

HOLMAN WOOD

J. L. Humphrey

*This book is dedicated to men and women everywhere who
volunteer their time and energy toward improving the quality of
life in their communities.*



While the habits and manner of speaking of certain characters in this book might seem familiar to some readers, this novel is a work of fiction and is not intended to portray real persons or events.

Chapter One

As Jake Flynn waited for his morning coffee to finish brewing, he stared out his kitchen window at a goldfinch eating thistle from the backyard feeder. Neither of them saw the hawk perched motionless in a nearby tree. When the finch took flight, the hawk made its move. All that Jake saw was a mid-air explosion of yellow feathers, as the hawk flew off with breakfast held tight in its talons.

Just as the goldfinch had not sensed imminent danger, Jake was unaware that the action of someone unnoticed would soon shatter the serenity of his morning.

Spring is Jake's favorite time of the year. The snows and cold of winter on the Piedmont in Montgomery County have ended for another year, while the wilting heat and frequent dry spells that are so often a part of summers in Maryland are still months away. Leaves sprouting on the oak and maple trees give the woods a pale green tinge. And the redbud trees are covered with reddish purple beads that look as if they were glued onto the otherwise bare brown branches.

Over the past weekend, Jake had celebrated the onset of warm weather by taking the white painted wicker furniture out of its

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winter storage in the shed, giving it a good wipe down with a damp rag, and arranging it on the screened side porch of the family home, just as his mother had done for the past several decades.

Jake's mother passed away in May of 2010, almost one year ago. Following her funeral Jake had put on a spread back at the house for the mourners, giving everyone a chance to eat and reminisce, laugh and cry, and try to ease the pain of their loss. Several family friends said how nice it was to see his mother's wicker furniture, her pride and joy, sitting on the side porch, as if she were still among them offering her usual hospitality in the form of the comfortable cushioned chairs and sofa. It was then that Jake had decided to move back to his family home and repeat the ritual of setting out the porch furniture each spring.

With a mug of coffee and last Friday's issue of the *Montgomery Courier* in hand, Jake grunted as he eased himself onto the sofa, accompanied by the crunching sound of the wicker. Even though he was by no means fat he thought he'd better take it easy the first time out, to make sure the aging furniture still held his weight.

A cardinal sat perched in the apple tree in the front yard of the old farmhouse, singing its spring song of "what cheer, what cheer." From across the road came the rat-a-tat of a woodpecker excavating a nest hole in a tree for this year's brood. And the occasional squeals of young children playing soccer, punctuated by the sound of the coach's whistle, drifted over the fields from the elementary school less than a mile away.

"It doesn't get much better than this," Jake said aloud to himself, flipping through the pages of the local weekly newspaper. Now sixty years old, he had long since resigned himself to the fact that folks might think he was nuts for talking to himself. But he knew that he was unlikely to change, and was thankful that he was now old enough to not give a damn what other people said about him.

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As he sipped his coffee, a headline in the paper caught Jake by surprise: "*140 acre Holman Wood in Germantown sold.*"

"How can you live next door to someone and know them your whole life, but they don't tell you when they sell the woods you played in as kids?" Jake mumbled to himself.

The land across the road had been forested since long before Jake was born or his parents bought the house on Holman Road. Their house, the one next to it, and Holman Hall itself were the only homes on the half-mile long road that ended at the Hall, a large farmhouse built by Rudolph Holman on three hundred and fifty acres of land he had purchased in 1911. The house Jake grew up in and the one next to it were built in the mid-1940s by Rudolph's two sons, Hans and Werner, on the five acre lots of land their father had given each of them after they had taken wives and agreed to help work the farm.

The family patriarch, Rudolph, and his young bride Hildegard had moved to the area near the end of the German immigrant movement that began in the 1800s. The early arrivals had disembarked from ships in Baltimore or Bladensburg and trekked west through the mountains. They passed the towns of Hagerstown, Cumberland and Frostburg, on their way to Ohio and beyond. Rudolph and Hildegard were latecomers to the movement, and had joined the group of German settlers who put down roots on the fertile land of northern Montgomery County.

Holman Farm was one of the county's premier farms for decades up through the mid 1900s. It had a well-earned reputation for producing excellent vegetables and fruit, eggs, dairy products and meat, and hardwood used for lumber. And Hilda, it was well known, made the best sausage in the county.

Jake's parents had purchased their home in 1948, after the Holmans' son Hans and his wife died childless, the double victims

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of a car crash on one of the county's narrow rural roads. The Holmans' other son, Werner, and his wife stayed on in their home next to Jake's parents, and still helped run the farm. But Werner turned to drink to cope with the death of his brother and died of cirrhosis of the liver in the summer of 1952, leaving his wife and a thirteen-year-old daughter, Greta, behind.

Jacob Michael Flynn was born in Doctors' Hospital in the District of Columbia in October of 1950. Both of his parents had been raised in the city of Washington. So, when it came time for his birth they headed into town so that he could be delivered in a "real" hospital, as they called it, rather than in the "backwoods" county hospital.

When baby Jake arrived home to the house on Holman Road for the first time, little Greta his next-door-neighbor was the first one to welcome him.

"Can I hold him, Mrs. Flynn?" Greta had asked.

"No, honey," Jake's mother had said, "you're so accident-prone I'd be worried you would drop him."

It is true that Greta was an "awkward" child. By the age of eleven, she had already fallen off their porch roof and broken her arm, tripped while running in the yard with friends and broken the wrist of the same arm, and broken three toes while kicking a tree. Lord knows why she was kicking the poor tree. It may have had something to do with having an alcoholic father.

As a child, Jake was never certain whether Greta's injuries were caused by clumsiness so much as her general inattention to what she doing. When he was six, Jake and his parents had visited Greta in the hospital just weeks after she got her drivers license, because she had run her car off the road into a ditch while mooing at a herd of cows she was driving past. She had done no real harm to herself, but was kept in the hospital overnight for observation.

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Greta's awkwardness had followed her into adulthood. One of Jake's more vivid childhood memories was of his eleventh birthday party. Just as he and his friends had finished playing "pin the tail on the donkey" and were gathering for the cake cutting, Greta's mother burst into the Flynn house in tears and wailing "She's going to kill herself one of these days. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Greta had fallen down a flight of stairs in the apartment building in Greenwich Village, New York, where she had moved at age twenty-one to study art and explore the beatnik side of her personality. She had fallen while standing on one leg and balancing a bag of groceries on her other knee as she tried to unlock the door to her fifth-floor walk-up.

Anyone else might have killed themselves. Greta had only broken her ankle. But her mother felt she must go to New York to care for her injured daughter. And since Mrs. Holman did not drive, Jake's parents disbanded his birthday party and drove the distraught mother all the way to the train station in Washington. Jake did not begrudge poor Greta her awkwardness, nor did he fault Mrs. Holman for not driving; but neither did he ever forget the birthday party that was cut short.

When Jake's father died in 1974, it worried him that his mother and Mrs. Holman were two widows living next door to one another on a remote road in the rural upcounty. The elder Holmans, Rudy and Hilda, still resided in Holman Hall at the end of the road. But they were both nearing ninety years of age and would be of little help in an emergency.

After Greta's mother passed on in 1977, Greta moved back to her family home from New York. The art scene had not responded favorably to her limited talent, and the beatnik movement in the Big Apple was long since dead. So, at 38 years of age she came

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home. And then Jake really worried, knowing that his mother had only Greta and the increasingly senile nonagenarians in Holman Hall as neighbors. It was some relief to him, and to his mother, that after attending college out of state he had moved back to the county and lived only twenty miles away in Wheaton.

The original three hundred and fifty acre Holman Farm had long since been split apart. Fifty acres had been sold to the county in the early 1960s: ten acres on the county road as the site for an elementary school; and the adjacent forty acres, including the farm's stream and a buffer on either side, for the Willow Branch County Park. A twenty acre lot was subdivided off as the setting for Rudy and Hilda's house--Holman Hall--and their barn, springhouse and pond. And the two five acre properties on which Jake's parents and Greta's mother lived side-by-side had been platted as separate lots. Of the remainder, one hundred and thirty acres of cropland was leased to local farmers and provided income on which the elder Holmans relied, and one hundred and forty acres was set aside in Holman Wood.

Rudy had taken a great deal of ribbing from the local farmers when he named the treed portion of his farm "Holman Wood" in the 1920s. They told him that in the United States a forested area like the one he owned should be called Holman Woods. "I log the trees and sell them to a mill for lumber," Rudy always replied, "and since I make money from the wood, I call it Holman Wood."

And now Jake was reading in the local weekly newspaper that the one hundred and forty acre parcel across the road from his and Greta's homes had been sold. As he finished his first cup of coffee of the morning, Jake wondered who had bought it and for what purpose. Was the purchase related to the push to recommend the area for residential zoning when the area master plan was revised last year?

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He and Greta had fought against the proposal, arguing that much of the land was still in agricultural use and Holman Wood wasn't appropriate for housing since it was protected under the county's Forest Conservation Law. They certainly weren't interested in having their own five acre parcels rezoned to allow one acre home lots. But last December the County Council approved a new master plan that rezoned the entirety of old Holman Farm, except the acreage owned by the county, as residential land "suitable for one acre home sites." Greta and Jake had lost their battle, but found it even more troubling that they were unable to discover who was behind the effort to rezone.

"Woo hoo," Jake heard someone call out, not far from his side porch retreat. It was Greta, coming out to hang laundry on her backyard clothesline. Wisps of silver hair flew in all directions around her face, thwarting her attempt to confine it in a bun.

"Hey, Greta, how are you doing?" he called back.

"It's great seeing the wicker furniture out again," she said.

"Thanks. It's still as comfortable as always," said Jake, standing. "I see someone has bought the Wood."

"What?" she asked, some fifty feet away and walking toward Jake's side porch. Suddenly, she bent forward and lurched, falling to the ground and dropping the wet laundry she had been holding.

"Lord save us and preserve us, she's tripped over her own feet again," Jake said to himself. In a corner of his mind it registered that he had heard a distant gunshot and some other quieter and closer sound, like a "ping," just as Greta had fallen.

"Oh, my god, I've been shot," Greta howled. "Damned hunters."

As Jake rushed out the screened porch door, he heard a vehicle roar down Willow Branch Road in the county park located across the cropland to the rear of his and Greta's properties. He glanced over while running to his fallen neighbor and saw a tan sports utility vehicle speeding out of the park toward the county road.

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"Are you okay? Where were you hit?" Jake asked.

"It's my upper arm, my good arm...the one I haven't broken," said Greta, now sitting up cross-legged. "Aw, it's just a nick, a flesh wound...hardly broke the skin. But what in the heck are hunters doing out this time of year?"

"Greta, you're bleeding a lot," Jake said. "Come on, let's get you into my house and I'll bandage you up. Then I think you should go to the hospital."

Jake helped Greta to her feet. By the time they reached his kitchen the sting of the wound was beginning to throb, and blood had already run down Greta's arm to her fingers and was dripping onto the old linoleum floor.

"Sorry about the mess," Greta grouched. Jake grabbed his first aid kit and applied gauze to her wound, wrapping it with adhesive tape.

"Forget it. You keep pressure on that wound," Jake said. "I'm going to call the ambulance."

He grabbed the phone off the kitchen wall, but there was no dial tone. "Great," he mumbled to himself, "the phone's dead. The friggin' phone company!"

"Greta, the phone's dead," Jake said as he walked her to a chair in his dining room. "I'm going to run to the store and call from there. You just sit here and try not to go to sleep...no, wait, that's for head wounds in case you have a concussion. Well, you just try to stay calm. I'll be right back."

Jake panted as he ran the two hundred or so yards to the little grocery store at the corner of Holman Road and the county road. "Nobody told me I'd be running a friggin' marathon at sixty years of age," he said to himself, then laughed out loud. "Well at least I've still got my sense of humor."

It was dark by the time Jake brought his neighbor back from the hospital and returned to his own house. He had followed behind

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the ambulance in his pick-up truck so he could chauffeur Greta home when she was released. It was indeed just a flesh wound, which the doctor cleaned and re-dressed. She was given a mild pain killer and told to go home and get some rest.

Since the accident involved a shooting, the county police had responded. They had questioned Jake at the hospital, as he waited for Greta to be treated. There wasn't much for him to say...he had heard a single gunshot and seen a tan SUV tearing down Willow Branch Road and out of the county park.

The officer who questioned him, a Lieutenant Jock P. Metheney, was probably half of Jake's age--a broad-shouldered man, six feet two inches tall, with a handsome, square-jawed face and thick, black head of hair. "Never trust a man named Jock," Jake thought to himself. The cop seemed all too ready to chalk up the shooting as an accident caused by someone illegally hunting out of season. Metheney said he would put the word out to his fellow officers to be on the lookout for a tan vehicle, but he guessed it was an isolated incident.

At home after dinner, Jake remembered his coffee mug and the *Montgomery Courier* he had abandoned on his side porch in the day's excitement. Stepping onto the porch to collect them, he remarked to himself "Damn, my first warm day of the year to relax on the porch--that's another party of mine the Holman's have cut short. Well," he chuckled, "as Scarlett O'Hara said, tomorrow is another day."

He put the dirty mug in the kitchen sink then picked up the nearby phone--still no dial tone. "I'll call the phone company tomorrow and have them check the line." Jake customarily wrote a mental to-do list for the following day, as a way of winding down and preparing for bed. He shut off all the downstairs lights, checked the lock on the front door, and headed upstairs for the night.

Chapter Two

The next morning, after downing a mug of coffee, Jake checked in on Greta. She said she felt fine, but griped to Jake that her phone was dead, too. He told her that he would drive to the corner store and make the service call from there, so she gave him a short list of items to pick up for her: a quart of milk, a package of English muffins, a can of tuna fish, and a jar of blueberry jam.

"By the way, Greta," Jake asked, walking toward her side door, "why did you sell Holman Wood?"

"I couldn't turn down the money," she replied. "They offered me two-point-eight million dollars."

"Sorry to get so personal, but are you that hard up for money?" Jake asked.

"Yes, to be frank," Greta said. "I've practically run through the inheritance and life insurance money from grandma and grandpa, and I don't have any regular income other than rent from the cropland out back. In addition to normal living expenses, I have property taxes to pay each year on this house, on Holman Hall, the rental cropland and the Wood. I thought I could solve two problems by selling Holman Wood. I wouldn't have to pay the property tax on it anymore, and I'd have a tidy sum of money to see me through the next several years."

"I didn't realize you were so strapped," Jake said.

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"Well, this darned government has decided to tax us for every little thing...a phone tax, electricity tax, flush tax," Greta shot back. "Honestly, a 'flush tax'? Now they're even taxing us to go to the bathroom!"

"In fairness, it's going toward a good cause...cleaning up the Chesapeake Bay," Jake retorted.

"State officials have known there was a problem with pollution and fertilizer levels in the Bay since the 1960s. If they really wanted to clean it up, they would have done it by now," Greta said, heatedly. "And you know perfectly well that you and I, and everybody else in the rural areas of this state, use well water and have our own septic systems. We are not destroying the Bay by flushing our toilets, but they make us pay the tax anyway."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Jake said. "I just didn't realize your need. So who bought the Wood?"

"Some company...the FBI LLC, or something," Greta told Jake. "Ted Higgins, my banker, handled the deal. I don't know what they think they're going to do with it, though, since it's a protected forest."

"But didn't you wonder why someone would buy that property if they couldn't do anything with it?" Jake asked.

"I guess I figured maybe this group were hunters and wanted it as their own private game preserve...something like that," Greta said.

"I'm not sure a hunting club would create an LLC," Jake said.

Jake had become familiar with LLCs--limited liability corporations--when he was researching campaign contributions to elected officials during the fight over the master plan revision last year. He had come to realize that buildable land is the principal natural resource in Montgomery County and, due to the fact that the county abuts the nation's capital, development of that land is highly profitable. The development industry and related trades

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exert enormous special interest influence in county political campaigns in order to elect pro-growth officials who, in appreciation for the financial backing, will work to reduce regulation of the industry.

In his research, Jake had discovered that development companies traditionally set up a "sister LLC" for every project they build, as a way of financially protecting the parent company in case a project is sued or goes belly up. He had also found that campaign contributions from LLCs were a convenient way for individuals to hide their donations to politicians' campaigns. It took quite a bit of digging to uncover the names of the officers and partners involved in an LLC.

"Well, I'm sorry I got you all riled up this morning. You need to rest and recover from that wound. I'll be back in a bit with your groceries." Jake walked out her side door and across the yard to his gravel driveway, got in his pick-up truck, and headed down Holman Road to the little grocery store at the corner to call the phone company.

"Hey, Big Jake, how're you doing?" called out Marni Green, as he entered her store. She was a tall, buxom woman with a full mane of golden blond hair that cascaded down to nearly cover her rather broad shoulders.

Marni Pearsall had gone through school with Jake, and moved in with her high school sweetheart, Fred Green, after graduation. Fred was captain of the high school football team, and apparently had no greater ambition than to live over the garage on his parents' property and help them run their farm. Marni and Fred married in 1970, right before the birth of their first child, and built a house on a "child lot" subdivided from the Green Farm. Fred's parents sold their farm in 1978 and retired to Florida, after Fred was accidentally shot and killed while deer hunting. And Marni, then a

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widowed mother of three young children, had used Fred's life insurance money to buy the old deserted farm stand on the corner of Holman Road, fix it up and winterize it, and reopen it as the Green Corner Store.

"I'm okay. I've got to call the phone company and tell 'em the line's dead," he replied.

"Awful lot of excitement yesterday," said Marni. "How's Big Greta doing?"

Marni preceded everyone's name with "Big," originally using it as a way of endearing herself to the male farmers who sold produce to her store. She found she could negotiate a lower price for the produce if she buttered them up a bit.

"She'll be fine," Jake replied. "It was just a flesh wound, thank the Lord. The hospital fixed her up and sent her home. She was probably more shaken up than she's letting on, but she's a tough old bird."

"Gawd, I hope I'm that spunky when I'm in my 70s," Marni chuckled, as Jake found the phone company's number in the book and dialed out on the store's pay phone.

When he was done making the phone service report, Jake told Marni he had to run an errand but would be back later to pick up some things for Greta. Then he headed down the road in his pick-up truck toward the county seat of Rockville, to do some research in the land records that were filed away in the courthouse.

In the Land Records Office, Jake looked up the transactions for Holman Wood. He pulled and perused the sheet of microfiche containing the deed from 1911, when Rudolph Holman had purchased the 350 acre farm. The file also held the record of Jake's parents' purchase of their house in 1948, and the sale of 50 acres to the county in 1963.

He found the plats of the lots for his family's house and Greta's home, and Holman Hall, and the division of remaining acreage into

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rental cropland and the Wood. There was the 1977 deed from when Greta inherited her home and her 1980 deeds for Holman Hall, the rental cropland, and the woods, following the death of her grandparents

But there was no record of the recent sale of the wooded lot. When he asked the clerk about the missing transaction, she smiled and told him that a lot of folks get confused by the "dual system" used for filing land transactions.

"The microfiche system was only used until 1999," the clerk had told Jake. "After that the county started computerizing the files." She led Jake over to a computer terminal available for public use.

Jake accessed the record of the recent sale. "April 8, 2011 - 140 acres sold by owner, Greta Holman, to purchaser, FTA LLC, care of Agent Geoffrey Kaye, Esquire" he mumbled to himself.

"What, sir?" the clerk asked.

"Nothing," Jake replied. "I'm just talking to myself. Thanks for your help."

He knew the name "Geoffrey Kaye" from his campaign donations research last year. The law firm of Silverberg, Fredericks and Kaye specialized in land use and zoning cases, and worked primarily for developers. Their offices were in a restored Victorian home on one of the side streets in Rockville, so Jake decided to walk the two blocks from the Courthouse to the law firm and pay Mr. Kaye a visit.

"Jake Flynn to see Mr. Kaye," Jake announced to the neat, well-dressed receptionist who sat in the former living room of the expensively furnished Victorian home, now headquarters of one of the most successful law firms in Montgomery County.

"Do you have an appointment?" he was asked.

"No, I'm just in town and thought I'd stop by and see if he was available for a quick question." Jake replied.

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"I'm sorry, but Mr. Kaye is busy preparing for an afternoon meeting," the receptionist stated flatly. "Would you like to leave a message for him?"

"No, that's all right. I'll call him later," Jake said, catching a glimpse of Geoff Kaye down the hall, walking from the law firm's kitchen back to his office with a cup of tea in hand. Kaye was a short, slim man in his 50s, who wore silver wire-rimmed bi-focal glasses that matched his trimmed silver haired beard and mustache.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kaye," Jake called out to the attorney. "I've got a quick question for you. Who are the principals behind 'FTA LLC,' the group that bought Holman Wood?"

"I'm sorry but that information is confidential," said Kaye, sounding annoyed that anyone should be asking the question. "My clients wish to remain anonymous."

"I'll bet they do," Jake thought to himself, making sure he didn't utter the statement aloud.

"Who is asking?" Kaye queried.

"Oh, no one," Jake said. "I'm just an interested party." Then he turned and quickly left the offices and walked the few blocks back to his pick-up truck. Meeting with one of the development industry's land use attorneys always left Jake feeling slightly grimy, like he needed to take a shower to wash off the encounter.

As Jake strolled past the beautifully preserved homes in the historic district of Rockville, a telephone call was being placed between two offices in the nearby complex of high rise county government buildings. When Councilmember Bob Krupp answered his cell phone a voice on the other end said, "Please hold for the County Executive."

"Bob, you know our little arrangement?" said the County Executive. "I need to come back to the well for another drink."

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"What are you looking for, more campaign donations?" Krupp asked.

"They're no good to me now. I'm done running for office," Frank Furman said. "No, it needs to be more personal this time. I'll need direct access."

"Things are pretty tight right now," Krupp said.

"Look, my daughter Laura is going through a rough patch and I want to help her out," Furman said. "A man should be able to help his own child, right Bob?"

"I'll check into it. It may take a while, though" Krupp said.

"No good, Bob. I told you I'd stay quiet so long as you made it worth my while," Furman said. "Talk to your buddy. See what he can do. Just make it fast."

"You're putting me in a tough spot," Krupp said.

"Back at you, Bobby," Furman said. "My hands are clean. I just hope I don't have to start talking."

"I'll see what I can do," Krupp said.

"Make it soon," said Furman. "You have a good day now." And he hung up.

Returning from Rockville, Jake stopped to pick up Greta's groceries at the Green Corner Store. Marni told him she'd seen a phone company truck drive past a few minutes earlier. On his way up Holman Road Jake spotted the truck parked halfway between the store and his house. He stopped to talk to the repairman who was up in the "cherry picker" basket working on the line.

"That was quick," Jake called up to the repairman.

"I was finishing up a job nearby when I got the call," he replied, "so I came right over."

"Did you find the problem?" Jake called up to the repairman.

"Darndest thing," the man called back. "The wire almost looks like it's been cut, not frayed like when it breaks if a tree limb falls

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on it. Besides, there are no trees near this line. Don't worry, though, I've have you back in service in no time."

"Well, thanks for the quick response," Jake yelled, as he drove off up the road to take Greta her groceries

By two o'clock in the afternoon, Jake was home again. "Only my second cup of coffee for the day," he mumbled to himself, mug in hand, heading out to the side porch to finally enjoy his celebration of the first warm spring day that had been cut short the day before. "No wonder my head hurts."

Jake had developed a four or five cup a day coffee habit back in his college days. Sometime in his early forties he began to notice that he would get a headache if he went without coffee for several hours. Ever since, he'd kept a steady stream of caffeine going into his body throughout each day. He had decided that if something was going to kill him, it might as well be coffee.

"I hate to repeat myself," Jake said aloud, settling onto the wicker sofa, "but it doesn't get much better than this." The sun had moved around to the back of the house by early afternoon, warming the bed of blue and pink hyacinths that lined the rear of the porch. Their sweet perfume wafted past Jake on a gentle breeze as he sipped his coffee and scanned the *Montgomery Courier*, which was left unread in the flurry of events the preceding day.

After a bit Jake looked up from the newspaper to see a small plane, a crop duster, spraying something on a farm field a few miles away. As he watched the plane swoop down for another run, his eyes refocused to only a few feet away and he noticed a small round hole in the porch screening. He walked over and examined it.

"What in the heck made that?" he wondered. As he walked back to his seat he spotted a similar hole in the screen behind the sofa, just above the wicker backrest.

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"One hole is a freak occurrence," he muttered. "But two holes..." As he glanced back and forth between the perfectly circular holes in his porch screen, it dawned on him that they must have been made by the bullet that grazed Greta's arm. They were on a perfect line with the spot she was in when she'd been shot--a line that passed right through the place he had been sitting. The faint "ping" he had heard right after the gunshot must have been the sound of the bullet ripping through his porch screen.

If he had not stood to talk to Greta yesterday morning, the bullet that only winged his neighbor would have hit Jake Flynn square in the head.

Chapter Three

Jake awoke early the following morning. Over coffee he decided to cook Chicken Parmigiana for dinner. And while buying the chicken at the corner store, he could ask Marni Green if she knew anything about the company that bought Holman Wood. He pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a clean tee shirt, laced up his running shoes, and headed out for a slow loping run to the corner.

"Big Jake, what's up?" Marni asked Jake as he entered her store.

"I need to pick up some chicken breasts," Jake said. "I'm making Chicken Parmigiana tonight."

"Are you having company?" Marni queried. She knew Jake usually made the dish when he was having guests over, since the recipe made so much. In the months since he'd moved back, she had been invited to more than one dinner at Jake's home.

"Naw," he replied. "I figure I'll take some over to Greta to be sure she's getting solid food in her while she recuperates."

"You're a good man, Jake Flynn," Marni said. "I don't know why some woman hasn't snapped you up."

Jake set about selecting a package of chicken breasts and gathering a few other items. "Speaking of snapping things up, do

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you know anything about the company that bought Holman Wood-the FTA LLC?" he asked.

When the revision of the area master plan was being considered by the Planning Board and the County Council last year, Marni had started a network of local residents trying to fight the increased housing density proposed in the new plan. The farmers and rural folk who patronized the Green Corner Store took their mission as stewards of the land seriously.

They felt that using valuable cropland for housing was a waste, and they freely shared their opinions with Marni. As the informal communications hub for area residents, she was the natural choice when it came time to pick a coordinator for the Keep Rural Areas Protected network, or KRAP as it became known.

The acronym was an inside joke with the locals, who resented the fact that their Councilmember, Bob Krupp, had backed the effort to allow more housing in the area.

"Let's give Krupp a load of KRAP" the network members would chant at the strategy meetings they held last summer in Marni's little store. The locals had welcomed Jake into the network like a prodigal son returning home from the big city, when Greta and he took up the fight against the rezoning of the old Holman Farm property.

"FTA LLC...I don't remember seeing that company on any of the campaign contributions lists we checked last year," Marni told Jake. "I don't even remember any major donors with the last name beginning with F, T or A."

"Well, I'll take a look through the donor lists myself, when I get the chance," Jake said, as Marni rang up his bill. He headed for the door with his groceries in hand and paused. "Say, do you recall seeing a tan sport utility vehicle driving around here recently?"

"Hmm...yeah, two maybe three weeks ago a tan SUV went up the road past here. I figured they were checking out Holman Hall to

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rent," Marni told him. "I guessed they were city folks looking to move to a quieter area...you know, grass farmers." The term was used by the locals to describe newcomers who flee from urban areas to live in the country and grow nothing but lawns. "They left out of here about ten minutes later. Why do you ask?"

"I saw a tan SUV go tearing out of Willow Branch Park right after Greta was shot the other day," Jake replied. "It was probably just a coincidence. Thanks, Marni, have a good day."

"The Lord willing," she said.

He wanted to be in good spirits as he jogged home, but the thought that a tan SUV had been on his road a couple of weeks ago bothered the hell out of Jake.

Once home, he put away his groceries and headed upstairs with a full mug of coffee, to look through the computer file of campaign donations to Councilmembers that he had compiled during the master plan fight last year. When he'd moved back home, Jake had turned one of the spare bedrooms at the back of the second floor into a home office. Now, unnoticed by him as he sat at his desk with his back to the window, a tan SUV had stopped along the road in the county park beyond his backyard.

Jake started by checking the list of donations made to Councilmember Krupp in the 2010 election cycle, the four years leading up to last November's county elections. He remembered pouring over the list last fall, trying to find a pattern of special interest money influencing Krupp's push to increase the housing allowed in the master plan. There were mostly small fifty and hundred dollar donations from individuals, and the expected \$4,000 contributions--the maximum allowed from any donor in an election cycle--which came from the land use law firms that did business with developers. It may be unsavory, but not illegal. One

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donation caught his attention again--a \$4,000 contribution from a 'Paul Shuster, Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina.'

Jake recalled that none of the locals doing research for the KRAP network had been able to find the connection between this man and Councilman Krupp. Why had a North Carolina resident given the maximum allowed campaign donation to Krupp, who sat on the Council's Education Committee and chaired the Government Operations Committee? They did discover that Krupp took his family to Wrightsville Beach each summer. Maybe the donor had met Krupp during his family vacation and thought he was...what...an out-of-state politician worth giving \$4,000 to? It didn't add up. And it still bugged Jake.

The phone rang and startled Jake. He walked downstairs to take the call in the kitchen, so he could refill his coffee mug while he talked.

"Hello."

"Big Jake, it's Marni," said the caller. "I just got a heads-up that somebody posted an anonymous message on the KRAP listserv. That thing hasn't been used since the Council approved the master plan last December. Anyway, it's a notice that the Planning Board is going to schedule a hearing on a plan to redevelop the Wood."

"Oh, geez, what trick are they trying to pull now, Marni?" asked Jake.

"Let me read you the message...quote: the plan would allow up to 100 one acre lots for single-family detached housing. Staff is recommending approval, stating the parcel has access on a county road and the area is undergoing revitalization with confronting retail on a newly rezoned commercial lot, end quote" she replied.

"What?"

"This must be the reason the Planning Board recommended my store be zoned commercial in the master plan rewrite," Marni said.

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"I couldn't figure why they wanted it so bad. But I didn't fight it because the store really is a commercial establishment, not a little farm produce stand anymore."

"They're saying the area is undergoing revitalization because the County Council just rezoned a store, which you've been running for thirty years, as commercial property. Those crafty bastards." Jake nearly spat out the words. "Well, they'll still have to find a way to get around the Wood being protected under the Forest Conservation Law."

"Don't worry. They will," said Marni, glumly. "Where there's money to be made, they'll find a way."

"Wow, thanks for the dose of optimism," Jake chuckled. "And thanks for the heads-up, seriously."

"I'll keep my ear to the ground for you, kiddo. Bye," Marni signed off.

"Damn," Jake muttered to himself, filling his mug with coffee. "Now I really need to figure out who's behind this FTA gang. Maybe I should check this year's campaign contributions." He headed back upstairs to do some online digging.

A look at the State Board of Elections campaign contributions database didn't reveal any unusual donations to Krupp or other Councilmembers in the first quarter of this year, just the expected small individual donations and maximum gifts from land use law firms.

"Marni was right. Nobody stands out with a last name starting with F, or T, or A," Jake mumbled, scanning the online donor lists. "What am I missing? The only one I can think of whose name begins with an F is County Executive Furman."

Everyone in the KRAP network believed Frank Furman was an upstanding guy who only had the best interests of the county at heart. He had served for one term as the Mayor of Gaithersburg,

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now the second largest city in Maryland after Baltimore, then gone on to be elected as County Executive. Now in his second and, according to him, last term as CE, Furman was known to be friendly with the big boys in the development industry but only because he said growth was good for the county as it increased revenue.

"Maybe it's worth taking a look at Furman's donor lists," said Jake, as he accessed the online records on the state database.

It was getting late, though, and Jake needed to start making the Chicken Parmigiana if he was going to get it to Greta in time for her dinner. He downloaded and filed County Executive Furman's donations reports from the past four years, before shutting off his computer and heading to the kitchen to cook.

Jake decided to join Greta for dinner. The company would do them both good. So when his chicken dish came out of the oven, he walked over to her house with the chicken, a salad, a package of pasta and some pesto sauce. Greta was always up for company, since it gave her an excuse to open a bottle of wine. And Greta was always up for drinking wine. As Jake cooked the pasta in her kitchen, she opened a bottle of *Brunello di Montalcino* that she had on hand.

"This wine will be perfect with the chicken," Greta remarked, pouring herself a glass.

"If there's any left by the time the pasta's done," Jake thought to himself.

That evening, Greta and Jake ate, drank and reminisced together about their shared childhood--exploring her grandparent's barn, swimming in the pond behind the Hall, and hiking in Holman Wood across from the homes in which they'd been raised. Even though Greta was eleven years older than Jake, as children it had seemed perfectly natural to both of them that they should spend

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their summers and free time together. Jake was ten years old by the time Greta moved to New York, and he was then old enough for his parents to trust him to safely bicycle to nearby farms to play with his friends from school.

Over dinner, the two old friends shared feelings with each other as deep as any they had shared in childhood half a century ago. They admitted they had deeply missed each other following Greta's move. And each admitted how good it felt to be neighbors once again. As the conversation wound down Jake also asked Greta's permission to contact her banker, Ted Higgins, to see if he knew anything more about the mysterious limited liability corporation that had purchased the Wood.

"Better yet, we can go see Ted together" said Greta. "I need to talk with him about what to do with Holman Hall. I don't think anyone is ever going to rent that place to live in."

Since Greta's grandparents had died and left it to her in 1980, she had only reopened the Hall once, the previous fall, for a fundraiser for the Keep Rural Areas Protected effort. Now it sat dark and empty, an increasingly dilapidated hulk at the end of their lonely rural road.

"Okay," Jake agreed. "I'll give Higgins a call tomorrow morning, and see if we can come in for a talk with him."

"You keep the leftovers," he'd said, putting the remaining chicken and salad in Greta's refrigerator. "I've got enough food to feed an army at my place." Then he gathered up his serving dishes and left through her side door.

"Good night, Greta."

"Thanks, Jakey," she replied. "Good night."

"My God," he thought, making his way home across the darkened yard, "no one has called me Jakey in forty years. I guess it was all that talk of our childhood that reminded her."

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He cursed himself for not turning on his side porch light before leaving for dinner at Greta's.

"Thank goodness I only had one glass of wine," he mumbled, as he stumbled on in the dark. Greta had finished the rest of the bottle. "Boy, she could drink a sailor under the table."

Chapter Four

Inside with the lights on, Jake put the dirty dishes he'd brought home from Greta's in the kitchen sink, poured himself a mug of cold coffee, and went upstairs to do some further investigation into campaign contributions on his computer. In his office, he took a sip of coffee and turned on the computer tower. He was puzzled to find that the "mouse" was not in its usual position.

Each time he finished working on the computer, Jake had a habit of leaving the mouse tucked neatly in the triangular upper part of the big red letter 'A' on the mouse pad that had been a promotional gift from Alleghany Power Company. But now he'd found the mouse sitting well outside the 'A' on the pad.

"I guess I was in such a rush to make dinner that I neglected my usual routine," he thought.

When he went to retrieve his new County Executive's donations file from the list of 'recently opened documents' on the computer's 'start' menu, it also showed his KRAP email address list as having been recently opened. And he knew he hadn't used that list since last year.

It struck Jake that somebody must have been in his house while he was next door having dinner with Greta. "Shit," he said aloud,

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"they've been on my computer." And they had seen his new research file looking into the County Executive's campaign funding, and also seen the complete list of local residents he had worked with in the Keep Rural Areas Protected movement, including their email and home addresses.

"Damn, I've got to start locking up when I leave home," he mumbled

An unsettling, almost nauseating discomfort swept over Jake--his personal space had been invaded. He began wiping down the computer mouse and keyboard with one of the antibacterial wipes he kept in his desk, in case the intruder had coated them with some dangerous substance to harm him.

"Well, this is pointless," he muttered to himself as he wiped the keys. "They could have gone anywhere in the house...messed with anything."

He threw the wipe in the trash can then cautiously walked through the entire house, checking every closet and making sure all the doors and windows were locked. In the kitchen, he poured the mug of coffee he'd brought with him from the office down the drain, along with the remainder of the pot in the kitchen. Then he made a fresh pot while debating whether or not to call the police and file a report. There was nothing missing, that he could see. So he decided not to make the call.

"I've just got to be more careful," he said, watching the coffee drip from the brew basket into the pot. "Not paranoid, just careful."

Then he chuckled, remembering the saying that it's not paranoia if there's really somebody after you.

"Still got my sense of humor," he thought. But he knew that whatever was going on was deadly serious--the phone line, the tan

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suv, Greta's shooting and the holes in his porch screen. And now an intruder had been in his house.

Back upstairs in his office Jake pulled down the window shades, thinking there might be someone watching the house. "I need to be a lot more careful," he thought.

Still shaken, he tried to focus on the list of donors who had recently contributed to the County Executive's campaign fund, scanning the file for last names beginning with the initials F, T or A. He found nothing unusual in the current year's report. Then looking through the County Executive's fourth quarter donations from last year he struck paydirt--four \$4,000 contributions from North Carolina all made the same week in September of 2010, including one from the mysterious Paul Shuster.

Jake wrote the four donors' names on a pad: Paul Shuster; Cynthia's Paper Store; Wylie's Real Estate; and TPC, whatever that was. He then checked his file of Krupp's donations received last year, to see when Shuster had contributed to the Councilmember. It was the same week in September as the four donations from North Carolina had been made to County Executive Furman.

"Time to do some investigating," Jake muttered, dialing onto the internet through his computer modem.

First he searched the name 'Paul Shuster' on an internet search engine. Even though he'd found nothing when he looked last year, Jake checked again to see if there were recent entries that might tip him off to the identity of the mystery donor. Sure enough, the 26th entry of 47,000 entries for the name contained the information Jake was looking for. It was a listing on a career networking site. When he clicked on the entry the following webpage opened:

"Member--Paul Shuster (no photo available), Managing Director, Tarheel Paper Company. For more information, log in using your member password."

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"Well, that explains what TPC stands for," Jake thought. "Now let's do a search for this paper company."

The website for the Tarheel Paper Company noted that their headquarters were in the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina.

"So why did the contributions from Shuster come from an address in Wrightsville Beach?" Jake wondered.

He looked back at the data he'd pulled from the Maryland Board of Elections campaign contributions database and saw that the street address in Wrightsville Beach shown for Paul Shuster was the same as the one listed for Cynthia's Paper Store.

"Curiouser and curiouser, said Alice," Jake muttered, quoting Lewis Carroll. "So who's behind this paper store? Who is Cynthia?"

He searched on 'Cynthia's Paper Store' and found there were 9,800 entries, many of which seemed related to the store in Wrightsville Beach. But when he clicked on any of those entries, the notice "webpage unavailable" popped up on the screen.

"So, what has become of Cynthia and her paper store?" Jake wondered. "Looks like I've got the first item on my to-do list for tomorrow...one last business day this week to track down Ms. Cynthia."

Jake shut down the computer and prepared for bed, exhausted from the cooking, the wine with dinner, and the frightening discovery that his home had been invaded while he had been right next door. Before retiring he double checked all the doors and first floor windows again, just to be certain they were locked.

Chapter Five

Friday morning dawned clear, and the sun beat down warmly on Jake's left arm which was hanging out the window of his pick-up truck as he and Greta drove in to Gaithersburg to see her banker, Ted Higgins.

Higgins was a stout and affable grey-haired man in his late fifties, who was trusted by most of the farm folk who lived in the upcounty. He was known for offering the best rates on the short-term loans that tide farmers over in mid-season until their crops are harvested. But many suspected that Ted also tipped off the sharks in the real estate industry to farms that were in financial trouble, so they could swoop in and buy up acreage at bargain prices.

"We read about your accident in the newspaper, Miss Greta. It must have been terrible," Higgins said, as he greeted Greta and Jake and ushered them into his office. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mr. Higgins," she replied. "Thank you for asking."

The two were seated facing the banker across his wide wooden desk. Jake asked Higgins the one question he had come to have answered.

"Do you know who is behind FTA LLC, the company that just bought the 140 acre woods from Ms. Holman?"

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"You know, I don't, Mr. Flynn," said Higgins, "and that's odd. I usually deal with the realtors and principal buyers on most real estate deals, but this sale was odd. It was handled by the local attorney for the company, Geoffrey Kaye."

"Why do you say 'local attorney' for the company?" Jake asked.

"Because the purchasing company is out of state; the check was written on an account with First National Bank of North Carolina," the banker replied.

"The Wilmington branch?" Jake queried.

"Yes. How did you know?" Higgins asked.

"Lucky guess," replied Jake. "Do you know who the parent company for FTA LLC is?"

"No idea," said the banker.

"Well, I thank you for your time. I believe Ms. Holman has some other business to discuss with you. I'm going to run next door to the drug store for a minute, Greta, but I'll be waiting outside when you're done." Jake stood to leave.

"Oh, one more thing, Mr. Higgins. Do you know how I could find out if a retail company located out of state is still in business?" Jake asked the banker.

"Most states have licensing offices that list all of the companies registered to do business in that state. I would start with them, Mr. Flynn," Higgins replied.

"Okay, then. Thanks again," Jake said, and he turned and left the bank.

Outside, Jake walked down the sidewalk to Padgett's Drug Store, a pharmacy that still looked much as it did when it opened nearly fifty years ago. He bought a pouch of Bugler cigarette tobacco, and returned to his truck to wait. Although Jake had given up smoking almost two decades earlier, the incidents of the past week

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had made him very anxious. And he thought that smoking cigarettes might calm his nerves.

"Somebody buys Holman Wood, then someone takes a shot at Greta...or me, the phone line is cut, and my house is broken into" Jake mumbled aloud to himself, leaning against the truck's hood facing the bank as he made himself a cigarette. He placed tobacco on a gummed paper and rolled it between fingers and thumbs with both hands. "And there's some North Carolina connection." He licked the gummed edge of the paper to seal it then stuck the finished cigarette between his lips.

"Shoot," he blurted out, realizing he didn't have any way to light the cigarette. Then he remembered that the truck had a dashboard lighter. As he walked around the truck to the driver's door, Jake glanced up and saw a tan SUV parked in the shade of a tree across the street. It was impossible to see the driver through the tinted windows, but they quickly started the vehicle and sped off down the street when Jake spotted them. Traffic blocked Jake's view of the fleeing vehicle, so he was unable to get a look at the SUV's license plate.

"I'll get you, you s-o-b, and I'll find out how you're connected to this whole mess," Jake muttered. His nerves were jangled once again. He sat in the truck to use the lighter, now feeling the need for a cigarette even more than he had a minute ago.

He wondered how the driver of the tan SUV knew Jake would be in Gaithersburg that morning. Had they followed his truck, or had Ted Higgins called and tipped them off? Jake didn't want to mistrust everyone, but the circumstances were suspicious.

"Damn them, now they're gonna give me cancer, too," Jake chuckled, as he inhaled the first drag on his hand-rolled cigarette. He finished the cigarette while waiting for Greta, and it left him feeling a little light-headed but calmer than he had been.

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Back home that noon, with a full mug of coffee beside him on his office desk, Jake went online on his computer to try and discover what had happened to Cynthia's Paper Store down in Wrightsville Beach. On the North Carolina state government website, he located the licensing department and found the records for "Cynthia's Paper Store, Inc." showing it had been started about five years ago. It listed a "Cynthia Nichols" as owner and gave her address as that of the paper store, the same address Jake had found for Paul Shuster, Managing Director of the Tarheel Paper Company and enigmatic contributor to the campaigns of Montgomery County politicians.

The records also showed that Cynthia's Paper Store had gone out of business in June of last year, three months before its \$4,000 donation to County Executive Furman's campaign had been made.

While he was on the North Carolina government database, Jake also searched for "FTA LLC" and found the company was incorporated there last December. The only contact person listed for the company was "Geoffrey Kaye, Esq., Rockville, Maryland."

"That's okay, I'll find out who's behind the FTA," Jake uttered aloud. "But for now, it's time to track down Ms. Cynthia Nichols and get some answers."

He walked to the kitchen to top off his coffee and grabbed the wall phone, dialing Directory Assistance for the 910 area code, the code for Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina. The operator answered.

"I'm trying to find a home number for a Ms. Cynthia Nichols," Jake told the operator. "I believe she's living in Wrightsville Beach, but she may have moved back to Wilmington."

"Just a moment, sir," the operator said. "I'm not finding a 'Cynthia Nichols' in either location, but I've got a 'C. Nichols' in Wrightsville Beach."

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"That must be it," Jake said, writing down the number as the operator read it to him. "Thank you." Then Jake hung up and dialed the number he'd been given. After the third ring, a woman's voice answered, "Hello."

"Is this Cynthia Nichols?" Jake asked.

"Yes."

"Of Cynthia's Paper Store?"

"Yes," the woman on the other end replied.

"You don't know me. My name is Flynn," said Jake, "and I'm calling from Montgomery County, Maryland. I'm doing research for a story on political campaign contributions, and I noticed that your store gave a \$4,000 donation to our County Executive Frank Furman's campaign last year. Could you explain why a North Carolina store contributed so much to a politician running in Maryland?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't know Frank Furman. I couldn't even tell you where Montgomery County is," replied the woman, sounding annoyed at the question. "I was asked by someone to make the contribution, I did, and I was repaid two weeks later."

"Would you tell me who asked you to make the contribution?" Jake gently prodded.

"No."

"Could you tell me how 'Cynthia's Paper Store' could write a \$4,000 check to a political campaign in September of last year when your store went out of business in June?" Jake asked, pointedly.

"Who did you say you were?" Ms. Nichols inquired.

"Never mind. Thank you," said Jake, slamming the phone back on its receiver.

"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," Jake mumbled, quoting *Hamlet* to himself as he headed back upstairs to change into his sweats to take a jog down the road.

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When he got to the Green Corner Store, Jake carefully laid out for Marni Pearsall everything that he'd learned that week. Marni also had some news to share with Jake. A second anonymous message had been posted on the KRAP listserv explaining that the Planning Board hearing on the plan to redevelop Holman Wood had been placed on the fast track for approval. The Board had decided to hold the hearing on the plan next week, instead of the usual ten days to two weeks after public notice. Folks would have to act quickly if they were going to try and prevent homes being built in Holman Wood.

Jake and Marni agreed that it was time to call another meeting of the Keep Rural Areas Protected network. She sent out a veiled message on the group's listserv stating there seemed to be some mischief afoot with the proposed plan that would allow Holman Wood to be developed. Marni ended her email by asking interested locals to meet in her store at 3 p.m. on Sunday afternoon for a quick meeting. There should be enough time to bring folks up to speed on events, and still get the farmers home to finish their evening chores before supper.

Chapter Six

Just before 3 p.m. on Sunday an assortment of pick-up trucks, motorcycles, and older model family sedans began pulling into the parking lot of the Green Corner Store. The Keep Rural Areas Protected gang was assembling once more. The members didn't know just who they were fighting this time, but they were determined to give somebody in county government a load of KRAP.

It made Marni nervous that there were a couple new folks she did not recognize--Regina Scarborough and Clara Dutton, two farm wives who lived out east of Laytonsville toward Sunshine. It seemed a little far for them to drive for a meeting on a local Germantown issue. But they said they had wanted to do something to protect the rural and agricultural land out in their area of the county, too. And some trusted members of the KRAP network vouched for them being "good people."

The *Montgomery Courier* had run a story on Friday about Greta being shot by someone hunting illegally, so when she entered the store everyone cheered. Three of the women surrounded Greta, asking about her wound and presenting her with gifts of food to "tide her over" while recuperating--a pint of peas picked by one

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woman that morning from her cold frame, a jar of cherry preserves another had put up last fall, and a quart of goat's milk from another. Greta was flustered by the attention, and blushed while thanking them.

By 3 p.m. a crowd of about thirty filled the small country store, and Jake started the meeting by explaining about the sale of Holman Wood to the mysterious FTA LLC.

"The Planning Board hearing on the development project to replace Holman Wood with one hundred homes is going to take place this coming Thursday afternoon," Jake said. "We need to present strong testimony against the plan at the hearing. And we need to research other places in the county where farmland is at risk of being used for housing, and ask folks who live in those areas to testify against the Holman Wood plan, too. And let's keep looking into campaign contributions to our elected officials so we can try and figure out who might be behind this scheme."

He related that Paul Shuster, who had contributed to Councilmember Krupp's campaign, was Managing Director of the Tarheel Paper Company. And both Shuster and his company also made donations to County Executive Furman's campaign last September, along with two Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina companies--an out-of-business paper store and a real estate agency. "We need to keep looking into these companies," Jake told the crowd. "We don't know that they are connected to the planned project for Holman Wood, but there's something fishy about them."

A few members of the crowd volunteered to do the research, and Jake asked them to work together and coordinate their efforts.

"Jake and I will work on writing sample testimony for folks to deliver at the hearing," Marni volunteered. "I'll expect the rest of you all to show up in the Planning Board chamber on Thursday, 'cause we've got to scare the hell out of them and make 'em think

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twice about approving this darned plan." A cheer went up from the crowd.

"And remember, we need to work under the same rules as when we were fighting the master plan rewrite last year," Marni reminded the crowd. "Only put things on the KRAP group listserv that you wouldn't mind your worst enemy reading. If it's something important, don't put it in an email because once something is on the internet you never know who could see it. If it's important, call Jake or me and tell us personally...and on a corded phone--no cordless or cell phones that someone could listen in on with a danged baby monitor."

"Finally, does anybody know a way that a developer could get around the county Forest Conservation law and cut down Holman Wood to build houses?" Jake asked.

"Why, sure," said Clara Dutton, one of the farm wives from Laytonsville, who was sitting atop the store's ice cream freezer and knitting a scarf from a ball of yarn tucked in her purse. She reminded Jake of Madame Defarge in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. "There was a small housing subdivision built last year on a partially wooded twenty five acre lot off Mount Zion Road south of Sunshine. The builder cut down every tree on the property before anyone from county Environmental Protection ever returned my phone call."

"When they finally did call," Ms. Dutton continued, knitting all the while, "I was told that the Planning Department had approved the project for what they called 'offsite Forest Credits.' In exchange for cutting down all the trees on the twenty-five acre parcel, the developer had to buy credits from the owner of another property who would promise to preserve a certain number of acres of trees on his land."

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"But who guarantees that the woods on the Forest Credit property are protected and not cut down sometime in the future?" asked Jake.

"They told me there's a note put in the land records for a property that sells Forest Credits showing how many wooded acres must be preserved forever--'in perpetuity' was the phrase the man used," Ms. Dutton replied.

Just then the front door of the store swung open. Everyone turned to see who it was. Someone gasped, startled because they had been so intently focused on the discussion underway. A county policeman stood in the door. "Is everything all right in here?" he boomed. "I got concerned when I saw all the vehicles outside."

"Everything's fine, officer," Marni replied. "Just some friends come by to shop."

"Jock Metheney, is that you? What are you doing all the way over here in Germantown?" asked a woman's voice.

"Miz Scarborough, I didn't expect to see you here," said Lieutenant Metheney. "You're a long way from home yourself."

"Clara Dutton and I drove over this afternoon to visit with friends in the area," Regina Scarborough told the police officer, "and we stopped in to this store when we saw all the vehicles out front, thinking there must be one heck of a sale going on inside."

"Well, so long as everything's okay I'll be on my way," said Metheney, turning and leaving the store as briskly as he'd entered.

Everyone stood silent for an odd few moments, unsure as to who should be the first to speak after the unexpected interruption of their meeting. Finally, Jake broke the silence.

"Mrs. Scarborough, I don't mean to be nosy," he said, "but can you tell me why you just lied to Officer Metheney?"

"I've known Jock Metheney for more than twenty five years," Regina Scarborough replied. "He went through Laytonsville

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Elementary School with my son Ronald. I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him--he's been a rotter since he was a little kid. Rumor is that he's 'on the take,' and will look the other way or bend the law if there's something in it for him. But since he's the County Executive's son-in-law, nobody dares make a formal complaint to the police department."

"He's Frank Furman's son-in-law?" asked Jake, taken aback by the news.

"Yes, he married Laura Furman. They've got a house on a couple hundred acres off Damascus Road that backs up to Patuxent State Park. The only reason I ever see them is that we shop at the same grocery store in Laytonsville." Mrs. Scarborough continued. "His beat is in the Third Police District, down around White Oak. I don't know what he's doing over here in Germantown."

Jake was mum, confused and wondering why this policeman whose beat is in the east county would have been at the hospital west of Gaithersburg this past week to take Jake's statement about Greta's shooting. Marni picked up the slack and concluded the meeting, thanking everyone for coming and asking them to please take some of the field greens from the store's produce section for free, on their way out.

"They'll make a nice salad with tonight's dinner, but they'll be nothing but a green soupy mess by tomorrow. Thanks again for coming." Marni said, ushering the crowd from her store. "Stay in touch. And we'll see you all at the Planning Board hearing this Thursday."

When the crowd had left, and none but Greta, Jake and Marni remained in the small local market, Marni shut the front door and locked it, temporarily. Turning back toward Jake, she asked "You want to tell me what the heck that was all about, Big Jake?"

"Metheney is the cop that took my statement about Greta's shooting in the hospital this week," Jake stuttered. "What the hell

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was he doing there if his beat is over in White Oak? And what did he mean when he said 'Miz Scarborough, I didn't expect to see you here.' Just who the hell did he expect to see here? And what the hell was he even doing here on a sunny spring Sunday afternoon? On top of that, we find out that he's Frank friggin' Furman's son-in-law! And by the way, who the hell is the anonymous tipster that left the notice about the Planning Board hearing on the KRAP listserv? There is too much we don't know. It makes me nervous. I don't like it."

"Calm down, Big Jake, there's no reason to start cussing," Marni said. "At least be thankful that those two ladies from Sunshine came to the meeting."

"Come on, Jakey, let's go," said Greta. "There's a fine Sunday afternoon to be enjoyed out there," she said as she collected the food gifts the women had brought her. "We'll divvy up the peas and have them for dinner tonight. Marni, do you want this goat's milk? I can't stand the taste of it."

"Sure," said Marni, "I'll make yogurt from it."

"Yuck," Greta grunted. "Let's go, Mr. Flynn. I've got a half-completed Sunday *Washington Post* crossword puzzle that I'm itching to get back to."

The two neighbors unlocked the front door of the Green Corner Store, said their farewells to Marni, and sauntered up the country road in silence toward their respective homes.

As they reached the point where they would part ways, Greta said to Jake "I know it seems like you've been driving me around a lot this week, but I've got another favor to ask."

"Sure, Greta," said Jake. "What is it?"

"When I talked with Ted Higgins, he suggested I look into getting Holman Hall registered in the county Master Plan for Historic Preservation," Greta told Jake. "I've been thinking of leaving the

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house as a community center in my will, since I've got no family to pass it on to. Ted said that if I can get the Hall designated for historic preservation, I can probably get tax credits to restore the exterior and keep it painted and maintained properly."

"That would be a great legacy to leave behind, Greta," said Jake. "I think Holman Hall would make a fine community center, especially for families, what with the pond and the barn and all. I know we had a great time playing on the property when we were kids. And it would be a good reminder of what a working farmstead used to be like."

"Yeah, that's what I think, too," Greta agreed. "So if you'll drive me there, I need to go talk with the Historic Preservation Commission staff at the Planning Department in Silver Spring, whenever you've got the time."

"Sure, Greta," Jake said, "you can talk to them this Thursday before the Planning Board hearing."

"Oh..."

"You are going to the hearing, aren't you?" asked Jake.

"I am now," said Greta, chuckling. "Thanks, Jakey. You're a good friend."

"No problem," he replied. "While we're there I can talk with the environmental planners about this whole forest conservation credit deal. I wonder how much the owners get for promising not to cut the trees on their property. Maybe you should have kept Holman Wood and sold off the credits in exchange for not cutting the trees. It might have made a nice little income for you in your old age."

Greta glared back at him. "Don't you dare call me old, Jake Flynn. I could still kick your ass," she threatened, comically, as she walked across her side yard toward her house.

"I'll bet you could, Greta," Jake shouted back at her. "I'll just bet you could." He shook his head and chuckled as he unlocked his own front door and went inside.

Chapter Seven

The beginning of the next week passed quickly for Jake. On Monday he had stopped by the Green Corner Store to work with Marni on writing sample testimony for KRAP members to deliver Thursday at the Planning Board hearing, which Marni typed up as she and Jake composed it. She then posted it on the group's listserv. She also reminded everyone to wear their KRAP buttons to the hearing to show the commissioners on the Planning Board how many folks were organized to oppose this housing subdivision on rural land.

On Tuesday morning, Jake rode his riding mower out of the shed for the first time of the year, and cut his and Greta's lawns. He kept about an acre of his property mowed, mostly out front between the road and the house, plus the side yard between the screened porch and driveway and a small area out back between the clotheslines and shed. The remainder of the five acres he left in natural pasture, where his mother had sown perennial wildflower seeds years ago. When he moved back to the home last May he had noticed Greta laboring to mow her property with a push mower, and offered to cut an acre of her property with his riding mower, too. She had gladly accepted the offer.

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It was late in the afternoon when Jake finished cutting both lawns. The apple tree in his front yard was in full bloom. At one point he'd almost flipped the mower into the drainage ditch that ran alongside the road while shooing away a mockingbird that repeatedly swooped to attack his head whenever he came too close to the apple tree. The male bird had chosen the tree as a nesting site, and it was now his responsibility to defend his territory while awaiting a mate.

After putting the mower back in the shed, Jake headed for the kitchen to fix himself his first iced coffee of the year. The wall phone in the kitchen was ringing when he came in the back door. It was one of the KRAP researchers who reported they thought they had found some interesting information on the Tarheel Paper Company. By searching the county government website, they had discovered a line item in the Department of General Services budget showing a \$3.1 million appropriation in the current and past three fiscal years for contractor services marked "TPC - for transporting and disposing of waste paper."

Jake knew that another company, Empire Waste, was paid to collect recyclable paper, cans and bottles that households and businesses separated from their other trash for regular weekly collection. He guessed this other contractor's fee must be for TPC to haul away and dispose of the recyclable paper that Empire Waste collected and delivered to the county's transfer station in Derwood.

He thanked the KRAP member for a job well done, and asked them to keep looking into the other companies he had mentioned at the group's meeting on Sunday.

"So much for the recycling program paying for itself," Jake thought, while hanging up the phone. "The taxpayers pay somebody to collect our recyclable paper from us, and we pay

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somebody else to haul it away. We probably do the same thing for the aluminum cans and bottles they collect from us."

"So, Mr. Paul Shuster, the county pays you and your Tarheel Paper Company to haul away our waste paper. My question is: just what do you do with all of that paper," Jake wondered aloud, as he stirred the sugar into his iced coffee. "And if you landed the contract starting with the budget approved in May of 2007, why did you just make campaign donations in September last year? I need to check for donations in the previous election cycle, too."

On the computer in his upstairs office, Jake accessed the State Board of Elections database and checked for donations in the four years leading up to the 2006 county elections. He found a \$4,000 donation from Paul Shuster to Councilmember Krupp in June of 2006 and one a month later to Frank Furman, who was then waging his first campaign for the County Executive spot.

"Well, it's no smoking gun," Jake thought to himself. "Companies have been throwing money at elected officials to try and win government contracts since time immemorial. You're spinning your wheels, Jake. None of this is helping you find out who is behind the development of Holman Wood."

Jake shut down his computer in disgust, grabbed a beach towel from the linen closet, and headed out onto the freshly mown backyard to finish his iced coffee while basking in the last of the afternoon sun.

Jake had set aside the next day of the week, Wednesday, to start the vegetable patch for the year. When he was young, his parents had grown a large vegetable garden at the back of the property each year. Greta's mother had always done the same at the rear of her property. After Jake's father passed away, the two widows decided to split the cost and work of a vegetable garden by downsizing and relocating their gardens together on a spot

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straddling the property line. And when Greta moved home after her mother's death, she had carried on the practice of sharing a vegetable patch with Jake's mom. Now Jake and Greta were continuing the tradition.

Jake drove to the Southern States in Gaithersburg late on Wednesday morning to pick up their onion sets, seed potatoes, cabbage plants, and seeds for the other vegetables they would grow in this year's garden. As he drove into the driveway on his return, Greta ran from her porch waving a wide-brimmed straw hat and smiling as if welcoming the victorious troops home from a war. She looked like an aging earth mother transported via time warp from the 1970s, wearing a white peasant blouse, ankle-length floral print cotton skirt, and sandals. She surveyed the assortment of plants and seeds.

Jake and Greta spent the entire afternoon planting row after row of the fifty foot square garden plot. Toward the end, she tired and opted to concentrate on affixing the empty seed packets to sticks, and posting them at the end of the rows to show which rows had been planted with which seeds--lettuce, spinach, basil, cucumbers, yellow squash, zucchini, and tomatoes.

"It looks like a garden, Mr. Flynn," Greta announced to Jake, when they'd finished.

"That it does," he replied.

"I'll call Ned Harker over at Pleasant Acres Farm tomorrow and ask him to bring us a load of his compost," Greta told him. "The stuff is so rich it's as good as gold...and we get it for free."

"Why is that?" Jake asked Greta.

"Ned's dad used to work on Holman Farm as a boy. When he got married my grandfather helped him buy his farm over in Poolesville," she told him. "Ned's brought us free compost every year since he took over running Pleasant Acres from his dad."

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"I guess all we have to do now is sit back, watch it grow, and start eating" Jake said, gathering up the tools they had used.

"Yeah, that's all," Greta laughed. "That is if the rabbits leave us anything to eat. Let's hope there's a good brood of hawks in the area this year, to keep the varmints in check."

"From your mouth to God's ear," he said, heading to his shed with the tools. "I'll see you in the morning. We should leave about ten so we can have our meetings with staff before the afternoon hearing. Sound like a plan?"

"That it does. I'll see you in the morning," Greta hollered, exiting into her house.

Back in his house, Jake grabbed the pouch of cigarette tobacco he had purchased the previous Friday, the Zippo lighter he'd found that had belonged to his father, a pad of lined paper, a pen and his coffee, then headed to the side porch to catch the last rays of afternoon sun while he wrote his testimony for tomorrow's Planning Board hearing.

It was hard for him to focus on writing, however. As he rolled a cigarette, Jake watched the farmer to whom Greta had rented the 130 acres of cropland out back drive his tractor up and down the rows of the field, turning the soil in preparation for this year's planting. And a flock of what seemed like hundreds of robins swept into his back yard to forage for bugs, seeking food to sustain them on their migration north for the summer.

While Jake sat puffing on the ill-shapen homemade smoke and staring at his yard and the field beyond, his mind replayed the scene of the only other time he had testified before the county Planning Board. In September of the previous year he had appeared at the Board's hearing on the draft rewrite of the Germantown master plan, to speak in opposition to the effort to rezone for more housing in the primarily rural area.

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"I grew up in the Germantown area," Jake had told the Board at their hearing last year, "and now I am back living in the family home I inherited from my parents. And I'm here to say that you got the revision of the master plan for this area wrong from the start."

"In the introduction to your rewrite, you state the primary purpose of the plan is to create housing for thousands of new residents coming to this county in the next twenty years. You seem to have forgotten that the main purpose of the current Germantown plan is to preserve the land in this area for agricultural use and as rural open space. That idea now appears as an afterthought in the third paragraph of your new Land Use chapter."

"What happened to your push for smart growth we've heard so much about?" Jake had asked at the hearing last September. "Aren't you supposed to be focusing new jobs and housing near transit centers in the downcounty in order to save upcounty land from sprawl development? Yet here you are, recommending the County Council rezone for sprawl housing in an upcounty agricultural area."

"Forgive me for interrupting, Mr. Flynn," Planning Board Chairman Aldridge Haskins had interjected during Jake's testimony at the hearing last fall, "but I believe there is sufficient acreage in Germantown to both continue farming and create some new housing in the area."

"I couldn't disagree with you more strongly, Mr. Chairman. You're doing a disservice to the Council and to the people of this county," Jake had continued in his attack on the Board at their hearing last fall. "They look on you as the experts in the field of land use planning, but the real experts in the field are the farmers sitting in this audience today...no pun intended. They know that this is the richest agricultural land in the county. And if the crop

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you choose to grow on this land is new housing subdivisions, then we'll have to ship produce from further and further away to put food on our dining room tables. And how much fossil fuel will have to be burned to transport that food to this county from elsewhere?"

Jake remembered the crowd of farmers and Germantown residents applauding this statement when he had testified at that September hearing last year. Planning Board Chairman Haskins had not been pleased with their approving response.

"It sounds like now that you're on board the ship, you want to pull up the ladder and not allow anyone else in the county," Chairman Haskins had said to Jake. The Planning Department staff members who were sitting near the Chairman all chuckled approvingly at his remark. Jake remembered seething with anger, not only at the Chairman's remark but at being laughed at derisively by the toadies on his staff.

"Your petty, personal attack on me doesn't change the fact that you got it wrong in this plan," Jake had snapped back at the Chairman. "You're so wedded to the idea of cramming more housing into this area that it almost sounds like you've got a financial stake in it."

"That's enough, Mr. Flynn," the Chairman said, his own anger showing in the red flush rising up his neck above his shirt collar. "The ethical standards of the members of this Board are not at question here today."

"Well, maybe they should be," Jake spat back, trying to counter what he perceived as the remark of a bully coming from the Chairman. Again the crowd cheered. Jake's verbal sparring may have been disrespectful, but it certainly earned him the respect of the members of the Keep Rural Areas Protected group, especially those who were fellow Germantown residents.

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"That's it, Mr. Flynn. Your three minutes are up," the Chairman stated, trying to contain his anger. "And if I hear another outburst from the audience I will clear the room. This is not a wrestling match where you cheer on the crowd favorite. It is a serious government proceeding, and you will show respect or I will throw you out. Is that understood?" As he spoke, Haskins' anger subsided and he regained his composure.

In a flash the memory was over, and Jake was back on the side porch of his home watching the afternoon sun disappear behind the ridge to the west.

"Oh, yeah, I should get a really warm welcome from the Board tomorrow," Jake muttered sarcastically to himself. "To heck with writing testimony; I'll just wing it at the hearing. I'm having dinner and going to bed early."

He rose from his chair and gathered his belongings.

"It's going to be a chilly one tonight. We'll probably have fog in the morning," Jake mumbled. Before going in to prepare dinner, he scanned the county park across the field, all the way from the parking lot back down Willow Branch Road to the elementary school on the county road, just to be sure there was no tan SUV lurking about.

After dinner, Jake washed the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen, then sat down and paid the bills that had come in the mail that day. Daylight savings time had started the past weekend, so the clock showed the sun setting an hour later than the week before. It was still early enough in the year that it was nearly dark by 8 p.m. By 9 p.m. Jake had finished his last cup of coffee of the day, checked to make sure the doors and windows on the first floor of the house were locked, and headed upstairs to bed.

Chapter Eight

Drifting off toward deep sleep, Jake heard what he thought sounded like the crunch of a car pulling into the gravel driveway. Wanting to stay asleep, however, his mind had reinterpreted it as the crunching sound made by his wicker furniture, and he wove the noise into a dream state fantasy in which he was spending a pleasant morning on the side porch. But when he heard a car door slam, Jake instantly awoke to full consciousness.

His heart raced as he quietly left his bed and crept to the front window of his bedroom. Through the sheer curtains, he could make out the figure of a person hesitantly walking on the paved path from the driveway to the front porch below his window. Even so, he jumped in surprise when the figure knocked on the front door.

Jake silently unlocked the sash lock on the window, then quickly raised the window and shouted, in as deep a voice as he could muster, "Whatever you're after, forget it...I've already called the police and I've got a gun."

The figure spoke, "JM, is that you?"

"Sean?" Jake asked, even though he immediately recognized the voice. It was the roommate he had left behind in the house in

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Wheaton when he'd moved back to his family home on Holman Road last year.

"Yeah, it's me."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Jake demanded, as he raised the screen and stuck his head out the window to glare at the figure below.

"I was out in Clarksburg having dinner with a work buddy and her husband, and thought I'd stop by on the way home and check in on you. I read in the paper about Greta getting shot last week, and I was worried" Sean replied.

"We haven't seen each other or spoken for eleven months, and you decide to just stop by in the middle of the night without calling first?"

"It's quarter of ten, JM...not exactly the middle of the night," said Sean. "Are we going to stand here with you talking to me from a second story window, like Romeo and Juliet, or are you going to come down and let me in?"

"Oh, God" Jake muttered. "Hang on. I'll be right down."

Jake always slept in the nude, and put on his robe and slippers to answer the door. As he descended the stairs, his mind raced with the details of his relationship with Sean.

They had met nearly twelve years ago through Integrity, a Catholic gay social group. Then in his late forties, Jake was not regularly attending mass. But he thought he stood a better chance of meeting a decent guy with good moral standards through the church related group than as a pickup at a gay bar.

Sean and he had hit it off right away, and spent more and more time together until six months into the relationship Sean moved in with him, into the house in Wheaton that Jake had purchased with money left him by his father. Two years later, Jake had put Sean's name on the deed as co-owner, a move that he regretted after they

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split up last year. When Jake moved back home, it was decided Sean could continue to live in the Wheaton house. But they agreed to sell it and split the profit if Sean should ever move.

Jake flipped on the front porch light, then unlocked and opened the door. There stood Sean Fitzpatrick, looking as sexually attractive to Jake as the day they had met--six feet tall with a build that made even men look twice, light brown wavy hair, dimples when he smiled, and a twinkle in his eye that was brighter than any light bulb.

"Damn," Jake muttered, as Sean entered the living room, "come on in." Without waiting for any social pleasantries, Jake headed to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. A visit from his ex-lover was going to require a clear head, and that required a mug of good, strong coffee.

"Well, 'hi' to you, too," said Sean, following Jake into the kitchen. He was familiar with the house, since he'd accompanied Jake many times during past trips to visit with Jake's mother.

"Let me look at you, JM," Sean said, as Jake filled the coffee pot with water from the tap. "You look...sleepy."

"Fuck you," Jake replied.

"And you smell like you're smoking again."

"Fuck you."

"At least give me a hug," Sean said, moving closer and pressing his body against Jake's back, his arms encircling Jake's waist from behind.

"Take your hands off me," Jake snapped. "Don't go there."

"Don't go there?" said Sean, backing away. "We were together for over ten years. For God's sake, JM, I miss you."

"Well, you should have thought of that before you started messing around with that bartender from Silver Spring," Jake said,

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hitting the button on the coffee grinder which he knew would make so much noise that Sean could not immediately respond.

When Jake had finished setting up the coffee pot and turned it on, he turned around, leaning back on the counter, and stared silently at Sean.

"How's Greta?" Sean asked.

"She's okay."

"And you?" he asked more gently. "How are you doing since your mom died?"

"I'm okay." Jake replied.

There was a long silence. Then Sean said quietly, "It was a beautiful service."

"You were there?"

"I sat in the back. I didn't want to upset you."

"I really could have used your support," Jake said, as his body convulsed in sobs. A deep well of tears gushed forth releasing the sadness over his mother's death and the breakup with his lover, which he had kept hidden until now.

Sean moved to Jake and threw his arms around him, holding him tightly. "I know, babe, I know," Sean murmured, tears filling his eyes, too.

After the tears had dried and the coffee was poured, the former life partners sat at the dining room table and had the discussion they should have had months before.

"Why were you seeing that bartender?" Jake began the questioning.

"I guess I felt abandoned. I always relied on you to help me escape being absorbed with my career concerns, and suddenly I found my play mate wasn't available," Sean explained. "You were here, spending more and more time up here caring for your mom."

"How did you meet him?" Jake asked.

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"Barrett...he has a name," Sean said.

"I don't want to know that," Jake spat back. "How did you meet him?"

"I met him at a teacher's retirement party held at the restaurant in Silver Spring where Barrett tends bar," Sean explained. "By the end of the evening, I found myself talking to him, sharing the things we used to enjoy but had no time for anymore. He said he like to bowl when he was a kid. I said I liked bowling. The next thing I knew, he met me after work one Friday evening to go bowling at Strike Bowl near my school in Bethesda."

"Did you sleep with him?" Jake asked.

"No."

"Then why didn't you tell me about him?"

"I suppose because it felt like I was betraying you, like I was having the kind of fun with another man that I should be having with you," Sean said. "Plus, I felt guilty for not spending as much time visiting your mom and supporting you as I thought I should."

"Well, there was a simple fix for that," Jake retorted.

"That's water over the dam," Sean said. "Why didn't you ask about Barrett, when you heard his phone message postponing our movie date?"

"At the time I didn't feel like I had the energy to deal with the scene it would create," Jake surmised. "I was already losing my mother to cancer, no matter how hard I tried to help her fight it off. I didn't want to deal with another loss that was out of my control. So I never asked you what was going on with this other man. I didn't want to know."

"More than a decade down the drain," Sean remarked.

"I thought it would hurt less if I controlled the decision, if I was the one to end it," Jake said.

"Did it?" Sean asked.

"No," Jake said. "Are you still seeing this bartender?"

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"No. I told him that spending time with him had messed up the most important thing in my life, and I broke off the relationship," Sean said. "After that I threw myself into my work to block out how lonely I was at home. I feel like a monk who gets let out of the monastery to go to his day job. Are you lonely? Do you miss me?"

"Things were a bit more mixed up for me," Jake replied. "First, I had the death of my mother to deal with."

"I can only imagine, since both my folks are still living," Sean said.

"The odd thing is that when mom died, my last surviving parent, I felt like an orphan," Jake said. "At fifty-nine years of age, I felt like I had been abandoned to go through the rest of my life alone. And not having you around didn't help that feeling. But I was surrounded by friends I've known my whole life and I was back living in the house I grew up in. That was a comfort. I know the layout of this house so well that I could probably lose my eyesight and still get around just fine. But I had this nagging fear I was doomed to follow in my mother's footsteps, a lonely old single pining after a lost love."

"I don't want us to stay apart, JM. I love you," Sean said.

Jake reached out and grasped Sean's hand as the two men leaned toward each other and touched foreheads. They stayed like that for a time with their eyes closed, listening to each other's breathing.

Eventually the discussion wound down and it was decided that it was too late for Sean to drive back into town that night. The pair moved upstairs to Jake's bedroom. Even though it was nearly midnight, the male mockingbird that had attacked Jake when he was mowing the lawn was now perched on the fireplace chimney of the house, delivering a concert of the calls of other birds it had learned to imitate. The chimney acted as an amplifier, and the

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fireplace in Jake's bedroom blasted the concert at a volume that rivaled the speakers at a rock concert.

"Where is that noise coming from?" Sean asked, disrobing for bed.

The mockingbird was going through his entire repertoire of impressions of other birds: robin, crow, blue jay, house wren, catbird, cardinal.

Jake chuckled. "It's a male mockingbird who's decided to nest in the apple tree out front this year. He must be sitting on top of the chimney giving a performance."

"Why do they imitate other bird calls?" Sean asked.

"Maybe it's to keep rivals from settling here--to make them think there's already a bunch of birds living on the property." Jake guessed.

"But why is he singing in the middle of the night?" Sean wondered.

"I don't know. They usually serenade at sunset," Jake explained, settling in bed. "Maybe he's chosen tonight to advertise for a mate."

"Leave it to sex to ruin a good night's sleep," Sean said, climbing into the bed next to Jake.

The two men did not get much sleep that night.

Chapter Nine

It had been a cool night, and in the morning a thick fog enveloped all of Holman Farm and the surrounding area, just as Jake had predicted the afternoon before. He and Sean shared a quick breakfast and a fresh pot of coffee. Then Sean borrowed a tie and prepared for the commute into town, to his job as principal of Pleasantdale Elementary School in Bethesda.

Jake threw on his robe and walked Sean to the driveway, giving him a kiss before he got into his car for the typically slow commute down I-270 to the Beltway. Sean turned on his car's headlights because of the fog, lighting up Jake's pick-up truck parked in front of his car.

As he backed out of the driveway, Sean shouted, "What's that under your truck? Did you duct tape a patch over a hole in your muffler?"

"What?" He had only heard the words 'duct tape' and 'muffler'. "Call me when you get home from work," Jake called out, as Sean drove away down Holman Road.

"Well, that happened, as the kids say these days," Jake muttered to himself as he walked back into the house. Even though he and Greta were scheduled to leave for Silver Spring in just over three

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hours, he decided to go back to bed and try and grab a couple hours more sleep.

When Jake woke up for the second time Thursday morning, he shaved, grabbed a quick shower, and dressed in a casual but nice outfit he felt was appropriate for an average citizen who was testifying at a Planning Board hearing. At ten o'clock on the dot, he exited his side porch door, locking it behind him, and headed toward his truck.

"Hey, sailor, can I get a ride?" Greta called out. She was sitting on the bench on her side porch with her purse perched on her lap, like an old lady waiting for a bus.

"Sure, toots, I think I'm going your way" Jake replied. "Hop in."

Greta stepped down off her porch, striding toward Jake's truck and swinging her purse around in a giant circle with her right arm. In standard Greta fashion, a few yards from the truck she lost control of the purse and it went flying ahead of her, hitting the ground and spilling out its contents.

"Oh, goldarnit," she said. "Hang on, Jakey. I dropped my purse."

"Typical," he thought to himself, as he rounded the truck to help her pick up her strewn valuables.

"Oh, I think my keys went under your truck," Greta moaned.

"No problem, I'll get 'em" Jake replied, as he grabbed a piece of out cardboard from the truck's cab to kneel on, so he didn't get dirt on the knees of his pants.

As he knelt and retrieved Greta's keys, Jake spotted the duct tape on the truck's muffler that Sean had mentioned when pulling out of the driveway earlier that morning.

"What the hell is this?" Jake mumbled, shifting both his body and the cardboard back behind the rear wheel, to get a better look. "It looks like a road flare taped to my muffler." But as he leaned under the back of the truck for a closer inspection, Jake realized that it was not a road flare.

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Jake stood up and handed his neighbor her keys, and calmly announced, "There's been a change of plans. We're going to be leaving for Silver Spring a little later than expected. Someone has taped a stick of dynamite to my muffler."

"My Lord, Jake," Greta said, blurting out the first thing that popped into her head. "Is someone is trying to kill you?"

"Yeah," he replied slowly, trying his best to inject some tiny bit of levity into the situation. "Let me repeat: someone has taped a stick of dynamite to my truck's muffler." Then his mind kicked into gear.

"All right," Jake said. "This is not going to stop me from testifying at today's hearing. I'll get a bucket and some sand," he told Greta as he walked to his backyard shed, "and I'll use gloves and cut the tape, in case there are fingerprints. Then I'll bury the dynamite in the sand, and leave it in the shed until we get back home. Sound like a plan, Greta?"

"Sounds good to me, Jakey," she said, "but then you're handling the dynamite."

Returning with the tools he needed, Jake told Greta to move away from the truck. She went back to her side porch and resumed her earlier position, sitting on the bench with her purse perched in her lap, to watch the delicate operation as it played out before her. Once the dynamite and accompanying duct tape were removed from the truck's muffler and buried in the bucket full of sand, and the bucket was safely stashed in the shed, the neighbors finally boarded Jake's truck for the ride to Silver Spring.

The two rode in silence down the county road, and south on Interstate 270 most of the way to the Beltway, before Greta finally spoke.

"You're awful quiet, Jakey," she said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah...no...I don't know," Jake said, Greta's questions serving as permission for him to voice his racing thoughts. "The image of

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that stick of dynamite taped to the muffler is stuck in my head. I didn't even know they made dynamite with fuses like that anymore. It didn't look real, like it was from an animated kid's show. You know, like something the coyote would use in a Roadrunner cartoon...like some overgrown firecracker on steroids. And it's so insidious...just sitting there waiting to explode. And we're driving along, oblivious to the danger when at some point it reaches the right temperature and the fuse ignites. Or the dynamite just reaches a point of instability and blows us to smithereens. It's so impersonal, so cold...a rifle shot from a distance, and dynamite taped to the muffler. It's cowardly. They could at least have the courage to confront me directly. This is not supposed to happen in civilized society. It's frightening...it's just frightening, you know?"

"I know, I know" Greta replied, then softly added, "quiet was good, too."

Jake roared with laughter.

Chapter Ten

When Jake and Greta reached the Planning Commission headquarters in Silver Spring, Greta headed to the Historic Preservation Commission office to discuss with staff the process for having Holman Hall declared an official county historic resource. And Jake headed to the Environmental Division to ask about the 'offsite forest conservation credits' process, and to get a list of the properties that had registered to sell credits in exchange for retaining wooded acreage in perpetuity.

After their meetings, the two met up in the garden outside the headquarters building, and headed to a diner across Georgia Avenue to grab some lunch. The eatery was an original metal diner from the 1940s, shaped like a railroad car. A counter with swiveling stools for diners ran down the middle, with the grill and kitchen on the back side and booth seating under the windows to the front. Years ago, the owners had built a cinderblock addition onto one end that doubled the seating area.

As Greta and Jake entered the crowded diner they heard a woman's voice call out "Hey, you two, over here." It was Marni Pearsall, sitting alone in a booth near the front door, her golden hair shimmering in the sunlight that streamed through the plate

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glass window next to her. She had closed the Green Corner Store for the afternoon, leaving a note on the front door that read 'Gone to Planning Board to give 'em heck.' Jake and Greta joined Marni in her booth.

"Marni, what are you doing here so early?" Jake asked. "The hearing doesn't start for an hour."

"Well, Big Jake, I'll tell you," Marni replied. "Every time I get anywhere near Silver Spring I stop in this diner and grab a bite. They've got the best grilled cheese sandwiches, french fries, and chocolate milk shakes in the county." Sure enough, that was the order laid out on the table in front of Marni. "What are you two doing here so early?"

"Jake and I had some questions for Planning Department staff, so we figured we'd kill two birds with one trip, so to speak," Greta told Marni.

The two latecomers ordered grill cheeses, french fries and chocolate milk shakes, in deference to Marni. Jake pulled out the list titled "Offsite Forest Conservation Credit Properties" he had gotten from the Environmental staff person with whom he'd met.

"You're not going to tell Marni about this morning?" Greta asked Jake.

"Well, I hadn't planned on announcing it to everyone," Jake said, "but I had an overnight guest last night. Sean stopped by..."

"No," Greta said, cutting him off. "I'm talking about the truck."

"Oh, right...the truck."

"Wait, Sean stayed with you last night?" Greta asked.

"Yeah, I thought you had heard him leaving this morning," Jake said. "I thought that's why you brought it up."

"Jakey, I could sleep through a tornado. I didn't know Sean came to see you last night," Greta said. "I'm talking about the dynamite you found under your truck."

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"Dynamite?" Marni exclaimed too loudly.

"Whoa, pipe down, Marni. You don't yell 'dynamite' in a crowded diner unless you want to get arrested by Homeland Security. Look, either by luck or by the grace of God, just before Greta and I drove off to come down here this morning I discovered a stick of dynamite taped to the muffler on my truck. Don't spread it around," Jake told the two women. "Somebody is playing for keeps, but I'm not sure who we should tell."

"Jeez, you've got to go to the police with this, Big Jake," said Marni.

"I probably will," Jake replied, "but I didn't have time to do anything this morning before we came to Silver Spring."

Greta and Jake's food arrived, and the three sat silently as the waitress placed the order on the table. When she'd left, Jake said "Right now, I just want to put that aside and focus on this list I got while I eat. Okay?" The two women nodded their assent. "I want to try and figure out who stands to make money off this development deal, and right now that includes the guy that sells 'offsite Forest Credits' to the developer, whoever that may be."

"The Forest Conservation Law is pretty complicated," Jake continued. "First we need to calculate how many credits the developer would have to buy, if they wanted to clear cut all 140 acres of trees in Holman Wood."

Jake poured over the notes that he had taken in his meeting with the staffer from the Environmental Division. "God, my handwriting is so bad I should have been a doctor," he mumbled to himself. The two women laughed, while eating.

"Okay, here it is. They have to buy two acres of credits for every one acre that's cut, for up to twenty-five percent of the tract area," Jake stated, pulling a napkin from the dispenser on the table on which to write his calculations. "Then they need a quarter acre of

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credits for each additional acre that's cut on the remaining seventy-five percent of the tract. Math was never my strong point, but I think that totals ninety-six and a quarter acres of credits they will need."

"Could they have made the calculation any more complicated?" asked Marni.

"Keep going. We're right with you, Jakey," Greta tossed in, then both women laughed.

"Now, I want to see if there's a property registered to sell offsite conservation credits that is big enough for the developer to purchase all of the credits from," Jake said, going back to the computer print-out he had received in his meeting that morning. "What the heck? It's just a list of nine properties identified by Map Number and Parcel Number. How do I find out where the properties are located and how many acres they are?"

"Not a problem, Big Jake," said Marni, who had now finished eating, as she reached into her enormous black leather saddle bag of a purse and pulled out her laptop computer. "The diner has wi-fi computer access for its customers, so we can access the State Department of Assessments and Taxation database and find out just where those properties are located and their total acreage."

As she was talking, Marni cleared her dishes to one side of the table, flipped open her laptop, and set about logging on to the internet and accessing the SDAT database. Jake and Greta silently ate in astonishment at the production taking place on the table in front of them.

"Wow," Jake finally said, "you ask a simple question, you get a parade."

"All right, I'm in the database," said Marni. "Give me the Map and Parcel Numbers for the first property."

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They worked through the list of nine properties, with Marni reading off the address, owner and acreage for each one and Jake making notes on his list. It was the information for the last property on the list that drew the attention of all three diners.

"Address: 5801 Damascus Road, Etchison, Maryland; Owners: Jock and Laura Metheney; Size: 200 acres," said Marni.

"That's Jock, the cop, and the County Executive's daughter," Jake mused. "This is the property Regina Scarborough told us about at the meeting last Sunday. But how do we know how many acres are forested? How many credits could they sell?"

"That I can't tell you," said Marni. "They can't sell credits for land they cleared to build their house. But they've got to have at least ninety-six and a quarter left."

Jake looked up and noticed the clock over the grill.

"Oh, shoot, we've got to get back across Georgia Avenue to the hearing. It's gonna start soon."

Chapter Eleven

Nearly all eighty seats were taken when Jake, Greta and Marni arrived at the Planning Department auditorium for the hearing. The word had spread like wildfire through the farming community that folks should come and show their support for preserving the county's rural land. More than two dozen members of the Keep Rural Areas Protected coalition were in attendance, all proudly displaying their KRAP buttons on their clothing.

Jake spotted the local Madame Defarge, Clara Dutton, on the far side of the room. She sat knitting next to her friend from the community of Sunshine, Regina Scarborough. A farmer in overalls courteously moved over one seat, without being asked, so that Jake, Marni and Greta could have three seats together.

The five members of the Planning Board were seated at the opposite end of the auditorium from the entrance on a horseshoe shaped dais raised about one foot above the audience level. The crowd was separated from the commissioners by two tables reserved for reporters from the media, one on each side of a center aisle. And right in front of the dais, within the horseshoe, was a large oval shaped table around which witnesses sat to deliver their testimony.

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As Jake settled in his chair, he began scanning the auditorium to see who he recognized. He noticed Montgomery County Police Officer Jock Metheney, standing in front of the dais and leaning over it, talking to the Chairman of the Planning Board. Next to Metheney was Geoffrey Kaye, the land use attorney that Jake had visited in Rockville to try and find out who was behind FTA LLC.

As the Board Chairman banged his gavel to bring the room to order, Officer Metheney turned to leave the room and spotted Jake in the audience. He glared at Jake as he walked up the side aisle toward the doors of the auditorium, then left.

"You're right," Marni whispered to Jake. "Metheney must be trying to sell the Forest Credits on his property to the developer."

The Planning Board Chairman, Aldridge Haskins III, had done a double hitch in the Army following graduation from college in the late 1960s, serving in Laos and Viet Nam. He was a tall and robust, bald man in his mid-sixties, who looked curiously like the late President Dwight Eisenhower on steroids. He began the afternoon hearing.

"Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen," Chairman Haskins began, "this afternoon the Board will consider the Project Plan application for Holman Wood. Mr. David Parker is the expert on staff assigned to the case. We will first hear the staff recommendation, after which the attorney for the Applicant, Mr. Geoffrey Kaye, will present the project. We will then allow other citizens to testify, after which Applicant's attorney may rebut opposition testimony if they wish. Mr. Parker, are you ready to begin your presentation?"

"Yes, Mr. Chairman. Thank you," replied David Parker, a slight, wiry young man who looked like he had graduated from college only a couple of minutes ago. Jake amusedly observed that Parker was trying to pull off the unshaven look of day-old beard growth

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which was the fashion of the day with male Hollywood celebrities, no doubt in an effort to look more mature and masculine.

"Applicant's project is called Holman Wood Subdivision," Mr. Parker began. "The project is in conformance with the area master plan recommendation for residential development, and would allow up to one hundred one acre building lots for up to one hundred single-family detached dwelling units. At present, the one-hundred and forty acre subject property is entirely wooded; but Applicant intends to clear cut all of the trees from the site. The requirements of the county's Forest Conservation Law will be met through the purchase of offsite Forest Credits. Staff calculates that the Applicant must purchase ninety-six and one-quarter acres worth of offsite Forest Credits in exchange for clear cutting the site, and they have identified the owner of a property registered with the program who is willing to sell those credits."

"That's not right," someone shouted. Jake recognized the voice as that of Clara Dutton.

"Order in the room, please," Chairman Haskins said, banging his gavel.

"But it's not right," Clara continued, loudly. "Law states they'd have to replant that many acres on the site. The number doubles if offsite credits are used."

"Order, please," the Chairman said, banging his gavel again. "Mr. Parker, is the insistent gentelady in the audience correct? If all conservation is provided offsite, must the Applicant purchase double the number of acres of credits that you have calculated?"

David Parker seemed pale and visibly shaken. "We will investigate the claim, if the Chair will allow."

"Of course, Mr. Parker," Haskins boomed. "Take your time and get it right." Then the staff members stood in a huddle around the

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seated Parker, whispering to one another for several minutes. Finally, the caucus broke up.

"Mr. Chairman, the information informally shared with the Board by the audience member is correct," Parker admitted. "It seems the Applicant must purchase credits protecting one hundred and ninety two and one-half acres of forest on an offsite property. But we believe that the property owner the Applicant selected still has sufficient acreage to sell all of the credits needed for this project."

"Can you tell us who that is?" an audience member shouted.

"We must preserve order," Chairman Haskins said, banging his gavel once more. "It is not necessary for staff to specify to the Board the owner of the property selling the necessary Forest Credits to this project; we are only considering approval of the project."

"We'd sure like to know," someone else in the audience yelled.

"Is it Jock Metheny?" Jake found himself shouting.

"Order, order," Haskins boomed. The room was now abuzz with dozens of conversations between audience members.

"This is fun," Greta whispered to Jake. "I'm glad I came."

"This Board does not know the identity of the property owner or owners who will end up selling Forest Credits for this project, and we will not discuss it further. Suffice it to say that if this project is approved, the required number of Forest Credits will be purchased or the project can not be built," said Board Chairman Haskins. "We will now hear from the Applicant's attorney, Mr. Geoffrey Kaye."

Kaye walked up from the audience and took the center seat at the witness table.

"Mr. Kaye, please inform the Board of the relevant details of this development project, as you see them, which argue for approval of the plan," said Haskins.

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Kaye launched into a rehearsed five minute presentation of the merits of the project. He explained that the project met the recommendations in the master plan recently approved by the County Council, as well as the standards of the zoning applied to the property. And he submitted a memorandum from the county school system stating that there was sufficient capacity in the local public schools to accommodate any new students who would live in the one hundred proposed homes.

Attorney Kaye also presented the Board with a report from the traffic engineer he had hired which asserted that “there would be little if any increase in traffic on the adjacent county road, in morning or afternoon rush hours, from vehicle trips generated by the planned housing units.” Kaye accompanied his talk with a slide presentation complete with artist renderings of the proposed subdivision that showed children playing in the yards of the finished homes and couples walking down sidewalks lined with mature trees, a size any newly planted trees would not attain for ten to fifteen years.

When Kaye finished his presentation, Planning Board Chairman Aldridge Haskins announced, “We will now hear from the citizens. Each individual is allotted three minutes in which to address the Board. The persons in the first group are Mrs. Regina Scarborough, Mr. Jake Flynn, Bert Cantrell, and Marni Green representing the Keep Rural Areas Protected group.” As he spoke, the group moved forward and took seats at the witness table. “Mrs. Scarborough, when you’re ready.”

“My name is Mrs. Regina Scarborough, your honor, and I live in Sunshine,” Regina said, leaning forward to speak into the microphone that sat on the table in front of her.

“I’m not a judge,” Haskins interjected. “You can call me Mr. Chairman.”

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Laughter rippled through the audience.

"Okay...Mr. Chairman," she said. Then she stopped, placed her purse that had been in her lap on the table next to her, leaned over and poured herself a paper cup of water from the pitcher provided for witnesses, and took a drink. "Sorry, I was getting a little dry."

Again, laughter rippled through the audience.

"I came here today to tell this Board that there is something wrong with the Forest Conservation Law in this county," Regina said. "I watched as a builder took down all of the trees so he could build new houses on a twenty-five acre parcel near my home. All the builder had to do was buy credits from the owner of another wooded property who promised not to cut down some trees on his land. Well, that other property was already wooded so the county didn't get acres of new trees to replace those that were cut. And that other property is not in my community. We lost twenty-five acres of forest in Sunshine. Protecting the trees in somebody else's community doesn't help us. This law doesn't work. That's all I came to say. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Scarborough," Chairman Haskins said. "Mr. Flynn is next."

"My name is Jake Flynn. You all probably remember me from the fight over the master plan that took place last year," Jake began. "I live in a house across the road from Holman Wood. I grew up there until I left for college, and moved back after my parents died. We know those woods have been there at least since 1911, when my neighbor Greta Holman's grandfather purchased the land for Holman Farm...and probably a lot longer than that. There are deer, wild turkey, rabbits, woodchucks, foxes and a lot more living in those woods. And if you allow somebody to cut the trees down to build houses for people, then the animals will lose their homes. Where will they go?"

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"My neighbor Greta is here with me today. She's too shy to come up here and talk to you," Jake continued. "But she told me that she agreed to sell Holman Wood because she thought the county Forest Conservation Law would protect it and not allow somebody to cut it down. I grew up playing in those woods. If you allow them to be destroyed, then where will the kids living in the new houses play? They won't have the chance that I did to get outside and experience nature first hand. They will be playing on landscaped lawns just like the kids in the downcounty suburbs do, and might as well not be living in a rural area.

"Your Rules of Procedure state that the Planning Board will hear testimony on development project plans from all interested parties. But that's just not possible, is it? The parties that have the greatest stake in this issue--the trees and wildlife that live in Holman Wood--they can't be here to present testimony to this Board. They can't afford the five hundred dollar an hour attorney to represent them like the developer of this project can. They have no voice, no say in the matter. They are the silent victims of your decision.

"You will probably approve this project because, for whatever reason, you and the County Council approved a plan last year to create more housing in this area. But before you make your decision, I want you to consider that there is already housing here...just not for people. Before you vote, I want you to consider not only what might be gained if you approve this project, but also what will be lost."

"Thank you, Mr. Flynn," said the Board Chairman, "but I don't believe the State Growth Plan mentions preserving housing for woodland creatures."

As was their custom, the Planning Department staff members in attendance all laughed at the Chairman's sarcastic remark.

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"The Plan does, however, recommend creating housing for the next generation of the state's human residents," Chairman Haskins added. "Mr. Bert Cantrell is next."

Bert Cantrell was a farmer in his late fifties who had worked a one-hundred and sixty acre farm in Goshen for over thirty years. In his plain spoken manner, he urged the Planning Board to keep the rural areas of the county available for farming.

"Mr. Chairman, I fail to see the relevance of this testimony," said one of the female Board members.

"Now, now, Madame Commissioner," Chairman Haskins chided, "a witness may use their three minutes to say anything to this Board that they wish. They could read from the phone book if they so desired, although it may not be the best use of the Board's time."

"Thank you, Mr. Cantrell," said Chair Haskins. "Next is Mrs. Marni Green."

"My name is Marni Green. I am the coordinator for the Keep Rural Areas Protected network, and I'm sure you remember me from last year's master plan fight, too," Marni began. "You know what's wrong with the Forest Conservation Law? It authorizes the continuing loss of forestland in this county. In exchange for cutting down one hundred and forty acres of trees, this developer has to preserve one hundred and ninety-some acres of forest on somebody else's property that are already wooded. Like Ms. Scarborough told you, we will still have lost Holman Wood. The developer should have to plant one hundred and forty acres of trees some place there aren't already trees.

"Did you know that the forest canopy covered forty-eight percent of the land area of Montgomery County in 1973," Marni continued, "but by the year 2003 that number had dropped to twenty-seven percent? You should be trying to strengthen the FCL, not continue to apply it with all of its flaws. Holman Wood

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is a precious resource that you should be trying to protect, not destroy. It's not just home to wildlife, but it's also an integral part of the Willow Branch watershed. Rain falling in the woods is filtered and percolates down into the water table, feeding the headwater springs of the stream. If you cover over too much land in the watershed, then you risk turning it from a continuous to an intermittent flow stream. And the upcounty forests are the lungs of this county. They filter pollution and allow you downcounty suburbanites to breathe cleaner air.

"And what about the developers?" Marni asked, gathering steam as she spoke. "Who are they? We don't know because they're hiding behind a limited liability corporation. I think that's pretty suspicious. And now it looks like the County Executive's daughter and son-in-law could benefit financially from selling forest credits to the project. This whole thing stinks worse than my granddaddy's old hunting jacket. It's a sin and a crime. You should all be fired if you approve this project. Oh, and by the way, Mr. Chairman, the State Growth Plan also recommends preserving rural areas."

The staff members and the Planning Board members on the dais sat stunned, glancing back and forth at each other as if puzzled about how to proceed. Chairman Haskins broke the silence.

"Well, that was most informative," Haskins said. "However, the issue before this Board at the moment is not the effectiveness of the county's Forest Conservation Law. Neither is the Board tasked with uncovering the identity of the developers."

Once again the room buzzed with whispered conversations between audience members.

"This Board, like lady Justice, must be blind in the application of the law. All that matters is whether this project adheres to the guidance in the master plan and the standards of the zone. Now, I

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will make this easy and quick for all parties," the Chair said, sternly. "How many others are here to testify before this Board?"

Eleven members of Keep Rural Areas Protected raised their hands.

"Of those with their hands raised, how many have something new to offer that is different from what the Board heard from this first panel?" Chairman Haskins asked.

All eleven audience members lowered their hands.

"Then the Board is finished taking testimony on this project application," the Chair ruled. "Mr. Kaye now has the opportunity to rebut."

Jake could feel hope drain from the audience like air escaping a balloon. The crowd was silent while Geoff Kaye, the Applicant's attorney, offered his rebuttal of the opposition testimony, then the Board began its consideration of the merits of the plan. The realization that approval of the plan was inevitable rolled over the crowd like a steamroller crushing eggs.

"What's the pleasure of the Board?" Chairman Haskins finally asked his fellow Planning Board Commissioners. When no one spoke up, he prompted, "Do I hear a motion to approve this application?"

"So moved," said one Board member.

"I second the motion," said another.

"Regrettably, I have urgent business which is unavoidable," Chairman Haskins announced unexpectedly. "The Vice Chair will preside in my absence."

With that, the Chairman rose from his seat on the dais and strode down the side aisle to the rear exit, leaving the audience and his fellow Commissioners puzzled. But the Vice Chair quickly recovered by calling for a roll call vote, and with a quick four-to-nothing vote and a bang of the gavel by the Vice Chairman the plan was approved.

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The reporter from the *Montgomery Courier* slammed shut her laptop, gathered up her bags, and dashed from the auditorium.

Outside after the hearing a crowd of KRAP members gathered around Jake in the parking lot, looking for guidance as to what their next move should be. Regina Scarborough and Clara Dutton stood nearby.

"It looks like the developer has some friends in county government that want to see this project built," Jake told the crowd, shaking his head in disgust. "It doesn't seem fair. But thanks for coming today, everyone. We'll keep working until we figure a way to save Holman Wood from being destroyed."

The crowd half-heartedly cheered, not knowing whether to believe Jake or not. Then folks headed to their cars to leave. Clara Dutton and Regina Scarborough waited until everyone but Jake, Greta and Marni had gone, and then walked up to Jake.

"I'm sorry we couldn't be more help today," Regina said.

"No, you were fine," Jake replied. "And Clara, you ruffled some feathers by making the developer buy twice the number of Forest Credits as the Planning staff calculated. You two have been a big help. I thank you both. Now you be careful on your way home."

When the two ladies from Sunshine had left, Jake, Greta and Marni went into a huddle.

"Well, this has been a real bummer," Marni said. "At least one thing is clear, though. KRAP is going to have to push the County Council to strengthen the Forest Conservation Law. Now can you tell me why Chairman Haskins left the room before the vote on the plan?"

"I don't know," Jake replied. "And why was Jock the Cop, the County Executive's son-in-law, here today? What was he discussing with Chairman Haskins? That's the third time now that I've seen him someplace he wouldn't normally go. There must be more going on here than meets the eye."

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Jake stopped talking and appeared to be staring at two pre-school children running around the playground equipment in the neighborhood park across Spring Street.

"Are you okay, Jakey?" Greta asked.

"Yeah, sure," Jake said, snapping back to the reality of the conversation. "Look, we'll talk again later, after I've had time to digest all this. Thanks for everything, Marni. You were great today, especially the bit about your granddaddy's stinky old hunting jacket."

"He never hunted. He liked to fish," said Marni, with a twinkle in her eye. "But those jackasses don't know that."

"Well, it was a good line," said Jake. "Drive safe."

Jake checked the muffler under his truck before Greta and he got in for the ride home to Germantown.

Chapter Twelve

For hours on Friday morning Jake Flynn sat dejectedly sipping coffee and smoking cigarettes on his side porch, dressed in a faded flannel shirt and an old, faded pair of blue jeans. The male mockingbird sat high up in the apple tree out front, warbling out his impressions of other birds. And Jake stared blankly as the farmer who rented the field out back drove his tractor up and down the rows, planting seed for this year's corn crop.

Not only had the project plan for Holman Wood Subdivision been approved the day before, but Jake had a frustrating phone conversation with Sean in the evening. Although the two wanted to get back together, Jake did not want to live in Wheaton anymore. And Sean had no desire to commute from Germantown so long as he was still working as principal at the school in Bethesda.

Around eleven in the morning, the Postal Service truck drove up Holman Road and delivered mail to the boxes in front of Greta's and Jake's homes. The truck turned around in the driveway of Holman Hall, and the driver tooted his horn as he headed back out toward the county road. Jake waved apathetically from the porch, certain the driver had not seen him do it.

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"Might as well see if there's any other bad news in the mail," Jake mumbled to himself, rising and exiting the side porch. As he walked down the driveway toward the mailbox by the road, the mockingbird flew silently from the apple tree and attacked his head, coming so close that the bird actually picked at Jake's hair with his beak.

"Son of a bitch," Jake yelled, jumping wildly and waving his arms around his head as he continued to the mail box. "I get it...it's your front yard. But we're going to have to learn to share because I live here, too, buddy," he explained, scanning the skies and shouting as if the bird would understand him.

A postcard in the mail grabbed his attention. It read: "Have information you need. Only trust telling you in person." It was simply signed "Cynthia."

Jake rushed over and knocked on Greta's front door. She answered the door wearing a white silk Japanese robe with gold embroidery and carrying a watering can with which she'd been watering her half-dead house plants.

"Pack a bag," he instructed her. "I've got to go on a short trip, and I don't trust leaving you here all alone on Holman Road."

"Slow down there, Jakey," Greta said. "Where are we going?"

"We are not going anywhere," he replied. "I am going on a little road trip. And you are going to stay with a very nice man who lives in a very nice house in Wheaton."

"Tres exotique," Greta exclaimed.

"I'm going to run home and throw some things together. I'll meet you at my truck in five minutes," he said. "Oh, and leave a light on to make it look like you're at home."

"I'm game. Nothing like plenty of advanced warning," Greta said, putting the watering can down on the living room floor next to where she stood. "See you in five," she said, rushing up the stairs toward her bedroom.

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Jake ran home and into his kitchen, and filled a tote bag with bottled water and half a dozen cans of 'Mr. Brown Coffee,' a thick, sludgy drink of espresso and sweetened condensed milk, like the coffee served in Vietnamese restaurants. Then he raced upstairs to his bedroom and grabbed a light jacket from his closet and a pair of bikini briefs from his dresser. "You never know when you'll need clean underwear," he mumbled to himself. Next he went into his office and retrieved Cynthia Nichols' phone number in Wrightsville Beach which he had gotten from directory assistance in North Carolina. Then he headed out the side door to his truck, locking the door behind him.

Greta emerged from her house dressed in a pair of black capri pants and a short black jacket over a white blouse, carrying a small wicker overnight case. She wore dark sunglasses and a wide-brimmed straw hat with black scarf straps which she'd tied in a big bow under her chin.

"Miss Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn," Jake called. "Your limousine awaits."

"Oh, what the hell good is life if you're not having fun," Greta said, getting into the truck. "So, the game's afoot. Tell me all about it as we travel to this mysterious place called Wheaton."

Jake snorted out a laugh as he backed the truck out of the driveway and drove off down Holman Road toward the county road. It was already close to noon on Friday, and if he didn't get out of the Washington area quickly he would get stuck in afternoon rush hour traffic. As it was, it would take Jake about seven hours to get to Wrightsville Beach after he had dropped off Greta. When they reached the house in Wheaton, he called Sean at his school in Bethesda to tell him he had a house guest for the night. Then Jake got back in his truck and headed out alone toward the Beltway and whatever lay ahead.

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After work on Friday afternoon Councilmember Bob Krupp held his usual informal meetings with special interest lobbyists over drinks at the Golden Lion restaurant in Gaithersburg. For decades the Golden Lion had been the gathering place at which insider information was shared over cocktails among high level officials from all branches of county government. And over the years scores of campaign donation checks had been pushed across the restaurant's tables into the waiting hands of politicians who the donors hoped would prove to be willing allies when elected.

On this particular day, Krupp met with a small parade of those seeking his advice or help in securing special treatment on issues-- a cell phone company seeking approval to locate a monopole transmission tower in a rural location, a child day care center owner hoping for a Special Exception to allow more children to be enrolled than permitted by law, and a representative from a coal-fired power generation plant in the upcounty who was investigating possible political pushback against company plans to enlarge the plant.

The Councilmember also met with a couple of individual constituents, "just plain folks" as he called them, who sought his aid on issues. But chances were slim to none that he would help them, unless they could show evidence of either political or financial clout.

When his meetings were concluded, Bob Krupp rose from his seat in the booth near the rear of the restaurant's dining room and put on his suit coat, which he had removed at the start of his afternoon meet-and-greet session. A tall figure dressed in blue jeans, a red and black plaid flannel jacket, wool knit cap and dark sunglasses brushed past Krupp and whispered, "Sit down." Krupp sat back down, and the man slid into the seat across the booth from him.

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"Who in the hell told Laura about the Forest Credit program?" the man asked.

"It was her daddy, the County Executive," replied Krupp.

"So Furman knows about the Holman Wood project?" the man asked.

"I might have mentioned it to him," said Krupp.

"That was stupid," said the man.

"I owe him a favor. He called me last week. He said Laura was in a financial bind and he wanted to help her out," Krupp said.

"Why didn't you give him a few thousand?" the man asked.

"Because I'm just scraping by at the moment," Krupp said. "So I told him I knew of a building project coming up that would need to buy forest credits to clear the land. I told him to have Laura register her property with the credit transfer program, and I'd see to it that the developer gave her more than a fair price for the purchase."

"You are going to screw up this deal if you don't keep your mouth shut. I'll straighten it out," said the man. "Right now I'm concerned about the Holman woman and her fucking neighbor, Jake Flynn."

"Stop worrying. I think we can scare them off," said Krupp.

"You better. And get the sign announcing the new subdivision erected on the site along county road. Once the locals realize the project is really going to happen they'll quit fighting it."

"That makes sense. I'll take care of it," Krupp replied.

The man in the sunglasses rose and quickly exited the restaurant. Bob Krupp downed the remainder of the scotch he had nursed throughout the afternoon session and left the restaurant to head home for dinner with his family. As he stood outside the restaurant unlocking the door of his car, a tan sport utility vehicle with tinted glass windows tore out of the parking lot of the Golden Lion onto Frederick Road and roared out of sight.

Chapter Thirteen

A few minutes after seven o'clock on Friday evening, Jake Flynn stopped to call Cynthia Nichols from a pay phone in North Carolina.

"Hello."

"Cynthia," he said.

"Yes."

"This is JF," said Jake, not knowing just how covert he should be.

"Mr. Flynn?" Cynthia asked.

"Yes."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm calling from a restaurant outside Wrightsville Beach," Jake replied.

"That was fast," she said. "I mailed the postcard on Tuesday."

"Can I come to your home to talk?" Jake asked.

"No, I don't want you here," she replied. "Take the causeway into town and go left on Lumina. When you get to Salisbury Street, take a right and park and then walk out on the beach. I'll be on the north side of the pier, wearing a pink beach hat. Meet me in fifteen minutes."

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"I'll be there," he said, and hung up the phone. Fifteen minutes later, Jake had parked his truck and put on the light jacket he'd brought along. Walking onto the beach he spotted a short, thin woman wearing a pink hat standing to the north of Johnnie Mercer's Pier, just as she said she would be.

"Cynthia?" Jake called out.

"Mr. Flynn," she replied. "Thank you for coming all this way to talk. Walk with me." They headed out close to the water's edge where the waves firmed the sand making it easier to walk on, but not so close that they risked getting wet. As they walked north up the shoreline they passed couples holding hands and people walking their dogs.

"I don't quite know where to begin," Ms. Nichols said.

"Well, you could start by telling me how you're connected to the Tarheel Paper Company and Paul Shuster," Jake told her, thinking her face looked too gaunt and ashen for someone as young as she seemed to be.

"Oh," she sighed, "First off, I want you to know that I'm not a bad person...really I'm not." She sighed again, more deeply than the first time.

"Paul Shuster and I were in high school together in Wilmington back in the '80s," Cynthia Nichols told Jake. "We had a fling and, stupidly, I got pregnant. He paid for an abortion, but things went wrong. Turned out I couldn't have children after that. Paul felt terrible...thought it was his fault...he promised to take care of me for the rest of my life."

"Oh, God," Jake muttered. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well anyway, his family is rich...the Tarheel Paper Company was started by his grandfather," Cynthia continued. "So, for years, every few months I'd get a nice fat check in the mail that

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was drawn on a TPC account. No phone calls, no visits, just a check. Then about five years ago, after he was made Managing Director at TPC, Paul called and said he had a plan that would set me up in style."

A strong, cool wind was blowing down the beach from the north, carrying sand that stung Jake's face, and got in his eyes, hair and mouth.

"Let's walk back the other way," he said, turning around and now walking down the beach to the south. "So, what's the deal with Cynthia's Paper Store?" Jake asked.

"It's part of the scheme, but don't rush me" Cynthia told him. "Paul told me he had met some out-of-state official who was here on vacation. The guy said he was on a powerful committee and could steer the county contract for waste paper disposal to TPC, so long as he got a kickback."

"Bob Krupp?" Jake asked. "Is that the official's name?"

"Yeah, Krupp," she said. "Anyway, the deal was worth three million a year. And the best part, Paul said, was that TPC could take the trash paper, pulp it, and make new copier quality paper from it to sell back to the county government. But he and Krupp wanted to hide where the new paper was coming from, and that's where I got involved."

Cynthia picked up an empty horseshoe crab shell and threw it into the surf.

"Paul set me up as manager of Cynthia's Paper Store, and got Bill Wylie, a local realtor, to find me a nice little storefront on North Lumina Avenue," she told Jake. "I got the sole contract to sell copy paper to the Montgomery County government, and Paul and I split the profit. He and Krupp used the back room of my store as headquarters for their scam, to keep the records off Tarheel Paper Company property."

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She laughed sourly. "Funny part was, the stationery and note cards I sold in the store weren't even made by TPC. I had to buy them retail from a store in Wilmington."

"So why the donation to County Executive Furman?" Jake asked Cynthia.

"The county had a waste paper contract with a Chinese firm at a lower price," she said. "Krupp convinced Furman to switch the contract to TPC by offering him a little financial incentive. Last September Paul asked me and Bill Wylie to make contributions to Furman's campaign from the paper store and Wylie Real Estate. Then Paul paid us back two weeks later. I could have paid it myself. I've got almost a million dollars saved up."

"And how did I get tangled up in this?" Jake asked, still trying to figure the whole thing out.

"When Krupp was here with his family last June, Paul met with him in the back room of my store," Cynthia continued. "I was doing inventory so I could order new stock, and I heard them planning a real estate deal for a wooded property in Maryland."

"Holman Wood?" Jake asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Krupp said if he could get the woman who owned it to sell, they could clear the land and put up cheap houses on the lots. Krupp figured they could make thirty or forty million net on the deal, and part of that would be enough to shut Frank Furman up for good. Krupp said the only problem was the Holman woman's nosy friend, Flynn. 'But we can take care of him,' Krupp said. I remember that as clear as if I'd heard it yesterday. His tone scared me."

"After Krupp left that night I told Paul I wanted out," she continued. "He took all of his records with him that night, and I closed the store the next week and went out of business. I didn't talk with him again until the campaign donation thing last September. That was stupid of me..." her voice trailed off.

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"And when I called you out of the blue last Friday, you realized you were still smack in the middle of things?" Jake asked Cynthia. She nodded. "Just out of curiosity, how did you find me?"

"It's called the internet...check it out," she snapped. "I searched on 'Flynn', 'Holman' and 'Montgomery' and the first three entries that popped up were newspaper articles about you fighting some master plan last year. All I had to do then was use an online telephone directory and I found your address on Holman Road."

"So you're telling me that my councilman is a crook?" Jake asked.

"Hey, I don't have an ax to grind with you or your councilman or anybody. I just thought you should hear what I knew. Look, it's dark. You should leave now," Cynthia Nichols told Jake. "I'm sorry for a lot of things I've done. And I'm sorry if you're tangled up in this whole mess. I wish you the best, Mr. Flynn. Good bye." And with that, she turned and walked away.

"Wait," Jake called out to her. "What if the authorities want to talk to you?"

"I guess they can," she called out, her back still to Jake, "if they can find me."

Then the stranger whom he had just met disappeared into the dark, walking north up the beach. Jake trudged across the sand back to the street on which he had parked his truck, and headed out of Wrightsville Beach for the trip up Interstate 95 and home.

On his long drive north on the interstate, Jake had plenty of time to wonder about how a Councilmember from a county in Maryland had become involved with the head of a paper manufacturing firm located hundreds of miles and two states away. He could never have imagined the intricate scheming that led up to Paul Shuster's seemingly chance meeting with Montgomery County Councilmember Bob Krupp in the summer of 2006.

Chapter Fourteen

In early 2005, at thirty-eight years of age, Paul Shuster took the reins as Managing Director of Tarheel Paper Company from his father. He immediately announced that he was instituting a major change in the way the company did business. No longer would TPC concentrate on sourcing raw materials to manufacture a high quality grade product with a low profit return.

Widespread use of computers had changed the way offices across the nation do business. The days of secretaries using typewriters to generate correspondence on sturdy, stationery grade paper had passed. Offices now wanted cheaper, lesser quality paper to feed into desktop printers.

Under Paul's leadership, TPC would cease harvesting trees for pulp and adding rag content to create letter grade paper. They would switch their focus to securing waste paper disposal contracts, and pulp the recyclable paper to make inexpensive copy grade stock. It was a win-win proposition that the company's Board of Directors, composed entirely of members of the Shuster family, was eager to pursue.

Paul initiated the transition process by pressing his fellow members on the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce to get their

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companies to contract with TPC to haul away their waste paper, rather than pay to send it to the landfill. When Paul secured the first government contract for TPC with the City of Wilmington, he knew the company had struck gold because governments generate a huge amount of paper waste.

At the time, municipal and county governments were just beginning to jump on the environmental bandwagon and "go green." Shuster guessed that city and county governments all across North Carolina...hell, all up and down the East Coast...were sending a fortune in waste paper to their local landfills. If only he knew a way to make contacts with the contracting personnel in those local governments.

When he first began working for the family company fresh out of business school, Shuster had made a contact in the real estate business. Bill Wylie owned a successful real estate business comprised of two separate divisions--one that handled property sales in Wilmington, and one for seasonal vacation home rentals in nearby Wrightsville Beach.

Wylie also had an arrangement with Paul Shuster to keep an eye out for cheap rural acreage forested with pines for TPC to purchase. After they logged the trees to produce paper pulp, TPC would resell the denuded land at a profit through Wylie Real Estate as "suitable to build" lots for housing or as "prime farm land," depending on how the land was zoned by the local jurisdiction.

Since forging their mutually beneficial business relationship, Bill Wylie and Paul Shuster had met for lunch in Wrightsville Beach every couple of weeks. It was at a lunch in September of 2005 when Shuster broke the news that TPC was changing its business plan and would no longer seek forested properties to log for pulp. Wylie made no effort to hide his anger at losing the generous finder's fees that TPC paid him.

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"Look, maybe there's something else I can help you find," Wylie had told Paul. "You want to get contracts with local governments for waste paper hauling. There's no better way to wrangle contracts than by cozying up to the elected officials who'll pressure the low level bureaucrats to sign with you. And I've got a bevy of elected officials from governments up and down the East Coast that rent beach houses from me every summer. I know, because they all include their professions on their rental applications."

"I don't know, Bill," Shuster had said, "I thought TPC would start by honestly grabbing a few in-state county government contracts and build from there. I'm not sure I want to get into a political pressure game right at the start."

"Money greases the wheels of government, Paul. It takes money to make money" Bill said. "But if you're going to try and influence politicians, I'd advise you stick with those that are located a ways away. 'Don't soil the bed you sleep in,' my granddaddy used to say."

"I'll have to think about it," Shuster replied.

"That's all I'm asking, Paul...for you to think about it," Wylie urged him. "We're getting rental applications now for 2006. I'll take a look at them and flag any out-of-state politicians planning to vacation here next summer, and I'll show you the list. Shoot, just one waste paper hauling contract with a county government would be worth what?"

"A couple million, maybe," said Shuster.

"A couple of million dollars. And all I'd be asking is a two or three percent finder's fee," prodded Wylie. "That's chump change for you, buddy...coffee money. Then I tell you when these officials are going to be here and where they'll be staying, and you can arrange to bump into them and introduce yourself. You're a smooth talker, Paul. You'll be signing government contracts in no

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time, in exchange for a few campaign donations to guys who'll be eager to make deals."

And that is how Paul Shuster happened to run into a Councilmember from Montgomery County on the boardwalk in Wrightsville Beach, on Sunday, June 18, 2006.

Since nine o'clock that Sunday morning, Paul Shuster had been sitting in his car down the street from the beach house that Bob Krupp and his wife rented through Wylie Real Estate, waiting for them to emerge so he could fabricate a meeting. It was the same house the Krupps had rented for one or two weeks each summer since they had gotten married five years earlier. At a quarter to ten, the family, all dressed in beach togs, left the house and headed down the street toward the beach. And Paul Shuster followed on foot at a distance.

When the Krupp family reached the boardwalk, Patty entered one of the shops with four year old son, Jason, to buy a surf raft. Bob sat on a bench outside, minding the stroller in which his other son, two year old Jordan, slept. Dad and son were both wearing navy blue tee shirts with the words 'Re-elect Krupp' printed in white lettering across the front, and there was a 'Krupp in 2006' bumper sticker on the child's stroller. The first-term Councilmember was in the midst of a re-election campaign against a weak Republican opponent, in a strongly Democratic area of the county.

"Beautiful day," Shuster said, stopping next to Krupp and pulling the running shoe from his left foot.

"Yeah," Krupp replied. "I hope we get weather like this the rest of the week."

"You just get here?" Shuster asked, pretending to dump sand from the shoe.

"We drove down yesterday," Krupp said.

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"And the wife's already stuck you with the kid while she goes shopping?" Paul said. "Happy Father's Day, right?"

"No, she's in buying beach toys with our older son," Krupp said. "She'll be right back."

"Mind if I sit?" Shuster asked.

"No, go ahead. It's a public bench," Krupp said.

"So I guess you really like this guy Krupp," Shuster said, retying his shoe.

"That's me. I'm Krupp...Bob Krupp."

"A politician, huh? Well, it's nice to meet a public servant," Shuster said. "My name's Paul Shuster."

The two shook hands.

"Where are you from?" Shuster asked.

"Montgomery County, Maryland," Krupp said. "I'm on the County Council."

"Oh, yeah, just outside Washington, D.C.," Shuster said.

"You're familiar with the area?" Krupp asked.

"I got my Bachelors in Business Administration at George Washington University," Shuster lied.

"I was a Business major in college, too. What do you do for a living?" Krupp asked.

"Me? I run the family business...paper recycling," Shuster said.

"Is that profitable?" Krupp asked.

"It would be, if the damned Chinese weren't underbidding us for government contracts," Shuster said. He was glad he had quickly maneuvered the conversation around to his purpose, not knowing how long Krupp's wife would be shopping.

"Yeah, I think we've got a recycling contract with a Chinese firm," Krupp said.

"You know what the Chinese do, don't you," Shuster asked, baiting the hook to see if he could snag Krupp's interest. "They

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float these barges full of recycled paper from the U.S. up their rivers to remote villages where they've got twelve year old kids picking through it for our personal information, financial records, state secrets...anything they think they can use to bring down capitalism."

"Sounds pretty insidious," Krupp said.

"Meanwhile, they're taking jobs away from poor Americans who are just trying to put food on their table," Shuster said. "You watch, the Chinese will be running the world in twenty years. We're already in debt to them up to our eyeballs."

"You said it," Krupp replied. "But they do manage to underbid you."

"Sure, because their companies are state run, Shuster responded. "They don't have child labor laws or minimum wage to deal with, like we do in the U.S."

Out of the corner of his eye, Shuster noticed Patty Krupp exiting the variety store.

"I don't know what the answer is," Krupp said.

"You could probably help, being on the County Council," Shuster said. "If I knew how much you were paying the Chinese, my company would beat the price. I'd gladly contribute to your re-election campaign, if you would help me take the contract."

"Well, this fall we're going to elect a new County Executive," Krupp replied. "After the election, I could try and convince him to switch to a domestic contract."

"Great. Here's my card," Shuster said, handing over his business card as Patty and little Jordan Krupp came walking up.

"Who's your friend, Bob?" she asked.

"Patty, this is Paul Shuster," Bob replied. "He's a local business owner."

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"Hi. It's nice to meet you," Shuster said. "You have a beautiful family, Miz Krupp...and an energetic campaigner for a husband. He's already managed to wheedle a donation out of me."

"He's a fast talker," Patty said, smiling.

"You're telling me," Shuster replied. "Well, I don't want to take up anymore of your time. Give me a call while you're still in town this week, Bob, and tell me where to send that donation. I better finish my morning jog now. It was nice to meet you all. Bye now."

"It was nice to have met you. I'll be in touch," Bob Krupp said.

Shuster set off jogging up the boardwalk toward the street on which he'd parked, running until he rounded a corner and knew Krupp could no longer see him. He had quit exercising after college, and was in no shape to impress anyone with his jogging ability. He panted all the way back to his car, trying to catch his breath.

"Nice guy," Krupp said to his wife.

"You never take a break, do you?" Patty remarked, shaking her head, as their four year old eagerly lead the family down the wooden steps and onto the beach.

As he carried the stroller containing his sleeping two-year-old son onto the beach, Krupp experienced a wave of deep disappointment in his wife. She repeatedly failed to demonstrate a constant attention to the family's financial welfare, as he did. Didn't she realize that in just over ten years they would need to save a minimum of one hundred thousand dollars to put their boys through college, and then only if they attended the University of Maryland and commuted from home? To put them through a university with a top national reputation would cost more than a quarter of a million dollars, including room and board. And they still had over twenty years of a thirty year home mortgage to pay off.

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The thirty-year-old politician sat with his family on the beach, warmed by the June sun, while his mind was clouded with a chilling fear that the remainder of his life would likely be a financial struggle. He had begun a career as a business consultant after college, helping local start-up businesses to grow. But he found that the corporate success stories in Montgomery County were often a result of government favoritism shown to members of a "good old boy" network. His was certain his lack of contacts had stifled his success, and hoped that serving a couple of terms on the County Council would increase his odds for success when he returned to his consulting practice.

As Bob Krupp sat and watched his wife help four-year-old Jason ride the surf raft in shallow water, he had the glum realization that she would probably never be the trustworthy confidante he hoped he had married. She could not see the value in the friendship he had forged with the stranger he'd just met on the boardwalk. She did not understand that, whether you're on vacation or not, you answer the door when opportunity knocks. He had a sinking feeling that ensuring the financial success of his family rested entirely on his shoulders, and it made him feel very alone.

Chapter Fifteen

At a little past three in the morning Jake completed the return trip from North Carolina, and parked his truck in the driveway of the house that he co-owned in Wheaton. He quietly unlocked the front door and entered the living room to find Greta wide awake, sitting on the sofa watching television in footed, flannel one-piece pajamas like babies wear.

"Jakey, cable television is great!" Greta announced. "Did you know there's a channel that only shows cooking and food shows twenty-four hours a day? It's like porn for dieters."

Jake chuckled.

"How did it go?" Greta asked.

"Fine," he said. "You want to go home now? I'll tell you about it on the way."

"Your wish is my command," she replied. "But I think I better change first."

"Yeah," he chuckled. "I think you better." While Greta changed out of her pajamas into a more suitable travel outfit, Jake tiptoed back and opened Sean's bedroom door.

"You asleep, buddy?" Jake whispered.

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"Yeah," Sean answered groggily, keeping his eyes shut. Jake walked over and sat on the edge of the bed, and ran his fingers through his lover's hair.

"Thanks for keeping Greta company tonight," Jake said.

"Sure, JM" Sean mumbled. "I like her. She's funny."

"That she is," Jake said. "You're a sweetheart, Sean Fitzpatrick."

"I know."

"Go back to sleep now. I'll call you tomorrow," Jake said.

"Okay."

Jake rose and left the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind him. Then Greta and he exited the house, and got in the truck for the ride back to Germantown.

"Sean is a good man, Jakey," Greta said.

"I know."

On the way home, Jake explained to Greta everything he had learned on his road trip to North Carolina. He told her that Shuster had met Krupp on vacation and cooked up the scam for TPC to earn millions of dollars by hauling away the county's waste paper, then processing it into copy paper and selling back to the government, with Krupp receiving a cut of the profits.

Jake also told Greta about Cynthia's Paper Store being set up as a front for the scheme, and how Wylie's Real Estate had been peripherally related. The four North Carolina campaign donations to County Executive Furman had been payoffs to buy his silence. Finally, Jake related what Cynthia Nichols had said about Krupp and Shuster partnering to develop Holman Wood.

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave," Greta remarked, when Jake had finished his story.

"Leave it to you to quote Sir Walter Scott in the midst of a crisis, Greta," he said. "But I really feel like blowing the lid off this and exposing Bob Krupp. Not only is he involved in some shady county contract scheme, but he should have recused himself from

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the vote on the Germantown master plan last year since he's a partner in a land deal and stands to profit from the rezoning."

"Sometimes you shouldn't let the opposition know what information you have until it's the right time to use it, Jakey," Greta advised. "You know, keep your powder dry until you're ready for the fight."

"I suppose you're right," Jake replied. "It makes sense not to spill the beans now, at least until I have proof of what Krupp did."

When he arrived home, Jake found a message on his telephone answering machine from Marni Green. The person who had anonymously posted messages on the KRAP listserv had contacted Marni and asked to meet with her and Jake. He would call Marni in the morning to see if she and the anonymous poster could come to his house that evening for dinner. He would invite Greta, too. She always appreciated a good home cooked meal.

Chapter Sixteen

Marni closed the Green Corner Store at eight o'clock Saturday evening as the mystery dinner guest drove into the store's parking lot and parked. The two walked the quarter of a mile or so up Holman Road to Jake Flynn's house together. They knocked on his front door just as he had removed the dinner from the oven and was preparing the gravy. Greta had arrived a few minutes earlier to help...and to sample the pinot noir she'd brought, to insure the wine was a good match for the beef dinner. She answered the door.

"Come in, welcome," Jake said, placing the chuck roast and vegetables on the dining room table and joining his guests in the living room. Marni made the introductions.

"Belinda this is Jake Flynn and Greta Holman," Marni said, doing the introductions. "Jake, Greta, this is Belinda Schaefer, reporter for the *Montgomery Courier*."

Belinda Schaefer was a petite, twenty-eight year old woman who stood no more than five feet three inches in height. She wore her straight brown hair in a bob, and was dressed in denim jeans, brown loafers, and a red and yellow checkered cotton blouse.

"Let's head in to dinner," Jake said. "I don't mean to rush you but the roast just came out of the oven, and it's best when it's hot."

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"It smells great," Belinda said.

"Can I get you some wine, Ms. Schaefer?" asked Greta.

"No thank you. I'm not much of a drinker," she replied.

"How about coffee or iced tea?" Jake asked. "I've got both."

"Iced tea sounds good," Belinda told him.

"Hit me up with some wine, Greta," Marni said.

When they were all settled and eating their salads, Jake nudged the conversation toward the topic of the planned subdivision.

"It's nice to finally meet you," he said. "We saw you at the Planning Board hearing on Thursday. I'm a fan of your writing, especially the headline on your piece that ran in Friday's edition-- 'Citizens throw KRAP at planning officials'."

"I wish I could take credit for that," Ms. Schaefer replied, "but my editor writes all of my headlines, Mr. Flynn."

"Please, call me Jake. Marni tells me that you were the one who anonymously posted the notice about the hearing on the KRAP listserv," Jake continued. "Can you tell us why you did that?"

"I grew up in the upcounty, and was a secret admirer of the work you all did with the Keep Rural Areas Protected group last year," Belinda replied. "I wanted to make sure you knew about the housing subdivision hearing that was added to the Planning Board agenda at the last minute. As a journalist I'm supposed to report the news, not make it. So I decided to share the news anonymously."

"But, why is this subdivision plan of particular interest to you, Belinda?" Jake asked.

"I want to make sure my Uncle Pete can keep farming here," said Belinda.

"I don't follow..." Marni interrupted. "Who is your Uncle Pete?"

"I'm sorry. I thought you all knew," Belinda replied. "My uncle, my father's younger brother, is the farmer who rents the acreage out back of here from Ms. Holman."

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"You're Peter Gustafson's niece?" asked Greta. Belinda nodded affirmatively.

"Well, I think Walt Disney said it best when he said 'it's a small world after all'," Marni blurted out. They all laughed.

"I remember the rural small town feeling there was in the upcounty when I was kid," said Belinda. "It seemed like you knew everybody, and folks cared about their neighbors. Unless you knew, you never would have guessed that you were only a few miles from the Nation's Capital. That feeling just gets further and further away as more grass farmers move into new housing subdivisions up here."

"Oh, Lord, and you're only a baby," cried Greta. "Think what it must be like for us old timers."

"Everyone help yourselves to the beef and vegetables. It's family style," Jake said. "So, Belinda, what made you decide that you wanted to meet with us?"

"First, I have to tell you that I haven't had carrots, onions and potatoes cooked around a roast in years. My mother used to cook pork roast this way," Belinda shared, as she served herself. "Anyway, I think there are some screwy things going on with this housing subdivision plan. I thought it might be good for us to get together and share information...in confidence, of course."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," said Jake, pouring gravy over the potatoes on his plate then passing the gravy boat to Marni. "I have learned some things that I don't want shared publicly right now."

As the four ate, they swapped information with each other. Belinda Schaefer explained that she had rushed from the Planning Board hearing on Thursday to call County Executive Furman for a quote before filing her story. But, she said, he had denied knowing anything about his son-in-law registering to sell forest credits to the Holman Wood project.

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"And when I called Councilmember Krupp's office, his confidential aide said he had never heard Krupp mention the Holman Wood development deal," Belinda said. "I still insinuated in my piece in yesterday's *Courier* that county officials may be connected with the deal."

Next Jake recounted for Belinda the events of the past few weeks: his suspicion that the gunshot which winged Greta could have been meant for him, the severed phone line, his house being broken into, and the dynamite taped to his truck's muffler.

"Good Lord," remarked Belinda. "Have you gone to the police?"

"No, except about Greta's shooting, of course," Jake said. "I'm not sure about trusting them. The cop who showed up at the hospital and took my statement while Greta was being treated was Lieutenant Jock Metheney, the County Executive's son-in-law who's now trying to sell forest conservation credits for the Holman Wood project. And he showed up at the KRAP meeting at the corner store and then again before the Planning Board hearing. Was he brought in to stifle investigation of any report I might make, or is he involved, too? And I've heard how cops back each other up, no questions asked. I'm just not sure..."

"I guess I should be a little more covert in my investigation," Belinda shared. "It's clear somebody is being deadly serious, no pun intended."

"But it's even more complicated," Jake said.

As the diners dug in to second helpings, Marni told Belinda about the campaign donations from North Carolina donors to County Executive Furman and Councilmember Krupp. And Jake told of his trip to Wrightsville Beach and Cynthia Nichols' explanation of the recycled paper scam pulled on the county government, as well as the payoff of the County Executive. He also told Belinda that Cynthia Nichols had drawn a connection between the paper scam and the Holman Wood development plan.

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"Who are all the principals are in the development company?" Belinda asked.

"We don't know for sure. They're hidden behind an LLC registered in North Carolina, using local attorney Geoffrey Kaye as their agent," Jake told her. "But I'm sure that Krupp and this guy Shuster with Tarheel Paper Company are two of the key players."

"We've got to find out. Somebody has to look it up in the North Carolina state incorporation records," Belinda advised. "You could at least get the ball rolling on an investigation into the paper recycling scam. Take the allegations to the Inspector General and let him start investigating. Do you know Bill Wrigley? He's a decent, honest man."

"I would be afraid that the minute he starts interviewing folks the officials involved will close ranks and the whole thing will disappear off the books," said Jake.

"Well, tell Wrigley that," Belinda counseled. "Ask him to focus on the books and hold off on interviews. You've got to tell the IG what this woman in North Carolina told you. It's his job to investigate allegations of fraud, waste and abuse."

"Maybe. I'll take it under advisement," Jake replied, immediately feeling a bit embarrassed at the lawyerly wording he had used. Then in an attempt to lighten the mood he said, "Let's clear these dishes away. Who's for dessert? I've got homemade key lime pie and a fresh pot of coffee."

"Aw, I'm stuffed. I couldn't eat a bit more. I'll have coffee, though," said Marni, standing to help Jake clear the table. "And maybe just a sliver of that pie, too. Jake makes a mean key lime pie, Belinda."

"I take it you're married, Belinda, since your last name is Schaefer, not Gustafson," said Greta.

"I was married a few years back for what seems like a couple of minutes, just long enough to get pregnant and find out that Mr.

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Schaefer and I had very different views about marriage," Belinda said. "It seems he thought he should still be able to see other women, and I thought our wedding vows should actually mean something."

"And you have a child?" asked Marni.

"Yes, a daughter named Melody," Belinda said, reaching instinctively for her purse in order to show the women the picture which she carried in her wallet. "She just turned three. She's staying with my parents this evening."

"Oh, she's got your eyes," said Greta, admiring the photo.

"And your smile," said Marni.

"Yes. And a sizeable percentage of Mr. Schaefer's take home pay, too," quipped Belinda. "We'll see how long that lasts."

The women chuckled.

"So, what's our next move?" Jake asked, bringing the coffee service on a tray from the kitchen to the table, and then returning for the key lime pie.

"You should file an appeal of the Planning Board's approval of the project with the Circuit Court," Belinda replied. "There's no chance you'll win the case, but the filing fee is only \$115 and it will stall the project while the case is being heard. I'd love to report that in a story for next week's *Courier*, but only if the appeal is filed first. I'll wait until you give me the go-ahead on that. In the meantime, I'll write about your call to strengthen the FCL, and lift some quotes from the testimony you and Marni gave to the Board. But, Jake, I really think you should tell the IG about the recycled paper contract scam."

"Sounds like a plan," said Jake.

"Are we sure we want to poke the sleeping bear with a stick?" Greta asked.

"The bear isn't sleeping, Greta. It's already taken a few swipes at us," replied Jake, serving up slices of pie to the women.

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"I advise you not spin your wheels responding to their agenda. Go on the offensive," Belinda advised. "They think they've won. Now you need to push them off balance by setting your own agenda."

"That's a lot to ask of average citizens," said Marni. "At first we were just trying to urge our officials to make decisions we felt were in the best interest of the county. Now we have to try and keep them honest, too. It's a big burden, in time and energy."

"And money," Greta interjected. "Don't forget, Jakey just paid for gas to drive all the way to North Carolina and back, and now we have to pay to file an appeal in court."

"Can you handle all that, Jake? I mean, I'm guessing you're retired. Do you have that kind of money to shell out?" Belinda asked. "I'm sorry if that's too personal. I guess it's the reporter in me."

"No, that's fine," he reassured her. "I've got my inheritance from my mother and a few minor investments, plus I still get royalties from a book I got published right after college."

"Wow, an author," Belinda said. "I'm impressed."

"It's more of a photo essay than a literary work," Jake replied. "A coffee table book, really. And it's used as a text book for art history courses at some colleges."

"It's called *Religious Iconography of Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages*," Greta informed Belinda.

"I'd love to see it," Belinda said.

"I'll see if I can dig up a copy for you," Jake said. "At any rate, I am doing okay financially, although this whole affair is costing me more than I expected."

"Thomas Jefferson said, 'The price of freedom is eternal vigilance'," Belinda stated.

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"My price is a little steeper. Somebody's out to kill me," Jake said. The gravity of this remark brought conversation to a temporary halt.

"This is serious stuff. There's no denying that," said Marni. She waited a beat before changing the subject. "Quoting Thomas Jefferson--sounds like somebody was paying attention in school."

"I was a history major in college," explained Belinda. "When my husband and I split up, what I really wanted to do for a living was write books. But I knew I'd have trouble getting published as an unknown author with no experience. So I decided to cut my teeth as a journalist. Reporting the news is like writing short, concise historical accounts, but about recent events."

"I'd like to ask a favor, Belinda," Jake said. "Could you check with your contacts to try and find out why Jock Metheney has been spending so much time on the west side of the county when he works out of the Third District Police Station in the east county and lives over near Sunshine?"

"Sure," Belinda replied, standing and retrieving her purse. "If you don't mind, I'd like to excuse myself so I can go home and write up some notes. I've discovered I have a lousy memory. And that's not a good quality for a reporter to have. Thanks for the meal, Jake. God, I wish I could cook like that."

"Wait up. I'll walk with you," Marni said.

"Come on, Greta, let's walk with them," Jake said. "A hike will do us good after that meal."

It was a warm evening, and the waning moon offered little light as the four walked down Holman Road toward the Green Corner Store. The Milky Way stood out in the darkened sky, a distinct band of fuzzy dim light composed of millions of distant stars. A chorus of young frogs was "peeping", and an owl hooted in Holman Wood.

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The four walked in silence, as folks who live in rural areas do. Had they been from the city, they might have been talking and missed the symphony of nature that surrounded them as they walked.

"You're welcome back any time," Jake told Belinda, when they reached her car in the store parking lot.

"Next time you should bring your daughter Melody," Greta said. "We can have a picnic lunch by the pond at Holman Hall."

"That would be great," Belinda told him. "Thanks again."

Belinda unlocked her car and started to get in, then stopped and wheeled around to the others.

"You know how sometimes you can meet somebody for the first time and yet you feel as close as family, like you've known them your whole life?" Belinda asked, rhetorically. "That's how I feel about you three. Thank you."

She turned and sat down in her car, quickly starting the engine and rolling down the driver's side window.

"Thanks again for dinner," she said, waving as she drove away down the county road. "I'll be in touch."

"Thanks for everything, Big Jake. We'll talk," Marni said. And she got in her car and drove off heading up county road.

"I don't ever want to leave here, Jakey," Greta told Jake as they walked back up the rural lane toward their homes. "I want to die right here on Holman Farm."

"Be careful what you wish for, Greta," he said.

"And don't let them cut down the Wood," Greta quietly pleaded.

"I'll try," Jake said flatly.

Chapter Seventeen

A warm front pushing in from the southwest brought clouds to the area over night, and a steady light rain fell from early morning until around seven o'clock on Sunday evening. It was just what the seeds Jake and Greta had planted in their vegetable garden needed in order to germinate. A rainy day filled with routine house chores was also what Jake needed to germinate the ideas that Belinda Schaefer had planted in his head during dinner the previous night.

By bedtime Jake's house was much cleaner, and he had decided to call the county Inspector General on Monday morning to set up an appointment. He had also made up his mind to file an appeal of the Holman Wood project approval with the Circuit Court. And he needed to contact the State Incorporation Office in North Carolina to try and find out who the principals were behind FTA Limited Liability Corporation.

At nine o'clock Monday morning Jake phoned the county Office of the Inspector General, as he stood in his kitchen sipping his first mug of coffee of the day.

"Mr. Wrigley has appointments for most of the day," the secretary in the IG's office told Jake. "He could see you at four o'clock this afternoon, if that's convenient."

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"That would be fine," Jake told the secretary. "Thank you."

"Name?"

"Uh, Mr. Smith," Jake said.

"Sir, if that's not your name, you can tell me your real name," the secretary said. "This office operates on the basis of strict confidentiality."

"Well, then, my name is Flynn,"

"All right, Mr. Flynn. I've got you down for a four o'clock meeting with Mr. Wrigley," the secretary repeated. "We'll see you then."

Jake spent much of the rest of the morning making notes for the meeting, primarily on what Cynthia Nichols had told him about the county contracting scam and the related campaign donations. He also called the North Carolina Incorporation Office to ask who the principals were in the FTA LLC, but met with no success.

"I'm sorry, sir," a female clerk in the office told him, "I cannot give out that information over the phone. You will have to come in to the office in Raleigh to get it."

Jake felt frustrated at his inability to discover who was behind the FTA. He had a newfound commitment to pushing for movement in this whole affair and he was thwarted in one of the first actions he took. He decided to phone an attorney who was a member of the KRAP network for advice on a judicial appeal of the housing project approval. Although the attorney's practice primarily handled personal liability lawsuits, he agreed to draft the filing on Jake's behalf and deliver it to the Circuit Court that afternoon.

By three o'clock, Jake had eaten lunch and changed into dress casual clothes for his meeting with the IG. Before leaving for his appointment, he went next door to tell Greta where he was going that afternoon. Jake felt it would be wise to share his schedule with at least one other person from now on, in case some harm was

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to befall him. He then hopped in his truck, rolled a cigarette for the drive, and set out for Rockville.

At three-thirty Jake pulled into a space in the parking garage behind the County Council Building and set out to walk the three blocks to the newly redeveloped Town Center to buy a cafe latte at Starbucks.

"If I'm going to have to do this crap," Jake mumbled to himself as he walked, "I'm at least going to reward myself with a treat."

Leaving Starbucks, Jake sat on a bench in the Town Center plaza outside the new glass and steel public library building and rolled a cigarette. He sat for nearly fifteen minutes rolling cigarettes and smoking them while sipping his coffee, before walking the block or so to the privately owned high rise office building on Monroe Street where the Office of the Inspector General rented space.

At five minutes to four, Jake exited the elevator on the fourth floor of 51 Monroe Street. Directly across the foyer from the bank of elevators were the glass walls of a party planning company, Events Montgomery. Unnoticed by Jake, the receptionist behind the glass walls glanced up to peruse his face. As he turned down the hall toward the IG's office, she pulled a small photo from her desk drawer to verify it was him and then called the cell phone number on the back of the photo.

"Hello," said the man's voice answering the receptionist's call.

"This is the lady at 51. The man you wanted me to watch for has just arrived," the receptionist said to the man on the other end of the telephone line.

"Thank you. Tomorrow morning a messenger will deliver an envelope to you containing \$1000 in cash, which he will give you in exchange for the photograph I lent you." And the man hung up.

The meeting with the Inspector General did not go as Jake had expected. He judged that Bob Wrigley was a decent and honest

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man, as Belinda Schaefer said he was. But Wrigley said he was not sure whether a contractor carting away waste paper under contract with the county, and then recycling it into copy paper which was sold back to the county government, constituted contract abuse or fraud. Neither was he certain that money donated by contractors to politicians' campaigns could be proven to be bribery.

"My team will investigate the allegations you have made," Wrigley told Jake. "Trust me when I tell you that your name will be kept in strict confidence by this office. Initially we will take a look at the books for the Department of General Services for the past four years or so, to verify the contracts and see who authorized them. And we will look into the reputation and records of the North Carolina firms you assert are involved. At the very least, we may be looking at an illegal campaign contribution to the County Executive from a retail business that was no longer a legal entity at the time of the donation. And your claim that Councilmember Krupp and the owner of TPC have now partnered in a real estate project, if proven to be true, could lend credence to the possibility of collusion in the alleged government contracting fraud."

"I want to thank you for coming in to see me," Wrigley continued. "A great many of our investigations are prompted by citizen assertions such as yours, and we rely on folks like you tipping us off to possible fraud, waste and abuse in county government. We will not inform you of the progress of our investigation. The only way you will know if your tip has borne fruit is if we publicly announce a finding of waste or abuse, or seek a criminal indictment against any of the individuals involved. We will only contact you if we have additional questions, but feel free to call or come in again if you come into possession of any other

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information you think is relevant. Please leave your contact information with our secretary before you leave. And again, I thank you."

With that, Bob Wrigley strode from the room leaving Jake alone to make his way back to the front office, where he gave the secretary his address and phone number. The meeting had taken just under an hour.

Jake made his way back to the County Council parking lot where he had left his truck, he regretted that he would now be travelling home in rush hour traffic. He need not have worried. As he approached his truck he noticed the rear tire on the passenger side was flat. His first reaction was to look around, as if expecting to see the culprit who had popped his tire lurking in the shadows of the garage.

"Jesus, Jake, not everything is a plot." He chuckled. "It's just a damned flat tire. Thank the Lord for triple A. I'm getting too old to be changing tires on this damned truck," he mumbled to himself as he walked past the goldfish pond to the rear entrance of the Council Building to ask the guard if he could use his phone and call for assistance.

By six o'clock, most of the county employees had left work and the parking lot was all but empty. Jake waited outside the front entrance of the garage for a time, rolling and smoking cigarettes while talking with the operator in the garage pay booth. He asked the operator if he could use the phone in the booth to call a friend, then called Belinda Schaefer's number at the *Montgomery Courier* and left word on her message machine that the Circuit Court appeal of the Board's decision on Holman Wood was filed that afternoon.

Eventually the parking lot operator went off duty for the night, leaving the wooden entrance and exit gates to the garage in a raised position.

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"At least I won't have to pay for parking now," Jake thought. He finally tired of standing, and went and sat in his truck. At six thirty there was a tap on the passenger side window, scaring Jake. He had not been aware of anyone approaching the truck.

"Mr. Flynn," the man said.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?" Jake asked.

"I'm from triple A," the man answered. "I got your name from the account number you gave when you called in."

"Where's your truck?" Jake asked, trying not to sound too paranoid.

"It doesn't fit under the raised gate at the pay booth entrance," the man answered. "Now let's get this tire changed."

Jake worked to calm his jangled nerves as the AAA mechanic set about swiftly changing out the flattened tire with the spare housed under the truck. It was nearly seven o'clock by the time the tire was changed and the technician had gotten the necessary information from Jake's AAA membership card. He decided to give himself a second reward for the day, and drive to the Wendy's located a few blocks south of the Council Building on Rockville Pike.

He only ate fast food about once a year, since the calories, fat and high sodium content were all things he tried to avoid at his age. But a Wendy's bacon cheeseburger was a guilty pleasure that Jake truly enjoyed. He sat and savored it, watching the parade of humanity that flowed through the fast food joint at dinner time.

"These are the people who need government's help: the new family with young kids; the broke army vet who's got a buck for dinner to buy one item from the dollar menu; and the old couple who eat their one meal a day here so they'll have money left for their prescription medicines," Jake thought to himself. "Our officials should spend their time and energy giving these people a

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clean environment, good jobs, lower taxes, and a better quality of life, instead of trying to feather their own nests."

When he had finished his meal Jake sat in his truck in the restaurant parking lot and smoked a cigarette, then rolled another for the ride home. The sun had set below the horizon, and the dimness of dusk closed in around him as he drove home to Germantown.

Chapter Eighteen

There was a new moon that night, so it was nearly pitch black when Jake pulled off the county road onto Holman Road. On the quarter mile trip up the rural lane to his home Jake noticed a reddish glow ahead of him, but his view of the source was blocked by the looming silhouette of Holman Hall, Greta's late grandparents' house.

"It looks like someone has lit a bonfire behind Holman Hall," Jake thought to himself.

As he drove closer, he said out loud "That's not a bonfire. The Hall is on fire."

Jake abruptly stopped his truck on the side of the road in front of his neighbor's house, pulled on the emergency brake, and honked the horn several times before getting out. Greta opened her front door and waved to him.

He shouted to her, "The Hall's on fire. Call 9-1-1. I'll run up and see what's burning." And he began jogging up the road toward Holman Hall.

Greta yelled to him, "Don't forget, grandfather owned an old pumper truck. I think it's still in the barn." She disappeared into her house.

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As he ran, Jake remembered playing with the pumper while exploring the barn in his youth. The thing was little more than a cart with a two-man siphon pump mounted on it, designed in the early 1900s to be pulled behind a fire department's ladder truck.

Jake jogged around the circular drive in front of Holman Hall toward the path that ran past the house to the barn out back. When he reached the front corner of the Hall he was blinded by the lights of a vehicle speeding down the path toward him. He tried to step aside to avoid being hit but was blocked in by the house. As the vehicle sped by within inches of him, the passenger side rear view mirror slammed into his right shoulder and broke off. In the darkness Jake's eyes could not decipher the color of the SUV. The driver continued on, careening around the circular drive and down Holman Road.

The impact with the vehicle's mirror sent a flash of pain running through Jake's shoulder, like dozens of pins stabbing the area. He could still move his arm so he reasoned, correctly or not, that no bones were broken. He tried to shake off the pain, and continued to the rear of the Hall where he found the first floor back porch already engulfed in flames and fire spreading to the screened, second floor sleeping porch.

He immediately turned and ran to the barn, opening one of the large doors. The old pumper cart stood just inside the barn on the left, exactly where he had played on it as a boy. He grabbed the handle in his left hand and began pulling the cart toward the door of the barn.

He planned to pull the pumper down to the pond and stick the intake hose in the water. Then when Greta got there, he could work the siphon pump by himself and she could aim the output hose and extinguish the fire. But by now a pain like searing fire was spreading across his shoulder, and the nerve endings all down his right arm were tingling.

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"Oh, God, the porches are on fire," Greta shouted, as she entered the rear yard of the Hall and ran over to help Jake. "Who was in that vehicle?"

"I don't know. The side mirror broke off when it hit my shoulder."

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Not really," Jake answered. "Let's get some water on the fire."

Together they pulled the pumper down next to the pond and set it up.

"I'll work the pump," Jake said, throwing the intake hose into the pond. "You grab the other hose and douse the fire."

Jake tried pumping one of the handles on the two-man pumper with both of his arms, but the pain in his right shoulder was unbearable. By the time his efforts resulted in any water coming out of the hose that Greta held, they could hear the sirens of the fire trucks on their way to Holman Hall. Still, they kept up their exertions, which kept the fire contained until the tanker truck crew from the Germantown Fire Station had driven into the back yard of the Hall and begun extinguishing the flames. The first floor porch was saved, but the sleeping porch above would require rebuilding.

Jake moaned in pain as he walked around to the front of Holman Hall. Greta propped him up under his left arm as he went. He was looking for a policeman to tell about the SUV that had run into him, and walked up to the first police cruiser he saw.

"Thank God," Jake said, spotting two stout, middle aged cops. "It's not Jock Metheney."

"Do you want me to call Lieutenant Metheney, sir?" one officer asked.

"That's okay. I'm sure he'll find out soon enough," Jake said, then mumbled to himself "if he doesn't already know."

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"What's that, sir?" asked one of the policemen.

"Nothing. This lady is the owner of the property," Jake said, referring to Greta, "and I am her neighbor. I think the person who set the fire is driving an SUV. It nearly ran me down, tearing past me as I arrived. The passenger side mirror hit me in the shoulder and broke off. It's lying on the ground around the side of the Hall."

One of the officers headed off to find the mirror while the other radioed in to headquarters for all units to be on the lookout for a sport utility vehicle with missing passenger side rear view mirror.

"We need to get you to an ambulance now, Jakey," Greta calmly stated.

On their way, Jake said, "It was an SUV that hit me, Greta. I'll bet it was the same bastard that shot you."

By now, neighbors from miles around had seen the fire or heard the sirens and raced to see if they could help. Their vehicles lined the sides of Holman Road. As Jake and Greta walked down the Hall's driveway toward the ambulance parked on the road, a crowd of friends and strangers lined their path and shared soothing words.

"Bless your heart, you take care."

"We'll watch over things 'til you get home."

"Let us know if there's anything we can do."

Marni Green ran up to Jake as he was being helped into the ambulance and said, "Give me your keys, Big Jake. I'll take care of your truck and pull it into your driveway."

Jake was taken to the Adventist Hospital in Gaithersburg where his shoulder was x-rayed. Fortunately it had not been dislocated, and there were no broken bones. But the attending physician ordered him kept in the hospital for observation overnight and put him on intravenous pain medication. If the pain had not lessened by morning, he would need a soft tissue scan to check for ligament or muscle damage.

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At eight forty-seven that evening, a distraught Geoffrey Kaye took another gulp of the single malt scotch he had poured himself, picked up the phone in his smartly appointed law office in Rockville and dialed Aldridge Haskins' home number.

"Yes."

"Aldridge, I think I really screwed things up," Kaye told the Planning Board Chairman.

"What's happened?"

"I went to Holman Wood tonight to set a fire at the Hall. We thought it would scare Flynn and the Holman woman into selling and moving. But I hit Flynn with my car," Kaye told Haskins.

"Have you been drinking?"

"Sure. But what am I going to do?" Kay asked. "I really screwed things up."

"Where are you now?"

"I'm in my office," said Kaye.

"Calm down, Geoff. I'm ten minutes away. I'll drive right over and we'll sort this out," said Haskins, and he hung up.

Kaye felt a bit better knowing he would have help coping with the mess he had made. When Councilman Bob Krupp first came to attorney Geoffrey Kaye to discuss a possible development project for Holman Wood, Kaye had suggested going to Aldridge Haskins for advice on the deal. He knew Haskins as a man with a 'can do' attitude, probably a result of his Army Special Forces training. And his education in land use planning and position on the Planning Board would serve the development partners well.

Kaye also knew Haskins was a deeply unhappy man who had toiled away in unrewarding jobs for more than three decades. His family, which he had tried to run like a military unit, had deserted him. His two sons were grown and living as far away as possible. And his wife had divorced him five years ago and been awarded a

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substantial alimony, which left Haskins struggling financially. The income from his Planning Board position and from teaching part-time in the School of Public Administration at Mount Vernon College, formerly an all-women's college on Foxhall Road in the District of Columbia, was barely sufficient for him to stay in his home near Lake Needwood. Kaye felt Haskins might jump at the chance for monetary enrichment, and he had been right.

Geoffrey Kaye poured himself another scotch and unlocked the rear door of the law offices. Within ten minutes Aldridge Haskins had driven to Rockville from his home, parked around the corner from the law firm of Silverberg, Fredericks and Kaye, and entered the rear door of the practice then removed his driving gloves.

"It's me," Haskins said, entering Kaye's office. "Now start at the beginning. You said on the phone 'We thought burning the Hall would scare off Flynn and Holman.' Who is 'we'?" he asked.

"Krupp. He called me last Friday night and said we had to find a way to force the two of them to clear off and sell the rest of the farm to us. I suggested setting a fire at the Hall," Kaye told Haskins. "Then I got a call this morning saying Flynn was meeting with the Inspector General, so I went through with the plan."

"What does the IG have to do with this?" asked Haskins.

"Don't you see? Flynn must have found out about the recycled paper scam," Kaye said. "He's blown the whistle on Krupp and Shuster. Now this whole development deal is going to fall apart. And I'm going to go to jail for hitting Flynn with my car."

"When did the accident happen?" Haskins queried.

"Right before I called you," Kaye told him, pouring another three fingers of scotch in his glass. "I drove right to the office from the Holman place and then I called you."

"And you set a fire at the Hall?"

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"Yes, I poured gas on the wooden porch in back and lit it," Kaye said. "I was watching the fire burn when I heard a horn honking, so I got in my car to drive away. That's when I hit Flynn. I might have killed him. I don't know."

"Did anyone see you?" Haskins asked.

"It was pretty dark. I don't think so...other than Flynn, maybe."

"Okay, so there's nothing to connect you to the fire or Flynn getting hit, unless Flynn lived and can identify you," Haskins reasoned calmly. "So let's hope he's dead."

"No, you don't get it. The passenger mirror slammed into him and broke off," Kaye said. "It's on the ground out by the Hall. It's proof that I was there."

"Still not a problem," Haskins said. "If we find out Flynn's dead, then we claim you were out inspecting the property because we were thinking of making Holman an offer to buy the rest of the farm. You'll say that you saw some teenagers set the fire and were leaving to drive to a phone to report it when you think you hit one of them. You were upset and decided to get legal counsel before turning yourself in to the police."

"And what if Flynn is still alive?" Kaye asked.

"Then we'll deal with that," Haskins said coldly.

"Oh, God, this is bad," Kaye moaned. "What about Krupp and Shuster?"

"If the IG pushes to indict them for contract fraud, it just means there's more money for everyone else," said Haskins.

The Planning Board Chair had advised the partners in the Holman Wood development project to write a 'fail safe' clause into the incorporation papers creating the FTA LLC, whereby if any one of them died or were convicted of a felony during the life of the company then that partner's assets would revert to, and be split by, the remaining partners.

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"You should keep your vehicle hidden until we find out what happened with Flynn," Haskins told Kaye.

"I've got a car cover I use to keep bird droppings off of it," Kaye said.

"Good. Let's put that on, and I'll drive you home," said Haskins. "You're stressed out and you're drunk. You should get some rest."

Kaye ushered Haskins out the back door, locking it behind them, and walked across the small parking lot behind the law offices to retrieve the car cover from his silver Mercedes-Benz G class sport utility vehicle.

"Where is your car?" asked Kaye.

"I parked around the corner, to be safe," Haskins said, putting on his driving gloves.

"Smart," said Kaye.

Haskins helped Kaye place the fabric cover over the SUV. Then as Kaye squatted to tighten the rope cinch in the hem of the cover, Haskins moved behind him and placed one gloved hand on the back of his neck, grabbed his chin with the other, and violently wrenched his head to one side snapping his neck. Kaye's lifeless body crumpled to the surface of the parking lot.

Aldridge Haskins calmly stooped down and retrieved Kaye's wallet, taking the cash and dropping the wallet on the ground. Then he removed the dead man's gold Rolex watch and wedding ring. He quickly exited the parking lot, walked around the corner to his vehicle, and drove off. On his way home, Haskins stopped at Lake Needwood and threw Kaye's wedding ring and wristwatch into the water.

By ten o'clock, Haskins had returned home to his split-level rambler, a nearly empty shell due to his ex-wife getting most of the furniture in the divorce. He sat in the living room in the lone armchair, and played a cassette tape of Hawaiian music on a cheap

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boom box while reading through documents in preparation for the week's Planning Board session. As he read, he fantasized about escaping the world he now inhabited to live in a shack on the western shore of Kauai, the oldest of the inhabited Hawaiian Islands...far away from his ex-wife, his two thankless sons, and all of the other idiots who surrounded him.

Haskins had honeymooned in Hawaii with his wife, following their marriage in 1976. They had flown into Honolulu from the mainland, intending to stay in one of the luxury hotels along Waikiki Beach. But they had found it to be too "touristy" and expensive for their liking. So, after visiting the Arizona Memorial at Pearl Harbor and paying their respects at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, they decided to island hop from Oahu to Kauai where, the locals told them, life was simpler and cheaper. There the newlyweds rented a one-bedroom shack that cost slightly more a week than their room in the Royal Hawaiian Hotel on Waikiki had cost for a night.

His honeymoon now seemed a distant memory to Haskins, as if it had happened a lifetime ago. But in the years since, whenever the arguments with his wife, or the household bills, or disciplining two rambunctious boys seemed too much to bear, his mind would wander to images of the simple shack on Kauai, as though it was a refuge awaiting his return. He was certain that if he could amass enough money he could live out his days leading a simple, solitary island life...living on coconuts, pineapple and poi, and whatever fish he could catch.

A new song, "*Kai Ino (Troubled Seas)*", began to play on the boom box. The sound of a slack guitar blended with the deep, rich tones of a Hawaiian male singer who told a story of lost love. The music flooded the house and the lyrics of the song engulfed Aldridge Haskins, nearly suffocating him.

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*"Alone...again. Kai ino.
I walk along the kahakai,
No one to hold, no where to go,
So small beneath the big Hawaiian sky.*

*"The moon above has lost its glow.
The orchids bloom, but not for me.
My heart feels sad and hollow.
I pray the aumakua hear my plea."*

Haskin's intense longing to escape the life in which he felt trapped had become a physical hunger that left him feeling empty and exhausted. The aumakua, the ancient gods, would be no help. He had been left alone to make his own way in life.

As the law firm's receptionist arrived for work Tuesday morning she discovered the body of Geoffrey Kaye, the seemingly unfortunate victim of a random late-night mugging. One of the partners in the firm phoned the Planning Board Chairman to share the grim news, news he had no idea the Chairman already knew.

Not long after that call, Aldridge Haskins received word that someone acting on behalf of plaintiff Jake Flynn filed an appeal in Circuit Court challenging the Planning Board's approval of the Holman Wood project. Haskins had the Board's attorney file a motion with the Circuit Court seeking summary judgment, claiming there were no grounds for appeal of the decision of the Board and asking the court to dismiss the case. But he knew Jake Flynn would have to be dealt with in a more permanent fashion.

Chapter Nineteen

Tuesday morning for Jake passed in a drug-induced series of fragmented images of nurses and of Sean and Greta, mixed with distorted dreams of the burning Hall and vehicles racing toward him. By noon the intravenous drip of painkiller into his system had been stopped, and Jake awoke feeling much more human...except for the dull, throbbing pain in his right shoulder. He opened his eyes to find Greta sitting in the chair in his hospital room, working on the *Washington Post* daily crossword puzzle.

"Hey, Greta," he said raspily, and then tried to clear his throat.

"Hi, Jakey," she said. "Let me get you some ice chips."

Greta pushed the "call" button clipped near the pillow on the hospital bed, to alert the nurse that Jake had awakened. Then she fed him a few ice chips on a plastic spoon from the styrofoam cup that had sat on his bedside table, awaiting his regaining consciousness.

"Where's Sean?" he asked. "I thought Sean was here."

"He's down in the cafeteria getting something to eat," Greta told him. "He's been right here beside you since yesterday evening."

At that moment Sean entered the hospital room and saw that Jake was awake and talking.

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"The wounded warrior returns to the land of the living," Sean said, walking over and sitting on the edge of Jake's hospital bed. "How are you feeling, JM?"

"I've been better," Jake said, and then laughed groggily.

A young female nurse entered the room and cheerily chirped, "Oh, good, you're awake, Mr. Flynn. How are you feeling?"

"He's been better," Greta and Sean replied in unison. Then Jake and the two of them laughed.

"Good. You're laughing. That's a sound we like to hear," said the nurse.

"Happy to oblige," Jake retorted.

"Now, the police said they want to get a statement from you before you were released. Do you think you would be up for that?" the nurse asked. Jake nodded. "I'll let them know you're awake. You just relax until they get here," she said, exiting the room.

"You gave me a scare, you know," Sean told Jake, "getting hit by that lunatic's car."

Jake grunted. "It's not like I planned it."

"You should have seen us in action, Sean," Greta gloated, "Jake manning the pumper while I doused the fire. You'd have been proud."

"I am proud of you," Sean said. "I'm proud of both of you. But I'm worried about your safety. I've decided to move in and take care of you until you've recovered, JM."

"Wait. You said 'that lunatic.' Did they catch the arsonist?" Jake asked.

"Wow, you're moving in, Sean. That's great news," Sean mumbled aloud.

"Of course it's great. I'm excited that you're going to move in," Jake told Sean.

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"The early local tv news reported Geoffrey Kaye was found dead in the parking lot of his law firm this morning, apparent victim of a robbery gone wrong," Greta told Jake. "He was found near his vehicle. They say evidence was found in the car that links him to a fire under investigation. It was him, Jakey, the fire...everything. I know it. He got what was coming to him and now we can relax."

In a short time, a Sergeant with the Montgomery County Police Department arrived in the hospital room to take Jake's statement about the fire and the SUV that hit him. He told the policeman that Geoffrey Kaye was the attorney for the Holman Wood development deal, speculating that this might provide some explanation for the arson. Jake also told the cop he wondered if Kaye had fired the shot that winged Greta two weeks ago.

The Sergeant also took a statement from Greta, although she admitted that she had arrived late on the scene and had missed seeing Jake being struck by the vehicle speeding off.

"Now, when can I get out of here?" Jake asked Sean after the police Sergeant had left.

"The nurse told me that if the doctor gives you the okay during afternoon rounds then you can leave anytime you feel up to it," Sean told him. "They're going to give you a sling for your right arm, to keep it immobilized while the shoulder heals."

"I can't wait to leave. I hate hospitals," Jake said. "They're so...germy."

After being cleared for release from the hospital on Tuesday afternoon, Sean and Greta took Jake home and settled him into bed in his home on Holman Road.

Chapter Twenty

Sean rose quietly on Wednesday morning so that he would not wake up Jake. He left a note on the dining room table stating he would stop by the Wheaton house after work to pick up some fresh clothes, and would be back in time to make dinner. As he backed his car out of the driveway of Jake's home onto Holman Road, Sean heard the mockingbird giving a morning concert from a top branch of the apple tree in the front yard.

The morning local television news carried a report that the County State's Attorney would hold a press conference about the fire and the related death of Geoffrey Kaye in front of the Courthouse in Rockville a little before noon. Marni closed the Green Corner Store for the morning to attend the press conference, so that later she could send an email with the details to members of the KRAP network.

At eight-thirty that morning, Circuit Court Judge Rudolphus Blount sat in his office in the County Courthouse in Rockville and read the Planning Board motion asking for dismissal as groundless the case filed by plaintiff Jake Flynn the day before. The judge decided he would not rule on the motion without hearing oral arguments from both sides. In a one sentence decree Judge Blount

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stated he would hold a hearing the following Monday, at which time the Board could argue grounds for dismissal and the plaintiff could argue why the case should be heard by the court. Blount's decree was immediately sent by courier to the Planning Office in Silver Spring, where it greeted the Chairman as he arrived for work.

By mid-morning a furious County Executive Furman was on the phone with Councilmember Bob Krupp.

"What the hell, Bob," Furman fumed. "I tell you my daughter needs financial help and you tell me she can make quick money selling forest credits to some damned building project. Now I find out the project is being held up by a court case. I asked you for help, damn it. Don't ever forget that I can ruin you with a single phone call."

Krupp tried to calm the livid County Executive, but was hung up on in the process.

Jake awoke around eleven in the morning to the sound of the phone ringing. He was groggy from the acetaminophen with codeine he had been prescribed to ease the pain in his right shoulder, and rushed into the upstairs office to answer the phone before the message machine picked up.

"Hello."

"Jake? It's Belinda Schaefer. How are you?" she asked.

"I had a little run in with a car on Monday," Jake told Belinda.

"God, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, "just a little sore."

"I've got news on your court case," said Belinda. "The Planning Board filed a motion seeking to have the case thrown out as groundless. First thing this morning the judge decreed that he would not rule on the motion without hearing oral arguments, which he scheduled for next Monday."

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"I think I like this judge," Jake said. "Did you find out anything about why Jock Metheney has been nosing around this side of the county lately?"

"Darn, I forgot to ask the other reporters if they know anything," said Belinda. "I'll do it, though."

"Thanks," said Jake.

"Did you get in touch with North Carolina yet, to see who the partners are in the FTA LLC?" asked Belinda.

"No dice. I would have to go to Raleigh in person," Jake told her.

"The *Courier* has a sister paper down there," Belinda said. "I'll see if I can find a reporter to go in and look at the papers for us."

"That would be a big help. At the moment I don't feel much like driving to North Carolina again," Jake said. "I did take your advice and visit the Inspector General."

"Good. So, the noose is tightening," Belinda said almost gleefully. "By the way, what do you make of Geoffrey Kaye's death?"

"Weird coincidence," said Jake. "That's who ran into me on Monday."

"You were there when he torched Holman Hall?" Belinda asked.

"I arrived after the fire was set. He hit me as he was driving away," Jake said.

"Kaye's death has the newsroom buzzing. They say it looks more like a murder than some random street robbery gone wrong," Belinda said. "I mean, it's not easy to snap somebody's neck like that...you need to have training. It's more like a professional hit."

"Well, that's an unsettling thought," Jake said.

"Oh geez, I have to run," Belinda told Jake. "I'm covering this morning's press conference in Rockville. Look, you take care of yourself. I'll call you if I learn anything new."

Jake hung up the phone. His shoulder still throbbed, so he returned to his bedroom and took another tablet from the plastic

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pill bottle on the nightstand and downed it with a swig of water from the glass next to it. The pills had taken away his appetite, so he decided to go out and sit in the sun for a bit to see if that would make him feel better.

Jake went to his dresser and took out his pair of light grey corduroy Ocean Pacific shorts, selected a Hawaiian shirt from the closet, then walked to the bed where he sat and pulled on the shorts with his left hand. He decided not to attempt to put on the shirt, and tossed it over his shoulder and headed downstairs. On his way outside Jake grabbed the pouch of Bugler tobacco and his Zippo lighter, and stuck them in a pocket of his shorts.

"That ought to be entertaining," he said to himself, "trying to roll a cigarette with a bum arm. Too bad I never learned to roll one-handed, like the cowboys on horseback did in old western movies."

It was now early May, and the sun warmed Jake's shirtless back as he walked to the shed in his backyard. Inside, he stepped past the bucket that held the dynamite he'd removed from the truck muffler.

"Shoot, he mumbled to himself, "I've got to do something with this dynamite. I can't just keep it sitting here in the shed."

Then he retrieved a folding lounge leaning against the wall and walked out near the clothesline in the backyard to set up the lounge, which was not an easy feat with one arm. Once horizontal, Jake felt all tension flow away as he seemed to melt in the morning sun's welcome warmth. And he fell asleep.

Jake was roused from slumber by the squawk of the mockingbird in the front yard and a man's voicing shouting, "Ow! Get away, damned bird."

"Who's there?" Jake called out, sitting up.

"Meter man," said the man, as he strode into the back yard. He wore a khaki shirt and pants, sunglasses and a brown baseball cap.

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"It's on the side of the house toward county road," Jake replied, lying back down.

"Thanks," said the man.

"Who are you talking to, Jake?" Greta called from her house.

"It's the meter man," Jake answered.

"Okay," Greta said.

Jake nodded off again, drifting into a codeine-induced dream world of burning houses and attacking mockingbirds.

The stranger walked to the side of the house, lifted the lid on the propane tank control panel and moved the shutoff knob to the 'off' position. He waited a few seconds--enough time for the pilot lights on Jake's kitchen stove and basement water heater to go out--then turned the gas back on again. Then he walked off down Holman Road toward the county road.

Early in the afternoon, Greta walked into Jake's backyard carrying a woven picnic basket like Little Red Riding Hood might have wielded while visiting her grandmother.

She tiptoed up to the lounge on which Jake was lying and whispered, "Woo hoo, Jakey. It's lunch time."

He sat up, completely disoriented by the codeine in his system and the strange dreams he had been having.

"Let's go on your porch and eat," Greta said. "I brought tuna salad sandwiches and potato chips."

"That actually sounds good," he replied. "I wasn't hungry earlier, but I think I could eat now."

Jake rose from the lounge and held the shirt out toward Greta, like a small child asking its mother for help.

"Can you help?" he nearly whined.

As she helped him remove his arm sling and put on the shirt Greta said, "You know, I don't think that man came to my house to read the electric meter."

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When Jake had donned his shirt and repositioned his arm in the sling, they walked to the porch and Greta held the screen door open for him.

"This is fun. It'll be like a picnic," she said.

After she settled Jake on the wicker settee Greta realized that she had forgotten to bring napkins, and went in the side door to grab some off his kitchen counter.

"Have you been hardboiling eggs?" she asked, returning with the paper napkins.

"No, Sean made spaghetti with meat sauce last night," Jake replied. "He knows it's my favorite of the things he cooks."

"Well, it smells like eggs in your house," she said.

"That's funny," he said. "I'm going to get some coffee. Do you want something to drink?"

"No," Greta said. "I brought bottled water."

Jake stood up and headed in the side door. As he walked into the kitchen he recognized the odor as the smell of rotten eggs that is added to propane gas. He quickly opened the kitchen door, rushed and opened the front door, and headed back out onto the side porch leaving that door open behind him, too.

"That's gas you smell, Greta," Jake said, breathlessly. "Get away from the house in case it blows."

Greta quickly stuffed the lunch back in the picnic basket and headed toward her home. Jake hurried to the propane tank on the other side of his house and turned the cutoff valve to the 'off' position. He then rejoined Greta, who had already begun eating lunch on her own side porch.

"You okay, Jakey?" Greta asked, chewing on a bite of sandwich.

"Yeah," he said, sitting down next to her. He let out a long sigh. "It must have been that phony meter man. You know, I really don't like having a target painted on me and not knowing where the next attack is coming from."

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"So Kaye wasn't responsible for everything," Greta said. "That's too bad."

"It looks that way," Jake replied. "But a wise woman I know once said 'what the hell good is life if you're not having fun?' This is the best picnic I've been to in years. So what if we were run out of our original spot by somebody trying to blow us up," he said cavalierly.

They both chuckled. Thank God they could still laugh, he thought to himself.

As they ate, Jake told Greta about filing the Circuit Court appeal and the Board's challenge. He also told her of his unsatisfying visit with the Inspector General on Monday, since they had not really talked since then.

There was a breeze blowing from the north. After lunch Jake ventured back into his home and set up fans at the door to the basement and in the south bedroom window upstairs, to disperse any accumulated gas. A couple of hours later he turned the gas back on and lit the pilot lights in the kitchen stove and the basement hot water heater.

Over dinner that evening, Jake told Sean about the fake meter man and the gas scare. They discussed the danger, and Jake said he would understand if Sean preferred to move back to Wheaton where it was safer. But Sean said he promised to stay until Jake was fully recovered, and he would stick to his promise.

"Somebody certainly wants you out of the way, JM," said Sean. "Isn't it time you told the police all that's been happening around here? You didn't tell the cop at the hospital about the break-in or the dynamite stuck to your truck muffler. And now there's this propane leak. And you're no closer to knowing who's behind it."

"I don't know who to trust, who is involved, or how high up in county government this thing goes," Jake said. "What if they've

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paid Jock Metheney and some other cops to muddle any investigation?"

"You talk about 'they' and 'them'. Who are they? What do they want?" Sean asked. "And what are they afraid you'll do?"

"I'm trying to stop a housing project from destroying Holman Wood," said Jake. "Is that it? I don't know."

"Let's think this through," said Sean. "You believe Councilman Krupp and this guy Shuster from North Carolina are partners in the deal."

"Maybe they're afraid I'll find out about their recycled paper contract scam," said Jake.

"But you didn't learn about that until you went to Wrightsville Beach and talked to Cynthia Nichols. Even if she let Shuster know she told you about the scam, somebody shot at Greta, or at you, and strapped dynamite to your truck before that," Sean reasoned.

"It's got to be about the subdivision project then," said Jake. "I don't know. What am I missing?"

"Well, maybe it's not about Holman Wood," said Sean, standing to clear the dishes from the dining room table.

"Okay. The developer is buying Forest Credits from County Executive Furman's daughter and her husband. Maybe the project is just a way for Krupp to funnel money to Furman through his daughter," said Jake. "Or her husband, Jock the cop, may be trying to hide something. Maybe I should be looking more closely at the Metheneys."

"Where do they live?" Sean asked.

"They have two hundred acres on Damascus Road, west of Sunshine," said Jake.

"We should look at the property," said Sean.

"You mean drive over there?" Jake asked.

"No," said Sean, "on the computer. Let's go upstairs. I'll show you."

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In the upstairs office, Sean used Jake's computer to log in to a webservice that employed satellite photos to map all of the properties in the county.

"How do you know about this?" Jake asked.

"We had a boundary dispute with one of the neighbors next to Pleasantdale Elementary," said Sean. "A guy with the public school system showed me this site and gave me the password to access it. Okay, I'm in. What's their address?"

Jake read the note he'd made on the list of forest credit properties he received from the Planning Department staffer, which was sitting on his desk: 5801 Damascus Road, Etchison.

"All right," said Jake, watching the aerial view of the Metheney property appear on the screen, with the boundaries marked with yellow lines. "That's Damascus Road along the bottom and Patuxent State Park at the top."

"There's their paved driveway. And the house is in that big clearing," said Sean, pointing out features on the computer screen. "What's that running diagonally across the property? It looks like a stream feeding into the Patuxent River."

"If it is, there would be an easement, a stream buffer, protecting it," said Jake. "I wonder if they've got enough forested acres to sell all the credits needed for the Holman Wood project. Let's print out a copy of the screen. Wow, that was amazing. Thanks."

After they had made the printout, Sean and Jake returned downstairs.

"Enough about me," said Jake. "Tell me about your day, Principal Fitzpatrick. Take my mind off Holman Wood."

As Sean washed the dinner dishes, he related the details of his day to Jake. Afterwards Sean poured himself a brandy and refilled Jake's coffee mug, and they went out on the screened side porch to play a few hands of double solitaire.

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"Are you sure you want to sit out here?" Jake asked, as they walked out onto the porch. "It may not be too safe."

"If you're going to sit out here, I'm sitting with you," Sean said.

Jake felt a warm rush of blood flow up his neck to his face, and he pushed to take a full breath as his body reacted to the depth of Sean's love for him. He mentally kicked himself for ever questioning Sean's commitment to their relationship.

Sean shuffled and laid out Jake's cards for him, since he couldn't easily manage it with his arm in the sling. Later, the two men watched the ten o'clock news on the television in the living room, and then they retired upstairs for the night.

Chapter Twenty-one

Jake awoke late on Thursday morning and managed to dress himself, short sleeve Hawaiian shirt and all. But he aggravated his shoulder injury as he gingerly moved to put his right arm through the shirt sleeve, and realized it might be some time before he could stop using the sling.

After downing a mug of coffee, Jake telephoned the person in the Planning Department who met with him two weeks ago to explain the Forest Conservation Law.

"I want to find out more about the Metheney property," Jake said. "Specifically, how many forested acres are there and how many Forest Credits could be sold to the Holman Wood housing project.

"That property was pulled from the Forest Credit Program," the staff person said.

"What? Why?" Jake asked.

"Apparently the wife registered the property with the Program, and the husband withdrew it. That's all I know," said the staffer.

"Okay. Well, thank you," said Jake.

As Jake hung up the telephone he heard the beeping of a truck backing up in his driveway.

"Good Lord, what now?" Jake mumbled to himself, rushing onto the side porch.

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It was Ned Harker delivering a load of compost from his farm in Poolesville. Jake spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon helping Greta spread the compost on the garden, as much as he could with the use of only one arm. The male mockingbird from the front yard apple tree kept watch over the operation from high up on the gutter at the rear corner of Jake's house.

At first it felt good to Jake to be engaged in manual labor. It took his mind off the troubles surrounding him. But when he heard his telephone ring a few minutes after four o'clock in the afternoon, he was only too happy to rush into the kitchen to answer it. Regina Scarborough was calling.

"Clara Dutton and I got to talking on our drive home from that Planning Board hearing a week ago. I don't think it's important, but Clara said I should tell you," Regina told Jake.

"Tell me what?" Jake asked.

"Well, that was the first time I had ever been to a Planning Board hearing," Regina continued, "but it wasn't the first time I had seen Chairman Haskins. He was at Laura and Jock Metheney's wedding back in November 2006."

"You were at their wedding? Wow, hobnobbing with the bigwigs," Jake said.

"No, Jock invited almost everyone he'd gone to school with. So my boy Ronald and my husband and I were invited," said Regina. "Frank Furman had just been elected County Executive so there were a lot of top county officials there, including Planning Board Chairman Haskins. I remember him because he hit the champagne pretty hard and danced with all of the bridesmaids. He made a fool of himself...old enough to be their grandfather."

"Is that what Clara thought you should tell me?" Jake asked.

"No, it's something Haskins said at the wedding" said Regina. "After the toasts, Frank Furman got up and announced to everyone

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that he was going to take care of building a house for Laura and Jock on the land they'd bought. He was just showing off how rich and important he was. But then Haskins got up, drunk, and made a speech about how he was short on cash because his ex-wife was bleeding him dry. But he said was going to help out with the new home, too, and save the newlyweds thousands of dollars."

"What did he mean?" Jake asked.

"I don't know. I guess that's why I remember it," said Regina. "At the time I just thought he was a cheap bastard who felt bad he hadn't brought a gift to the wedding."

Jake suddenly realized the significance of the woman's memories.

"Regina, you're terrific!" said Jake.

"I am?" she asked.

"I think I know what Haskins meant," said Jake. "Thanks for calling, Regina."

"Okay," said Regina. "Well, good bye."

"I'll let you know if it pans out," Jake said. "Thanks again. Bye."

When he had hung up with Regina, Jake walked back outside and was pleased to find that Greta had finished spreading the last of the compost on the garden. The sprouts that had emerged from the seeds planted two weeks ago stood out in vivid green rows, contrasted against the rich, dark compost surrounding them.

"Can I ask you for a favor?" Jake asked. "Do you have a driver's license, Greta?"

"You want me to drive you someplace?" she asked.

"Oh, golly, no," he quickly replied. "I need to go to the County Courthouse Monday morning for a quick hearing about the court case, and I shouldn't be driving with my arm in a sling. In case we get stopped by the police, you can slide over into the driver's seat."

"It'll be like we're delinquent teenagers," Greta laughed. "Sure I will."

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"Great," said Jake. "The hearing is at nine o'clock in the morning, so I'll meet you at my truck at eight thirty. We'll be home by lunchtime."

"You know, I'm not an early riser," said Greta.

"You are a treasure, dear Greta," said Jake. "It's a date...Monday morning."

The Friday edition of the *Montgomery Courier* ran a story written by Belinda Schaefer about the death of attorney Geoffrey Kaye. In his office that morning, Aldridge Haskins read the banner headline on that day's paper-- "Rockville attorney found murdered"--with a sense of detached pride. Belinda's story noted that Kaye had been the agent for a controversial Germantown real estate development just approved by the Planning Board.

"Police believe Kaye set fire to a home near the project site on Monday night, and struck a pedestrian with his vehicle while fleeing. Kaye's body was discovered next to his SUV, in which police found a can containing gasoline believed used as an accelerant for the fire. At a Wednesday press conference the County State's Attorney announced police have no clues or suspects in Kaye's death, but noted it is still early in the investigation."

In the continuation of her article on page 12 of the *Courier*, Belinda Schaefer reported that, in a related development, a lawsuit had been filed to stop the Holman Wood development project from going forward.

Haskins name appeared nowhere in the article. It pleased him that he seemed to have gotten away with his crime. When he finished scanning that week's edition of the *Montgomery Courier*, the Planning Board Chairman retrieved the briefcase from next to his desk, turned out his office lights, and told his secretary he was taking off early for the weekend. Then he walked out of the

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building, got into his tan Jeep Liberty, and drove out of the Planning Board members' private parking lot heading north on Georgia Avenue toward the Capital Beltway.

Haskins exited the Beltway onto Interstate 270, turned off at the Germantown exit and drove up county road past Holman Wood to see whether the sign announcing the new subdivision had been erected. It had been. It read "Coming soon to this site - Willow Branch Estates - 100 luxury detached homes starting from the mid-\$700,000s." In smaller print were the words "all inquiries handled through Geoffrey Kaye, local agent" accompanied by Kaye's office telephone number.

"That will have to be changed," Haskins thought to himself. Then he turned the car around and headed back down county road toward Rockville.

Aldridge Haskins drove to the law offices of Silverberg, Fredericks and Kaye, where he engaged the services of attorney Saul Silverberg to replace the now-deceased Geoffrey Kaye as local agent for the Willow Branch Estates development project. Haskins explained that he was helping the development company negotiate the legal processes in the county because they were headquartered out of state. He told Silverberg that all matters involving the project needed to be handled in the strictest confidence.

Haskins concluded the meeting by telling Silverberg that legitimate inquiries regarding sale of the new homes should be forwarded to Wylie Real Estate in Wrightsville, North Carolina. Then Haskins stood and shook the attorney's hand, left the law offices and drove home. He felt satisfied that he had successfully handled the messes created by the idiots surrounding him.

It was now clear to Aldridge Haskins that the only possible risk to his reaping a fortune in profits was posed by Jake Flynn. He was

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sure that the lawsuit would go away once Flynn was out of the picture, and that the Holman woman would then move and sell the remainder of her property.

Chapter Twenty-two

On Monday morning, Jake drove one-armed to the County Courthouse in Rockville with Greta 'riding shotgun' at his side. When they arrived on the eighth floor of the building Jake and Greta were met by Ernest Showalter, the attorney from KRAP who had filed the Circuit Court appeal for Jake.

"Look, we don't have to argue the case this morning," said Showalter.

"I understand," said Jake.

"We just have to give the judge a solid reason not to dismiss," Showalter stated.

They talked in hurried conference in the foyer and then entered the courtroom. The carpeting, wood paneling, and upholstered seats in the court seemed oddly luxurious to Jake, more like a small plush movie theater in an overpriced cineplex. Showalter ushered Jake to the defendant's table, past the bar that separated the public seating from the front of the court. Greta took a seat in the audience behind Jake and his attorney.

The attorney for the Planning Board was seated next to Chairman Aldridge Haskins at the applicant's table. Eight members from the Planning staff were chatting while taking seats in the audience

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behind them. It seemed strange to Greta that everyone knew which side of the aisle to sit on, like a wedding without ushers. The door to the judge's chamber opened just as they all got seated.

"All rise. The Circuit Court for Montgomery County is now in session, Judge Rudolphus Blount presiding," the clerk announced.

"Be seated," the judge said, taking his seat. "Good morning. We have before us a motion seeking summary judgment, filed by the defendant in the case of *Jacob Flynn v. Montgomery County Planning Board*. Let's see if we can't make this quick. I will hear from the Board's attorney first."

The attorney for the Planning Board was an efficient looking woman in her mid-thirties who wore eyeglasses and had her jet black hair coiled in a tight, neat bun at the nape of her neck. She stood to address the judge.

"Thank you, your honor," the attorney began. "We believe the case filed by Mr. Flynn seeking to overturn the Board's approval of the Holman Wood project plan is groundless and without merit."

"Let me stop you there," the judge interrupted. "In your motion, you make a claim that Mr. Flynn has no grounds on which to sue. Now you're saying Mr. Flynn's suit is without merit. If you want the court to decide whether or not his suit has merit, then the court will first have to hear the case. Is that what you want?"

"No, sir," the attorney said, seeming flustered by the interruption.

"Then, let's stick to 'groundless' and argue that point," said the judge.

"Thank you, your honor," the attorney continued. "We believe the suit filed by Mr. Flynn is groundless. The Germantown Master Plan approved by the County Council last December recommends housing for the Holman Wood parcel. And at their session on Thursday two weeks ago, the Board, acting on the authority granted them by the State of Maryland, approved a project that

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would provide that housing. The Board acted within its authority, after receiving information relative to impact from the project on local area traffic, on the public schools, and..."

"Whoa, let's not get ahead of ourselves," the judge interrupted again. "I don't want you to argue the case this morning. I just want to hear why you think the suit is groundless. And you have already provided that. Do you have anything you wish to add?"

"No," the attorney replied. She sat down, now seeming completely flustered.

"Thank you. I will now hear from the defendant's attorney," Judge Blount said.

"Thank you, Judge Blount," said attorney Showalter, standing as he began. "My client, Mr. Flynn, is appealing the Board's approval of the Holman Wood project plan because he does not believe the members gave sufficient weight to consideration of the State Growth Plan before acting."

"Objection, your honor," said the Board's attorney. "Mr. Flynn presented no information from that Plan when he testified before the Board. The plaintiff cannot introduce new information on judicial appeal which was not presented to the Board in reaching its decision."

"The Board's attorney is correct in so stating," said Showalter. "But the Growth Plan for the State of Maryland was discussed at that hearing. It was the Board Chairman himself who opened the issue for investigation."

"Is that correct, Chairman Haskins?" asked the judge.

"Yes," Haskins mumbled, remaining seated.

"Please stand when you are addressing the court," the judge said. Haskins rose.

"Yes, I guess so, your honor," said Haskins. A flush of red rose up his neck from his collar, from a mixture of embarrassment and anger.

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"I do not want you to guess, Chairman Haskins. This court cannot base a decision on guesses," boomed the judge. "Did you initiate discussion of the State Growth Plan, or not?"

"Yes, I did," Haskins stated, his face now fully reddened.

"Thank you, you may be seated," said the judge. "Continue, Mr. Showalter."

"The State Plan contradicts and, we believe, overrides the relevant county master plan," Showalter said. "It is this basis on which we seek appeal of the project approval."

"Is that all?" the judge asked. Showalter nodded in the affirmative. "Then it is the decision of this court that the motion for summary judgment is denied. But before I hear the case of *Flynn v. Planning Board*, Mr. Flynn, I want you to exhaust all other avenues of appeal. That means you must petition the Planning Board for reconsideration of their project approval, in order to fully consider the relevance of the State Growth Plan on their decision. And I am going to help you out there, Mr. Flynn, because I am ordering the Board to hold a reconsideration hearing this Thursday. Is that understood, Chairman Haskins?"

Quickly standing, Aldridge Haskins said loudly, "Yes, your honor."

"If the Board again votes to approve the Holman Wood project, then I will hear your case, Mr. Flynn," the judge continued. "You will have thirty days from the date of that action in which to file the Plaintiff's Brief in the case. The Planning Board will have fourteen days in which to file the Respondent's Brief, and then you will have ten days in which to file a Reply Brief. I order that no work commence on the Holman Wood project until the case is decided, and only then if the court finds in the Board's favor. This court stands adjourned."

Judge Rudolphus Blount banged his gavel, stood, and quickly left the courtroom as everyone else stood at once.

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"Jackasses," Chairman Haskins uttered, slamming through the gate at the bar and rushing up the aisle to the exit, nearly knocking into the bailiff seated by the door as he stormed out of the courtroom. His mind was racing. Too many unplanned, uncontrolled events were occurring. The scheme was not playing out with military efficiency, as he had planned.

"Wow, Ernest, we won," Jake said to his attorney. "You were great. I'd loved to see you in action when you're prepared for a case."

"Well, you know what they say," said Showalter. "Sometimes you get the bear, and sometimes the bear gets you. I guess this was our day. But you're going to have to work with Marni on writing a damned good brief for this case, or the judge is going to know this whole thing was a ruse to slow down the project. Good luck on Thursday, but I don't expect the Board will reverse their decision."

"Me either. But a lot could happen in the meantime. For now, thank you," said Jake, "thank you, thank you." And he gave the attorney a heartfelt hug.

"C'mon, Jakey, let's go tell Marni you won," said Greta.

Greta again 'rode shotgun' and looked for police, ready to slip into the driver's seat if needed, as Jake drove one-armed back to Germantown. They stopped at the Green Corner Store at the entrance to Holman Road to share the good news with Marni. And the three friends stood in the store and ate frozen ice cream bars in celebration.

Back home with a mug of coffee, Jake called Belinda Schaefer at the *Montgomery Courier* office to tell her what had happened in court that morning. He wanted to make sure she had plenty of time to call people for their reactions and write the story before her copy deadline on Thursday.

"Somebody got to my editor, Jake," Belinda told him.

"What? What do you mean?" he asked.

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"I got called in to his office this morning and told I'm being reassigned to cover the State General Assembly in Annapolis," she said to Jake. "He told me it will mean a hefty raise for me, which will come in handy raising a kid. But the session in Annapolis is over for the year, so there's nothing really to do until next January. I know I'm being pulled off county news for another reason. It must be because of Holman Wood."

"When do you start the new beat?" Jake asked.

"I'm supposed to start right away," Belinda replied. "But I told my editor that I insist he allow me to write a wrap-up piece for this week's edition, and he agreed. I've only got one more shot at this story."

"So the government controls the media?" Jake asked.

"Not exactly controls," said Belinda, "but if the paper doesn't do what officials want, then they don't give our reporters any news tips. That reminds me, it turns out Jock Metheney's been spending time on the west side of the county because he's allegedly having an affair with a waitress who works at a restaurant in Shady Grove."

"That would explain why he was so quick to respond when Greta was treated at Shady Grove Hospital for her gunshot wound," Jake replied.

"My sources tell me that wife Laura hired a private detective who confirmed Jock's philandering, and she's getting ready to divorce his ass," Belinda continued. "That must be why they're selling Forest Credits for their property. Laura's building up the bank account before she sues to take half in a divorce settlement."

"Oh, that's right, I haven't told you. The Metheney property has been pulled from the Forest Credit Program," said Jake.

"Why?" Belinda asked.

"Don't know for sure, but I've got a good guess," said Jake. "You've mentioned you have sources in government that feed you

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information. Do any of the little birdies that sing to you work in the Permitting Services Department?"

"You bet," said Belinda.

"Good," said Jake. "You and I need to make an inquiry. I think we might be able to make this final Holman Wood story of yours a real bang up piece."

Chapter Twenty-three

By Tuesday afternoon the Planning Board website had been updated and the reconsideration of the Holman Wood project plan had been placed on the agenda for Thursday. A link on the agenda took computer users to an exhaustive report by Planning Department staff on all of the applicable sections of the State Growth Plan that supported approval of the Holman Wood project. The report concluded by stating "The Planning Staff recommends reaffirming the prior project approval."

A few minutes before noon on Thursday, Planning Board Chairman Aldridge Haskins called the next item on the agenda for the session. Jake Flynn, Greta Holman and Marni Green were seated in the audience, as were a handful of members of the KRAP network. A new reporter for the *Montgomery Courier* was seated at the reporters' table up front. And Jake noticed Belinda Schaefer slip in the rear door and sit in the back row of the auditorium just before the Chairman called the item of interest to them all.

"Next we have Item Six, *Reconsideration of the Project Plan approval for the Holman Wood housing subdivision in Germantown*," the Chair announced. "Mr. David Parker of the Planning Department staff has filed a report that I believe is very

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thorough in its examination of the State Growth Plan and its relevance to approval of the Holman Wood subdivision project plan. Mr. Parker, do you have anything you wish to add at this time?"

The staffer, still sporting his affected "five o'clock shadow", nodded in the negative.

"We have only one speaker signed up, Mr. Chairman," the Clerk said. "Mr. Jake Flynn." Jake stood and walked to the table in front of the dais on which the Board sat.

"Mr. Flynn, you're becoming a fixture around this building. Perhaps we should give you your own office," Haskins said in a smarmy attempt at humor. Of course, all of the Planning staff members seated on the dais laughed. "What do you have to share with the Board? Do you have some unique perspective on the State Growth Plan which the staff has overlooked?"

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman," Jake began. "But I don't wish to address the State's Growth Plan. I would like to discuss two other documents that I think the Board will find interesting."

"This hearing is to reconsider the Holman Wood project approval in light of the recommendations contained in the Growth Plan," said Haskins. "Any new information is disallowed."

"With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, you are the one who stated two weeks ago that a citizen could present any information they wanted to the Board in the three minutes they are allotted," said Jake. "I believe your exact words were 'they could read from the phone book if they so desired.' I think the Board will find the documents I am presenting slightly more interesting than the phone book."

Jake rose from his chair at the witness table and delivered multiple copies of a two-page handout to the Clerk. He returned to his seat as the Clerk distributed the pages to the five members of the Board.

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"The first page you have before you is the Building Permit application for construction of a home on the property owned by Jock and Laura Metheney, filed with the Department of Permitting Services in January of 2007" Jake told the Board.

"This is absurd," said the Chairman. "We're not here to talk about the Metheney property."

"Well, it is related because the Metheneys were going to sell Forest Credits to the Holman Wood project, Mr. Chairman. And after all, it's my three minutes," Jake said. "If you look about two thirds of the way down the Building Permit application you see the question 'Will land protected by the county Forest Conservation Law be cleared for this project?' And someone has written in the word 'Yes.' Then the form states 'If yes, please attach a copy of an FCL Program Report certified by the Planning Department showing how requirements will be met'."

"I've heard enough," Haskins boomed. "This has nothing to do with the Holman Wood project."

Someone from the Keep Rural Areas Protected network in the audience booed. Chairman Haskins banged his gavel.

"We will have order or I will clear the auditorium," Haskins declared.

"The second page I've given you is the FCL Program Report that was attached to the Metheney's Building Permit application," Jake continued. "There you see the question 'Number of forested acres to be cleared?' And someone wrote in 'Eleven'. Then the question 'Number of Forest Credits purchased?' And someone wrote in the word 'waived', after which the initials 'AH III' appear. I believe that's you, Mr. Chairman."

Someone from KRAP laughed loudly. Chairman Haskins banged his gavel.

"We will have order or I will clear the auditorium," Haskins declared.

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"Can't deal with the truth?" a KRAP member shouted.

"Order," Haskins said loudly, banging his gavel repeatedly.

"But I don't believe you have the authority to waive a law that you are sworn to enforce," said Jake.

Greta, Marni, Belinda and the six members of the Keep Rural Areas Protected network who were in attendance all broke into applause.

"That's it. I want the audience cleared. Everyone out," Haskins said. "This Board will deliberate, and you will be called back in when we have reached a decision."

Everyone sat stunned for a moment, not moving.

"Out," Haskins bellowed. "Now!"

The dozen or so people in the audience, including the novice reporter from the *Courier*, all filed into the relatively small foyer outside the auditorium, and the Clerk locked the doors after they had exited. Belinda made her way over to Jake, Greta and Marni.

"In all my years covering the Board, I've never seen the audience cleared," Belinda said. "You really struck a raw nerve."

"It's his job on the line," said Jake. "But the Board better uphold the integrity of the FCL. A lot of farmers would like to clear trees on their land to increase the tillable acres on their farms, but they can't unless they buy Forest Credits. It's not going to sit well with them if they find out the County Executive's kid cleared land illegally without buying credits, and the Planning Board Chairman approved it."

"What's that buzzing noise?" Jake asked.

"Oh, it's my cell phone," Belinda said. "I forgot that I put it on 'vibrate'."

Belinda took the phone from her purse, and exited the foyer to take the call on the plaza outside the building.

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"Jakey, I don't understand. Why didn't you present testimony on the State Growth Plan?" Greta asked.

"Our KRAP attorney, Ernest Showalter, told me it was really a non-starter," Jake replied. "The State Plan is written so broadly that it justifies building more housing, protecting the environment, or keeping land in agricultural use. The reality is that the circuit court probably wouldn't reverse the project approval and substitute their judgment for that of the Planning Board. I filed the lawsuit to hold up development of the wood while I kept investigating."

Jake watched Belinda through the plate glass wall of the foyer, and noticed her grower more animated as her telephone conversation continued. Finally, Belinda flipped her phone shut and walked back into the building.

Rejoining Jake, Marni and Greta in the foyer, Belinda announced, "You are not going to believe this."

At that moment, the doors of the auditorium were unlocked and Chairman Haskins pushed through the crowd, purposefully knocking into Jake as he went. Then the Clerk announced to the crowd in the foyer that they could reenter the auditorium.

"Shoot, I'll tell you later," said Belinda. Everyone scrambled to take seats in the audience as the Board Vice Chairman began to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Board has reached a decision in the case," the Vice Chair said calmly. "We have decided to confirm the approval of the Holman Wood subdivision Project Plan, by a vote of four to zero. But we have also determined that the Metheneys did indeed violate the Forest Conservation Law by illegally clearing eleven forested acres on their property. The Board has decided, also by a vote of four to zero, not to impose a fine on the Metheneys, but rather to order that they purchase the required number of Forest Credits to compensate for the clearing

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that took place on their property in 2007. That is the ruling of the Board."

The Vice Chair banged the gavel. Three of the members of KRAP booed.

"This Board stands adjourned," the Vice Chair said, banging the gavel again. And the four remaining Board members rose and left the auditorium en masse.

Jake, Belinda, Greta and Marni remained in their seats as the Board and Planning staff members, and the rest of the attendees, all exited the auditorium.

"That was nothing," Greta said. "That was a slap on the wrist."

"Not even a slap," said Marni. "That was a light tap on the wrist. That was a love pat."

"So, what was the call about?" Jake asked Belinda.

"It was a colleague who's a reporter with the *Raleigh Beacon* in North Carolina," Belinda said. "She went in to check the incorporation papers for the FTA LLC for me, and she told me that four partners are listed in the records. You were right, Jake. Councilmember Krupp and Paul Shuster, the guy with the Tarheel Paper Company, are both partners. And so are attorney Geoffrey Kaye and Planning Board Chairman, Mr. Aldridge Haskins the third."

"Son of a bitch," said Jake, standing and walking quickly toward the exit. The three women rushed to keep up with him. He spoke as he walked at a fast clip through the foyer, out the doors of the building, and toward his truck in the parking lot.

"I'm going to see Inspector General Bob Wrigley right now," Jake announced. "And if they say he can't see me, then I'm busting into his office. And if he isn't there, then I'm going to sit down and wait until he gets back. I'm going to blow the whistle on this unholy alliance if it's the last damned thing I do."

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Jake pulled his keys from his pocket as he reached his truck, and began unlocking the driver's side door.

Rushing to keep up, Greta said, "Don't forget, Marni and I rode down here with you."

"Well, get in," Jake instructed. "This bus is pulling out."

Both women jumped into the cab of the pickup truck alongside Jake. "It's a good thing it's my right shoulder that's hurt," Jake thought to himself. He wouldn't have been able to use his right arm to drive anyway, with the two women squished in beside him.

"Call me as soon as you know anything. You've got my cell phone number," Belinda said. "I've got one hell of a story to write, whether my editor wants it or not."

"Bye, Belinda," Greta and Marni both called out, as Jake drove his truck out of the Planning Board parking lot up Georgia Avenue toward Viers Mill Road and Rockville.

While Jake went in to see the Inspector General, Greta and Marni walked to the shops in Rockville Town Center to grab lunch, promising to bring him back a sandwich. When the IG finally saw him, Jake seemed out of breath as the information learned since their last meeting spewed out of him. He was breathless from excitement, not from physical exertion. When the torrent of words from Jake had ceased, Bob Wrigley spoke calmly.

"When you came to see me two weeks ago, I took your allegations very seriously," Wrigley said. "This office immediately launched an investigation. If accusations of wrongdoing are made which involve elected officials from two branches of the county government, I feel it deserves my immediate attention. After attorney Geoffrey Kaye was found murdered last week, a man who was involved with a real estate development project under investigation, if only peripherally, I believed it was my duty to share all of the information we had

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collected with the County State's Attorney. I can tell you that his office has also undertaken its own investigation."

As he listened, Jake's breathing at last began to slow.

"The State's Attorney and I both realize that there have been instances of late in which you and your neighbor have found yourselves in real physical danger. As a result, our investigations are proceeding with all possible haste" the IG continued. "What I cannot tell you is when, if ever, either office will release any findings in this matter. I understand how unsettling that must be for you. But I appreciate your coming in to see me again and sharing the additional facts that you have uncovered. I do appreciate your dogged pursuit of the truth, Mr. Flynn. Thank you."

"Well, I hope you do something fast," Jake said. "Because I don't know how much longer I can continue living like this."

"Again, I thank you," Wrigley said, as he stood and ushered Jake from his office.

As he exited the office building at 51 Monroe Street, Jake found Greta and Marni sitting in the sun on a bench in the courtyard outside, and dining on the carryout food they had purchased at a nearby delicatessen. Jake sat and ate the sandwich and drank the coffee they had brought him.

It was beautiful and warm early May afternoon. As he ate, Jake realized that passersby were completely unaware of the scurrilous schemes being hatched by unscrupulous officials in the high rise government buildings around them.

When the three friends finished eating, they walked to the parking garage behind the County Council Building to retrieve Jake's truck. "Thank God I don't have a flat this time," Jake thought as he neared the truck. He had neglected to get the damaged tire fixed and was still riding on the spare. Marni, Greta and he piled into the pickup and left for Germantown.

Chapter Twenty-four

Returning from the trip to the Planning Board and the unscheduled visit with the Inspector General, Jake stopped his truck immediately after turning onto Holman Road, to let Marni out at the Green Corner Store. Then he and Greta drove up the road to their homes.

"I guess we'll have to wait for somebody else to do make a move now," Greta said, exiting the truck and heading toward her home.

"I suppose so. Thanks for tagging along," he said. "I appreciated having your company. I always do."

Jake went into his house and headed toward the kitchen for coffee when he heard Greta scream the word "intruder" at the top of her lungs from next door.

"Shit, they've got Greta."

Jake rushed onto his side porch and out the screened door. As he turned toward Greta's house, a rifle shot rang out and a pane in his dining room window shattered behind him.

He quickly changed direction and ducked into his tool shed, nearly tripping over the bucket containing the stick of dynamite. He pulled the door shut behind him.

"Where are you, Flynn?" a man's voice called.

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Jake cracked the door a bit and saw the shooter. He had on camouflage fatigues and the green and black mottled face paint worn by combatants in jungle warfare. A similarly patterned bandana was tied around the top of his head. He lurched from Greta's front yard toward her side porch, dragging her along with one arm around her neck and the other carrying his rifle.

"This ends now," Jake mumbled. He picked up the dynamite and gently removed the duct tape, leaving it behind, and then slid the stick of explosives into his pants pocket.

"Get your hands off me," Greta shrieked.

"Let her go," Jake yelled, running from the shed to his driveway and crouching behind his truck.

The stranger raised the gun with his free arm and fired another shot. The slug struck the side panel of the truck's bed. Greta struggled with the man. She gurgled as he grabbed her more tightly around the throat.

"Don't hurt her," Jake shouted. "She's an old lady."

"I told you not to call me old," Greta croaked, stomping on the stranger's foot and yanking the rifle from his hand in one swift move. Stunned and in pain, the man relaxed his grip on Greta and she ran toward the road. Seizing the opportunity, Jake rushed forward and tackled him.

The two men wrestled on the ground for what seemed an eternity to Jake. At one point the stranger sat astride his hips, pinning him down. The pain in his right shoulder made Jake scream out. But he connected a punch with his left fist to the stranger's face. Then the stranger landed a strong right punch to Jake's jaw, and Jake used the man's momentum to throw him off onto the ground. He tried to stand but the stranger beat him to it and rushed Jake, grabbing him around the neck with both hands and strangling him from behind.

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No matter how hard he tugged at the man's wrists with his one good and one bad arm, Jake could not loosen the man's grip on his throat. Jake pushed past the pain in his right shoulder, reasoning with himself that it didn't make sense to coddle the shoulder if it resulted in his being killed.

Jake looked over to see Greta ten feet away aiming the rifle at the struggling duo.

"Don't shoot," Jake gurgled to Greta, "unless he kills me."

"Oh, I'm going to kill you," the assailant said, leaning in to whisper right into Jake's ear. "But I'm not going to snap your neck, like I did to that dumbass lawyer."

Jake thought it felt odd how the hot breath of the man's whispers was warming his ear. In another circumstance the act could be almost sexual. Then he wondered why he was thinking these stupid, unrelated thoughts when he should be focused on the fight.

"I'm going to strangle you so I can feel the life slip out of you," the man whispered to Jake. "And then I'm going to kill your neighbor. I want to make sure you never mess up my plans again."

Jake tried to kick his right leg backwards into one of the attacker's kneecaps. But he missed entirely and his body weight sagged onto his other leg, his remaining support, which only tightened the man's grip on his neck. Jake breathing was almost entirely cut off, and he sensed his field of vision narrowing as he became lightheaded.

"This is not how I want to die," he thought to himself. Somehow, the thought emboldened him and gave him momentary clarity. Jake slid his hand in his pocket, removed the dynamite and his Zippo lighter, and lit the fuse.

"Either I'm going to blow this guy up, or we're both dying," he thought to himself.

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With enormous effort Jake threw his weight into spinning around to face his attacker, although it felt like the man's grip might tear the flesh from his neck. He tugged at the front of the man's camouflage shirt, and stuck the dynamite down the neck opening. The startled stranger relaxed his grip, and Jake shoved him backwards with all his might and dove in the opposite direction.

"Hit the ground, Greta," Jake yelled.

The sound of the explosion left a ringing in their ears so loud that Jake and Greta could barely hear the sirens of the arriving police cars. Peter Gustafson, Belinda Schaefer's farmer uncle, had called 9-1-1. Belinda had asked him to watch over Greta and Jake. He was working the fields out back when he'd heard the shots, and had used his cell phone to call the police.

Greta and Jake both sat up slowly, staring at the mangled body of their attacker yards away as police cars screeched to a halt on the road out front. Officers swarmed into the yard. Greta was the first to stand.

"This is not what I meant..." Greta yelled to Jake, at too high a volume due to the ringing in her ears.

"What?" Jake yelled back, walking toward her.

"...when I said we'd have to wait for somebody else to make a move" Greta replied.

"I know," Jake yelled.

Now standing toe to toe, they reached out and hugged each other for several minutes.

"I think he's dead," Greta then said at a more reasonable volume, her hearing returning.

"I know," Jake said.

Both of them were suffering mild shock. As the rush of adrenalin faded they grew exhausted, and their arms and legs felt heavy. The police led them onto Jake's screened side porch, where they sat

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side by side on the wicker sofa while an officer asked them each questions about the order and timing of the afternoon's events. For them the rest of the afternoon and early evening seemed a series of vivid moments interrupting long stretches of blank numbness.

Marni came running up from the Corner Store when she heard the explosion and rushed, red faced and panting, onto the porch. When she was certain Jake and Greta were all right, she returned to the store and called Sean at school to tell him the news so that he would not be alarmed to arrive after work and find Holman Road filled with police cars and other emergency vehicles.

A black van from the medical examiner's office pulled onto Greta's front lawn, and the investigators officially identified the body as that of Aldridge Haskins III, chairman of the county Planning Board. Jake already knew who it was, having recognized the facial features during their struggle despite the camouflage make up and the bandana that Haskins wore to cover his bald pate.

At one point Sean ran up the driveway and onto the porch and hugged Jake then Greta. "God, I'm so glad you're all right," he said. "Marni called and told me what happened." He served Jake and Greta glasses of room temperature water, and told them to sip it while they were being interviewed.

The three learned the crime scene investigators had retrieved the duct tape from Jake's shed that was used to strap dynamite to his pick-up truck. The fingerprints on the tape would later be matched to those on file for Haskins. Investigators recovered the rifle slug that Haskins had fired into the truck and the one that shattered Jake's dining room window. They also used a metal detector and found a slug in Jake's front yard. The blood on it pointed to it having been the shot that had struck Greta in the arm, and the caliber matched the other two fired from Haskins' rifle.

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In late afternoon it occurred to Jake that Belinda should be told what had taken place, and he asked Sean to call her. "Her number is on the board by the kitchen phone," Jake said. Sean would later tell him that Belinda's uncle had already called her.

By seven o'clock the police had finished their investigation of the scene, packed up, and driven away from Holman Road. Jake and Greta remained seated side-by-side on the wicker sofa for some time, staring across the corn field out back. They could hear the banging of utensils and other noises coming from the kitchen. As dusk fell, Sean came onto the porch to announce that he had fixed dinner and thought the two should come inside and eat.

The three sat in relative silence eating the canned beef stew Sean had heated and served along with store-bought corn bread and cole slaw. He served water with the meal, wanting Jake and Greta to get food on their stomachs before imbibing caffeine or alcohol.

After the meal, as Sean cleared the dishes to the kitchen, brewed coffee and got out the brandy and snifters, he could hear Greta and Jake talking in the dining room.

"Thank you for saving me," she said.

"Greta, you did as much to save yourself as I did," he replied.

"But when I screamed, you came running...right away, no hesitation," she said.

"Yep, I did."

"Why?"

Jake reached across the table and took her hands in his.

"Because that's what neighbors...and friends do for each other. They help each other," he said. "And you're not just a neighbor or a friend, Greta, you're family...you've known me since the day I came home from the hospital. That's what families do, what good families do...they've always got each other's backs."

Overhearing their conversation from the kitchen, tears welled up in Sean's eyes as he prepared the coffee.

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"Of course, I'm not sure I would have run that fast if I'd known he had a loaded gun," Jake said to Greta.

They both laughed.

"Don't spoil it, Jakey," Greta said. "We're having a moment here."

After the three finished their coffee and brandy Sean suggested they all walk to the Corner Store to buy dessert. While they stood in the store eating ice cream treats on a stick, Jake and Greta gave Marni a detailed accounting of the events that had taken place after they dropped her off at the store that afternoon. On the stroll back up the road Sean noticed that Jake and Greta walked close together, and guessed they felt a bond which only survivors who have endured a shared event can know.

When they arrived home, Sean turned on the television to a sitcom and announced he had some reading to do for work. He told Greta to help herself to another brandy, if she wanted, and suggested she stay the night in the upstairs guest room rather than return to her house alone. Then he headed upstairs to the office, leaving Greta and Jake seated together on the living room sofa watching the television. At a little after eleven p.m. Jake finally retired to his bedroom for the night, and Sean woke as he disrobed for bed.

"Did Greta decide to stay in the guest room?" Sean asked.

"She fell asleep on the sofa, so I put a coverlet over her and left her there," Jake said, as he climbed into bed, spooning with his back to Sean. "Hold me?"

"I've got you, buddy," Sean said as he slipped his arms around Jake and held him close. "You're safe."

"I feel like I should go to church," Jake said.

"Why," Sean asked, "to give thanks that you had to defend yourself from a lunatic who tried to kill you?"

"No...to thank God I was able to," Jake replied.

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They lay together like that for a few moments, breathing in silence, until Sean felt the tension begin to drain from Jake's body.

"You know, you're my hero, JM," Sean said in a low voice. "What you did today showed a lot of courage."

"Courage only exists if there's a choice," Jake replied. "I didn't have a choice. Whether he had killed me first or Greta, I knew he wasn't going to stop until we were both dead." He breathed a heavy sigh.

"You're still my hero," said Sean. He held Jake in a tight embrace until they both fell off to sleep.

Sean awoke at his usual time the next morning. He left Jake asleep in the bedroom and tiptoed downstairs past Greta, still asleep on the living room sofa, and went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. He tried to mix up a batch of waffle batter as quietly as he could, while frying up sausage patties in a cast iron skillet. When the two sleepers finally woke up, roused by the aroma of sausage wafting through the house, Sean broke his silence and telephoned the school to say he would be late.

After Sean left for work, Greta and Jake decided to spend the morning together pulling weeds in the vegetable garden. It had rained during the night and washed all traces of blood from Greta's front lawn. And just after dawn a half dozen crows had scavenged the few small bits of the former Planning Board Chair which the Medical Examiner had not retrieved following the previous day's explosive incident.

After lunch, the two neighbors inspected Greta's doors and windows to be sure Haskins had not broken any of the locks. Thankfully, it seems he had carefully picked one of the door locks to gain entry to her home the day before, and no repairs were needed. Jake's dining room window had been shattered by a bullet and needed to be repaired, however, so Greta and he drove to the

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hardware store in Germantown and bought a pane of glass to replace the damaged one.

Back home, Jake installed the new window pane while Greta sat on his screened porch, overseeing the work from the comfort of one of the wicker chairs. The telephone rang as he worked, and he hurried to the kitchen to answer it. It was the County State's Attorney.

In an officious tone of voice, the State's Attorney said he had determined that no charges would be brought against Jake for unlawful possession of explosives or failure to obtain the necessary use permit, since the dynamite had been brought to his property without his permission and was used only as a weapon of opportunity against an assailant who had threatened his life. Then, in a warmer and more personal tone, he thanked Jake for contacting Inspector General Wrigley to share his suspicions of wrongdoing by county officials.

"Well, that certainly puts my mind at rest. Thank you for calling", Jake said and then hung up. In truth, it had never crossed Jake's mind that he might be charged for any of his actions in the entire sorry affair.

Greta again joined Jake and Sean for dinner that evening. But following dinner, she felt sufficiently recovered to return to her home and spend the night alone. The two men sat at the table and watched through the dining room window as Greta made her way across the side yard to her house.

"It's about time for my annual spring getaway," Jake said.

"Right," Sean said, standing to clear the dishes from the table. "It's time for the annual Flynn family reunion."

"Yeah, well, about that..."

"You should go," Sean said. "It would do you good to get away for a while."

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"And you?"

"I should get back to the house in Wheaton anyway" Sean said. "It's the end of the school year, so I have lots to do at work. I'll be fine. And we can ask Marni to check in on Greta and make sure she's okay."

"I'll be back before Memorial Day weekend," Jake said.

"Sure," Sean said. "No problem. The break will give us both some time to think"

"All right, that's settled," Jake said.

Chapter Twenty-five

The death of Aldridge Haskins was reported in a banner headline in that Friday's *Montgomery Courier*, along with a story written by reporter Belinda Schaefer detailing his and other county officials' involvement in the Holman Wood development project, all peripherally related to a contracting scam perpetrated on the county government.

In the following weeks, a grand jury was empanelled to consider the filing of indictments. The jury decided there was sufficient evidence to try Geoffrey Kaye on charges of arson and attempted vehicular manslaughter, but the charges were dismissed due to his death.

Although the jury decided they could not charge Aldridge Haskins with the murder of Geoffrey Kaye, based on Jake Flynn's hearsay testimony of an admission made during their fight on Greta's front lawn, there was sufficient evidence to charge Haskins with assault and battery for the struggle with Jake and Greta and with three counts of attempted murder--for Greta's shooting, placing dynamite under Jake's truck, and taking shots at Jake. Again, as was the case with Geoffrey Kaye, the charges were dismissed as a result of Haskin's death.

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The grand jury members were split as to whether charges of being accessories to attempted murder would stand against Councilmember Robert Krupp or County Executive Frank Furman, and so no indictments were filed on those charges. However, charges of malfeasance in office and conspiracy to commit fraud were brought against both of them for their involvement in the Tarheel Paper Company contract scam of the county government. And Krupp was also charged with bribery, for soliciting campaign donations to County Executive Furman in an attempt to buy his silence. Both men resigned their offices in disgrace.

The grand jury investigation revealed the names of the four partners involved in the FTA Limited Liability Corporation that purchased Holman Wood to develop it: Bob Krupp, Geoffrey Kaye, Paul Shuster, and Aldridge Haskins. The investigation also uncovered the 'fail safe' clause which had been written into the incorporation papers creating the LLC, whereby if any of the four died or were convicted of a felony during the life of the company then that partner's assets would revert to, and be split by, the remaining partners.

In due time, Councilman Krupp pled guilty on all charges brought against him, to save his family the ordeal of a trial. Paul Shuster was extradited from North Carolina to Montgomery County, and was convicted on contract fraud and bribery charges. And Geoffrey Kaye and Aldridge Haskins were dead.

Since no partner in the real estate tontine was left to receive the assets of any other, the one hundred and forty acre parcel known as Holman Wood was placed in receivership by the court. Eventually, ownership of the land was turned over to the Montgomery County government and the property was registered with the Legacy Open Space Program, "to be held in perpetuity as a wildlife preserve for the benefit of the people of the county."

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Belinda Schaefer was recalled from the Annapolis beat by her editor at the *Montgomery Courier*, and once again assigned to cover county government for the newspaper. For weeks she wrote lead stories for the newspaper covering the unfolding investigation into the contract scandal and the indictments and convictions that resulted from it. Belinda also wrote of the efforts and risks undertaken by a small group of committed individuals to protect the environment and quality of life in their community. She won a 2011 Maryland Delaware D.C. Press Association Award for Investigative Journalism for her series of articles.

Lieutenant Jacob "Jock" Metheney was asked to retire from the Montgomery County Police force rather than risk being dismissed for conduct unbecoming an officer. His wife, Laura, filed for divorce soon after. They sold their property on Damascus Road and split the profit, most of which went to pay their respective divorce attorneys.

Following Paul Shuster's extradition to Montgomery County, Jake paid him a visit in the Clarksburg Jail. He thought the man looked absolutely miserable. But since he didn't know Shuster, Jake wondered if perhaps he hadn't always looked that way.

"I have only one question for you," Jake said, sitting across a table from Shuster in the jail's visitation area. "The limited liability corporation you created to develop Holman Wood...what does the 'FTA' stand for?"

"Fuck them all," Shuster said.

Jake stood up and walked out of the jail in silence. On the drive home, he stopped in at St. Mark's on White Ground Road and gave thanks to God for getting him through the ordeal of the past few weeks, and prayed for the soul of Aldridge Haskins.

Wilmington realtor Bill Wylie would skate free in the affair, as the details of his part in arranging the meeting between Paul Shuster and Montgomery County Councilman Robert Krupp

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remained hidden from the grand jury. When Shuster was called before the panel he was questioned as to how he had initially met Councilman Krupp. He responded that he had met the vacationing Krupp quite by accident, while jogging on the Wrightsville Beach boardwalk. Shuster kept quiet about Bill Wylie's role in selecting Krupp as a possible bribery target to goad into securing the county recycled paper contract for Tarheel Paper Company. Shuster figured that he might need Wylie's help in figuring out his next money making scheme, when released from prison, so it was best to keep quiet about the significant role the realtor had actually played.

Although the grand jury was interested in what part Cynthia Nichols and the Paper Store may have played in the contract fraud and bribery scheme, Ms. Nichols could not be located by the County State's Attorney to be called as a witness before the panel. She had sold her home in North Carolina in early May, along with all of her furniture, and there was no trace of her movements after that. It was as if she had vanished from the face of the earth.

In June, Inspector General Bill Wrigley issued a statement regarding his office's investigation into allegations of possible fraud and abuse surrounding the county waste paper disposal contract with Tarheel Paper Company. His conclusion was that, although improper influence may have been exerted to implement a switch from the Chinese firm which formerly held the contract to TPC, the Division of Contracting Services decision had actually saved the county money. The waste paper hauling contract would remain in place with TPC, now being run by Paul Shuster's relatives. The IG did recommend the county dissolve its agreement to purchase copier paper from TPC; and a new contract was forged with a Chinese supplier at a lower price per ream than Tarheel or Cynthia's Paper Store had charged.

Chapter Twenty-six

Sean Fitzpatrick told his colleagues at Pleasantdale Elementary School that he was retiring. This school year would be his last as their Principal. On Memorial Day weekend, Sean moved his belongings into Jake Flynn's home on Holman Road in Germantown, and they found someone to rent the house they co-owned in Wheaton.

The mockingbird in the apple tree out front of Jake's house had attracted a mate that spring, and together they were raising this year's brood of young hellions. The male continued to serenade all within earshot each sunrise and sunset, and attack anyone who ventured too close to his nest.

On July 2, the Saturday of the Fourth of July holiday weekend, Greta hosted a potluck dinner in Holman Hall for the folks in the Keep Rural Areas Protected network, to show her appreciation for their help in saving Holman Wood.

Jake, Sean and Greta went to the Hall in early afternoon to open the doors and windows and air out the old house, and to arrange tables and chairs for the dinner. The dining room table would seat ten comfortably. But they needed to move several smaller tables and assorted chairs from other locations in the Hall into the front

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parlor, the guest parlor of the hundred-year-old farmhouse, to handle the thirty or so guests they expected for dinner.

Marni closed the Green Corner Store at three o'clock and drove up to the Hall to help with the preparations. She brought half a dozen bags of cube ice for the drinks. Sean helped her transfer them from her vehicle into three large insulated coolers situated on the floor next to the sideboard in the dining room, while Greta and Sean spread tablecloths on the smaller dining tables they had commandeered for use in the parlor.

While they walked to her vehicle to get the second load of ice, Marni inquired if she could ask Sean a personal question.

"Sure, Marni," he replied.

"Big Sean, do you and Jake make each other happy?" she asked.

"Well, we hit a rough patch last year," he said. "But then what couple doesn't? We've been together for twelve years, so I guess we're doing something right. I hope Jake's happy, but I can't answer for him. I can tell you that he makes me happy."

"Good," said Marni. "Big Jake's a special guy, and there isn't much I wouldn't do to see him happy."

"Now I have a question for you," Sean said.

"Shoot," she replied.

"Why is it you care so much about Jake?" Sean asked. "Is there some history between you that I don't know about?"

"Oh..." she groaned. "Jake and I were best of friends through junior high, going everywhere together. I assumed we'd end up going steady...maybe even get married. But in high school he started to pull away. So when my Fred, the handsomest boy in school, asked me on a date, I didn't look back. We were wed not long after graduation. Then after Fred died and I opened the store, I'd see Jake occasionally when he stopped in for groceries for his mom."

She took a deep breath, exhaled it and then continued.

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"I thought we might see if there was still a spark between us. I figured he hadn't married because he was unlucky in love, or had a relationship go sour on him. Eventually it dawned on me I was barking up the wrong tree...that he isn't into women. But he was my first crush, so he'll always be special to me."

"Thanks...I didn't want to open up old wounds," Sean said.

"Puhleeze...life's too short for me to be that sensitive," she snorted.

"I want to ask something else," Sean said, "and maybe you don't know the answer, but...Greta's a rich woman since she sold Holman Wood. And she could afford to buy all of the food for this shindig. Why is she throwing a potluck dinner?"

"You're showing your city roots, Big Sean," Marni replied. "In a rural area if you do somebody a favor, like feeding them a fancy catered dinner, then they owe you. Now some folks might look on that as a burden...they might even resent you for it. But if you throw a potluck, and everybody gets to contribute and do their part, then nobody feels beholden to anyone else. Greta's a smart gal. She knew by making it a potluck that everyone would enjoy themselves and focus on the reason for the party...to celebrate saving Holman Wood."

"Wow, pretty smart," said Sean.

"Yup," said Marni. "You have any other questions, you feel free to stop in down at the store and ask."

"You know, I know a couple of handsome older teachers I bet would love to meet you," Sean said. "One's a widower and other one's wife left him a few years ago for a rich Washington lawyer. I'd be happy to try and set you up on dates with them."

"Well, call them up, Big Sean," Marni cackled, picking up a bag of ice under each arm and heading off toward the Hall. "I'm not gettin' any younger."

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As Marni and Sean were having their talk outside Holman Hall, Greta and Jake had their own conversation in the parlor about the future of the Hall. Later that afternoon Greta noticed Jake and Sean having a talk down by the pond, and guessed Jake was explaining to him the offer that Greta had made. She was right. And Sean agreed to it.

The guests began to arrive around four o'clock. Belinda Schaefer came with her daughter Melody. Belinda's uncle, Peter Gustafson, was there with his family, too. Ernest Showalter, the attorney, came with his wife. And Clara Dutton and Regina Scarborough attended, accompanied by their husbands and Regina's unemployed thirty-year-old son, Ronald.

By quarter past four, cars were parked out beyond the gate posts at the entrance to Holman Hall, down the side of the road all the way to Jake and Sean's driveway. And the sideboard in the dining room was groaning under the weight of the food that the guests had brought: fried chicken, potato salad, coleslaw, beaten biscuits, a ham, three bean salad, a grits casserole with sausage and cheese, and seven different desserts.

As is the case in rural areas, even one so close to the Nation's Capital, most of the men gathered on the front porch of the Hall to talk. Others played horseshoes in the side yard. The women set about arranging the food. And the Gustafson kids and their cousin Melody Schaefer played on the tire swing that hung from a limb of the oak tree in the backyard, and hunted for polliwogs in the pond. At five o'clock, Greta stepped out onto the rear porch of the Hall and rang the dinner bell, calling everyone in to eat.

Before their holiday break, the Planning Board and County Council had swiftly approved Greta Holman's application for historic preservation status for her grandparents' home. When everyone had served themselves and settled to eat, Greta announced that the old farmhouse would be renovated and opened

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to the public as the Holman Hall Farm Museum and Wildlife Center. Jake, Sean and she would be the curators.

Following dinner, as it grew dark outside, everyone gathered in the meadow near the pond for the lighting of a small bonfire. The crowd watched as the wooden sign meant to advertise Willow Branch Estates was tossed on the fire. Jake stood watching the sign burn, with Greta on one side and Sean on the other. He felt a sense of satisfaction that order had been restored to his world.

"You know, I won't know what to do with my time now that I'm retiring, JM," Sean whispered to Jake.

"I wouldn't bet on that," Jake replied. "We'll have plenty to do, running a farm and a museum."

"Sounds like a plan," Greta quietly stated, watching the fire all the while.

"I'm going to go stark raving mad out here in the boonies," Sean whispered.

"I know," Jake said, sliding his arm around Sean's waist and giving a squeeze.