

KIN

A Novel

Jeffrey Birch

Also by Jeffrey Birch
Fiction

Magnet For Murder
Frozen Solid
The Hunting
Conflagration
Crossings

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First e-book edition: 2014.

ISBN

For Doug and Terry Roberson who reside in the valley.

Without family, man does not exist. Without knowledge of kin, our pasts are invisible.

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Author's Note

Rock Valley Families

Stewart

Martin – Inheritor of the Stewart estate from Calum
Calum and Abby – Martin's aunt and uncle
Marilyn – Martin's mother
Sean and Trudy – Martin's deceased grandparents
MaryJean Lott – Martin's aunt estranged from the family
Malcom Lott – MaryJean's son

Campbell

Patsy Bishop – On her mother's side
Mabel – Matriarch
Iris - Daughter
Rusty – On his father's side

May

George – Father of Jered and Samantha
Carole – George's wife
Loreen
Waylon
Squeaker
Samuel Pike – On his mother's side

Standford

Donnie – Cousin to Robbie
Robbie – Cousin to Donnie
Harlan – Cousin to Donnie and Robbie
Travers – Cousin to Donnie and Robbie

Standifer

Patsy's father

Patterson

Sheriff Tom – A May on his mother's side
Deputy Mike – On his father's side.
Marybeth – Mike's wife

Chandler

Penny – Sheriff Patterson's deceased wife
Rock County Judge - Morris

Gatlin

Joannie Lynn – wife of Sheriff Patterson
Dan – A sheriff's deputy and brother to Joannie Lynn

Swallow

Doc – Veterinarian

Swan

Dean – A sheriff's deputy

Emma – Deceased wife of Rusty Campbell

Sally – Daughter of Emma and Rusty Campbell

Could a house die with its owner? It seemed dead – silent and dark. A closed husk, resigned to abandonment slowly fed to the damp loam in small bites of decay. Would it be surprised I had claimed it, remember me, accept resurrection over demise and yield protected secrets or follow mute to oblivion?

My head was swimming with revelations as I entered my uncle's house with trepidation taking in familiar spaces and furnishings as I wandered through rooms not seen in more than two decades. Dust motes of Uncle Calum floated in dead air raised by my footsteps weakly illuminated through gauzy lace curtains. A noisome smell I couldn't place caught in my throat. The air was oppressive, heavy with seeming physical force that pressed in, starving my lungs for oxygen. I loosened my tie and sucked in stale air, head unexpectedly swimming, light as my body seemed heavy. Windows not opened in years gave grudgingly as I worked them free from old paint with held breath and jerking pulls. With the front and side doors thrown open, outside air fought stale for entrance and in time prevailed. A wind skipped through tall trees, a partner in the ventilation. I stood at the side door, breathing deeply feeling an intruder.

Sam Pike, uncle's lawyer had delivered me to the farm after the funeral just minutes before. I'd met Pike that morning at his office before the funeral to sign papers and accept transfer to me of uncle's vast lands holdings and other property. I'd flown to Chattanooga from my home in New York City after Pike's lugubrious but perplexing call two days before.

"Well, Martin, you are now the owner of four thousand acres in Rock Valley," Pike said, offering a large, fleshy hand across an expansive, polished mahogany, lawyerly-looking desk. "It's the largest contiguous holding left in the valley. I'll see that everything is duly recorded. Congratulations. You are indeed fortunate."

I sensed a little envy had seeped into Pike's voice through his lawyerly formality. "Fortunate" seemed an understatement. I was astonished. My comfortable world of teaching in Manhattan had been in one phone call turned upside down. I simply didn't know what to make of what had happened. "Tell me again what you know of how my uncle fell to his death."

"Tom Patterson said he planned to stop by the farm this afternoon to discuss that very matter. I believe he's best suited to answer that question. I don't know more than I've told you."

"Yes. The sheriff. I remember meeting him at the service but it wasn't the time or place to get into it."

"I know him some. Been sheriff of Rock County for a good long while. You'll find him very thorough. Not one to jump to conclusions."

Pike had worked hard to get everything prepared for me on short notice so I said, "I appreciate all you've done here, Sam."

Pike chuckled. "Until you seek other representation – fire me as it were, it goes on your uncle's account but I appreciate your appreciation. I hope I can be of service in future."

I had instantly liked Pike and his stuffy, genteel but self-effacing manner devoid of guile. He reminded me of the iconic Southern Lawyer depicted so often in movies right down to the light-colored suit and suede buck saddle shoes worn shiny. I wondered if he considered me a carpet bagging college egghead from New York who was through legal means of inheritance taking over a vast southern estate. Swooping down from the North. Our relationship seemed

cordial so I asked but somewhat diffidantly, “Do you think people in the valley will object to me inheriting the property?”

“If you were coming to Chattanooga instead of the valley for some business acquisition I would say that you needn’t give it a thought.” He shrugged. “In the valley? You will have some getting acquainted to do. You are a Stewart for all the good and bad that goes with it.” Pike shifted his ample girth in the big oak chair. “I had a fine relationship with your uncle. I knew of his generosity but many saw a harsher side to him that will be the lingering bitter taste on the tongues of some valley folks.”

I shifted the subject needing to think about Pike’s words. “As I mentioned on the phone, I hadn’t been in touch with my aunt and uncle in many years. I missed her funeral being out of the country at the time. This came as a complete surprise.”

“It is sad when family passes. Abby had a fine send off. Wonderful woman. Regrettable you were unavailable but I completely understand. Life and distance are impediments to family ties these days. She passed away about one year ago, as I recall. Yes, this very month to be exact.”

“I also appreciate your taking the lead on the funeral arrangements. I have little experience with that and would have been at a loss.”

Pike nodded his thanks and said, “You met a few people who figured in your uncle’s life at the funeral. I wonder if you noticed the elderly woman who approached the casket and tucked something inside.”

“I didn’t.”

“I sauntered over after she left and did not remain for the service. I saw what she had placed. It was a small photograph. A little explanation is in order. The woman was Calum’s other sister, MaryJean. Other than your mother, Marilyn. Last name Lott.”

“What? I didn’t know another sister existed. In the summers I spent at the farm she was never mentioned and I don’t remember my mother ever saying anything about a sister.”

“MaryJean was maybe eight years older than Marilyn. Closer to Calum in age but older by a year or two I believe. This is before my time working for your uncle but the story goes that there was a serious falling out between Calum and MaryJean. She had no interest in the farm and wanted it sold. But Calum wouldn’t agree. Marilyn always did what Calum wanted and apparently the two sisters who were never close before, became estranged after. Partly from the difference in ages, I suppose. I’ve met MaryJean at social functions a few times and she has a....” Pike searched the ceiling for a word. “Caustic personality.”

MaryJean married Stan Lott another Chattanooga attorney who made a fortune investing in things but no one ever knew quite what. Stan died last year of a brain tumor and MaryJean lives in a big house, mansion really on Signal Mountain here in Chattanooga. They were a good match. Kindred spirits as they say. Stan was, well, a lot like MaryJean in personality. They had a son, Malcolm and it was his photo that MaryJean placed under your uncle’s hand. Malcolm has some brain development issues. Don’t know exactly what the affliction is called but has lived all his life with his parents and still with MaryJean up on the mountain. He must be around your age. Maybe a few years older. Stan had them traveling constantly and I believe they own a place in Hawaii, big island and some type of villa somewhere in Italy. Vineyard, I believe with partners.”

I shook my head with wonder. “I have a wealthy aunt and cousin I knew nothing about.”

Pike chuckled. “Now that you’re here you’ll quickly see how complicated family relations are – yours and everybody else’s.”

“Do I have other relatives I don’t know about?”

“The Stewart line by that name has died out to a few. I expect there’s second and third cousins around but I’m not acquainted with them. The direct line and the name ends with you unless you have children.”

I shook my head. “Sam? I think you’ve dropped all the bombshells I can stand for one morning.”

Pike chuckled. “Yes. Getting straight on kin will take time. Let’s be on our way.” Then his jowly chin dropped, brow pinched, fingering a gold tie clasp, but with a convivial voice asked, “Do you think you’ll keep it?”

I blinked taken aback with the abruptness of the question. “The farm? I, I don’t know. I’ve only just arrived. I need to spend some time there.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I completely understand. Get the lay of the land as it were.” Pike stared earnestly at me. “But if you *should* decide to sell at any time I would appreciate an opportunity to throw my hat into the ring early so to speak. An investment group would be needed but I have associates....” Pike waved a hand of pink, speckled fingers like bratwurst, eyes shifting away and let the thought hang unfinished before adding, “I have kin, family in the valley, you see. In Mayville. Not valley landowners now. My family lost their lands years ago as have many. Working for your uncle, I have come to know the estate intimately.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Sam.”

Pike’s face shifted, rounding, lips spread to a smile as hands dropped to his sides. “Then, I thank you for the consideration.” His voice was soft with the elongated vowels of the Tennessee accent.

The drive with Pike to Rock Valley seemed unfamiliar. Pike maintained an affable but stultifying stream of conversation oblivious to my silence. I studied the landscape from Chattanooga up the forested mountains to the Cumberland Plateau that rose above the Tennessee River valley where the city sat cozily abutting the water’s edge. Nothing was familiar until the car breasted the last ridge and made the long descent into Rock Valley. At once, everything felt eerily the same as if time had stopped in the valley.

The forested driveway from Stewart Lane that joined the county road two miles north wound for a half mile to the house hidden from it and backed against a precipice that overlooked General’s Ridge across the broad valley floor. Pike’s parting words were in my head as the car stopped in the circle drive.

He’d said, “Well, Martin, we have arrived. A key should be under the doormat. I’ll wait until you have entered. It’s only been a few days since your uncle’s untimely death. Things should be as he left them. All the services are on. I made sure of that once I knew you were coming directly.”

“Thank you, Sam. I recognize the house and the driveway seems as long as when I was here as boy.”

“Feel free to call on me if you have a need. Your nearest neighbor, your only neighbor is Patsy Bishop about a mile farther on the lane.”

My mind had wandered and I hadn’t heard those words as I slid from the car. “Thank you for dropping me off.”

“Think nothing of it.”

I had waved Pike off after finding the key and entering.

I continued to wander through the ancient structure with fresh air having won the battle. Being there seemed strangely surreal that after twenty-four years the house would feel as though

I never left. Little had changed. The furniture was the same. The area rugs, more worn but the same lay under the dining room table and in the living room. Beds had familiar spreads and windows the same curtains. Only the exterior siding had been painted gray from white and shutters were black not gray. Yet, the house seemed different in ways that found no words.

Before countless memories of my summers at the farm as a boy could flood back, the sound of an engine came followed by a triple rap at the front screen door. A woman perhaps in her late thirties stood on the stoop. She carried a milky white glass, serving dish with contents hidden under aluminum foil. She'd arrived on some type of open all-terrain vehicle that sat in the drive.

"I was at the mailbox. Thought I saw a car come over the rise and guessed you had arrived since it didn't keep coming. I'm Patsy Bishop. Next property over. About a mile or so. Lane's straight as an arrow to my place. Saw you at the funeral but didn't get a chance to introduce, well, reintroduce myself. Got there late. Well attended. Real sorry about Calum. Do you remember me?" Patsy glanced around. "Didn't notice your wife at the service. She didn't come?"

"Divorced for a few years." She stepped back as I pushed the screen door open. I stared at her quizzically with a look that quickly shifted to recognition. "My gosh. Please come in. My uncle's attorney reminded me of you. Is it Mrs. Bishop? You weren't a Bishop then as I recall."

"Oh, Patsy will do just fine and I'm a was in the married department. Lost my Jim to a farm accident last year." Her face dropped for a moment but recovered a warm smile. "Back then I was a Standifer. My daddy's name."

"A farm accident? That's terrible. Standifer? Seems I do recall that name as well. Good to see you again after..." I shrugged. "Twenty-four years."

"Long time, that's the truth. You went on with your life. We all did." Patsy's eyes searched my face. "My lord. Don't know that I'd recognize you on the street but here, in this house, I surely do. You have Calum's eyes."

"Really. Can't remember anyone saying that. Do you remember my mother?"

"Marilyn? More that I knew of her. She'd drop you off in June and leave was what I heard. She moved north before I was born."

"Yeah. She did. I was born in Minneapolis."

"Since Abby passed, your uncle mentioned you from time to time. You were on his mind this past year. Saw Tom Patterson at Walmart yesterday. Said he'd heard you were attending the funeral. Thought you might not get to cooking right off. Had this made. Lord knows Calum hated the chore. Abby did all that. When she passed last year, he was at a loss. It's just a hamburger casserole. Calum favored it."

"Thank you, Patsy. That's very thoughtful. I haven't begun to consider any of that. Tom Patterson is the sheriff I met at the funeral."

"Yes. Been doing poorly himself health wise since some heart surgery last year."

"He didn't seem well."

"I was at the funeral to pay my respects. Jim and I knew Calum and Abby well. Fine neighbors. Calum was widely known in the valley." She glanced about. "Where are all the flowers?"

"I didn't know what to do with them. I left some at the gravesite. I asked the funeral home to dispose of the rest."

She walked to the dining room, set the glass dish on the table. "Dish is fine in the oven to warm it, not on the stove top. Abby didn't hold with microwaves." Patsy looked down at the dish and then glanced at me. "Calum leave you the property?"

"Amazingly, yes. All four thousand acres."

"Big piece of ground. Biggest single land holding left in Rock Valley, as I recall. Most families have had to sell off pieces of land through the years. Not Calum."

"I *do* remember you, Patsy. You were a young girl with pigtails but I believe I'd recognize you in a different environment. You're the grownup version of that girl. It seems strange now as adults that we never really met or spoke as children."

"You were a couple of years older and at that age you seemed much older. You'd show up in June after school let out. I'd see you riding that chestnut roan mare every day until you left sometime in August."

"Trix. Her name was Trix. Whatever happened to her, I wonder?"

"Oh, she passed away a few years after you stopped coming. Keeled over in a pasture, as I recall. Your uncle wouldn't sell her in case you came back."

My chest tightened. "I wish I had. Do you have time to sit for a few minutes?" We took chairs in the dining room on furniture that had occupied the room for decades. "The sheriff said to me at the funeral that you told Donnie Stanford to look for my uncle sensing something was wrong on the day of his death."

"That's true."

"It was Sam Pike, my uncle's attorney who called me with the news that my uncle had been found behind the house below the ridge. He dropped me here a few minutes ago. I'm expecting Sheriff Patterson this afternoon help me understand what happened. Uncle's dying so suddenly and in such a strange way shocked me. I've had no satisfactory explanation of why my uncle fell ninety feet to his death. Pike knew little of the details. Can you tell me what you know?"

"Hmm. Sam Pike. He has kin in Mayville, I think."

"He mentioned that."

"Anyway, it's a mystery how Calum tumbled over the edge. That's the plain truth. What I know is that he wasn't where he usually was, where he should have been at that time of day. I've been looking in on him most everyday lately since his health began to suffer."

"That was kind of you."

Patsy shrugged with a hint of embarrassment. "We were close. That's what neighbors do."

The conversation lulled as I imagined Calum standing at the ridge top and losing footing. Then I asked another question that had preyed on my mind. "Patsy, I'm curious why the funeral was held in Chattanooga and not here in the valley."

"Abby was from there. Calum brought Abby to the valley as I heard it. I guess you wouldn't know that. I don't know if you met her kin. I believe I saw one at the funeral. Not acquainted with her side of the family." Patsy shrugged. "Not many Stewarts left."

"I see."

"Do you think you'll stay on?"

A noncommittal shrug of my shoulders signaled I hadn't begun to approach that decision. "I don't know. I've only just walked through the door." Pike had asked the same question that with its repetition produced a feeling of anxiety. Did I need to decide quickly? What if I didn't? Pike clearly wanted the property. Why did it matter to Patsy? Just curiosity? "I have a career

teaching at a college in Manhattan. It would be a big change but it's an unbelievable property and I have such fond recollections of being here as a boy."

"What do you teach?"

"World history." I offered a small smile. "I do my best to keep my students awake."

"Wasn't a favorite of mine. History of the valley is about the only history I'm up on and there's many know a world more than I do."

I'd see you on your property when I'd ride by. You were always busy."

Patsy chuckled. "I'd get busy. Shy was what I was. I think I'd have fainted dead away if you stopped and said anything to me."

"We were just kids," I sighed. "As I said, I wish I had gotten back sooner. Life has a way of...happening."

"Truth in that. I'd see you from our property when you'd come along the trail in that step those horses do." Patsy's voice turned wistful. "The land, my land, was my family's land and when Jim and I got married, he took over the farming of it." Her eyes flitted aside as sadness clouded her features. "Calum was planning on buying eighty acres. I'd keep the other eighty. Need someplace to live, and I've only ever lived on that farm. Jim was a fine farmer. Made the most of a small piece of ground. He was working on getting into organic, no till farming when he died."

"Had you and Calum agreed on a price? Pike mentioned his interest in acquiring more land but was not specific."

"Maybe hadn't risen to the level of mentioning which parcel to a lawyer." Patsy waved a dismissive hand. "Oh, Calum threw out a price, and I threw one back. We were still at the price-throwing stage, I guess."

"I see."

"I'll be real honest with you, Martin. Calum didn't need another eighty acres. Mine are mostly valley floor farmland. Decent land but not the best in the valley. He loved the woods most and those big pastures where his horses and cattle range. If my eighty acres was all forested, he'd have begged for it. I used to watch him riding one of his favorite Walkers in that clippity-clip gait of theirs, prancing out among his herds or heading up into the woods on those trails of his. He was a sight. Sat ramrod straight in the saddle until last year. I guess the arthritis in his back limited his ability to ride. He had a fall in the bathroom a few months back that sealed the end to his riding. Was never one to complain but I know it was a big disappointment. Your uncle was in a lot of pain toward the end. Not that old really but something seemed to give up in him after Abby passed."

I nodded, not having a useful response but feeling profound sorrow.

Patsy scoffed. "Shoot, he'd have just turned around and leased it to Robbie Standford anyway. Calum didn't have a personal interest in farming. Oh, he knew farming, but he loved his horses and being in the cattle business more. The huge forest was more like a family legacy or trust, I guess. He added to it through the years. Never sold an acre or tree to my knowledge. Now its been passed to you."

"Why don't *you* lease your acres to Standford?"

Patsy smiled and stood. "I best be getting back. Chickens to feed. Real nice seeing you again, Martin." She stopped on the stoop. "I knew something was wrong that day. At four in the afternoon, Calum was always in that big log chair looking out at the valley like he was scheming on owning the whole shebang. When I saw the glass on the arm of that chair full of that special whiskey he drank, I knew something had happened. That's when I called his hired man, Donnie

Stanford to look around for him.” She shook her head with disbelief. “No way that man fell off that cliff, Martin. The chair sits a good ten feet back. No reason for him to walk to the edge. His balance wasn’t good this past year. He hadn’t climbed down that cliff in I don’t know how long. He wouldn’t...” Patsy stepped down to the walk.

Disquiet became bewilderment. “Wait. What do you think happened?”

Patsy looked deeply into my eyes. “I don’t know, Martin. I surely don’t. You take care now.” Her face recovered the pleasant warmth that seemed a protective barrier to her thoughts. “I’ll stop by for the dish or drop it by when you’ve a mind. Pyrex. Belonged to my mama.”

The abrupt shift in the conversation left me feeling restive. Perhaps we could speak again.

There was more that I wanted to ask Patsy but my time with her got me reminiscing. I spent summers at the farm during my childhood between the ages of eight and fifteen. Those summers with my aunt and uncle were the only times I felt truly part of a family. My unmarried mother packaged me off to her brother, Calum so she could have: “Time to myself”. What she did for three months I never learned and was probably better off not knowing but she always seemed happy to see me in August. We didn’t have much money, so mom drove me from Minneapolis to the valley as soon as school let out, stayed a few days, and drove away. I imagined she returned home, but she never said.

At sixteen, I refused to go anymore. A girlfriend entered my life and I was quarterback of the football team. Two years later, I moved out of my mother’s apartment and began studies at the University of Minnesota eventually earning a degree in English, then another in philosophy and a doctorate in world history. That led to a professorship at the City College of New York in upper Manhattan where I have lived for seven years.

At the end of each summer at the farm, one day late in August, mother would show up in whatever old car she had at the time and we would drive back. Mom must have called first because Aunt Abby would say, “Your mother will be here tomorrow, Martin. Best say goodbye to Trix today. She’ll be crying big horsey tears after you’ve gone for a week.” Aunt Abby would grin, feigning a tear she’d pretend to wipe away. Now, I find it odd that mom never asked to speak with me when she called.

The drives back were the most enjoyable times I can remember with her. With the windows open, she’d play the radio loud and we would sing along at the tops of our lungs. Neither of us could carry a tune in a bucket. We would stop for hot beef sandwiches with mashed potatoes, cheeseburgers and Cokes at diners along the way, and stay in whatever cheap motels flashed vacancy signs.

Mom departed permanently with a guy she’d met somewhere not long after I left home for the university. She must have figured she’d fulfilled her duties to me as her child. We lost touch, which is to say she disappeared. Mothering was never a driving passion for her but I feel she did as well as she could.

“Marty? I met this sweet, sweet man and he’s taking me, well everywhere, just everywhere.” Her arms waved toward everywhere. “I don’t know when I’ll see you again. I love you, Marty.” She kissed me on the cheek and left with the man in his car leaving me hers. I worked my way through college, living wherever I could and eating often with my girlfriend’s family.

The first two summers at the farm, Uncle Calum and Aunt Abby were working to have me live with them full-time, but mom firmly said no. I thought she was receiving welfare for me from Hennepin County or the State of Minnesota. I never knew who my father was. Since my last name was the same as hers, and hers the same as his uncle’s, I believe she never married.

Mom never said. I never asked. It was always just the two of us. She would say, "We're two peas in a pod, Marty." Then, she'd hug me and say, "I love you my little love bug." At those moments, I felt truly loved.

I often wonder what my life would be like if my aunt and uncle prevailed. Perhaps the indefinable longing that sometimes creeps over me at night would have been assuaged. Uncle Calum, Aunt Abby and mother argued late into the night about me before she left those first two summers. After that, I can't recall them asking again. I want to believe mother refused because she wanted me in her life, not because of welfare money. The nice thing about memories is you can make them what you want.

"That boy needs a stable home, Marilyn. This will all be his if you let us raise him." Uncle Calum would punch a thick finger onto the table and Aunt Abby would "uh-huh" her concurrence as she crocheted little round things that sat under other things. I could hear them arguing from my bedroom. Their voices rose and fell with matching emotions. Sometimes, I tiptoed from my room to watch. Uncle Calum always drank whiskey. Aunt Abby drank sweetened ice tea and mother drank orange Nehi, sometimes grape, from the bottle through a straw but it was called Coke until specified. All soft drinks, regardless of flavor, were generically called Cokes in the South, it seemed. That reminded me of egg creams in New York that contain neither eggs nor cream but are a soft drink made from milk, chocolate syrup and seltzer.

"Calum? Marty is my boy. I appreciate you both letting him have time with you here, but he's mine to raise. I want him to know you and be here on the farm in the summer but I want him raised with me."

I hadn't thought much about that statement from mom then. Now, as I ponder the death of my uncle, I wonder why she relocated to Minnesota in the first place. What drove her from her home in the valley? Had she wanted me or was I simply an accident? Had she fled, pregnant, in humiliation or for some other reason? I wish I could ask her. For years, I tried to locate her without success.

Most people in the valley I met during my summers, except my aunt and uncle, appeared of modest means. Uncle Calum's wealth was apparent by the magnitude of his land holdings and possessions. The Stewarts had been large landowners for generations. Mom grew up in a rural but affluent household. But my life with her in Minneapolis was far from prosperous. She had fled the farm with nothing. My uncle aided her financially through my childhood years, I believe but neither mom nor uncle said. Some trauma had to have occurred that precipitated her departure in her late teens. Perhaps being in the house again would shed light on what that was. "The answer is here, somewhere in this house. I can feel it and I will find it. You hear me, house? You can't keep it from me," I shouted to mute walls. And then the house groaned. I started and whispered, "That's the wind."

Thinking back, words and phrases like will-o'-the-wisp, impetuous, throw-caution-to-the-wind and impulsive marked mom's temperament. But those descriptions fell short of what I came to recognize much later was a bipolar brain disorder that drifted between elation and depression in turns.

It began one spring Saturday morning when she asked without warning, "Marty, how would you like to spend the summer with your aunt and uncle in Tennessee? There are woods and horses to ride. I know you will just love it there."

I remember my first emotion was fear. "What about little league, mom?"

“Oh, the farm is a lot more fun than throwing a baseball around. You need to meet Abby and Calum. They’re your family. He’s my only brother. I know you will just love it there, Marty.”

“Is that where you grew up?”

“Aha.”

“Why did you leave if it was so great?”

“Because that’s what I wanted. And a person should do what they want in life. People shouldn’t make other people do things they don’t want to. Remember that, Marty.”

“What if I don’t want to go?”

She gripped my shoulders. “It applies when you’re older. Now, you have to do what I tell you. That’s what parents do. I’m the parent.” And that ended the conversation. A short time later, we departed for the farm with my glove and bat in the trunk. I wondered then if my new uncle would play catch with me. Maybe there was little league near the farm. A town had to be somewhere.

Mom and I spoke like Minnesotans with the flat, hard consonants typical of their speech. That is, until we returned to the valley every June after school finished. Miraculously, it seemed to me then, mother reacquired the soft drawl in minutes and lost it just as quickly when we drove back to Minneapolis in late August.

I was ambling around the house toward the log chair after Patsy left and after my reverie of reminiscences when Sheriff Tom Patterson's cruiser pulled in. A deputy was driving and both exited the vehicle.

"I'm happy you're here," said Patterson, after easing from the police car.

"I was walking around the house to the overlook."

Patterson accompanied me at a slow pace that I matched. The chair sat as Patsy described ten or more feet back from the rim of the cliff. Patterson and I approached. The deputy hung back a few paces. Patterson didn't introduce the man.

"Is this where he fell from?" I asked.

"That conclusion fits the evidence."

"What's the evidence?"

"The condition of the body resulted from a fall. Your uncle met the rock face in three places on his descent. Traces of his blood, tissue and fiber were found on the rocks. Not much doubt the DNA will come back as his but that report is not back yet. You're welcome to view the photos we took but not much point."

"So, he did fall." I stepped to the edge. "What a horrible thing. Do you think...?"

"Careful there. Yes, he did and the coroner stated death occurred almost instantly."

I moved back from the crumbling rim of the precipice. "Anything more?"

"It was Calum's daily ritual to have a glass of whiskey around four every afternoon. I spent more than a few afternoons with him so I can attest to the accuracy of that and the time. The glass was found half full on the arm of that chair. That was about the amount he'd start with so it appeared he hadn't drunk any."

"Did my uncle have a problem with alcohol? Could that have been a contributing factor?" I noticed a circle one half inch deep and three inches in diameter had been cut into the wood of the chair's right arm, I guessed, for the whiskey glass.

"Can't say as I know for certain. Don't recall him going in for seconds the times I was with him. He seemed to know when to stop. Never saw him drunk."

"I see. The chair sits well back from the edge. How are you thinking he tumbled over?"

"I received the autopsy results a short time ago. No evidence of inebriation, illness or a cardiovascular event were found that would have caused your uncle to lose consciousness and fall over the edge but Calum had declined this past year. That was common enough knowledge. Autopsies don't always show everything. Things happen to old folks that, well, just happen."

I folded my arms, gazing out to the immense valley below. It was a commanding view. I remembered that uncle kept the forest cut back from the ridge to assure the valley was visible.

"Have you drawn a conclusion, sheriff?"

"Not officially. There are three possibilities. Your uncle fell by accident, was thrown over or jumped."

I turned, searching Patterson's face that held a neutral expression. "Suicide?"

"It's a possibility. I'll grant you, Calum Stewart didn't seem the type but it's no mystery he missed Abby, had become more feeble and didn't like it."

"How will you determine a cause of death?" Patterson's three options summed the possibilities but I was reminded of Patsy's incredulity that uncle fell by accident.

Patterson pushed his hat back. "Without someone seeing something choosing which of the three options is the right one may not be provable."

"That's disappointing, sheriff."

"There are two other pieces of evidence I need to mention that complicate things. First, there was blood from another person on Calum's right hand but not on the chair or glass. Like most folks, Calum carried a pocketknife. I've seen his a time or two. Handmade, expensive jack knife and it wasn't on his person."

"Why is the knife important?"

"The amount of blood on his hand was substantial. Whoever it belongs to had a sizable cut probably on a hand that gripped Calum's."

"I see."

Second, a big signet ring was missing and recently removed from the same hand that had the bloodstain. I mention that because I need you to search the premises and vehicles for it. It's important to know if he removed it or someone pulled it off and took it before or after his death. A pronounced tan line around where the ring was confirmed it had recently been removed. Can't say as I ever saw Calum Stewart without that big ring on his right hand and a wedding band on his left. I believe you'd have to remove the finger or cut the wedding band to get *it* off."

"What did the signet ring look like?"

"Square black stone with the letter S set in little diamonds in a gold band," Patterson explained. "Hefty gold ring. Expensive. Man's ring. Calum was a big man with big hands but he'd lost some weight this past year."

"And the blood? Whose is it?"

"We don't know yet. We have a blood type. The DNA results will not be available for about a week. Unless that individual shows up in a criminal database, we won't know who it belongs to until that individual is apprehended."

"I can understand that the blood complicates things. Without it, it would be easier to conclude that uncle fell or jumped."

"It does and that's true."

"Does the blood on his hand from someone imply foul play, that he was pushed or thrown over?" I realized I hadn't seriously considered that option until then. "Wouldn't that be murder?"

"We're getting ahead of ourselves, Professor Stewart."

"I can't imagine someone getting blood on a hand and not immediately washing it off. Especially human blood."

"A reasonable conclusion. Nevertheless a conclusion without evidence."

"Yes. I suppose that isn't evidence of anything except the blood being there." I was trying to imagine a bleeding person innocently gripping uncle's hand, covering it with blood and not coming forth after uncle fell to his death. "I'd like to see the place where my uncle was found."

"We can take the cruiser."

The trip to the bottom of the cliff required driving back to Stewart Lane behind the house. After two miles, we turned right onto the county road. Another three quarters of a mile we turned right again onto the farm road that ran along the base of the mountain the length of the property. The valley floor lay to the left, the forested mountain to the right. The exposed, jagged rock wall that rose up nearly one hundred feet to the ridge top and the house was visible through the trees. The road had been cut in along the mountain well above the valley floor.

The climb to the place where uncle's body was discovered was another 150 feet up a heavily wooded slope.

“Patsy Bishop stopped by just before you arrived. She said she called my uncle’s hired man to search for him. She said she found the empty chair and the glass of whiskey and thought it odd.”

“Truth in that and that is as it was told to us by Mrs. Bishop. Donnie Stanford is the hired man. He made the call to us after finding the body.” Patterson glanced at me. “Was at the funeral.”

“Now that you mention him, I believe I did meet him but I completely forgot the name.” I scanned the area. “How did he discover my uncle? The trees are closely spaced.”

“You’ll notice the underbrush is kept cleared.”

“Yes, I see.”

“Said he was driving along this road to the farm buildings yonder and spotted Calum’s big gold belt buckle reflecting in the afternoon sun.”

I glanced through the trees. “Not much direct sunlight comes through. Only in streaks here and there.”

“True enough, but one of those streaks flashed off the buckle according to Donnie.”

It was difficult for me to understand how Donnie could have spied the glint of a gold belt buckle through the forest from that distance in a moving vehicle. The dirt road was uneven and trees crowded in on both sides. A driver would have to pay attention to his driving but I waited to learn what the sheriff had in mind.

Yellow police tape marked an irregular circle bounding the area where uncle had lain. The position of uncle’s body was outlined on the rocks in paint. We approached and stood. I tried to imagine the old man I saw in the coffin laying crumpled and broken in the place that was marked. The outline did not look much like a person. My eyes drifted up, scanning the cliff to the ridge.

“Where he struck on his descent is not easily visible from here,” Patterson said, noticing the direction of my stare.

“Anything there to see?”

“Enough blood to identify the places he connected with rocks. Nothing more. Rains tonight, it will be gone. Not worth the climb. Treacherous. The rock is loose in many places. Seeps and little springs make it slippery. The steps Calum fashioned into the face of the cliff years ago have crumbled in many places. Don’t believe Calum made the descent in recent years.” Patterson pushed his hat back, staring at the rocky cliff. “Had a rope tied to a tree above to examine it. Still, a deputy slipped and got a little banged up. Rope saved him from a similar fate to your uncle.”

My stomach fluttered at the thought. Heights and I do not get along. “Could you have missed the ring?”

Patterson shook his head. “Calum had large hands as I said and I doubt that ring had been off since he married Abby as I also said. It would not have come off during the fall but we scanned the area with a metal detector.” Patterson turned to me. “Calum’s gold wedding band was on his left hand as you could have seen at the funeral. Probably not worth but a fraction of the signet ring that he wore on his right.

“I didn’t. What’s the significance of it missing?”

“Has some value. Be nice to know what happened to it and his pocket knife.”

“You’re thinking someone removed them?”

“Didn’t say that. Premature to say that but it’s important that you make a search to help settle the question.”

“Okay. I’ve seen enough. No need to climb up.”

The deputy moved to Patterson’s side almost protectively as Patterson took in several deep breaths. “I’m all right, Dan,” Patterson murmured. “Professor Stewart? This is Deputy Dan Gatlin.”

Gatlin nodded but said nothing.

I was feeling self-conscious at Patterson’s referring to me as Professor Stewart. I needed to address that at some point but said, “Standing here after walking from your police car, I fail to see how the hired man, Stanford could have spotted a belt buckle from such a long distance in a moving vehicle.”

“Fair point. The body was found in bright sun. The sun sets behind General’s Ridge yonder across the valley. It shines directly onto Calum’s cleared ridge. He regularly watched the sunset from the chair.”

It was difficult to see the opposite ridge, General’s Ridge, through the trees. Its massive, hulking form rose up from the valley floor and was already darkly shadowed in the late afternoon sun dropping behind it. In minutes, the bright, slanting rays shining onto uncle’s cliff would be gone.

“When we reached the body, the gold belt buckle was still reflecting light shining on it in a narrow swath. Gap in the trees was just right. I walked along the farm road a distance watching the body and the buckle, but the sun was at least thirty minutes lower in the sky when we arrived. There was no reflection to where Donnie said he’d stopped the pickup.”

“What are you saying, sheriff?”

Patterson checked his watch. “Right about now is when we received the call from Donnie that he found Calum’s body.” He dug in a pocket, produced a large polished gold oval belt buckle, and held it for me to see. “Calum had it made special somewhere. Has one of his horses that won awards pictured. Evidence. You’ll get it eventually.”

Patterson turned to Gatlin and handed him the buckle. I hadn’t noticed the rolled photographs in the deputy’s hand. They had worked out the procedure before arriving. Gatlin climbed to the place where uncle had lain. After studying the photos, he held the buckle where it had been on his body. Patterson began walking along the farm road, staring intently toward the buckle. He walked twenty paces or so from the point Donnie Stanford claimed to have seen the glint from the buckle. Then, he repeated the distance in the opposite direction. Patterson shook his head. “Dan? I’m going to step it off again. Tilt the buckle up and down some,” Patterson shouted to Gatlin. After completing the test, Patterson stopped beside me as I leaned against the cruiser. He motioned Gatlin to return.

“See anything?”

“The cruiser is where Donnie said he saw the buckle. Allowing for some inaccuracy in his recollection, I wanted to see if he could have been wrong about the location. I walked because my head is about eye level with a driver in a ¾ ton pickup. It’s a foot or better lower in a car such as this.” He nodded his head toward the cruiser. “Would make a difference.”

“Come on, sheriff. Did you see the buckle?”

“Can’t say as I did.”

We climbed into the cruiser and continued on the wooded farm road. It led to the horse barn, corrals, and other maintenance and storage buildings. Beyond and below the buildings lay farmed acreage. Beyond that were pastures for the cattle and horses.

Minutes later the trees parted. We reached the first buildings. Gatlin continued driving. We passed the large horse barn that opened, at its far end, into a corral. Several horses with colts and fillies milled about. The offspring hung close to their mothers, separating to frolic before returning to the protection of the mare. A pickup was parked near the barn.

“That’s the $\frac{3}{4}$ ton Donnie drives. Belonged to your uncle, I believe,” Patterson said.

We continued another one hundred yards where Gatlin stopped, slid out and opened the sheriff’s door. A tractor was working in a field far ahead heading toward them. Patterson exited the cruiser, nodded thanks to Gatlin and slowly walked toward the field’s perimeter, raising a hand above his head. Gatlin opened the rear passenger door for me. I exited, standing near the cruiser. The tractor approached and stopped. The engine quieted and a man climbed from the enclosed cab. His high steps were centered in the furrows between the rows of something green and about a foot high. I pushed off the cruiser and joined the sheriff.

“Sheriff?” The man from the tractor said.

“Robbie? This is Professor Martin Stewart, Calum’s nephew and new owner. He’s a college professor from New York City.”

I approached the pair and shook the man’s hand. It was a firm shake and a calloused hand, my eyes shifting between them. The time had come. “Guys? My students, well some of them, refer to me that way but please call me Martin.”

“This is Robbie Stanford. He leases farmland from Calum, now you. Him and Donnie are first cousins.”

Robbie said, “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Martin. We was all real sorry to hear about your uncle. He was a fine man and will be missed by many in the valley. Laura and me are sorry we couldn’t attend the funeral. Her brother unexpectedly went into the hospital in Knoxville and we had to be there. He’ll be all right.”

“I understand and thank you for the kind words.” I heard footsteps to my right and turned to see Donnie Stanford’s loping stride bring him among the group. I remembered Donnie’s signature gait from the graveside in Chattanooga although I had forgotten his name. He had approached me then but I was distracted by the ceremony.

“Saw y’all from the barn,” Donnie explained, nodding a greeting to me.

Patterson acknowledged him but turned to Robbie. “You were here the afternoon Calum died?”

“Saw him earlier a time or two from the tractor. Didn’t pass no words between us. Couple of waves is all,” Robbie said.

Patterson noticed a Band-Aid on Robbie’s left hand. “How’d you come by that?”

Robbie held up his hand. “Just a scratch. I don’t rightly...barbed wire as I recall at home.”

“Get a tetanus booster?” The sheriff asked.

“I’m current.”

Both men nodded with pressed lips.

“Keeping up with those weeds?” Patterson asked.

Robbie glanced at the field, pushing up the bill of his cap. "A war you never win."

"Laura likely to remember you getting that scratch?"

"Spect she would, she fetched the Band-Aid."

Patterson peered again at the plastic strip. "Don't recognize the character on it."

Robbie's face broke into a smile. "Dora The Explorer. Cartoon my youngest watches on TV. Probably not one you'd come across."

"Know what your blood type is?"

"I surely don't, Tom."

Patterson turned to Donnie. "You've given a statement about when and how you found Calum's body. Any chance you could have been this-a-way or that-a-way some when you spotted the buckle?"

"No. I showed you the tree I stopped at. Has that big ole knot on it. I remember 'cause I asked Calum if I could slice it off. Them wood turners pays nicely for a burl that size in walnut, but he said no. Didn't want nobody touching his trees." Donnie shook his head and muttered. "Must be a million of 'em."

"You two have words about the burl?"

Donnie's eyes shifted left and right. "No. Nothing like that, Tom. I asked. He said no. As you seen, the knot is still there. Ain't been touched."

I noticed the sheriff didn't mention the autopsy results or the missing ring.

"You boys don't go vacationing in Hawaii just yet. May find a question or two more occurs."

Donnie and Robbie chuckled at the idea of a vacation. Gatlin smiled and the sheriff appeared amused at his joke.

Robbie said. "Guess I'll have to tell Laura to sell the tickets."

More chuckling followed.

I contributed a smile. My eyes wandered, taking in the familiarity of the property. A thin, dark-skinned boy emerged from the horse barn and moved among the animals in the corral. The horses migrated to him. In seconds, four mares were standing close. Their offspring continued their playful running and kicking. The boy carried a pail the contents of which I couldn't see but the mares were keen for it. He affectionately rubbed four noses. The horses seemed relaxed and trusting.

"Who is the boy, sheriff?"

Patterson followed his eyes to the figure in the corral, obscured by the crowding horses. The horses parted slightly and the boy was visible. "Don't rightly.... Donnie? Who's the kid?"

Donnie stepped beside Patterson and me. "Story in that, Tom."

"Best tell it." Patterson said with his droll, laconic manner of speaking.

Donnie let out a deep breath. "About a month ago this old Mexican guy shows up with a fancy, hand-tooled saddle with silver pieces all over it. Offered it to Calum. It was fine piece of work. I'll say that. The fella said he made it. Well, Calum decides right then and there to buy it. Didn't dicker for a price one bit. Had the kid with him."

"What's he doing here?"

"Calum was at the corral at the time and the kid went straight to the horses. He kinda looked at them and said something but I didn't hear. Spoke real gentle. Darned if the horses, the same four didn't just come right to him. Calum saw that and I don't mind saying he was surprised especially by the chestnut mare. A more skittish animal I never met. Anyway, the old Mexi guy asked if it would be all right if his son came by and did chores or whatever so he could

be around the horses. No pay. The kid ain't completely normal in the head. Don't talk to people. But he has a way with horses like I never seen. Like he can talk to them without words and they understand." Donnie shook his head in wonderment and continued. "See that there chestnut mare? That's the one. The black little one, that's her colt. She twice kicked out the sides of her stall. Once over a horse fly. Another time over nothing. Delivery of the colt was a terrible effort. Her first. Doc Swallow worked it out of her. Was all which-way inside. Took hours. She was worse after that until the kid showed up."

I began walking toward the boy. "What's his name?" I asked Donnie.

He shrugged. "No idea. I point out what needs doing and he does it. Hard worker."

Patterson and Donnie followed.

"*Habla ingles?*" I shouted over the rail of the corral.

The boy looked up and shook his head.

"*Como se llama, chico?*"

"*Hector.*"

"*Cuantos años tiene usted?*"

"*Catorce.*"

"*Los caballos tienen gusto de usted.*"

The boy smiled and nodded. "*Me gusta los caballos, tambien.*"

"All right, stop a minute. What's being said?" The sheriff asked.

"The boy's name is Hector. He's fourteen. I said the horses like him and he replied he likes the horses. If he's mentally challenged, it's not apparent."

Patterson pushed his hat back on his forehead. "Well, ask him if he was here the day Calum died."

"Hector? *Estaba aquí el día que murió el viejo hombre?*"

The boy nodded. "*Si, Señor. A las cuatro recorro a camino. Mi padre viene para me. Pasé el lugar donde estaba el jefe en las rocas. Me asustaron.*"

I turned to Patterson. "He says he was; that he walked to the road at four and passed my uncle's body. His father picks him up at the county road. He was frightened."

Patterson nodded and leaned toward me, whispering to my ear. "Ask him if he remembers seeing the signet ring on Calum's finger."

"Hector? *Usted recuerda ver un anillo del oro grande con los diamantes pequeño en el dedo del jefe?*"

The boy hesitated, then shook his head. "*No, Señor. No vi anillo.*"

"Ask him one more question. Did he see anyone else near the body that afternoon?"

"Hector? *Usted vio cualquier persona cerca del cuerpo que tarde?*"

The boy's face clouded. He shrugged but said no more.

"What the devil does that mean?" Patterson asked.

Gatlin again opened the car door for me. Apparently, police car doors in the rear seat can't be opened from within. Patterson powered down the window as I climbed from the car. "That boy saw someone but was too scared to say. I need to interview the father. Maybe the boy told him. Watch for him if you would please and give me a call."

With a dutiful nod, I turned onto the paved walkway.

Patterson shouted after me. "Don't forget to look for the ring and the knife. Useful to know if they're here." Gatlin reclaimed the driver's seat and the car pulled away.

As I re-entered the house, foreboding washed through me as if the old structure had been a witness to evil. I shook the thought from my head. "It's a house for God's sake. It's just being in a different space alone. Get a grip." But there was a duality to my feelings. My sense that the old house was holding secrets was real. At the same time, it beckoned. The only times I felt part of a family were in it and at the farm with mom, Uncle Calum and Aunt Abby. Uncle used to tell me stories of the Stewart family history in the valley. I needed to reconnect. I had an aunt and cousin I didn't know existed. Uncle had spoken of other relatives I needed to find. I had a strong and unexpected sense of being home – among my people, my kin.

The hot dish from Patsy beckoned. Before I could slip off the foil, a rap at the screen door commanded my attention. Donnie stood before me, thumbs hooked into front pockets. "Hey, doc. Thought you and me might talk over a couple things."

"Donnie, why don't you just call me Martin? We can dispense with the title. I've said the same to the sheriff and your cousin."

Donnie nodded. "Okay, then, Martin."

"Could this wait until morning?"

"Ain't life and death but there's things I gotta know."

I pushed the door open and Donnie stepped into the foyer. "What's on your mind, Donnie?"

"First off, the pickup I use. Well, truth is, that belonged to your uncle. Because I pick things up, drop things off and use it everyday on the farm, I drive it home."

"I see. How do you handle the personal miles with the IRS?"

Donnie blinked. "Ain't never come up."

"Okay."

"Second. Well," Donnie looked down at his feet before reconnecting with my eyes.

"Thing is, well, do I still have a job, Martin?"

It was my turn to look down. I needed time to go over the books and learn what Donnie did. "For now, yes. I say for now because I need to understand my uncle's operational expenses. I don't mean to suggest I'm not keeping you on. How much are you paid?"

"Thirteen dollars an hour for twenty-nine hours a week. That's three seventy-seven every Friday by check." Donnie straightened. "I'm what your uncle called an independent contractor."

"Do you have other work?"

"I raise and sell hogs. Brings in some additional."

"No withholding? You take care of your taxes, then?"

"Myrna Mae, she's my wife. She handles all that. I give her the checks. Myrna Mae's real good with numbers. Works at Walmart."

The connection between numbers and Walmart escaped me. *Maybe she works in accounting.* “As far as the pickup truck goes, it seems my uncle was more or less loaning a vehicle to you. I’m assuming he paid the license and insurance.”

“I guess. We never discussed it.”

“Who buys the gas?”

Your uncle has a big ole tank up off the ground. He’d order a refill as needed. We go through it pretty fast, so it don’t get old. We’re about due. I fill it from there. He filled his SUV and four wheeler and we filled everything with an engine that wasn’t diesel.”

“What has a diesel?”

Donnie shrugged. “Nothing right now. Used to own that big tractor Robbie drives. Old Mr. Stewart sold it to him about a year ago. Now Robbie takes care of it.”

I was feeling sensory overload. “We’ll continue with the pickup arrangement for now. Is there anything else?”

“No. I expect that covers it. When you’ve a mind, we need to go over the ordering Mr. Stewart did and the picking up I do. Keep a while. Nothing needed in the next few days.”

“Good news.”

Donnie’s head bobbed. “All right, then. I’ll be heading home.” He loped to the pickup.

Peace at last. I peeled back a corner of foil that covered the casserole, replaced it. It had cooled but smelled appetizing. A large propane tank sat along side the house. The gas range and oven were fueled from it. I recalled the big tank but as a child hadn’t learned its purpose. It was always there. If natural gas had come to the valley, uncle hadn’t elected to hook up.

I guessed three-fifty was a good temperature. No more than Patsy’s mother’s Pyrex dish settled on a rack than another knock sounded, rattling the screen door. I shouted from the kitchen. “Who is it?”

“Diego Hernandez, *Señor,*” came a shout in return.

I walked to the door answering a second interruption in as many hours. A man older than I and I guessed to be near fifty stood on the step. He was short but deep through the chest. A worn western straw hat covered his head. His jaw sprouted grizzled growth of several days. The man exhibited the same dark skin and features as Hector.

“*Señor Hernandez? Me plazeo hacer su conocido,*” I said. “But let us speak in English if you are able. My Spanish is limited.”

The man nodded. “*Si.* Yes. We can speak in English.” He took a breath. “I was sorry to learn from Hector of the old man’s death. He was a good man.”

“Thank you. How may I help you?”

Hernandez took a deep breath. “I look for my son, Hector. He was not at the road where I pick him up. I looked in the barn and called to him. I drove into the pastures, looked and called.” The man shrugged. “Sometimes he follows an animal he sees, especially a horse. There are many horses in the pastures. He wanders away. Sometimes too far to hear my call.”

“I met him earlier this afternoon. He has a special way with horses I was told and saw.”

Hernandez smiled showing crooked and missing teeth. “He has a gift from God. He speaks to the horses and they hear him.” His face shifted to concern. “Hector did not answer when I called. But he must be here.” Hernandez offered an obsequious shrug, his eyes lowered to his hat now held with both hands. “Do you know where he is? Have you seen him?”

With lips pursed and a knitted brow, I replied, “Not since this afternoon when I saw him in the corral with several horses. I have no idea. This is my first day back. I am completely at a loss on many points. When he wanders away, does he return on his own?”

Hernandez looked earnestly at me. "Oh, yes, he always returns when he gets hungry and realizes he has been away too long." Hernandez let out a breath, his expression shifting to worry. "I must go to help my sister now for a while and cannot stay longer. I can return later when he comes back to the barn. Maybe you could watch for him? He will not know where I am. I wrote a note for him to wait and left it in the barn but he might miss it." Hernandez looked down. "He does not read too good."

"Of course, Diego. I will." I shared the man's obvious distress. "I'm sure he'll show up as you say. Has he wandered away here like this before?"

Hernandez shrugged and nodded. "A few times." Hernandez cocked his head. "You do not speak English like the people here."

"No, I suppose I don't. I'm from the North."

Hernandez appeared in thought and asked, "Canada?"

"New York City by way of Minnesota, a bordering state."

He nodded but I was unsure if it implied understanding.

"I go now. If you see my son, please have him call the place where we stay. I will return in a few hours to get him." Hernandez extracted a small piece of paper and laboriously wrote a phone number on it. "He does not have a portable telephone and will need help with the numbers."

I took the paper and glanced at it. "I will see to it, call you and am happy to deliver him to you when he appears. Don't worry. We'll find him."

Hernandez thanked me profusely and left in a battered pickup truck. The right rear quarter panel flapped from a missing strut.

My search for Hector Hernandez could wait a short time. Blessedly, no more visitors appeared at the door and I was able to sample Patsy's dish. A loaf of bread was in the refrigerator. A practical practice I shared with uncle for people who live alone. A large walk-in pantry, I remembered offered a range of staples and vegetables in sealed glass jars. I selected corn.

After a quick but satisfying dinner, I found the keys to uncle's SUV, drove to the lower farmed acreage to the far end of the horse barn that adjoined the corral that opened onto the expansive pastures. I looked outward toward the pastures and called to Hector with a sonorous voice. Hector didn't appear.

The adjoining corral was the last place I saw the boy with the four mares and their offspring. I scanned the area and repeated the call. No response. After a search of the barn, I decided to drive through the large fenced pastures where the horse herd and cattle are held and to the tree line that begins the extensive woodlands of the Stewart property. The boy could not have gotten far and there seemed no reason for him to wander into the fields among the row crops.

The barn featured an electronic ventilation system that continuously exchanged its air and controlled the temperature. Thus, no windows pierced the walls making ceiling lights a necessary supplement. Numerous skylights illuminated the interior during daylight. I recalled that uncle had the barn constructed to protect the animals and supplies inside. With both doors secured, the animals were safe from intrusion. The building was also sprinkled in the event of fire.

The big door was closed on the end opening into the corral. I slid it open and entered. One fluorescent fixture was continuously illuminated to avoid complete darkness at night. The switch for the main lights that flood the barn was where I remembered. Horses in stalls moved

at the unexpected illumination and my unfamiliar scent. They shifted and gently blew. "Hector," I called. No reply. At the far end of the building, the opposing door was ajar by six inches. A slice of late afternoon light angled across the floor. I heard a distant rattle from the door. "Must be the wind." I saw no one and nothing moved apart from the horses shifting with agitation at intrusion by a stranger.

Walking the length of the barn with stalls to either side, I realized someone had stabled the four mares with their offspring I saw earlier in the corral and provided feed. Water was continuously provided in a trough along the wall. The stalls were clean. Fresh bedding straw was laid. Two colts and two fillies lay in stalls. Two other mares stood with heads hung over doors. I passed them as I walked. One nickered softly accepting my presence. The chestnut mare bobbed her head with eyes rolled and stamped feet. Her temperament was different from when Hector was with her and from the other horses. Her colt moved tight to the side of the stall avoiding her feet, deprived of nursing.

I continued walking past the four horses and offspring. The building had twenty stalls, ten to each side. Horses prefer to spend the night in the pastures, I recalled from my childhood. In winter and bad weather, some were stabled or migrated to a lean-to for cover. Winters in Tennessee are mild compared to Minnesota. These I suspected were stabled because of their young. Coyotes roam the countryside and black bears are not common but exist in small numbers. Feral packs of dogs are infrequent as land owners shoot them on sight but do on occasion appear as I recalled.

During my summers at the farm, uncle often owned fifty or more horses at one time. The pastures they occupied have security cameras and motion detectors at their perimeters. They sound in several places on the property, including my aunt and uncle's bedroom.

Peering into empty stalls, I called again to Hector. At the door of the last stall on my left stood the pail Hector had carried. A few carrots and apples were inside. I continued through the big door, sliding it open. Metal rollers in a metal track sounded loudly. Peering about, I saw no one. I re-entered, closing the door. A glance over the first stall door on my right confirmed it was empty like others. With the bolt slid back, it swung open and I stepped in. It was swept clean but at the back, a mound of straw lay heaped. The other empty stalls I passed had nothing similar.

With arms folded, I approached and studied the straw. "Why is this here?" I toed idly at the mound, separating the shafts, strewing them about. Something firm connected with my shoe. Parting the straw farther, revealed worn denim fabric. Then, a crumpled body appeared. "Good God!" I bent to expose it. The body was Hector Hernandez. The boy's head sat at a wrong angle on his neck. I lurched away, my back connecting hard with the stall boards. One pocket of Hector's jeans appeared turned out. "Dead! He's dead." My next thought was that the boy fell and broke his neck but the way the head was turned that seemed impossible with nothing in the stall to fall from. "The boy was murdered," I said in a whisper. Whoever killed Hector Hernandez searched the body for something. He might yet be in the barn. I tentatively lifted an arm. The body was soft and flexible. My eyes darted wildly about with held breath. No sounds.

I usually carry my cell phone but I left the house without it. I dashed through the length of the barn to the SUV and rushed back. In the house, I searched rooms at a run. "Where did I put the phone and the sheriff's card?" I calmed with effort taking a breath but with a hammering heart. The phone was as I left it on the dining room table. The card was on the hutch also in the dining room. I entered the sheriff's personal number with a shaking hand, flubbing the numbers twice. "Damn. Settle down." Patterson answered after the fourth ring.

“Sheriff Patterson? This is Martin Stewart.”

“Did you find the ring?” Patterson’s voice sounded tired.

“No, I haven’t searched yet. I’m calling because I just discovered the Mexican boy’s body in the barn. His neck appears to have been broken. He was lying under a pile of straw in a stall. One pocket of his jeans was turned out. He was murdered, sheriff and the murderer searched his body for something.”

“Did you examine the body? Did he have a pulse? Was he warm or cold? Was blood present?”

“I kicked at straw covering him to discover the body. It yielded to my foot. I, I lifted an arm. It was flexible and he didn’t respond. I couldn’t see if his eyes were open. His head was turned from me but his neck was twisted terribly, his head almost backwards. There was no visible blood. I am certain he is dead.”

“Are you with the body now?”

“No. I’d forgotten my phone at the house. I’m there now.”

“Meet me at the barn. I’ll be there in ten minutes,” Patterson said.

