, monotonous, vibrant and profound. He needed this untouched nature to feel solace. He

hadn't realized it, but he was grieving and lonely. He knew why. It was a combination of Michael's death and that cliché, grief over the loss of innocence. He kept being reminded that he had to be suspicious of everyone except his parents. It was hard to know that he probably would never share that innocence with anyone else. Maybe sadness was a luxury of being human.

After a while, Russ started talking, almost as if he were talking to himself. "God, I idolized Michael when we were young. Brilliant older brother, a little eccentric, but that was the price of genius. He could be so charming. He could brighten a room with his ideas. Graduated summa cum laude from Yale, in architecture. He was headed toward a brilliant career. Christ. He just fucking blew it. Throw yourself in the garbage like that that's what Carl said. I don't know what happened. When Carl had him committed and he was diagnosed schizophrenic, that, now that was a crisis for me. It was hard to be objective. See it as a disease. I had never noticed anything wrong with Michael. But when he got out -- he was in for a year -- he did start acting strange. He mocked people, twisted their words to his own ends." The truck hit a stone in the road, and he concentrated on driving, lapsing into a silence so concentrated it seemed made of the darkness of night. Outside the rain wept.

They arrived. "Beautiful house," Bacon said. A guide comment. It was so dark they could see little except that it was huge. The Alwyn mansion looked as if it had begun as a hunting cabin, then gone out of control and started reproducing itself. Rooms, porches, balconies crept into the forest, melding with the dark. The walls were covered with vines, and vines ambled up five stone chimneys that jutted out of the gabled roof. The word grandiose sprang to Ray's mind. His own garage could easily fit in the portico over the front door.

"The original house was built in 1785, but it's been enlarged and modernized," Russ said, as if he had delivered the short speech many times. They entered a parquet-floored hall with

a dazzling copper chandelier. At the far end of the hall was a monumental wood piece of furniture with hooks and a mirror and a bench -- a combination closet and dressing alcove. Ray knew there was a name for it – his mother liked to study antiques, though she didn't buy them. It stood on feet, which were carved lions' heads. All the lions had open jaws. Ray could practically hear them growling.

Stacy walked down the stairs, the light from the chandelier falling on her dark hair. She wore jeans and a tee shirt without a bra. "Hi guys," she said. "Where's Molly?"

"In the truck," Ray said.

She said, "Eleanor said dinner would be delayed. Something about the roast. Ray, do you think Molly would like a little tour of the yard before we eat?"

Ray gurgled. He was fixated on her breasts. Bacon and Russ hung their jackets up on the monstrous coat rack at the end of the hall. Stacy slipped on a raincoat and she and Ray went out. It had stopped raining. The air was lush and redolent with forest smells. Stacy opened the door to Russ' truck, but Molly, curled in the front seat and didn't move.

"You can lead her to a piss place but you can't make her piss," Ray said

Stacy said nothing. She was leaning against the closed door of the truck. Her raincoat had fallen open. She was staring into Ray's eyes with an unguarded look that let Ray see how the brown in her eyes turned to gold at the center. She seemed completely relaxed, and to be thinking nothing. That was so unusual that Ray, aroused already, took a step, leaned against her, and kissed her, running his arms inside the arms of her raincoat, then up along her arms and over her breasts. She sighed and he lifted her tee shirt.

"Not here," she said, after he had made a very satisfactory exploration. She encircled his waist with her arm and walked him into a small house at the side of the driveway that could

have been a guardhouse, a garden shed, a tool shed, but turned out to be a guest house. They lay down on the bed. The feather quilt sighed and puffed to the side to nest them.

“That was my grandmother’s quilt,” Stacy said, as if that put a seal of approval on what they were doing. They undressed and slid under the quilt and Ray slid into Stacy, and in some reaction that Ray would never understand because it couldn’t be explained rationally, no matter how much people tried, Stacy slid into Ray and they slid home together.

“That was fast,” Stacy said when she caught her breath. “It’s the anticipation. I’ve been waiting for that for a long time.”

“I’ve been waiting since eighth grade,” Ray said. And they started all over again. They really messed the bed up this time. Stacy was strong and pliable, and they were all over each other. Mentally, the years went by in Ray’s mind, like a slide show that brought him to the present and held him there, focused on one of Stacy’s earlobes. The lobe fascinated him. Every inch of her body begged for attention. And got it again, though Ray thought it would never be enough. He would never tire of this timeless act, these curves that changed in every light..

Stacy settled her head on a pillow, “You make me feel adored. I love being adored by you. How does that country song go? She sang, *if I could make a living out of loving you, I’d be a millionaire in a week or two.*”

“Did you forget? You are a millionaire, and I don’t give a damn,” Ray said. “If you want to be adored, I’m your man.” He traced one of her collar bones. “I do adore you. I always have, since I sat behind you in study hall and picked a long dark hair off your white mohair sweater.”

She laughed. “Don’t laugh,” he said. It’s true. I adore you. To me you have always been shining.”

She wiggled against him. “I love it when you talk like that.”

“Dinner,” Russ’ voice called from the main house. A cowbell

sounded.

“That’s the dinner bell,” Stacy said. “I haven’t heard that since I was a kid. That’s Russ’ sense of humor. What a great brother.”

They out of bed and repaired the damage as well as they could. Stacy looked in the mirror and said, “Sex is all over me.”

In the dining room, Stacy introduced Ray. Carl and Eleanor said they wished their guests to be on a first name basis. “I already told Bacon, but I want you to know, in this house, I am Carl to you, Ray.”

“Sure thing, Carl.”

“Sorry we’re so late eating” Eleanor said. “The roast took longer than I thought.”

Bacon said “It’s great to be invited to dinner. My wife is a Canadian cook. She can make a banquet out of lilies and yarrow. She’s sure to quiz me on all the details of a French meal, so I better pay close attention.”

Everyone laughed. The sight of the family getting ready to have dinner made Ray think of how many times they must have eaten together when the kids were growing up, not knowing that Michael would be missing today. The lines of a country song repeated inanely in his mind. “I wish I didn’t know now what I didn’t know then.” Stacy had put him in a cowboy mode.

Again, Ray was impressed by Carl’s head, disproportionately large on his compact and muscular body. He appeared foreshortened. Even in the large head, the eyes were unusually sizeable, with a magnified look. They reminded Ray of one of his regular customers who had a glass eye. Ray always tried to guess which one was real. Some new technology enabled them to move with equal agility.

Eleanor's brown hair, usually bouffant and Jackie

Kennedyesque, matted her head like a hairnet from which wayward strands escaped. Her sweatshirt and pants were uncharacteristically dowdy, off set by a magnificent manicure that hinted at her usual grooming. The nervous energy she emitted could have powered half of Cascade County. "Welcome to the table" she said, tossing the salad with frenzy.

"It was kind of you to come." Carl's voice was melodious, as if he was giving a speech.

"Daddy, you don't need to be so formal," Stacy protested. "We know Ray and Bacon from high school. Of course they want to help." Ray noticed she was glowing especially tonight, the shine that used to make him hyper-aware in high school. He used to interpret this as a signal that he was in danger of becoming infatuated with a woman. He'd usually been right.

Louise looked middle aged; the years had carved lines into her thin face like veins of minerals in quartz. She had a frizzy perm. She wore a plain brown business suit that looked like a uniform. Bacon started to pull out her chair so she could sit down, but she didn't seem to care, pulled the chair rudely right out of his hands, and seated herself.

"My condolences." Bacon said to everyone. His hands folded soberly.

Carl passed his hand over the shiny top of his head down to the gray fringes surrounding the crown as if he was sweating, although it was not hot in the room.

"Please sit down," Eleanor said in a party voice. She indicated Ray's place at Stacy's right, a space where Michael could have sat, and a place for Bacon at Carl's right. The dining room was elegantly lit with electric candle sconces on the walls. Eleanor dashed back and forth from the kitchen setting out steamed vegetables, bread, a tureen of gravy, and a roast decorated with parsley surrounded by a wreath of browned

potatoes. Carl filled wine glasses.

As soon as Eleanor sat, Carl speared a carrot. "Tell us what you saw," he said urgently. "We want to know everything." He held the fork in mid-air, the carrot forgotten.

"It was about 10:00 when we reached the Falls. I'm not a hundred percent sure about the time. I wasn't looking at my watch." Ray stopped as tears started to stream down Eleanor's cheeks. He couldn't bear to see women cry.

She wiped her eyes with her napkin. Bacon continued. "We wanted to run the Falls. But the water was too high so we portaged around." He paused, then added, "Michael was a brave man."

"Look where it got him," Louise said flatly.

Stacy said, "I can't understand it. Michael was brave but not reckless. He had gone over the falls so many times. He read water like a book. He would have known the Falls would be too high."

"The current was strong," Bacon said. "We barely got out of the river before the Falls. He might have decided to go over. Maybe conditions were different an hour or two earlier when he made the judgment call."

In the silence that followed, Ray observed the porcelain and the weighty silverware, then watched Stacy's hands move over the bread from one end to the other as if she were blind, before she sliced a heel off.

"I'll take a slice." Ray was almost mesmerized as she scooped up the slice and passed it to him. "Delicious." It was wheat, with chewy wheat berries. His pleasure in the taste displeased him. Wasn't he king of the power bar? He couldn't allow himself to get used to this kind of eating.

"Mother makes it," she said, folding her napkin with her long, pale fingers.

Eleanor looked at her daughter as if over bifocals. A grandfather clock from another room, ticked an irregular heartbeat. Eleanor pushed her plate away, took a pillbox from her pocket and swallowed two large green and yellow pills.

"Is the pain bad tonight, Mother?" Louise asked.

"The thought of Eugene coming, and Michael, and ...oh...I have a headache." She rubbed her forehead with her fingers, wiping at a worry line.

Russ said, "Before Gene gets here, let's talk the about the bullet. At the scene, Eugene observed a puncture wound in the canoe. We thought maybe a rock went through it, but the ballistic team at Majestic Bay says a bullet hole...the same bullet that hit Michael. A .22. That means he was shot at close range."

Carl wrenched his cloth napkin open and wiped his face. He cleared his throat a few times and blew his nose on the napkin. The food on his plate was undisturbed. He said, "It's like God just picked up that boy and took him away."

"You don't believe in God, Carl," Russ said.

"How can we explain an accident like this?" Eleanor demanded. "That boy was strange in everything he did. There's no explanation. We should have kept him in the Ward."

Stacy exploded, "You never should have sent him to the Ward!"

Carl's voice was sharp. "We've been over this."

"You're right," Stacy said. "It's too late. It was too late years ago. The way you treated him."

Eleanor protested, "We treated him just the way we treated the rest of you, and you're not ill."

Ray felt like an intruder. He turned his attention to an elegantly etched glass-door gun cabinet in the corner. He focused on old black powder rifle, a Smith and Wesson 12 gauge, some single and repeating rifles, and handguns displayed ceremoniously on the shelves. He felt the danger lurking behind the polished gleam of the wood barrels, the luster of the metal fixings. Ray appreciated fine workmanship. It brought him back to a time when hunting was a sport for the upper class. The guns would be fired in civilized bloodlettings, the ritual of the hunt, dogs yapping. After the kill, the hunters would change to evening dress.

Eleanor was tapping the table with a spoon. Her voice was raspy and her words slow. The pills were working. "He must have had a schizophrenic episode. He never would take his pills. He wanted to be"— she searched for the word — "natural. I asked him why, why."

Louise snorted. "He was a freak. He wanted to be a freak."

"He was not," Stacy retorted. "He wasn't a schizophrenic. He was a happy, curious, active kid who happened to rock your boat too much, to turn a phrase. What is wrong with natural? And when he turned against Carl's business ideas and threatened to become an embarrassment or even an obstacle, Carl, you and Eleanor committed a crime against that boy. You always deny it. But you put him away for your convenience. You ruined him. Well, not ruined, because he picked himself up and made something of himself. Nothing like what he would or could have been, but something honest and brave."

"You just don't want to face the fact that he was sick. He was diagnosed," Louise said.

"You're brain-washed."

Ray's fork felt heavy when he lifted it, as if the atmosphere made movement difficult. When he started chewing again, he was conscious of every bite. But, oh, was the food good. He

asked for seconds, then thirds of everything.

"You sent me to boarding school at the same time you sent him to the ward," Russ said. "One year Michael's fine, my great older brother. I come home a year later and he's bitter, he's changed. I didn't, I don't have any answers," Russ said.

"Such a loss," Carl said.

Eleanor said, "I wonder if he thought of us, at the last..."

In the background, the clock chimed seven times.

Ray looked around the table, from face to face. How could anyone in the county envy them their fortune, if this was the price? He scraped the gravy from his plate clean with a piece of bread. The Alwyns would probably think that was low class. He looked around at the faces ringing the table again, as if they were decorations. Maybe they never understood the boy. Did these thoughts fit into Michael's death?

"Shall we repair, as they say, to the living room for coffee?" Carl suggested. "Ray, Bacon, Russ."

Eleanor and Louise began to clear the table. Ray wondered if Carl would offer the men a cigar and brandy. The idea of Stacy being put in a traditional feminine role washing dishes amused Ray, somehow, although it sure would be nice if she could cook like her mother.

"Mother," Stacy said, "I'm going to give Ray a little tour of the house."

Eleanor said, "Very nice. Louise and I can wash up in a jiffy."

Stacy took Ray's hand and they walked down a long hallway toward a glazed glass door. She opened it and suddenly they were in the Caribbean, with house plants that Ray was used to seeing in pots. Now they were grown enormous. Ferns, dracaenas, ficas, jade plants. There were cocoanut and other palm trees The jungle surrounded a hot tub. "Too bad we

don't have time for a hot tub," Stacy said.

"We have time for this." Ray sat on a padded chaise lounge and unzipped Stacy's jeans, then his own. He lay on the lounge and she sat on him. "This is our Caribbean honeymoon," Ray said, then was horrified that he had even thought of marriage and all it entailed.

They moved slowly together, rhythmically. Ray felt every nerve in his body tingle. They gushed a waterfall.

"I wasn't asking you to marry me," he said, afterwards.

"Marriage doesn't have anything to do with the way I feel about you." She stood up and dipped quickly in the hottub before putting on her jeans.

"Don't be embarrassed. I've been married. Once is enough. I was in love. But you can have love without marriage. I don't need to be married again." She squeezed him as he put on his jeans, "See, you brought up marriage and I brought up love, so we're both feeling vulnerable and embarrassed. But" she hugged him and ran her hands down his back "I'm feeling so good."

"I like the word adore," Ray said.

"How did you like the house?" Carl asked, when they joined him and Russ in the living room.

"Impressive. Especially the spa."

"Ah yes," I'm drawn to tropical climates. The mill sponsors a town in Mexico where we vacation. We bring money and contemporary concepts to a village that was completely out of touch with modern civilization. It's deep in the Yucatan."

"Growing bamboo is one of Carl's pet projects there," Louise said.

Carl waved his hand, dismissing the remark. "We are bringing in electricity, and teaching modern agricultural methods." Ray remembered Dave, the barber, saying Michael

mentioned Carl and bamboo. That subject should be pursued.

Bacon was right on top of it. "I read somewhere that bamboo makes good paper," he said. "I wonder why mills don't use it instead of trees. It grows one to three feet a day."

Carl said vaguely, "Our research department is looking into it."

Stacy said with authority, "We know that some species of boreal bamboo can survive in climate zones 5, some even colder into zones 3 and 4. But you can't introduce a foreign species without consequences to the natural landscape. Most bamboo spreads by rhizomes, and is extremely invasive. If bamboo got established here, it would take over, unless costly measures to prevent that were taken. Can you imagine Maine covered with bamboo instead of hard and softwoods? What would the animals do? Our world would change completely. At HUG we are making computer simulations of it. So far, the conclusion is that it is totally inadvisable to grow bamboo in this area on the scale the timber companies would need to produce paper."

Ray looked at a collection of botanical prints on one wall and lithographs of European cities on another. On a third, theatrical masks grinned and grimaced, exhibiting a range of human emotion. He had a ridiculous urge to talk to them. They imitated the emotions of the Alwyn family at that moment, only they seemed easier to relate to. "They're Italian Commedia dell'Arte masks," Russ said, noticing Ray's gaze. "They're very old, from original troupes that made them. Some are wood, some are leather. You know the main themes of Italian comedy were adultery, jealousy, old age and love."

"That about covers it," Ray said

Bacon said, "Pardon me if I'm out of line here, Carl, but Michael had a deed on his body..."

"That damn deed." Carl started pacing. I showed it to

Michael last year, because he was living on Nunotuck land and I wanted to protect his campsite, if necessary. At first he pretended to be interested. He asked me to make him a copy, which I did. He took it, and then he said he didn't need a damn deed. Those were his words. I said I meant I could negotiate a small section of the land for him. He didn't thank me. He took the deed, called me a rude name and left.

Ray asked, "But where did you get the deed?"

Carl motioned them to get up and follow him through another door. They were in a library about the size of a two car garage. Every shelf was full of old books. Leather chairs and cozy reading lamps were placed at inviting angles. Even Ray, who didn't especially enjoy reading, wouldn't have minded spending a rainy afternoon browsing the books in the room.

"I'm not a scholar. I'm a collector of rare and valuable books," Carl said. "I was in here one day, assessing that shelf," Carl pointed. I took out a book at random. I remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday. *The History of the Nunotuck Indian Tribe* it was called, and damn me if a paper didn't slip out of it onto the floor. I picked up the paper, and it was the deed we are talking about from 1789. I went immediately to the Registry of Deeds, and substantiated for myself, with my own eyes, that that deed was recorded in the Registry. But I didn't tell anyone or do anything. I locked it up in a safe place. I didn't want lawsuits. I didn't want to disturb the balance of power in the county. You Nunotucks hate us Alwyns – I know that. But we don't hate you. You're good neighbors and good people. You do good things with your ginseng and herbal factory. You steward the land. You're not on welfare, you don't have or want gambling, you don't drink and your crime rate is low. Why would I want to lose good neighbors? We have enough lumber in our consortium to supply us raw paper material. We're researching energy efficient fuels and other possible raw materials for paper besides the cotton and cloth for which we're known. We're shorter on good neighbors than we are

on land.”

They could hear Eleanor and Louise coming into the living room. They went back in and sat down. Coffee was distributed.

Stacy picked up a birch bark covered book from a side table and said, "Michael wrote journals. He wrote almost every day and gave them to different people. I'm so glad you saved yours, Mother."

Stacy read aloud from the journal.

They say I'm anti-social. That's because I only like people if they don't forget they're human. Look at paved roads covering the earth with something dead. Look at little knick-knacks, statues and vases. When we can have flowers growing wild, rock formations glittering in changing light. Look at elevators when we have legs and can walk. Look at sanitary napkins. Even the name makes me twitch. Untouched by human hands. And that's a virtue, mind you. And they think I'm crazy.

Carl said, "Schizophrenia can make you lose touch with reality."

"Then call me schizophrenic," Bacon said. He relaxed, stretched his hands along the back of the sofa he sat on. "Where's the sheet? Sign me up, man."

Stacy said to Ray and Bacon, "He was considering publishing his journals."

"Well," Eleanor declared, "Thoreau he was not."

"Right on, Bacon," Stacy laughed. "Mother, as for you, I'm not going to waste time throwing pearls before swine. If you don't mind, I'll take the journals he left you. I'll collect them all and try and find a publisher who cares about the earth, the environment." Stacy closed the book and put it in her

purse.

Eleanor almost whispered, "I want a drink with a stiff current in it." She gasped. "Oh God, what did I say?"

From outside, they heard small insistent yips. It was Molly, reminding them that they had left her in the truck. Russ dashed out, saying, "She probably has to go. Not in my truck!"

"Dog?" Carl said, in a voice, which made it clear what he thought of dogs. "Since when does Russ have a dog?"

"I hope he won't let it in the house." Eleanor sounded alarmed. "He knows you're allergic."

Russ came back into the room. Molly dashed in after him with such enthusiasm that the masks on the wall trembled. "I couldn't catch her," he apologized. "I couldn't just leave her outside."

Carl's protuberant eyes swelled. At first Ray couldn't tell if it was anger or an allergic reaction to the dog, then as Carl's face flushed an ugly red, he decided it was anger. Carl looked different somehow, as if a surface layer of character had been peeled back to reveal more primal – more animal – behavior. Ray had sometimes wondered whether people who didn't like animals were afraid of their own animal natures.

Ray picked Molly up and headed outside.

Stacy said, "If only that dog could speak. She was at the Falls this morning." She stopped. Carl's head had swiveled to look at her. "My intern was there. This was my intern's dog, but he gave her to Ray."

"Someone you knew was at the Falls this morning?" Carl asked, as if he hadn't heard right. "When Michael went over?"

Stacy put her head in her hands. "I don't know if it was the same time. I mean, yes, Neat was there. But he didn't see

Michael. I don't think anyone saw Michael go over. Neat was riding with a Biker Club. They're into nature. They donate to HUG. So I told Neat to go along and socialize with them. They were target shooting. They weren't right down at the Falls. I know the spot. You can't see the water from where they were. Neat says they weren't in the meadow long. Officer Eugene Wiley arrived. He told them shooting was prohibited on Park land. So they left. I guess the dog got forgotten in the confusion." Stacy smiled at Ray, who had just come back in after putting Molly back in the truck, after letting do her thing. She said, "Neat said they all put down their guns when Wiley arrived –and right after that Neat heard a shot coming from upstream. It didn't seem important at the time, but now of course it is. Who was shooting? At what? What I wonder is what time this all happened? And did Wiley hear the shot? We'll have to tell him about Neat, and the dog by the river, and the gunshot, of course. When is he coming?"

Nobody answered. Eleanor burst out, "Why do you associate with people like that? Why don't you help your father at the Mill, like Louise?"

Stacy gave Ray a glance. In it Ray saw a mute appeal, and a defensiveness that surprised him. "HUG stands for Healthy Under Ground," she said to Eleanor, as if she had told Eleanor before, and she ought to know. "We work with ground water. I'm not working against Carl or the mill. We all want clean ground water. I don't attack the mills. They have a problem, but they're putting a lot of money into research for ways to improve their pollution record."

Carl snorted and Stacy flared back, "Every little bit counts, Carl. Bikers are as concerned with water conditions as you Carl."

Carl dismissed this with a shrug. "We all want clean ground water. I think you could focus more directly on helping us achieve that."

"HUG has another mission, besides the research we do, Carl.

It's called public awareness, Carl. It's called education. It's called democracy and the common man and woman."

Eleanor was swaying from side to side in her chair. "If only they made sleep without dreams."

"Mother," Stacy said sharply. "You can't fall asleep before Eugene arrives."

"I can and I will," Eleanor said. "I can talk to Wiley any time. Whoops!" She would have slid on the floor, but Carl caught her. He grunted as he tried to hold her up.

Louise sprang up to help. "Here Mother. Have some coffee."

The doorbell rang.