

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/4*

Anne Brudevold

### **Hunter Moon**

#### **Chapter 20**

Carl had called a family meeting and Stacy had asked Ray to come. Ray was getting more and more enmeshed in the Alwyn family. He told himself he had to protect Stacy. He wasn't sure what he had to protect her from.

Carl paced the living room. His hands clenched and unclenched, and the line of his jaw was tense. The rest of the family sat silent. Did Ray imagine it, or was Carl addressing the family as if he were giving a news conference? He was in public mode. He hadn't said a word about Ray being there. He seemed increasingly aggressive as he strode back and forth. His voice was unnaturally loud. He was wearing a suit with incongruous hiking boots. Every so often he paused to blow his nose with a grand honk into a white folded handkerchief that had originally peaked formally from his breast pocket, until it became bunched and clotted.

It was late afternoon. Eleanor sipped at a glass of white wine while stretching out on the sofa. She looked convalescent, Victorian, with red fever spots in her pale cheeks. Her hair was slightly greasy. It looked as if she hadn't been to the hairdresser's for some time. That would have been unthinkable before Michael's death.

Louise sat in a chair by the fire, holding a pair of wire-rimmed glasses that she kept putting on and taking off, a nervous gesture that seemed to have little to do with eyesight. Yet Stacy said she did need glasses.

Russ wore a red plaid shirt, corduroy pants, a down L.L.Bean vest and work boots. He carried a leather briefcase stuffed full of unruly papers, as if he had raced from work, a dozen projects waiting to be finished. He had a car bumper slogan pasted on his briefcase – Arms are for Hugging.

Stacy sat close to Ray on the sofa and clung to his arm. He was sure he could save her from any danger that might beset her. He tightened his grip on Stacy's hand and tried to focus on what Carl was saying.

“As a result of Russ' newspaper article, I'll be making some changes that will affect you all.”

The family members shifted their body positions uneasily, and Carl strode back and forth. Why did Ray have the impression of pacing, of a cage? On the

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surface, Carl looked composed, perfectly in charge.

His voice continued. "The Mill's environmental procedures compare well with other factories. No one can hope to make Alwyn Mills the scapegoat of a national problem. That's right. You heard me. I'm not blind, deaf and dumb. I know we have to begin to consider the environment. But you guys -- all of you--" he made a sweeping gesture that included everyone in the room -- "you guys are radicals. Go try to run a mill. You'll find out soon enough. The world isn't your idealistic sweet little cradle. Your article, Russ, lists in detail the effluents the mill has already released into the river. It points out that new political regulations will mandate expensive modifications in factory equipment. I fully intend to put these into place, but I must delay them, because of the economy. I have consistently followed common practice in the Maine

logging industry. Alwyn Mills is just your average mill. I haven't broken any law."

Carl paused and ground his heels into the expensive Persian carpet. "Above all, my family should be behind me. But both my sons chose to set themselves apart, and a daughter," he gave Stacy a steely glance, "is so naive she works for an environmental group that discusses issues instead of economic reality. How can I say this more clearly? We're dealing with numbers and business deals here. This isn't even a paper mill!" He was getting more and more worked up. "This is a cipher on the stock market. It's going up, folks. I've made it go up. And I'm going to make it go up even higher."

Stacy gripped Ray's hand tighter but said nothing. Her face was white. Carl cleared his throat. "I've looked at my choices of action. I've finally decided. Why not make a clean breast of every industrial fact? That's the way to save Alwyn Mills. Release all the facts to the public, then I will resign as president. My legacy will be that I was the Alwyn that led the other mills in full disclosure, thereby pioneering reform. I have little or no knowledge of modern technology, so I can't be faulted for not directing the environmental clean up. However, I recognize the importance of pursuing this policy. Therefore, I will step down as president and Louise will take my place. The Mill gets good PR. My reputation is salvaged. Louise gets the opportunity to lead she deserves. Maybe this way, Russ and Stacy will join us, and once more the Alwyn family will show solidarity. Stacy and Russ will have the chance to put into practice what they preach. Louise's financial knowledge will assure the mill will stay in business. It's the best way to clear our name. I'll turn my attention to other affairs. You see I am sensitive to Russ' and Stacy's concerns. I want to keep the family united."

"You're sacrificing your job to the God Alwyn," Stacy said incredulously. "What kind of God is that? You want Russ and me to quit our jobs, abandon all we've built to jump in and save your project?"

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"The God of family," Carl said, "is the only God I've ever believed in."

"Why can't you just admit you've done some things wrong, and keep on running the mill?" Stacy asked. "You can get consultants to help you make the necessary changes."

"Well," Carl hesitated, "there's more."

Heads turned expectantly, following Carl as he paced again, to the window this time, then back. He sat in an over-stuffed armchair, but sprang from it immediately, and resumed his tight circling. Cleared his throat. "I have other interests," he said. "After all, now we have the deed Michael exposed. I intend to acquire the land specified in the deed to grow bamboo here in Maine as an alternative to trees. I already have a small plot of bamboo growing near Michael's camp. I leased an acre from Terence a few years ago. It's doing well. It could take over the whole mountain in a few years, and spread everywhere. It makes good pulp and good paper. It's cheaper to harvest and grows faster than trees. At last, we will have a ready pulp supply for the mill. And land to develop other businesses as well. Like a mall by the river, a casino. The world's the limit." He looked around the room, surveying each face, seeking signs of approval. So you see, by letting Louise step into a larger realm, I also allow myself to go forward to develop other businesses. We all benefit."

Stacy said in a small voice. "Oh, God."

Carl took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. Eleanor took a large sip of wine.

Stacy said, "First of all, I will tell Terence and we will personally tear each and every rhizome of bamboo off Nunotuck Mountain. What you have done is an insult and a crime. You

have invaded Indian Territory and desecrated it. Why didn't you at least plant it on your own land? "

"Because the Indian land is our land. We have a deed."

"No, Carl. I visited the Mill recently. I've seen the materials in the closet behind the mill museum."

Carl's face seemed suddenly cold. Ray had the impression of looking at a mask, like the ones on the wall.

"What does that have to do with anything? Those materials have been there since the eighteen hundreds, even before probably. As I recall, you children used to rummage there."

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Stacy hesitated, then said, “that’s true. However, someone has recently used it for another purpose. It is not a playground for children. This is hard for me to say.”

Carl angled his head. “What can possibly be the matter, Stacy?” His voice conveyed careful concern.

“The deed is a forgery,” Stacy blurted. Carl started. His posture was rigid. Ray had the same sense of danger and apprehension he had had in the canoe, at the moment when he and Bacon had approached the Falls and felt the relentless drive of the current. “Why do you say that?” he exclaimed.

“It’s the paper the deed is printed on,” Stacy explained, her face averted from Carl’s. The deed is dated 1789, but the watermark shows the paper was not manufactured until 1793. Whoever forged it could have made a dozen forgeries using the various papers. But the forger of the so-called original deed did not know his watermarks.”

The silence was deafening. Ray heard his heart pounding. Or was it Stacy’s heart, which must be pounding louder than his?

“Lord,” Carl said finally. Then repeated, “Lord,” drawing out the word, shaking his huge head. “Who could possibly have done it?”

Stacy flinched. Her voice shook. “Carl, we all know you’re the only one who would want to.”

“Lord,” Carl said again, but sharply this time. The word sounded strange on his lips. “It wasn’t me. The deed fell out of an old book. If it’s forged, it must have happened a long time ago.”

“Weird that it would turn up now,” Russ said.

“Why didn’t the person who signed it in 1789 act on it?” Eleanor said.

“Maybe he viewed as a future investment,” Louise said, with the detached air of an historian. Let’s see—1789 -- Samuel Alwyn signed it. He would have just built the mill. Maybe he had visions of larger things, but wanted to consolidate. Then never got around to expanding.”

“He might have not have known about the watermarks. He forged it for future generations of Alwyns.” Russ said.

“The ink looks fresh,” Stacy insisted. “It matches the new inks in the museum closet that are made from the old recipe. The old inks are dried up. The ink on the deed does not exactly match any of the old colors, or, I should say, the way

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the coloration changed through time on, say, the deed from 1788."

Ray asked, "What about the pages torn out of the Registry book? I wonder if there is any way of determining when those pages were torn. I wonder if there is a connection. Maybe the forger wanted to make sure no one could invalidate the deed." Ray felt like a hound on scent.

"Don't you remember, Ray?" Stacy said. "When I showed the deed to Terence at the Full Moon Festival, Monique said she had just checked her deed against the original at the Registry of Records. That means the records were intact until recently."

"The police are looking into the Registry crime," Carl said stiffly. "I suppose now they'll investigate the forgery too. If you're right, Stacy."

"I'm right," Stacy said. "Who else could have gotten into the closet at the mill where the inks and papers were? Who else but you, Carl? They're going to have ink experts, paper experts, and handwriting experts all over that deed. How do you think you can possibly get away with it? You say you had the forgery, Carl, but you had given a photocopy, to Michael a while ago. The reason this came to a head the day Michael died was that you drove him crazy with your bamboo schemes. He jumped the gun, lost his temper, lost control and, Jesus Christ, lost his life."

"Stacy," Eleanor cried. "Have you taken leave of your senses? This is your father you're speaking to. This is a tragedy for us all. This is no time to make accusations."

"Wait a minute, Eleanor," Carl said. His voice had resumed its resonant balance. "Michael said he was digging up the bamboo, and that Terence already knew about it. He had a schizophrenic attack, he lost control, and he thought he had to go to the police or Terence that very day and tell them he thought I was going to act on the deed. It's not as if these things are done in a day. He acted irrationally. I am not responsible for his death."

"Please!" Eleanor exclaimed weakly. Her forearm covered her eyes. Her body looked sickly and languid. Sweat ran from her forehead.

Louise scrunched into her chair and said, "I'm so sick of being in the middle. I don't know where to begin to lie or cover-up. I'm so confused. So now I have to explain that everything Carl told you about the morning of Michael's death was a lie. The argument was – about Michael's and Carl's disagreements over bamboo. Michael said he had just been up to the bamboo field that Carl planted. The bamboo was taking over the forest. Michael was furious. He left the house in a rage. What you don't know is that I was there. I had gone to the house to work with Carl. We were going over the books, trying to see if we would find

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some money to implement some of the suggestions Russ had made in the newspaper. We already knew about these techniques. We just hadn't really tried to put them into place. Carl saw now that it was more urgent than he thought. So, yes, I was there the morning Michael came to see Carl. I saw and heard everything. Michael left, shouting that he was going to canoe over the Falls and take the deed to Terence, because if Carl planted bamboo everywhere, that deed could destroy the Reservation. Michael said he had told Terence about the deed a long time ago, as soon as Carl had given him a copy, but Terence had laughed it off and said no one would ever take it seriously. Michael had never given the deed to Terence. Carl said Michael's actions would cause a huge problem in the county. He Michael was wrong to act so hastily, that the deed should be researched first. He tried to placate Michael. He said he'd tear the bamboo out with his own hands. Michael said he was a liar. Michael left, running down the path toward the river. Carl told me to go back to the mill and keep my mouth shut. He grabbed his .38 from his desk drawer and ran down the path after Michael, the path that leads to the landing dock on the river about a half a mile from the house."

Russ and Stacy stared at Louise. They seemed suspended, hanging on her every word. "I believe it's the first time in my life I didn't obey Carl. I didn't go back to the mill. Instead, I followed him, but I don't think he heard me. Carl reached the water just as Michael had finished tying himself into the canoe. I know this because I could see him working the rope, tying ends together. Michael was so surprised to see Carl, he just sat there. Carl said, 'I'm ordering you to give me the deed and step out of the canoe.'

Louise continued. "Michael still sat there. He looked completely in shock. Carl put his hand in his pocket, took out the gun and raised it. He said, 'I'm going to shoot a hole in canoe. It will sink. You'll will have to swim ashore. Then you won't go over the falls and kill yourself. Now get out of the canoe and give me the deed.'"

"Fuck you," Michael said.

"I'm going to shoot a hole in your canoe." Carl aimed. Just as he shot, Michael bent down. I think he was trying to get out of the way. But he must have leaned right into Carl's bullet. I didn't know that at the time. Carl didn't check, and I don't think he imagined he had shot Michael. But the hole in the canoe was obvious, even to me, at a distance, hiding behind a tree. After Carl shot, Michael sat up once and loosened the slip knot around the pier. The canoe started to float downstream. It looked as if Michael was busy leaning down, doing something at the bottom of the boat.

"I told myself Carl was a lousy shot. He couldn't have shot Michael if he tried. I didn't even think he hit the canoe. I told myself the reason Michael stayed down was that he was afraid Carl might shoot again. And Carl said,

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‘Damn, I can't hit the broad side of a barn. All Hell's going to break loose in Cascade County.’ I believed him. I always believe everything Carl says. But I was really scared of him now, because of what I knew.. I turned around and ran uphill as fast as I could."

Louise paused. She made a slight grimace. "That's my role in this family. I follow Carl's cues. Because none of you do. You leave it all up to me. Otherwise this family would have fallen apart long ago. God damn you."

Russ and Stacy stared at her. She continued, as if she were so used to the ideas that they meant nothing to her. "As I told Wiley, I went to the house I'm buying and instructed the workers on what to do. Then I went to the mill. Carl came in really dejected. He started to talk about how he must be out of step with the times. In an earlier day, he would have been seen as a strong man, protecting his family and livelihood. His family would have stood behind him. I felt sorry for him."

“There is no way to prove that I killed Michael. Even the idea makes me sick. Louise, you saw me shoot, but as you said, I didn't shoot at Michael. I shot at the canoe. He happened to lean down at that very moment. He must have leaned into the shot. It was a complete coincidence.”

Eleanor groaned and lay down on the sofa.’

Carl rushed on, as if he was trying to gloss over what he had just said. However, about the deed, it looks like we're stumped. I didn't do it of course. But the news that the deed is forged certainly changes my plans.” He sat, mulling things over. "Of course I won't act on the deed. That gives us political points. I will help remove the bamboo from the mountain. So this forgery thing is a mute point. The registry documents are gone anyway. The forgery is worthless. This has nothing to do with my resolve to quit the Mill. Louise, I'll need to meet with you tonight and fill you in on the details faster than we expected. Then I'm leaving for Mexico on business. I'll be gone for a while. For your information, I don't need Alwyn Mills anymore. I can start a mill in Mexico, using bamboo as a source. It's sure to be another example of Alwyn outstanding success. Eleanor and I have plans to move there permanently. In fact, we're leaving tonight.”

Stacy gazed at her father with a pained look on her face. Eleanor poured herself another glass of wine. Louise had laid her glasses in her lap and was rubbing her eyes as if they hurt. Russ fumbled with the zipper on his vest. Ray tried to wrest his thoughts from the present and concentrate on knife handles. Staghorn, micarta, apple burl. He forced himself to imagine he was holding a knife in his hand, balancing it on his index finger, letting it swing ever so slightly back and forth like a pendulum, perfectly balanced. He wanted to throw it into the earth and have it fly gracefully arced exactly to where he was aiming. He wanted to retrieve it from its upright piercing position in earth and gently wipe

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dirt from the blade and shine it, admiring its temper, resilience, and sharpness.



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### **Chapter 21**

*What should I do? I hate what my father has done. How can he champion family when he killed his own son? I can't bear the thought of Michael's lifeless body being ferried down the river only to plunge unguided over the Falls. Our family is destroyed. Louise says it's partly my fault. But it's the role of the younger generation to judge. My problem is that I'm too kind, too loyal. I'm caught in a trap. My parents, Russ, Louise -- they depend on me. I used to think I had my own destiny. I see now I'm no more than a speck in a pattern of constantly changing specks. I have no meaning, except as part of a pattern of history. I want my place in history to be a just one. I want to be clear and worthy. Can I help my family and satisfy my conscience at the same time?*

*I will probably never know if my father meant to kill Michael. Should I make the facts that Louise has revealed available? And to whom? What is the right thing to do? To keep the secret or to reveal it? If I turn Carl in will it destroy the Mill, destroy us all, and pull me down in the wake? Michael is gone. How important is it to know how?*

Stacy sat in her living room looking out the picture window over the Nunotuck River. She was talking to herself out loud.

*This last and worst of Carl's actions will make Ray hate me. He's such a moral person. He'll start to despise my family's -- irregularities. Irregularities is a kind word. Ray will end up hating me because of my family.*

Midnight. She and Ray had gotten into the habit of calling each other, but tonight she couldn't call. If he asked her about it, she would excuse it by saying, 'we saw each other earlier this evening.'

And he didn't call her either. That gave her a premonition of dread. She stared at the phone and watched it not ring.

*Tomorrow I'll call. Tonight I'm too tired even to sleep.*

For a long time Stacy sat in her living room looking out the window at the shifting stars. She looked at Cepheus and Cassiopeia and realized that Michael's vision was coming true. Cepheus had sacrificed his own child, even though Perseus, Terence, had protected him for a long time. The myth was not complete, however.

Ripples

Russ didn't write about it in the Cascade County Gazette.

Bacon said, "The paper says Carl escaped to Mexico. Do you know if the

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news is true? Has he left the country? Or is this just one of those Alwyn publicity stunts?"

"Bacon, I have to go." Ray was pissed off. He didn't want to keep Alwyn family secrets and didn't want to talk about them either. Didn't want to cooperate with the FBI or the CIA or whoever was going to get involved. Stacy Alwyn had gotten him into this. Ray chided himself for being right back to where he had started years ago. He was falling in love with a dangerous woman. What was it Sage said? *Upheaval in Cascade County? Be sure you're on the right side?* Damn psychic.

Ray drove to Majestic Bay and bought one copy of every newspaper available. Took them home and read them. Today the news of Carl's escape to Mexico and Louise's sudden succession to power was confined to Maine. Tomorrow the Associated Press would spread it all over the nation. How would Russ Alwyn handle that in his little Cascade County Gazette? Today Russ' headline article profiled Louise Alwyn, the successor. A tame little company newspaper.

Ray tilted the kitchen chair on its two rear legs. A good position for thinking. The papers were seethingly critical of Carl, but optimistic about the Mill's future. Brilliant. Ray thought. It was all going according to Carl's plan.

And now what was Ray supposed to say to Stacy? And what was Stacy going to do? Keep the whole thing secret from the police? Ray wished he could design a knife that would separate truth from falsehood, sincerity from delusion, honesty from secrecy. That would be some knife. The issues were as tangled as the knots around Michael Alwyn's feet when he went over the Falls in the canoe.

The next morning Stacy did call, but it was just to ask if he would like to have lunch with her at the Alwyn Diner. "Sure," Ray said, wondering how stale the hamburger rolls would be this time. She must be having a hell of a time.

All Stacy said was she had to pick up some documents that Carl had drafted and left with Louise before he left for Mexico. She and Ray could meet at the mill and walk to the diner.

As he drove to meet Stacy, Ray became aware of a sick feeling in his stomach. The Alwyn mess settled in the middle of his body like a stone. He was probably not up to a meal at the Alwyn Diner. At the outskirts of Alwyn Mills, Ray almost turned his truck around. He would have done it if there wasn't an 18 wheeler churning up dust behind him. Alwyn lumber truck, naturally,

Outside the mill, he encountered Evelyn Waites eating a bag lunch, sitting on an iron bench by the employee entrance. The sun was shining a cold narrow slant illuminating the tight red bricks and the murky frothing of the Nunotuck River

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over the dam.

Stacy arrived right after him. Upon seeing them, Evelyn put her half-eaten sandwich on a folded napkin, wiped the corners of her mouth with another napkin, and greeted them efficiently. "How can I help you?" she asked, as if she were not outside in a brisk wind, but sitting at her desk inside.

"We're here to see Louise," Stacy said.

"Ms. Alwyn has taken over Mr. Alwyn's office. She said you were coming. She's taken over his office. It happened overnight," she said, this time with an air of amazement. She decided her lunch hour was over. They followed her inside and she announced them formally over the intercom.

Louise was looking out the picture window, her back to them. Ray could sense the crease of tension between her shoulder blades. "Have a sit," she said in a tired voice. "Take a load off."

"Louise, you look exhausted," Stacy said.

Louise turned to face them. Behind Carl's desk, she looked diminished. It was her head, Ray decided. Carl's had been of such exaggerated circumference. Louise had inherited the disproportion between head and body, but her size was more diminutive to start with.

"I didn't know Ray was coming," she said. "Stacy, this is family business."

Stacy said, "Ray can hear anything you want to tell me."

Ray was thinking, *wait a minute Stacy. Do you mean that? Do I want you to mean that?*

Louise's hand flipped palm up in a gesture of surrender. "It's OK," she said, with a dismissive smile Ray, as if Ray didn't count anyway. "I had Evelyn copy the papers Carl left for you." She pressed the intercom button on her desk.

Evelyn Waites was talking on the phone, evidently unaware that the intercom button had been switched on. Her voice filled the room as she pursued her private conversation. "Mother, I'm at work. I can tell you this job is going from bad to worse."

Louise put her elbows on the desk and leaned forward. Her mouth hung open and she was panting a little. Evelyn continued to be heard through the intercom. "Oh my God.... Mother, I'll call you back....Ms. Alwyn, sorry – uh – I didn't see the intercom light...."

"Please come into my office, Evelyn," Louise said. "And bring the folder Mr.

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Alwyn left for Stacy."

Evelyn entered hurriedly. She handed Stacy the folder, then lingered by the door, unsure what to do, unsure how much they had heard.

Louise straightened the papers on her desk. "Evelyn, you know things about the Mill I don't. We'll have to sit down sometime and you can enlighten me. As you know, I've only been involved in finance. I'd appreciate suggestions for improvement – in the area of staff relations for example." Louise's voice was as crisp as a new Treasury note. She continued, "I expect a candid working relationship. Things are different now. Before, you reported to Mr. Alwyn. Now you report to me."

"Certainly, Ms. Alwyn," Evelyn answered, trying to recover her composure. She seemed to wrack her brain trying to come up with a helpful response. "There is one thing. When I started with Mr. Alwyn, every Monday he brought a fresh box of donuts and put it on my desk. We had jelly for a year before I dared tell him I didn't like jelly. Then he bought cream-filled. Six months later, he switched to crullers. Ms. Alwyn, I never dared tell him I don't like – make that I really despise – donuts."

Louise smiled her tight smile and said, "I don't like donuts either." She tugged on her glasses chain and said, "Thank you for your candor."

Evelyn blushed. She was not used to having her opinions exposed. She might want to keep them secret. Louise might try and change relationships with the work force at Alwyn Mills. Ray wondered if she would get further than donuts.

After Evelyn left, Louise said, "I've already made some changes around here, but Carl has barely given me the time to get started. I need to hire technical consultants. I need men who can make the improvements you suggest, Russ. I need your help. Stacy, I need your network. I've ordered some new machines and hired men who know how to run them, and I've fired others. I hate firing a man who's given twenty years of his life to the mill. They hate me. This morning a delegation came up from downstairs, from the paper mill section. They want to start a union!

We've never had a union here! I told them if they do that, they can all look for other jobs. There are plenty of people who need work."

Stacy looked shocked. "But some of the men have been at the Mill all their lives. They're loyal. They depend on the Mill and the Mill needs them. They're highly skilled. They can be retrained."

"Yes, but it doesn't mean they can make demands!"

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"Unions usually negotiate."

"We're not having a union here," Louise said firmly. "Every year, the workers have gotten a standard of living raise. This year I'm cutting it out. I have to watch the bottom line so I can make the environmental improvements all you tree huggers want. When I told the workers that, they wanted me to open the books, so they could see whether or not the Mill needs to economize. Open the books! Just because Carl's gone, they think they can push me around. Just because I'm a woman they think they can push me around. I'm going to prove I'm tough and serious. I'll fire anyone who doesn't cooperate, I don't care how well they know how to run a machine, or how many generations the man's family has been with the mill. They are replaceable. Plenty of guys in Maine know how to run a mill machine.. Well, as if that wasn't enough, then I had a meeting with a committee from the pulp mill section. They want to be involved in the environmental and health concerns. I think that's a good idea, but things are getting out of hand. I feel I'm losing control, and I don't have enough support. Stacy, you and Russ have put ideas in people's heads. and now they're running wild and you're not doing a thing to help. It's practically anarchy here. Carl has dumped everything in my lap, and you're making it worse, not better."

Stacy was staring open-mouthed at Louise. "This is bad."

"Anyway, as far as your and Russ'role is concerned, Carl wanted to regulate it."

"Regulate it? What does that mean?"

"It's all in the folder he left for you. Take it and read it. Get back to me."

"All right. Would you like to have lunch with us? We're going to the diner."

"I have to work through lunch," Louise said, indicating a brown bag on the corner of her desk.

Stacy and Ray went to the Alwyn diner. They faced each other over the table of a booth. Over a bowl of soup, Stacy read the papers in the folder. Ray contemplated getting a haircut at Dave's, and wrapped his hamburger in a napkin for Molly, whom he had left napping in the truck.

Stacy hardly touched her food. A frown appeared as soon as she began to read, and the longer she read, the deeper it got. Finally she pushed away her bowl and said, "Now I really have had it."

"What's the problem?" Ray asked.

"Carl has left the Mill, and all the Alwyn assets to Louise, after he and

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Eleanor die.."

"To Louise," Ray repeated.

"Louise gets the house and a life-long stipend. Eleanor's going to Mexico. Russ and I get an incentive package to keep our mouths shut," she said. "Telling me to keep my mouth shut is like asking water to run uphill." She glared at him, as if he were the source of the problem. Then she snapped, "Don't ask me what I have to keep my mouth shut about."

Ray felt as if she had slugged him. "Look," he said, "I know you must be upset, but ..." he stopped. She looked absolutely stricken.

"He disinherited me," she said, unless I leave my job and start working at the Mill -- with Louise! The same goes for Russ." She was about to burst into tears. Before she did, she got up hastily and ran out of the restaurant. The waitress called, "Hey." Ray threw a ten dollar bill on the table and went after Stacy. She was nowhere to be seen.

Ray stood outside the restaurant contemplating the ragged snapdragons in the window box. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard the echo of people coming out of the Community Center, and someone saying, "No matter what else they do, those Alwyns sure know how to entertain." A cold breeze blew down the street. *Poor Stacy. No trust fund? Now she's like all the rest of us.* The thought comforted him. Slowly, he started toward the barber shop. He'd get a haircut.

The barbershop was empty. Dave slouched in one of the chairs. His mouth was open, making little gasps every time he took a breath.

"Hch, hmm," Ray said, at a volume calculated to startle. Dave lurched to an upright position.

"What can I do you for?" he asked. *Over forty years, the same question.*

"A trim," Ray said. He settled himself in the chair next to Dave. Dave got up slowly. Wrapped a towel around Ray's neck. Picked up a comb. Combed up the thin fringe of hair around Ray's bald spot. "Your hair ain't growing too good," Dave said.

"None of us is as young as we used to be," Ray said.

"I hear Carl Alwyn's left town," Dave said.

"Everybody's heard that," Ray said. "It's all over the news. Did you cut Carl Alwyn's hair?"

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"Nah." Dave took a pair of pair of scissors and snipped. "He goes to Kennebunkport. Political haircut."

The door to the barbershop opened, and Stacy walked in. "Hello," she said. She sat down by the window and picked up a magazine, leafing through it distractedly. "It's not the money, Ray," she said. "I make enough at my job to earn my living. It's the betrayal."

Ray stared at his reflection in the mirror. His face looked impassive. Dave hadn't changed his expression either. He stood, holding up a few strands of hair with the comb, scissors poised. In the mirror, Stacy's face seemed to dissolve. It was funny what mirrors could do. She didn't look like herself. The tears, the heaving sobs. They must belong to somebody else. The snip of Dave's scissors reassured Ray. Cutting hair was a simple thing. You just took the unwanted strand and got rid of it. Ray's hair was easy. He didn't have that much to lose.

Stacy hunched in her seat and gave herself entirely over to crying. Ray looked around the barber shop. It was like church. The little blue bottles of sacramental ointment, the sterilizer that absolved all ills, the old magazines, spread like scriptures, the ornate silver cash register dominating and demanding, like the ever-present collection plate.

An hour later, Ray and Stacy stood in the parking lot outside the brick building that housed the Cascade County Gazette. They had parked their cars next to each other, like a couple of nesting doves. Stacy's environmentally conscious VW roosted beside Ray's truck.

Ray and Stacy entered the lobby and mounted the utilitarian stairs to the second floor. A secretary ushered them in to Russ' office. There was no reception area. She assured them that Russ would be with them shortly. She told them to make themselves comfortable.

Stacy sat informally on Russ' desk holding the folder containing Carl's disposition of the family assets. "I want to see the expression on Russ' face when I show him we're both disinherited," she said. She had recovered her aplomb. One foot rested on the floor, the other swung jauntily, restlessly. "Maybe it will bond Russ and me together. Two outcasts. He's going to be more upset than I am. He tries so hard to be an objective reporter, and he has this absurd

conviction that people will accept the truth if he confronts them with it. It's going to be a shock for him that Carl is rejecting him."

Ray removed some folders from a chair facing the desk and sat down. He put the folders in his lap. Folders occupied every inch of surface space. The piles looked meaningful, and suggested, somehow, that the chaos was superficial and

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there was an underlying order.

A few minutes passed. Stacy checked her watch. "I have to be back at work by 2:00." She walked around the office opening folders, reading their contents. "I'm not snooping," she said defensively. "It's a newspaper. This must be public knowledge."

"All we read is what's fit to print," Ray countered, "what if the content of these folders is unfit?" But he opened a folder and idly scanned the first page. Second page, third. It was a memo from Louise to Carl regarding falsified results released to the public. It noted that release levels of nitrogen oxides and fly ash had been changed, and that in one public meeting damage of downstream bridges by sulfuric acid corrosion of metals was minimized by the mill spokesperson. The memo asked Carl if he had authorized the deceptions. He passed it to Stacy.

"How the hell did Russ get his hands on this?" Stacy demanded after reading.

The next folder Ray picked up dealt with a Majestic Bay golf course and weed killer they were using, and the run-off into the river. Plus the antiquated sewage system. No septic. Right into the river. "But Dad doesn't own a golf course," Stacy said, perplexed.

Ray pointed to the last subscript. Tally Ho Golf Course is a subsidiary of Alwyn Inc.

"Carl has been battling the golf course for years, accusing them of shoddy environmental practices."

"Look at this." Ray pointed to a briefcase by the desk. "Real snake skin."

"That used to be my father's, too," Stacy said, recoiling, as if that offense to the natural world were another blow. "I haven't seen it for ages. He must have given it to Russ. But at the time he first got it no one was protesting about endangered species." She took a deep breath and got busy with another folder -- "Oh my God. The IRS won't like this."

Ray stared at the folders spread about the room. What was Russ planning?

Russ opened the door. Ray closed the folder. Stacy said aggressively, "Hello Russ. It seems we've all been foraging in Carl's file cabinets."

Russ sighed and passed a hand over his face, closing his eyes for a minute. It seemed to be a familial gesture, this passing the hand over the face, as if the gesture could prevent the eyes from seeing.



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"It's dirty work," he said.

"Dirty work?" Ray repeated.

Russ said in a voice like a worn down file, "The work of bringing down Carl Alwyn. Here's a sweet detail. Yesterday, some hunters were scouting next to the land fill. They found a dead moose. It wasn't your ordinary dead moose. It had diarrhea all over its body, and it was covered with lime. Somebody called Louise and asked if the Mill had dumped lime -- you know it's a by-product of the pulp mill -- into the land fill. She said no way. But the manager of the land fill said 10 trucks filled with it went in the day before yesterday. So let's add illegal dumping to the charges. Since Louise is running the mill now, she's implicated." He lifted his hands in the air, then crossed them at the wrists. He said, at a poor attempt of humor, "My hands are tied. This is a small community. I'm a reporter. I can't lie the way the national papers do. My readers phone their neighbors. They know the facts. Public opinion is turning against the Mill. People are

selling T shirts and coffee mugs. You know what the logos say? 'You can't argue with a dead moose.'"

None of this was a surprise. "Just out of curiosity, you know anything about bamboo?" Ray asked.

"I've got files on that. Carl doesn't want the FDA to get wind of it. He wants to forget the whole business real fast, before anyone knows he started it. He doesn't want to hamper any other mill from trying it. The FDA will regulate it. They'll want studies done. No one knows the long range effects of bringing an invasive plant like this into an American forest. Mold. Bacteria. Insects. He planted the one acre at the Reservation. He misled Terence about what he was doing. Even though he pissed the Nunotucks off, he got what he wanted. He proved bamboo will grow in Maine. He'll find a way to get a patent. That system he's got for containing its roots. You can't dig the stuff up in its natural state. So that farm method makes perfect sense. Just lift the plants out in their starter packets. That operation is ready to go. Carl doesn't want anyone to spoil it. He'll sell the idea to the paper companies. They'll lobby in Congress, pay off the necessary people and bingo. Carl will collect his share. He's sitting on a gold mine. That's even before he starts collecting his fortune in Mexico."

"You might want to think about whether or not to report all this," Stacy said, her voice cold as steel. And we both have to think about whether to tell the police about Carl's shooting Michael. She handed him the file she had brought. "I'm sure Carl made up an individual folder for you, but it probably says the same thing as mine. You and I are both cut out of the family fortune. Unless we keep quiet and join Louise at the Mill. It's pretty simple blackmail." Then she added in an entirely different, thoughtful voice, "Maybe, Russ, you and I can find a way to fight this from the inside. Maybe we can make more of a difference

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if we join forces – and I don't mean compromise – but try to educate and help Louise.”

“Let me read that,” Russ said. As he read, his brow furrowed. When he finished, he put the folder down. “I see what you're saying, Stacy. You're not talking about trying to keep our claim on the family fortune intact. You're talking about taking over the mill from the inside.”

“That's right, Russ,” Stacy said. “We're going to infiltrate.” She got up and hugged him. “Damn it, I'm going to keep my job at HUG. As far as Alwyn Mills goes, I'll be a consultant, I'll help bring the right people in. I'll try and bring Louise to her senses about firing people left and right. You know, she has an inferiority complex because she's a woman, but mostly because she has been invisible behind Carl all these years, and now she is forced to come out and show her colors. She's going overboard.”

“We'll both help. No reason not to really. I guess anger and divisiveness got the best of us. I feel sorry for Louise. I'll use the paper as a voice for the mill's progress, and I'll make sure the news is good – and that it's true.”

“We can make the mill a showcase.”

“We'll loose tons of money.”

“We can afford to loose tons of money. This is not about us keeping our family fortune.”

“I think we have a plan.”

“We have to convince Louise.”

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### **Chapter 22**

Rain streaked the windows of the Alwyn Diner. The room smelled of steamy body warmth, cigarettes and coffee. The same waitress who had served Bacon and Ray when they stopped here during their canoe trip, tucked a limp strand of hair behind her ear, leaned against the back wall and leafed through her order pad. The first Mill shift would start soon and the room was emptying. She put her pad in her apron pocket and began clearing dishes from the tables.

Ray and Wiley had met for breakfast. Ray had been a little surprised when Wiley phoned to suggest it, but he could hardly refuse, even when Wiley had specified the Alwyn Diner. You couldn't do that to a cop, even if it was Wiley. Amid the clatter of plates, Wiley leaned over his mug and said in a conspiratorial voice, "I've got the graphologist's report."

"Okay." You never knew what Eugene was up to. "What's a graphologist's report?"

"Handwriting analysis," Wiley said triumphantly. "Here." He shoved a paper across the table, and said at once, "It's a photocopy."

"Where would the world be without the photocopy machine?" Ray began to read.

*Lines and words, pressure, size of letters, connections and disconnections between letters, are identical in the forged sample and the sample of the subject's natural hand. Although a forger may willfully change the slant of the strokes, the strokes themselves are almost impossible to change. In both samples we see consistent concealing and counterstrokes which indicate insincerity and amorality. The over development of the lower zones of letters shows inordinate concern with material success, and also a certain ponderous mentality. Tall capitals show one who likes to tower above others – superfluous flourishes show the desire for greatness – calculated to ingratiate, almost presumptuous. As for the connecting strokes between letters, some are flat garlands, which indicate a businessman of boastful unconcern for conventional morals, while others are square, demonstrating deliberate conventionality. Note also a few lower parts of letters left open at the bottom – this warns of criminal tendencies, especially when combined with the manifest irregular pressure of the pen.*

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“Which samples does this report talk about?” Ray asked.

“The forged deed,” Wiley said. “And Carl’s usual handwriting.”

Ray stared at Wiley, thinking well, this doesn’t change anything, it just confirms it.

“He confessed,” Wiley said.

“He confessed. To what? To who? Or whom, whatever.”

“That he forged the deed. To us, I mean to the hotshots running the investigation.”

“He admitted he forged the deed?” Ray repeated.

“Guess that surprises you.” Wiley eyed Ray over the rim of his raised mug. “I thought your girlfriend might have mentioned something,” he said.

“My girlfriend.” Ray sipped his coffee. It was black and bitter. The waitress wiped the table next to them. Ray kept his voice low. “No, it doesn’t surprise me. Last I heard,” he said, “Carl told the family that a distant ancestor forged the deed. But Stacy had her suspicions he’d still be guilty. How would it surprise me if in court, he admitted he forged it but said it didn’t count because he never intended to use it.”

“We pressured Carl’s lawyers and they gave in. We sent the deed out to one of the best handwriting analysts in the country. We showed Carl the report. Graphology is an exact science, you know. It is admissible evidence in court. He’s guilty because he gave it to Michael and Michael believed it was real. Whether or not Carl intended to use it to take over all Nunotuck land is irrelevant.”

Pushing a few dry crumbs of scrambled egg to the side of his plate, Ray told Wiley about the closet behind the museum in the Mill.

“We know all about that,” Wiley said. “Carl took us there himself. Only trouble is, he still says he’s innocent.”

“How does he do that? By mail? Isn’t he in Mexico?”

“He’s been back and forth. Pilot and all. I can’t really talk about it. You’ll see at the trial,” Wiley said, motioning the waitress to bring the bill.

“He’ll be there? He going to trial for forgery and it’s a no brainer that he’ll be found innocent of the forgery because he said he never intended to use it. It was like a game to him. Playing with old equipment. Trying out inks. Penmanship.

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Are they going to rev it up based on the graphologist's report?"

"Yep. And another trial for Michael's murder."

"Hey, that's something else. I bet Judge Tahan is getting some really big bucks now. What do you think? New car? Boat? And all the lumber buddies must be getting blow jobs from Mexican señoritas."

"You don't believe justice will be done."

"Nope," Ray said cheerfully.

Ray wrapped left over pieces of sausage from his breakfast in a napkin to bring to Molly, who was in the truck. Hopefully she was sleeping, not chewing the steering wheel.

As they left the diner, Ray wondered why Wiley had shown him the graphologist's report. How had he obtained it, since he was officially not part of the investigating team? "Hey Wiley," he said, opening the door of the diner, feeling the sudden chill and damp of outside air. "I thought they took you off the investigation."

"Eyeh," Wiley said. "Officially they did. Every now and then they consult me. When they can't figure something out," he said, with some pride. "Since I'm not part of the team, I'm not bound by the same rules they are."

"Why are you telling me about the graphologist's report?"

"Thought you might like to know," Wiley said. "Thought your girlfriend might like to know. There's a lot of stress in that family."

"And you're trying to increase it," Ray said.

Wiley lifted his hands in the air. "Why not? Someone might crack. Reveal something."

Ray walked to his truck, where Molly was waiting. Molly had her nose pressed to the crack of window Ray had left open. Smudges from her nose covered the glass. Time to wash the truck. She noisily gobbled the sausage Ray gave her and licked the grease off his hand as he started the engine. A dog made a man feel appreciated. Dogs didn't lie or forge documents. When dogs were hungry, they ate, when they were happy they showed it. Animals were direct, perfectly themselves. Humans were flawed. Complicated.

Molly laid her head on the gearbox. Ray patted it, then down-shifted awkwardly over her neck, and started home.

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As usual, he headed for the mailbox. There was news of Carl's impending trial. and that he would return from Mexico to attend it.

The next day, friends and interested parties who had read the discreet notice in the Cascade County Gazette or heard of it by word of mouth, packed the courtroom in the District Court across from the Registry of Deeds in Majestic Bay. Those unable to secure a seat milled the corridors outside, smoking and speculating.

The air was filled with lurid anticipation. Everyone understood that during a trial the subtleties of human behavior, intention, excuses, conditions of the past, mitigating circumstances of social, economic and personal kind were sifted and reduced to a verdict – guilty or innocent. People liked this. They wanted things simplified. Shades of meaning ultimately counted for little, and would be discarded. Ray had a sour taste in his mouth, as if his morning coffee were re-percolating in his stomach. Seeing things in black or white offended him. Only the most heinous criminals – did that include Carl? -- should be so diminished.

Carl was being tried for forgery of the deed and tearing the pages out of the Registry records. It was mid-October. Carl had returned from Mexico. The investigation had been pushed to trial in record time. Ray was sitting in the back row of the Majestic Bay District Court.

The walls of the courtroom were a flat cream color. The woodwork was pine, stained dark to look like a more expensive wood. Two small windows in the front of the room let in a dull light. A row of overhead fluorescent light buzzed enough to be heard over the buzz of the crowd waiting for the trial to begin.

The cast of legal characters was out of central casting. The prosecutor was a young shark of a woman with a rapacious appetite for the kill. She owed her career to Representative Fielding.

Carl's lawyers were the sharpest (substitute richest, savvy at trading time-shares in the Bahamas for ski condos in Conway). Ray had seen them drinking with the prosecutor and Judge Tahan at The Legal Bar, a popular Majestic Bay watering hole. They were all alike. Criminals, lawyers and police – similar mentalities on different sides of the fence. That was Ray's opinion. He didn't care for any of them.

The jury had been obliged to omit those with ties to Alwyn or other paper industries. Three of the people on the jury spoke French as a native language, and needed a translator. One wasn't a fluent reader, but had been accepted because she was adept at recognizing visual signs, and thus could understand the concept of forgery.

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Ray had learned these background details from a customer who worked as a parole officer.

He believed in his job. He wasn't as cynical about the legal system as Ray was.

Everybody rose as Judge Tahan entered the courtroom from a side door. He walked toward the bench as if he were about to direct a symphony. He was a fat man with a face that shone pink as a pig. His reputation for being a legal machine, for making quick decisions, for having a mind like a chain saw had impressed most of Cascade County's political leaders. He was a personal friend of Representative Fielding. And was of course Carl Alwyn's friend. Ray just hated having to stand up as this travesty of a judge waddled into his seat and plunked himself down.

The judge read something from a folder, consulted the prosecution. Wiley was sitting in the back of the courtroom across the aisle from Ray. Earlier, outside the courthouse, he had told Ray he had not been listed as a witness by either side. Both prosecution and defense were afraid his legal methods might be challenged. They were suspicious of his ambiguous stance – he wasn't clearly identified with either prosecution or defense. He said he didn't care. The case was fixed anyway. The lawyers and judge had figured it out already; the trial was engineered, a lousy theatrical performance. Justice operated in the world, Wiley said, but often took a detour in the courtroom. Wiley was, Ray was now convinced, a really great and weird cop. He went his own way. He was a Reservation cop.

First witness was the head detective on the case. Under questioning by the prosecutor, he detailed the discovery of the problems of dates of the deed and the paper it was written on. He referred to the graphologist's report.

Ray tuned out. He knew these facts already. He realized he had already decided that Carl was responsible for the forgery (he preferred this term to the word guilty) and almost didn't care what the court verdict was. If justice existed, Ray thought, in addition to the court's verdict, Carl would find it in daily life. He would find it in people's opinions of him. In what his family thought of him. After thinking this, Ray's memory of the order of facts presented in the trial was hazy.

Carl took the stand in his own defense. He caused a sensation right off the bat by saying, "Yes, I did forge the deed." The courtroom erupted in a buzz of whispered exclamations. But that was just the beginning. He continued, "I never thought the document would be scrutinized. I forged it but I never meant to pursue it. It was not meant to be a legal document. Michael misconstrued it, and left before I could explain."

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“I beg to differ,” the prosecutor said, when it was her turn. She leaned forward on her high heels and said, “You meant to pursue it. You would have pursued it. You had your lawyers check it out. You would have tried, but the forgery was recognized – you hadn’t expected that.”

Carl didn’t look worried or guilty. Rather than defending himself, he seemed to be reassuring the court. “How can I be guilty,” he asked, “when I never acted on the deed?”

“No further questions,” the prosecutor said.

Nothing being said seemed real. Wiley was right. It was all orchestrated.

The next line of questioning concerned the removal of pages from the book at the Registry of Deeds. Workers at the Registry were called to the stand. No one could recall Carl ever entering the Records room. It was a mystery how the pages had disappeared.

The defense introduced a surprise element – a detective who had found an irregularity in Carl’s checking account. The detective testified that Carl had given a large check to a former employee shortly before the discovery of the deed. The ex-logger had relocated to Cancun. The detective had flown down there and interviewed the logger. When pressured about his newly

acquired resources, the logger admitted to having received the money from Carl. He said Carl had paid him to get out of town. It was a long story. He had been injured on the job, denied benefits, and in a fury, had torn the pages from the Record Book and thrown them in the white liquor bath at the Mill -- recycled them, he said, virtuously. His goal had been to cause trouble for the Alwyns, put them in the news, and annoy them. He didn’t care what he tore out as long as it had the name Alwyn on it. That would cause a scandal. Obviously Carl had not asked him to tear out the pages. The money had nothing to do with that. Carl Alwyn was a very nice man. He had learned about the denied benefits and had personally intervened to offer the man a settlement for his injuries. He had told the logger that the benefits department had made a mistake and he wanted to correct it. Carl had encouraged him to take a long vacation, and he had been more than willing, being tired of the cold climate of Northern Maine, tired of taxing physical labor, and without family or friends who would miss him. A loner, the detective said, a typical logger. He had no other connection to Carl. There was no indication Carl was involved with the tearing out of the pages. The logger should be tried for this crime, but it would take some time to bring him back to the States to face charges. The detective introduced a tape with the logger’s statement as evidence for Carl’s innocence.

Called to the stand again, Carl corroborated the detective’s account of events. He indignantly denied hiring the logger to destroy the Records. That was an



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outrageous act of vandalism he hadn't known about when he took pity on the logger and intervened in his case. Carl was a law-abiding citizen and had never broken a law in his life or encouraged anyone else to do so.

The trial took all day. Ray was not surprised by the verdict. Innocent on all counts. It was an unsatisfactory ending. Parodies of justice happened all the time. Ray wasn't naïve. There were after all plenty of legal crimes.

In the courtroom corridor after the trial, Stacy said rather vaguely, justice had a crooked, winding way. She refused to look Ray in the eye as she said this. Ray felt a chill. His relationship with Stacy was bound to break up. No matter what she believed about Carl's innocence or guilt, she was an Alwyn and would be loyal to her family.

Afterwards, in the Bar and Grill adjacent to the courthouse to which everyone repaired, prosecution, defense, family, and as many people as could fit in, Louise let out a long sigh. "Carl confided in me long before this. Believe me, even if Stacy hadn't discovered the deed was forged, even if it had been eventually accepted as legitimate in a court of law, he never would have pursued it any further than as a negotiating point to persuade Terence to let him rent more land for the bamboo trees." She breathed on the lenses of her glasses, wiped them with the sleeve of her sweater and put them on.

Terence stared at her. "What do you know about that damn bamboo Do you know how invasive they are? Carl never told us. We're still tearing the damn things out by the roots and we already cleared the whole acre with a backhoe.

Louise said, "Good luck .It has nothing to do with me."

Carl was across the room, talking with Representative Fielding.

"Well it has a hell of a lot to do with me," Terence said. I could sue Carl for invading my land with bamboo, but I hate this parody of justice so much, I believe I've had my fill of courts for a lifetime. I'm going home, and getting my hands dirty till I get rid of every single rhizome of bamboo that ever thought it could make a life start in Maine."

"Suit yourself. And please don't bring Carl's issues to me. We are instituting new procedures and we need time to sort them out. The pollution will also take its time to neutralize. Russ wrote the policies all down. I'm hiring a lot of new people. I'm firing people. I'm shaking this county up, and I feel bad about it. It's a tough transition. People don't want pollution, but they still want their jobs. However, they're not qualified to do the new jobs that are needed. I just hate telling a guy who's given twenty years to the mill that his job is gone. I try and find them something else, in loading or whatever, but it's not easy."

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Terence called to the bartender, "Bring this lady a beer."

"Actually, Terence, I don't drink beer."

"You run a mill now. You and me are going to have a beer. When you've drunk half, I'm going to tell you about a very special crop we grow. It's native. It's not bamboo. It's not invasive. It's tough enough to make paper. I myself haven't figured it out yet, but give me a couple of beers and I will. What I'm telling you is that the Nunotucks are ready to cooperate with the Alwyn Mill people if you cooperate with us. It's a new deal."

They shook hands. Ray didn't know what it meant, or whether it would happen. It was one of Terence's goodwill gestures, which sometimes did not have the effect he wanted. But you never know.

Ray had never been so relieved to get home. He went over to Eileen's. "Ma. Got something to ask you."

"Speak your piece."

"There's a woman I'd like you to meet. Have her over to dinner."

Eileen's smile was a little artful. "Any time she can come, give me a holler, and give me time to defrost something tasty."

"You knew, didn't you."

"Umm."

"Dammit Mom, You've been playing cards again."

"I won this time. She said I was in for a big surprise. It wasn't coming up all roses. I won fourteen dollars. Sure, invite her. I've always said that. But don't cause trouble. It's bad for Steward's heart."

Ray gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. "Have I ever told you what a shameless gossip you are and how and I love you? You won't regret this, Mom. I promise."

"Promises, premises," she said. She looked a little old, going up the stairs. It was hard to imagine the young girl, the lithe dancer, but she still had the music inside.

Ray went home and called Stacy.

"I owe you a family dinner," he said. "I've had so many of yours"

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“Why Ray,” she sounded stunned. “You’re inviting me just like that? No crisis? Nothing to solve?”

“Just like that. Pretty boring. You’ll probably nod off and fall asleep in the mashed potatoes.”

“Mashed potatoes? With gravy?”

“Gravy maybe. My dad has a heart condition. But Ma might serve it for a guest.”

“Oh I wouldn’t want her to go to any trouble.”

“Is that you talking about trouble? Gravy is the least of your problems, lady.”

“Stop teasing me, Ray. It’s very nice of you to invite me. When should I come?”

“Are you free tonight”

“Yes sir.”

“We’re on.”

“I’ll bring some apple cider.”

”Okay.”

Stacy arrived in jeans and a beige velour shirt. She wore hiking sneakers and carried a small purse and a gallon of apple cider, which Eileen graciously accepted.

They sat right down at the table. “Why waste time,” Steward said. “You came to eat. We don’t do small talk in this house.”

“I played cards with Sage at the Senior Center in Majestic Bay this morning,” Eileen said, “Pass the peas, please. I don’t know why I bother. How can a psychic play a fair game? Pass the cod, please, Steward.”

It was buttered for a change. She must have had a lapse of cholesterol consciousness. The potatoes were dry, but Eileen had made a tureen of gravy. “I’m on a mission to lower Steward’s high blood pressure and cholesterol,” she said to Stacy. “Why we have cod almost every night. I put butter on it for your sake, Stacy.”

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“I truly appreciate that Eileen. Your son’s diet is quite different.”

“Irregular,” Eileen said, except when he eats with us. I don’t know what he does. I stay out of it.”

Steward spoke between bites. "I hear the detectives assigned to investigate Michael’s death are consulting Sage. They must be desperate.”

Ray said nothing. He didn’t know who these detectives were, and he didn’t want to admit it. Stacy didn’t say anything about it either. “I’d rather not talk about our family issues tonight. I’m so pleased you invited me to dinner -- such a treat!” She sounded really grateful. Eileen’s face lit up. She liked Stacy. Ray knew what was going to happen next. Eileen would start telling stories Ray had heard a million times before. Steward would start reminiscing too. Ray always liked hearing the stories. They were familiar and comforting. They were family.

“Did you know, Stacy that Steward and I won the national dancing contest in 1945? You’d never know it by seeing us now, but we were so light on our feet darling, weren’t we? It was like we were flying!”

“Put that record on, Eileen,” Steward said. “I like to hear the old tunes. Put on the one we won the contest with. *Stella by Starlight*. They went into the living room, and the grating sound of the needle was replaced by the grating sound of *Stella by Starlight*, and what do you know, Eileen and Steward were dancing. Well they danced every Saturday at the Starlight Grill, but this was different. This was their contest dance. “Don’t do the ones where you turn me over,” Eileen said, or lean me back too far.

“Don’t worry, darling, I’ve got you.”

They were breathless when they finished, taking a big bow. Stacy and Ray clapped until their hands were red.

Eileen took a deep breath. “Who wants ice cream,?”she asked.

“I’ll get it,” Ray said, as he always did. And just like that, a magic moment made an invisible seem into the garment of the day.

Steward turned the TV to the local news channel. There was Carl Alwyn, standing by the rushing waters of the river, coat open, oblivious to the wind and weather. The man fit in with the

scenery. He looked like a force of nature. Leaning earnestly toward the microphone, he announced that he had long looked forward to passing the mantle of responsibility for the Mill to the next generation of Alwyns. He replied to a question asked by an unseen reporter – for the cameras remained as if

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mesmerized, on his small body, large head, and the raging water behind him, "New technologies are available. Louise Alwyn has consultants – both her brother and sister, understand them better than me. My sons and daughters will carry Alwyn Mills forward into the twenty first century. We will be a model for pulp and paper mills as far as emissions, pollution, and of course, production, goes."

"What are your plans, sir," an unseen reporter asked.

"My plans?" he repeated the question. "I'm retiring."

So that's Carl's strategy, Ray thought, as the butter pecan melted, almost untasted on his tongue. Carl would transcend legal issues, forget the mill, forget the forged deed. He had put all that behind him. He was retiring. Right. And pigs fly.

When the newscast was over, Eileen and Stacy played cards, and Steward took Ray on a tour of the garden –i.e. the bushes around the house he had trimmed. "Took me all day with the trimmer. And then I had to gather it all on a blue tarp and haul it out and dump it in the woods."

"Just take it easy," Ray said. "Don't plan too much for one day."

"My only next plans are to take Eileen dancing at the Starlight Grill. Why don't you invite Stacy? She seems like she'd like a dance. It would be interesting to have an Alwyn doing the two step."

"Maybe I will," Ray said.

He went back to the garage, his "cabin" he called it, at 10. That was Eileen and Steward's bedtime. For once, Ray didn't feel the quiet of the house. Outside he lingered a little to mourn the fact that the roses he had planted there now bloomed in Sheila's backyard. Ray had preferred the climbers and wild roses to the dainty tea roses and hybrids. How he had loved to see the red blazes cascading over the back fence, bearing down on the trellis, gripping up the south wall of the split-level ranch. Roses transformed the ordinary modesty of the house.

The phone rang. It was Wiley. "Don't worry about that innocent verdict," he said. No matter what the courts say, Carl is being punished for the forgery. He'll have to live with what he did for the rest of his life. People suffer, even without the law. I bet Carl Alwyn can't sleep right now, If he does, he has dreams I don't want to imagine."

"I'm not sure he has your kind of conscience," Ray said.

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“Well this might make you feel better. I found his gun.”

“Say what?”

“In the river, man. Where else?”

## **Chapter 23**

The Alwyn Mills Community Center was a cinder block building, an old warehouse. It was on the far side of the Mill, outside the fence, near the forest. Unlike the factory buildings, it looked run-down. The front door was flanked by two small paneled windows. The side of the building was lined with delivery bays. Rusty train tracks overgrown with grass ran to them. At the first bay, two railway cars, doors padlocked, still waited. Graffiti had blossomed on their sides. "Greg, where are you?" "Life Sucks," "Megan LaVerdierre 527-8756," Sean loves ????" Ray parked his truck, leaving Molly inside. As he walked back to the Community Center, he heard the scratching of tree branches against the metal boxcars.

Louise had decided throw a party at the Community Center, her first public affair since taking over control of the Mill. Everyone in Cascade County was invited. It was good PR for people to see that a clear transition was in place. Carl and all the old boys in the lumber world were coming to quell the rumors that Alwyn Mills was out of the mainstream. She had told Stacy, "I'm starting to think like a CEO."

With a crowd of other people arriving, Ray entered a long fluorescent-lit room with bare cement floor and walls. It was equipped with two pool tables, a row of old pinball machines and a few Ping-Pong tables. Well-wishers cheering the players on surrounded all the game stations. In one corner, people were dancing to Otis Redding. In another, someone was playing a battered upright piano. Officer Wiley waved at Ray. He was standing near the door, next to a woman Ray didn't recognize. "You've met my wife, haven't you?"

"Sure." She had a new hair color and had lost weight. "Hi Terry. Good to see you." Last he heard, Terry had left Wiley. She stood close to him now, and his gun belt pressed into her hip. She must be reconciled to it.

Behind him, Ray heard Sage arrive. Her laughter hissed like a radiator. He turned and saw her barge toward him. She patted his back in a motherly way, and towed him toward the nearest sofa. There were several sofas along the walls, all occupied, but people scrambled to cede place, as Sage's trajectory had an inevitable quality, like a comet on course from outer space toward Earth. Her magenta dress was an other worldly purple and reminded him of the colors of the Alwyn library. Her chins trembled when she sat down. She dried her sweaty face with her sleeve, leaving shards of matted powder behind on the material. "Ray," she commanded, patting the sofa space beside her. The entire sofa had been vacated.

Ray obeyed. "Remember that reading you gave me? You were right about an accident about to happen," he said. "It was Michael Alwyn's death. Although I

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guess by now we know it wasn't an accident."

Her eyes misted. Tears formed. She brushed them away with a purple sleeve. "I am so sorry. Ray." Again a tear started to roll. This time she let it melt a path down her cheek. The powder piled up on both sides, the way banks form along a river. "All I can do is warn people. I can't stop anything that is about to happen. It's a terrible talent to have, Ray."

"It's not so bad," Ray said. "At least you can put people on guard." It felt odd for him to be comforting her. After all, he remained skeptical.

A woman approached them. "How do you hear voices?" she asked Sage.

"I'm a pipe sounding in the wind."

"That's so poetic!" the woman exclaimed.

"Thank you." Sage pressed her palms together. "You have tasted deeply of the joys and sorrows of the world." Sage reached to a table beside the sofa. It had plates of snacks. "This is fabulous chip dip."

Stacy came over to greet Sage and Ray, and Neat followed Stacy, saying to her, "I've been reading about your Dad in the papers." Stacy, like a professional waitress, balanced on her palm a sizeable plate laden with triangular sandwiches. She had been walking around the room and serving. She offered the sandwiches to Ray and Sage. Neat kept on talking. "Your Dad used to be a hero around here. Boy, how the mighty are fallen. All the charges against him! Those forgery charges were overturned, but all that environmental crap Russ uncovered in his newspaper article – Carl sounds like Satan. I thought of him just the other day while I was reading "Paradise Lost."

"The Great Maine Wilderness was never exactly Paradise," Stacy said. "Have a sandwich." Neat grabbed a handful.

Louise, who was hobnobbing with officials from another paper company and whose back was to Neat, half-turned and said both to him and the executives, "We all heard what you said. Alwyn Mills is just your average mill. The more the investigators search, the more they find that we have not broken any laws. The laws themselves should be changed. That takes time. The entire logging industry is working together."

"Boy, is Maine a great grad school," Neat enthused. "Paradise tests the soul. Louise, I feel comfortable with you, because you have a lot of problems and not all the answers. Just like me. And," Neat continued, but Louise had turned back to the paper executives.



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"Ray," Neat said, seizing on him. "I saw Carl on TV. He should be back in the eighteenth century fighting duels and defending his honor. I think he confuses the Mill with the idea of Good. It used to be a common mistake to idealize institutions. We don't do that any more. Now we know, and I quote Milton, "Man's ways even at his best/ Are far from God's as earth's from Heaven."

Carl approached, smiling, and, having heard the last part of Neat's speech, clapped him on the back and said, "I see you know your Shakespeare!" He turned to Ray and shook hands, then moved toward Wiley, and clapped him on the back. "Good to see you."

Wiley clapped Carl on the back. "Congratulations on the innocent verdict." Wiley smoothed the lapels of his suit. His wife had melted into the crowd. A tall man in a dark suit came over and stood beside Wiley.

"You know what the best part of this gathering is?" Carl pontificated. "Seeing my daughter carry on the legacy. Seeing my son and my daughters cooperate."

"That innocent verdict sure must take a lot of pressure off you," Wiley said, continuing his line of thought. He and the tall silent man beside him shared a meaningful glance. "That must free your mind up for the next trial. Michael's murder trial."

Carl's smile disappeared instantly. "Have you discovered anything new?" "They found the bullet," Wiley said. "It was hard work. Buried deep in the riverbed. They found the gun downstream. They matched the bullet to the gun."

Carl turned on his heels and left abruptly, walking toward Louise, taking her arm and pulling her away from the group she was chatting with. The two of them stepped to the end of the room.

Their conversation looked agitated. Eleanor who stood nearby, joined them, looking upset. Soon she came across the room and spoke to Stacy.

Ray's gaze went back to Wiley. Wiley was watching the Alwyn family. Stacy put down her tray of food, went over to Russ and shepherded him back to the rest of the family. Then the entire family headed toward the front of the room, toward the outside door. Their progress was slow, interrupted by greetings from partygoers, but it was clear that they were headed outside. Ray went ahead of them thinking now was as good a time as any to let Molly out of the truck for some fresh air. If Stacy needed help, he would be nearby. He would make it out ahead of the Alwyns. It might be a while before they could exit. When he reached the door, he turned back to look for Wiley, Wiley was gone, and so was the tall man in the dark suit.

Ray closed the door of the Community Center behind him, muting the sounds

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of laughter, conversation and music, a successful party. He crossed the street and walked to his truck. It was far enough away that the sounds of socializing were barely audible. He let Molly out to do her business. She promptly trotted toward an overgrown bramble of bushes and brambles that sprawled beside the Community Center. In the distance a night owl hooted its unearthly hoot. Molly nosed around in the bushes, refusing to come out when he called her, pawing and digging. Following her, Ray found himself in an enclosed thicket. She had found the carcass of a squirrel and was single-mindedly chewing on it. Ray let her do it. It was disgusting.

From the thicket he could see the Community Center door open. The Alwyn family stepped out one by one – Carl, Eleanor, Louise, Russ, Stacy. They hurried across the street and approached the thicket. Eleanor collapsed onto a bench on the sidewalk, not ten yards from him.

Carl said, “Everything will be all right.”

“What is going on?” Stacy asked.

Branches were all around him. Molly snuffled over her catch, but the Alwyns were too involved to hear. Ray knew that his invisibility was imaginary and fleeting. He didn’t want to spy on Stacy’s family. He started to step forward when, from behind, someone put a hand on his arm, and whispered, “Shh.” Ray turned to see Wiley, and the tall dark-suited man. He tried to shake off Wiley’s grip. Then Wiley’s companion stepped forward. In his hand was a gun. It was pointed at Ray.

Ray's thoughts raced. The two men must have left the Community Center earlier. How had they placed themselves in the thicket just now? Damn professionals. Ray could just imagine Bacon mocking, “That’s a great watch dog you’ve got there, Ray.” The men ignored him, while restraining him. They were listening to the Alwyns.

Carl spoke in a gravelly voice. “We’re leaving for Mexico again tonight. There are problems here...” Carl looked at his family. His voice softened. He put his arm around Eleanor, who looked pale with anxiety. “You’re my life. Let’s get you home.”

Again he looked at the circle of faces around him. "Louise, we've been over the business plan. You know how to get in touch with me." She flinched, just a little. He turned to Russ and Stacy. "I'm sorry things have turned out as they have. We have all made choices. Consider the facts. I leave you the option. You can still change your minds."

“Change our minds about what?” Russ asked. Stacy stood immobile, her face

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in shadows. Ray would have given anything to be able to see Stacy's face.

"Louise will explain." Carl and Eleanor walked away. Carl unlocked the Mercedes parked in front of the Community Center. Before she got in the car, Eleanor turned and called, "Stacy,

Stacy darling, I need you as soon as you can come tonight. Catch up with us. Please come home tonight. Soon." Carl guided, almost pushed, Eleanor into the car, and drove off.

"What's going on?" Stacy asked Louise.

Louise sat on the bench Eleanor had vacated. "Wiley found the bullet--"

"What bullet?" Russ asked.

"The bullet that killed Michael," Louise said.

"They found the bullet!" Russ exclaimed. "That's amazing. I mean that should help the investigation."

"Right," Louise said in a dry voice.

Louise's voice shook a little as she said, "Remember I told you I saw Carl chase Michael to the river and shoot at the canoe? Remember I told you Michael leaned into the trajectory of the bullet? Carl said we needed alibis, just in case. 'Just in case what?' I asked. 'Just in case.' he said. Carl would say he hadn't left the house. I told him I'd to say that that morning I had driven up to see my new property. That was the truth. I did meet the workmen there, but it was two hours later. Carl kept saying, 'We have to protect the family.' I didn't worry any more about it. When I found out Michael had died, like everybody else, I thought Michael drowned going over the water fall. So did Carl. Until we found out Michael had a gunshot wound. Then I realized... oh my god..." She sighed all the air out and almost whispered, "I was so scared. I thought if I ever cross Carl, he'll kill me too. And even if Carl didn't get me, the police would arrest me as an accomplice because I had been there. I could go to jail. Still, I kept thinking we were safe because the police would never find the bullet. But tonight Carl told me a detective on the case was at the party. Carl had overheard the detective say they had found the bullet. Carl said they found the gun too in the river. Carl thinks the Feds will mount an aggressive murder trial against him. He's escaping to Mexico. He'll stay there this time. I don't know if they have extradition laws – probably. But who is going to fly down – two cops with handcuffs to bring him back? I know he's set everything in place so he live in Mexico and become a rich man. He told me all along he had a back-up plan if the bamboo plan up here didn't work. He's leaving and now I really am in charge of the mill and I have never really been alone like this. You have to help me. I have to keep my alibi

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about going to my property and never having seen Carl shoot Michael in Michael's canoe. Then there's the mill. I can't run it alone. I don't have the knowledge, and I haven't had time to hire all the right people. In the middle of all this there'll be police and I'll have to take all the shit, because Carl's going to get away." She looked at Russ and Stacy. "Carl didn't mean to shoot Michael."

In the pale street light, her expression was ghastly. Ray tried to imagine his own family in such a situation, but could not. His mother and father were home, watching TV, eating ice cream. Cindy was at her mother's, probably on the phone, typical teenager. Sheila and that putty-fingered chiropractor were probably watching TV. What a life.

Russ hadn't taken his eyes off Louise. He said, "Dad may not have meant to, but he did kill Michael."

Stacy said, "Nothing will ever be the same."

Ray did not want to be part of this scene. He was painfully aware of the stranger's gun. It was digging into his ribs. Molly was still chewing on a squirrel carcass, Wiley just standing there. Ray longed to detach his mind from this situation. However, he was mesmerized, like a passer-by compelled to watch a train wreck.

Louise visibly shivered. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders, trying to warm herself. She spoke with urgency. "You can't make this public knowledge. I have confided in you. Everything is at stake. This is family. You've got to support us. You've both been digging away at Carl. Now you know how vulnerable you have made him -- have made me. So back off. Nobody can prove anything if we keep quiet, stick together."

"How can we go on?" Stacy wailed. "What's going to happen to us? We're just torn apart. Carl took his own son's life. And now none of us will ever trust each other. We'll never get over it. I don't think we can build something new on an old lie."

"Shut up," Louise said in a cold voice. "We've got good lawyers. We should focus on moving forward with our lives and the business. Don't let the media or your own ideals tear us apart. We have a mill to run." She gave them a piercing glance.

No one said anything for a minute. Then Louise asked wistfully, "What about the party?" It was a surprisingly touching question.

"It's your party, Louise," Stacy said. "It was your idea. You're the CEO."

"All right, thanks" Louise said grimly. She headed back to the Community

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Center.

"Wait, Louise." Russ ran after her. "I'll help. Anyway, I need some pictures for the newspaper."

The man in the suit put away his gun and said, "I'll get the warrant for Carl's arrest. We've got to get that guy before he flies." He retrieved a small cassette recorder from his breast pocket, popped out the tape, and grinned. "High tech."

Molly chose that moment to dash over to Ray and attempt to jump up and lick his hand. "Eewh," Ray whispered, thinking 'dead squirrel.'

Undeterred, she raced to the man in the suit, who crouched down. He obviously hadn't seen what Molly had just eaten as he murmured, "Kiss me," and she lavished germs all over his face. He looked up at Ray. "We didn't really find the bullet," he said. "Just thought we'd scare the bejesus truth out of them. It worked."

Stacy walked rapidly down the street past the thicket. The tall man stood up and jabbed the gun again in Ray's ribs. He whispered, "Catch up with her, get her to let you go with her to the house. We've got to catch Carl, understand?" He jabbed the gun again, painfully between Ray's ribs for emphasis.

"Yes," Ray gasped, afraid the guy would break his rib. He got as quietly as he could out of the thicket, and ran after Stacy, calling her. Molly raced behind him. Stacy turned.

"What do you want?" she asked, putting the emphasis on "you," as if his appearing now was

the last straw.

"What's wrong?" Ray asked, thinking fast. He had to make her believe he knew nothing of any family trouble. "I was going to ask you to come over."

"I can't," she said. He put his arm around her. Never had he felt so scummy and manipulative. She leaned against him. "I've got to go to my parent's house. Eleanor said she needs me."

"Is she sick?"

"Who knows? All I know, it's a shitty night. If you want to have a real shitty time, you can come with me. Maybe you can feel my pain. Ha ha. Great invitation, huh?"

"Whatever is going on, you know...."

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“Yeah, I know. Your famous caretaker’s complex.”

“You got it.” Ray tried to be upbeat.

“Okay. It must come in handy. You get invited to all the right places.”

“You’re being sarcastic. Is it that bad?”

“Yes, Ray.” They reached her car. She looked at him as he walked around to the passenger seat. “It’s that bad. In fact, you are probably not going to like me after this.”

“We’ll see about that.” Ray got in the car. There was a strong possibility that Stacy would not like Ray by the end of the evening. This could be the night when Ray met his undoing. He was trying – he was forced --- to maneuver events, just as Oedipus had when he fled to avoid killing his own father. Stacy started the engine. Ray tried not to even guess what was going to happen. He felt as if he hadn’t breathed for days. He rolled down the window and took a deep gulp of air. Breathing hurt his ribs. He closed his eyes. His eyeballs felt gritty. He wanted to go home and shower – and brush Molly’s teeth, and put her in the tub and make her use mouth wash. All the events of the past weeks – had it only been a few weeks? -- it seemed like forever – flashed through his mind like a movie. Michael’s hand turning in the whirlpool, Russ searching Michael’s pockets, Carl’s muddy boots on the expensive pale Oriental carpet, Eleanor’s poodle sweater, Stacy’s glistening hair, Louise’s cat-like contentment with her coffee, and the rushing river, the swirling currents. And then everything seemed obscured by white water. He opened his eyes. Stacy had backed out of her parking place and turned around. She was inching through the crowd of people who were beginning to leave the Community Center. “Nice party,” he heard someone say. “No matter what you say about them, those Always know how to entertain.”