

Giant Killers

BY

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Chapter One

The Funeral

A cold autumn wind swept across the cemetery and through the small cluster of mourners huddled by the open grave. A tall boy with sandy-coloured hair stepped away from the others and moved into the shelter of a large spruce tree. The old minister's voice rose shrilly in the afternoon air. "Amanda Palmer was a woman loved by all who knew her. To lose one so young fills each of us with a sharp sense of sorrow. Our hearts go out today to her young son, Jason."

Jason McCormick glanced up, drawn to the dark, piercing eyes of the man standing next to the minister. He shuddered and moved further into the shadow of the spruce.

Hardly anyone had shown up for his mother's funeral - just a few of the people from the apartment building, and Jack Palmer, his stepfather. His real dad hadn't bothered to come. But then again, why should things change now?

He stared into the open grave before him. Was this all his mother's short life amounted to - a few people gathered together uncomfortably in a lonely graveyard? His thoughts drifted back over the past few weeks - his mother's life slowly wasting away as cancer ravaged her body.

A muted chorus of *amens* interrupted his thoughts. Finished! Another in a long series of ordeals was over. Jason remained under the spruce tree as the knot of mourners exchanged polite farewells and started toward the cemetery gate. His

stepfather was solemnly shaking hands with everyone in that phoney way of his, like during their visit to the lawyer's office earlier that day.

"I was just reviewing your wife's *Last Will and Testament*," the solicitor had told them when they were seated. "Quite standard really, except for a rather large life insurance policy that Mrs. Palmer took out on herself a few years ago." He studied the page before him. "Almost half a million dollars has been left to her son, in trust to you, Mr. Palmer, until Jason reaches the age of 18."

Jack whistled softly between his teeth. "Any catches?" "There are three restrictions," the lawyer said. "No more than \$2500 can be withdrawn in any one month; the money must be used primarily for Jason's welfare; and all withdrawals must be countersigned by your stepson."

Jason noticed Jack Palmer's jaw tighten. "Sounds like she didn't trust me."

"Appears so," the lawyer answered, pushing away from the desk. "And once Jason reaches the age of 18, your trusteeship ends. The balance of the money is for his use alone."

"When can I make the first withdrawal?" Jack asked.

"We should have the paperwork finished by next week."

Jack got to his feet and leaned across the desk, his face only inches from the lawyer's. "I'll be back one week from today - and things had better be ready."

Jason shuddered, forcing his attention back to the casket in front of him. He could almost see his mother's face through the casket lid - healthy and vibrant - that's how he would always remember her.

“The service is over, kid. Let’s scram.” A hand was on Jason’s elbow, drawing him from the shelter.

“What a bag of gas,” Jack said as he unlocked the door to his beat-up station wagon. “All the praises in the world ain’t gonna make no difference to your mother. Once you’re dead . . . you’re dead.”

Jason dropped into the passenger seat. The cold wind . . . the overcast sky . . . everything about this rotten day seemed perfect - perfect for being the most horrible day of his life. He pulled an old, worn picture of his parents from his pocket and held it up to the light of the side window.

“Ugly,” Jack said, glancing at the photograph. “Never did meet your old man, but from his pictures, I don’t know what your mother ever saw in him.”

Jason looked up, his brow knotting angrily. “He’s not ugly.”

Jack Palmer’s right hand shot out, catching his stepson on the side of the face. Jason reeled back against the door, his hand going up to his cheek.

“He walked out on your mother,” the older man shouted. “He broke her heart. At least I stayed with her.” Jack pulled a small bottle from his jacket and tilting it to his mouth.

“You never stayed with her,” Jason cried, his voice breaking. “When she was so sick you were always out drinking.”

“Things are really gonna change now, boy,” Jack said with an ugly smirk. “You ain’t got your momma to protect you. You’re gonna do as I say, when I say. You got that? In a few days you and I are gonna make our first little withdrawal.”

Jason looked back down at the worn picture. He understood why Jack would wonder what his mother saw in his real dad. Amanda Palmer had been beautiful, whereas his father was a big, rawboned, grim-looking man with pale blue eyes, and long black whiskers stretching half way down his chest.

“Why didn’t he come to visit Mom when she was so sick?” Jason asked quietly, leaning his head against the car window. “Why didn’t he at least come to the funeral?”

“Your old man’s as comfortable around people as a porcupine that just backed into a patch of poison ivy.” Jason drew his chin down into his collar. “He’s never around when he’s supposed to be,” he said bitterly. “I don’t even remember what he looks like. I need this stupid picture to remind me.”

“Who cares?” his stepfather said. “Our lawyer friend made it pretty clear this morning that I’m in charge for the next four years. Anyway, I hear your old man’s a hermit now, living off by himself in the middle of nowhere. Being around people was just too much for him - so he took off.”

Jason looked back out the window as the first buildings of town began to appear. Kirkland Lake was a decent-sized town by northern Ontario standards, although the headframes from long-dead gold mines seemed to be always waging a constant battle against the ever-encroaching wilderness.

Jack pulled the station wagon over to the curb and turned off the ignition. “I’m gonna grab a drink before supper. You don’t mind, eh Kid? Won’t have to worry about a beer budget for much longer, eh?” He pocketed the keys and climbed out.

“I’m going to walk home,” Jason said, getting out the other door.

His stepfather shrugged. "It's starting to rain. You'll get soaked, but suit yourself. Just be sure you have my supper ready."

Jason stepped into the rain, pulling his collar up as far as it would go. Their apartment was only a few blocks away and the walk would help clear his thoughts. He bent his head and started off down the darkening street, the rain seeping into his clothing and down his neck.

Nothing left now, he thought. Nobody even to come home to. He'd been so busy looking after his mother, he hadn't been able to keep up with his friends at school - small wonder no came to the funeral.

Their apartment was located on the second floor of an old hardware store on the main street of Kirkland Lake. It was fairly small with only two small bedrooms, but his mother had always kept it neat and homey. As he pushed the door open and stepped into the small entranceway, he felt a knot tighten in his throat. For a brief instant he had to fight desperately to keep back the tears. Never again would his mother greet him at the door. Never again would she be there to ask him how his day had gone.

He hurried through the tiny kitchen and living room and into his bedroom. He shut the door and flopped wearily down on his bed, not even bothering to remove his shoes or his damp jacket.

His thoughts were in complete turmoil. What would his life be like now - with just him and Jack. His temples began to throb, the pain shooting across his forehead. No wonder his head ached - in just a couple of short days his life had been thrown completely upside down. He closed his eyes and lay his arm across his face to block out

the dim street light filtering in through the cracks around his window blinds.

He awoke to the sound of his bedroom door closing, and the low murmur of voices just outside his bedroom. He sat up with a jerk, glancing quickly at the luminous hands of the alarm clock beside his bed - it was almost ten-thirty, he'd been asleep for several hours. He lay back down, the voices slowly came into focus as he stilled his racing thoughts.

"Yah, he's asleep," he heard Jack say. "It's been a pretty rough week for the kid."

"He'll get over it." Marcel Dubois. Jason recognized the voice of one of his stepfather's drinking buddies. "My mother ran out on the family when I was twelve. We were better off without her."

Jason could hear his stepfather open the fridge door, then close it again. "Might as well have another beer, Marcel. You never know when it might be your last."

He could hear the laughter of the two men, and chairs being dragged across the kitchen floor. "It's a tough thing to lose your wife, though," Jack Palmer continued.

"Then again, tough things always seem to happen to me."

"Seems that way for all of us at times."

"Bad enough she had to go and die," Jack continued. "But she left me with this kid to look after. Imagine! Leaving me all alone with her kid to bring up."

"Well, cry me a river. It's not like you don't have a whole bank full of money to ease the pain," Marcel said.

"Yah, but the kid has to cosign each of the withdrawals. That's going to be a real pain in the neck."

Again the two men were quiet for several minutes. Jason could easily visualize the dark face of his stepfather's friend, the bushy eyebrows and frazzled hair and beard, as he leaned over his beer.

There was a long pause before Marcel spoke, and when he did Jason had to strain his ears to make out the words. "What would happen if the kid weren't around?" the other man asked.

Jason felt his blood turn cold within him.

"Just out of curiosity - understand," Marcel said. "But what should happen if the kid were to disappear - on a rather permanent basis. Would you get all the money?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does your wife's will cover the possibility of the kid dying before you do? Say, God-forbid, he was to meet some unfortunate accident. Would you inherit the cash?"

"Yah, I suppose I would. After all, there ain't nobody left in the - there's just the kid and me."

"Well, now, here's a little proposition for you, Jack," Marcel said. "Suppose the kid does meet with a little accident, real unexpected-like. I don't suppose you'd be too upset, would you?"

There was another long pause, while Jason felt like his heart would pound its way clear out of his chest.

"I wouldn't have to get that kid to co-sign those monthly cheques no more," his stepfather agreed.

"The money would be all yours, Jack. Think of it."

“Right now, when the kid turns eighteen, he gets it all, and I get nothing. But I don’t want no talk like this - it’s murder, after all, and he is my stepson.”

“It would be an accident, Jack. An accident. And I’d be doing all the dirty work,” Marcel said. “And you know the best part? I wouldn’t even charge that much. One hundred thousand. That’s it. If your wife’s insurance policy is as big as you say it is, well you’d probably never even miss that much.”

Jason could hear his stepfather get up from the table and walk across the living room floor. “If I were to go along with this, I’d want to be there when it happens - when the kid has his little accident. I sure wouldn’t want him popping up again in a few days after I’d paid you off.”

“No problem.”

“If I were to agree to this, when do you figure it would happen?” “Soon,” Marcel said. Jason heard him get up from the table. “Tell you what. Meet me down at the Highgrader Bar tomorrow at three. We’ll talk some more and make our plans.”

“It better be a good plan,” Jack said. “No way I’m spending the rest of my life in prison. Not when I’m so close to this little nest egg.”

“We won’t get caught, Jack. The north is a big country. Millions of spots to hide something so it’ll never be found. The kid will never know what hit him. And no one will figure it was anything but an accident.”

There was a long pause, then Jason heard Marcel say in a low, threatening voice. “And when we’ve done the job, Jack, you pay up and shut up. I have quite a bit of practice at arranging little accidents for less-fortunate people - I could arrange the same

thing for you, too.”

“He’s no kid of mine,” Jack muttered sullenly.

Long after Jason heard the door to the apartment close behind his stepfather’s friend, and he heard Jack shuffle off to bed, he lay in the darkness staring up at the ceiling of his tiny bedroom.

“Gotta get out.” He sat up in bed and felt his damp clothing. “Tonight.”

He spent the next half hour quietly packing a small gym bag with a few extra clothes and the bare essentials, keeping an eye on his alarm clock and one ear open for his stepfather’s snores. When they finally came he slipped quietly out of the apartment and into the darkened street outside.

Chapter Two

Shades and Shadows

The rain had stopped but a cool light mist seemed to hang in the night air, causing a chill to seep through Jason's light jacket. He drew his collar up and started almost blindly down the town's main street.

Where could he go? He thought briefly of going to the police station and telling them about his stepfather's plan, but quickly decided against it. He would have no proof, and then Jack would know that he had found out about his plan. That would just make things worse.

Maybe it was just drunk talk. When Jack sobered up in the morning he might not even remember his conversation with Marcel. Jason shook his head. No. His stepfather hadn't been that drunk. He'd remember alright.

The bright lights from a vehicle he was passing snapped him out of his reverie. He stopped and looked up into the warm comfort of an Ontario Northland bus idling in front of the terminal. He stood staring up at the bus for a moment or two. He hadn't thought that a bus would be passing through town so late in the night. He reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet, carefully counting the small collection of bills. One hundred and seventy dollars - the sum total of a savings account he had drained yesterday.

With a deep breath, Jason opened the door to the bus station and walked inside.

An older man in a white shirt looked up from the counter. "Can I help you?"

“Where’s that bus going?” Jason asked.

“South - to Toronto.”

“How much for a one-way ticket?”

“Student Rate is seventy-eight dollars.”

Jason counted out the correct amount.

“You’d better hurry,” the agent said. “They’re pulling out as soon as they load some parcels.”

Jason collected his ticket and walked back into the night.

“Just in time, son.” The bus driver removed the first part of Jason’s ticket.

“You’ll be changing buses in North Bay.”

Jason pocketed the ticket stub and made his way down the narrow aisle. An empty seat directly across from an older couple caught his eye. He tossed his small duffel bag into the rack above his head, then he sagged into the plush seat, enjoying the brief feeling of excitement that washed over him.

The elderly lady across from him was staring at his wrinkled clothing. “You look like you’re barely dried-out,” she said. “You must have been caught in that rainstorm earlier.” Jason nodded, attempting a smile.

A nagging feeling inched its way into his mind as the bus pulled out of the station. What would he do when he arrived in Toronto? What then? He didn’t know a single living soul in that enormous city. He should have planned this better. And what about Jack? The life insurance settlement was the first big break old Jack had ever had. He would be furious! Jason shuddered, wrapping his arms around his chest. Jack would

never rest until he had tracked him down. He knew his stepfather that well. He would have to drop off the ends of the earth. A surge of panic rushed through him as he looked out the window at the darkening northern landscape.

Finally he curled into a ball in the middle of the plush double seats. And he dreamed.

It was raining and he was wandering through a graveyard late at night. A full moon had cast the cemetery in shades and shadows, but the moon had also made it possible for Jason to read the names on many of the tombstones. After several minutes he came upon a large, sentinel-like gravestone. Was this was his mother's marker? He drew closer, and as he did, a large, dark shadow stepped from the blackness. Jason froze - a great, icy hand seemed to reach out and seize him. Yet, even in his terror, he did not run, for there was something disturbingly familiar about the figure before him. Was it his mother? Slowly the apparition raised its head and bore its piercing eyes directly into Jason's. He could feel his heart pounding frantically - but he had to get a closer look at the face. He had to know if this was his mother.

The moon dipped behind the great limbs of a willow tree, casting the face before him into darkness, then almost as quickly it broke free. Jason drew in his breath. He could now distinguish a great black beard stretching down the broad chest of the figure; pale blue eyes staring solemnly back at him, and he was as silent as death.

"Dad!"

The man just looked at him - looked right through him. There was no recognition in his eyes, no warmth, or light.

Jason moved forward another step. He had to make some kind of contact with this man or lose him forever. As he edged closer, the man stretched out his arm. Jason held his breath. Everything around him was so perfectly still that he could almost hear his own heart beating.

“Ja - son,” the man whispered.

As his name was slowly swallowed by the night, Jason could see the man’s jawline begin to alter. The beard began to shrink, then disappear. The forehead receded; the eyes darkened - and it was then that the ghost-like figure smiled - a great hideous, leering smile that reached out and seemed to devour him whole.

“I’ve been looking for you, boy,” the spectre whispered. “Where have you been?”

Jason felt the ground sway beneath him as he staggered backwards. Jack! The terrible face of his stepfather loomed before him like a huge jack-o-lantern, and suddenly he found himself falling . . . crashing to earth . . .

Jason’s head snapped back with a tremendous jerk and he was awake. Awake and shaking. He glanced quickly around him. The hum of the bus motor and the muted conversations of the other passengers slowly filtered into his consciousness. He sat up and turned to the elderly lady across the aisle. She smiled curiously.

“Nightmare?”

Jason nodded sheepishly. A dream? His stepfather’s face had never been so real - so terrifying - almost as if he had crawled right inside his skin.

A few seats ahead of him a passenger stood up and pulled a suitcase down from the overhead rack.

Jason turned to the woman across from him. “Where are we?”

“Just coming into North Bay.”

“Already?”

The lady nodded. “Are you meeting someone in North Bay?”

“Toronto,” Jason said “I’m going to Toronto.”

The lady was quiet for a minute. “What part of Toronto?”

“Just Toronto.”

“Yes, but what part of the city? York? Etobicoke?”

Jason paused for a moment. “Downtown.”

The lady turned to her husband with a frown.

Outside, the lights of North Bay began flashing by. A lump formed in Jason’s throat as he remembered the shopping trips that he’d taken to the city with his mother.

“North Bay.” The driver’s voice crackled over the loudspeaker. “Passengers going to Toronto can grab a quick bite to eat before transferring to the southbound bus. Those travelling west to Sudbury will have a half-hour’s wait.”

Jason felt for his wallet. He needed to stretch his few remaining dollars as far as possible, yet he was starved. He’d missed supper and would have to get something to eat.

As he entered the bus terminal, he could see the elderly woman whisper something to her husband. She then turned into a small alcove where a bank of pay phones lined the wall. Jason felt a chill course up his spine as he made his way past them and over to the small snack bar. What was there about that old woman that seemed so familiar?

Chapter Three

Last Stand

Jason McCormick glanced at a clock over the lunch counter of the North Bay Terminal. Eight o'clock. He had twenty minutes before the Toronto bus arrived.

The elderly lady from the bus had finished making her phone call but was nowhere to be seen. "Probably just my imagination," he thought.

A stout blond waitress in a blue sweater approached.

"Hamburger and Coke, please," he said.

He stretched his legs out under the counter, thankful that most of his clothing had dried in the overheated bus. What would his stepfather do when he realized he was gone? Probably nothing until morning - he'd be too drunk until then. However, with Jack, you could never be sure. If he discovered that Jason had taken the bus south, he might just hop in his car and follow him down here. The main highway out of Kirkland Lake ran north and south, so it would be a simple matter for Jack to track him down. One good thing, though - Jack wouldn't be calling the police - no way would he ever deal with them.

And what would he do when he got to Toronto? That was another problem. There was no one there he could call on for help, or stay with.

Jason was still deep in thought when the waitress brought his order. He was famished!

"Attention, passengers!" The loudspeaker over his head crackled to life. "The

westbound bus to Sudbury has been delayed. It won't be departing for another forty minutes."

Jason shrugged and finished his burger. Too bad he hadn't bought a ticket for Sudbury . . . He'd been *there* a few times - and it was a lot smaller than Toronto. He paused, the glass of Coke halfway to his mouth. Maybe it wasn't too late. Why couldn't he trade the second part of his ticket for one to Sudbury? He downed his drink and headed over to the ticket counter.

The agent looked up as Jason approached. "Help you, Son?"

"Is it possible to change my ticket destination from Toronto to Sudbury?"

The agent frowned as he took the ticket stub. "I don't see why not."

A moment later Jason was handed a new ticket along with a \$30.00 refund. "It's not nearly as far to Sudbury as Toronto," the agent explained. "You should arrive before eleven o'clock."

"Thanks." Jason pocketed his ticket and change.

He returned to the seats along the side of the terminal and picked up a newspaper that someone had left behind. A brief article with a Sudbury dateline caught his attention: "*Wilderness Area Threatened: Demonstration by Local Natives Rumoured.*" He flipped the paper open, looking for the obituaries.

A few minutes later Jason was nestled back into the plush seat of the westbound Ontario Northland bus. He drew a long sigh. It was wonderful to have his clothes completely dry again. Now all he had to do was settle down in this big soft seat, get a bit of shut-eye, and forget all about his stepfather and every other troubling thought that had

been haunting him for the past few days.

Still, his mother's face continued to drift in and out of his exhausted mind. It seemed he had just been getting to know her - just getting to appreciate what a marvellous person she was, when tragedy had struck them.

He remembered the time she'd taken him to a *Three Stooges Film Festival* up at Northern College and the fun they'd had. Halfway through the first film she had laughed so hard, she'd choked on a piece of popcorn. The projectionist had to stop the movie to make sure she was alright.

It was only a month later she mentioned at breakfast how she had lost a few pounds. A checkup at the hospital had followed . . . then some more tests . . . Finally, a little, grey-haired doctor telling them that she probably only had a few short months to live - and there was really nothing they could do about it.

A fresh sense of despair filled him as the dull throbbing of the bus engine drew him slowly back to life.

He shook his head. Changing destinations had been a good idea - that old lady on the Toronto bus had spooked him. Once he arrived in Sudbury, he'd see about checking into a hostel or the Salvation Army. Then he'd start looking for a job.

He sat a little straighter and glanced around. Only four other passengers had boarded the bus for the two hour trip to Sudbury - he was grateful for the solitude - time to think, and plan.

Suddenly he felt the bus slowing.

"What on earth is that?" The driver said.

The highway for the next hundred yards was lit up like they were driving into a city. Large lights were hung from cars and trucks parked at intervals along the shoulder of the highway. At least a dozen people brandishing placards were scattered among the parked vehicles.

Jason strained his eyes for a better look as the bus crawled to a stop.

“Looks like some kind of a demonstration,” the bus driver muttered.

A uniformed police officer with a flashlight strode up to the bus and banged on the door. “Back it up,” he yelled as the driver opened the door. “We’ve got a tractor trailer blocking the highway. Back the bus up onto the shoulder of the road. We’ll let you know when the way’s clear.”

The driver sat staring at the policeman for a moment in disbelief. “Back it up! Have you ever tried to back one of these things on a dark highway?”

The policeman waved his flashlight in a circular motion and stepped away from the bus.

The driver cursed under his breath, shifted gears, and slowly began backing the bus onto the shoulder.

“It’s a demonstration alright,” a passenger near the front of the bus said. “It was a good thing they had the road lit up like that, or we’d never have seen them in time to stop.”

“Oh no!” The driver banged his fists on the steering wheel. “I think we just slid off the shoulder.” He hopped out of his seat and leaned out the door.

“She’s mired.” The driver jumped back into his seat and picked up the mike for

his CB radio. “North Bay. This is Dan Fettick on the westbound Sudbury.” He waited for an acknowledgement, then continued. “We’ve got some kind of blockade holding us up about halfway between North Bay and Sudbury. Some protestors have sealed off the highway. To top it off, my rear wheels have slipped off the road and I’ll need a tow to get out. Please advise.”

There was no response for at least two or three minutes. The driver was picking up the mike to repeat his message when a voice finally crackled over.

“Fettick - this is the terminal. We’re getting an advisement from headquarters about your situation. Just hold tight. It may take awhile as it’s quite late. We’ll radio for a tow truck in the meantime. If the road isn’t going to reopen soon, you may have to return to North Bay.”

Jason glanced quickly down at his watch. Return to North Bay. He could feel his heart begin to beat loudly within him. Returning to North Bay would mean being that much closer to his stepfather.

Chapter Four

Blockade

“Look at that,” one of the passengers said, pointing to the growing confusion down the highway.

Jason could now see a number of people tied or chained to a flatbed truck blocking the Trans Canada. “Looks like the cops are trying to cut the demonstrators loose from that semi so they can clear the highway,” one of the passengers remarked. “I wonder what the protest is all about.”

“Are we going to be here awhile?” Jason asked.

“Looks that way,” the driver said.

“Mind if I get some air?”

“Suit yourself. Just don’t get yourself into trouble.”

Jason eased himself out of the bus and into a group of the sign-carriers. Most of the protestors appeared to be native.

“Giant Killers.” Read one placard.

“Old Growth Forests - Our Children’s Heritage.”

“They must be demonstrating against the logging of some old stands of timber,” he said to himself.

“Noble cause. Just like an old western movie - Natives defending their land against the encroachment of the Whiteman.”

Jason moved a bit closer to the truck blocking the highway. The police didn’t

seem to be making much headway at cutting loose several old people who were chained to the tractor trailer. He glanced at his watch, a sudden surge of panic running through him. They had to get these people out of here. He couldn't go back to North Bay! He had to get to Sudbury - keep putting the miles between himself and his stepfather. He joined a group of motorists gathered near the flatbed trailer.

A loudmouthed motorist in a dark business suit approached the protestors. "What's the big idea blocking off the road in the middle of the night?" He shouted.

A frail-looking older man in a buckskin jacket stepped from among the sign-carriers.

"I am sorry for the inconvenience," the old man said. "We are trying to alert people everywhere about a local situation. We have expressed our concern in many other ways to the authorities, but no one will listen - they merely give excuses and tell us that jobs and full employment are more important."

There was a pause. Even the police who were cutting the chains of the protestors stopped and looked up.

"What's this all about, anyway?" the businessman asked.

"A logging company from the south has come into this area and is clear-cutting everything to the north of us. They are destroying every tree, including a stand of white pine that are hundreds of years old. We were assured by the Canadian government that this section of forest would never be touched."

The businessman guffawed. "That's the way it is today, old man. Trees are meant to be harvested - the same as corn and wheat. It's a crop. These lumber companies

replant what they take.”

The old man scratched at the gravel in front of him with the toe of his boot.

“Maybe so,” he finally replied. “But have you ever stood beneath a stand of giant pine trees? Have you ever been there on a warm summer day when the sun is shining and the south wind is blowing? That forest is our last living link with the past - and we want it preserved for our children.”

As the old man finished speaking, Jason was surprised to find that he had been holding his breath, picturing himself amongst the towering white pine.

A pot-bellied truck driver in a jean jacket and baseball cap stepped from the crowd. “Look, old man,” he said with a growl. “You just move your people out of here. I’ve got sixty crates of perishables bound for market. So get off the highway. This is public property, not your Indian Reservation.”

“The trees are public property too,” the old man answered calmly. “They belong to you as much as they belong to anyone. Once they are cut down, they are gone forever - forever. We will never see anything like them again in this part of the world.”

Jason watched the truck driver’s face grow beet red in the darkness. The big man raised his fist and shook it in the direction of the protestors. “You move that rig or else.”

The old Indian met the driver’s stare, squaring his frail shoulders slightly. Jason could sense the truck driver tensing beside him as if to spring, yet the old man showed no fear. With a roar, the driver lunged forward, hands outstretched toward the old man’s neck. Without thinking, Jason stuck out his foot. The attacker’s heavy boot struck Jason’s foot and he pitched forward, sprawling awkwardly to the ground between the

two groups of people. The protesters quickly pulled the old man back in amongst them.

The truck driver scrambled to his feet, glaring back in Jason's direction.

"Maybe I'll just drive my transport right through your stupid blockade," he shouted, backing away from the crowd. "I'd like to see your faces then."

A television crew was scrambling to set up their equipment a few feet from the confrontation. Camera flashes burst here and there in the night as Jason slowly began retracing his steps to the stranded bus. There was something in the old man's words that made more sense than he had heard in a long time.

"What a dilemma," he thought. "These protestors have a legitimate concern, but I've got to get going - I can't go back to North Bay."

So immersed was he in his thoughts that at first he didn't feel the hand on his shoulder. When he finally turned, a medium-sized boy about his own age was standing behind him, a huge grin spread across his face. He had curly black hair and big dark eyes that seemed to dance, even in the darkness. Jason looked down at the boy's outstretched hand.

"I saw what you did back there," the boy said. "And I just wanted to say thanks."

Jason took the hand.

"My name's Shanny Rupert," the boy continued. "My dad's one of the organizers."

Jason grinned. "I'm Jason McCormick. That was quite a speech the old man gave."

"He's the chief," Shanny said. "My grandfather. Sorry to interrupt your trip."

Jason frowned at the reminder. “Yeah. I’m in a real pickle. No way I can go back to North Bay.”

The other boy stared at Jason for a minute. “Why don’t you stay here for a day or two?” he suggested.

Jason frowned. “Stay here? Where?”

“With us. My folks won’t mind. After all, you did save my grandpa from getting busted in the chops. My dad told me to come over and say thanks.”

Jason looked back at the bus. His mind played over the old man’s words once again, and he felt a strange feeling of peace. “Are you sure? Your folks wouldn’t mind?” He asked.

“Absolutely and absolutely not,” Shanny said. “Go ahead and get your stuff from the bus.”

“This is all the stuff I have,” Jason said with a grin.

“Man, you are a light traveller. I hope you’re not a light sleeper, ‘cause you’ll likely be sleeping in the same room as me, and they say I snore louder than a chain saw - that is if we ever get home tonight.”

He thumped Jason on the shoulder, then led him back across the parking lot, through the growing crowd of television crews and disgruntled motorists. Jason smiled. Even these angry motorists didn’t seem nearly as bad as returning to North Bay and coming face-to-face with his stepfather. Not nearly as bad!

Chapter Five

The Cavalry

Jason followed Shanny Rupert down the shoulder of the highway, past the floodlights, policemen and silent demonstrators. Several more vehicles had pulled up to the roadblock, the drivers climbing angrily from their cars.

A heavysset police officer was now attempting to direct traffic with a megaphone. "All right, you people pull back from the flatbed and move off the highway."

Instinctively Jason stepped back.

"Don't worry," Shanny said with a laugh. "The cops thought they'd have the highway reopened long before this. And we're getting some fantastic publicity - look at those t.v. cameras - that's what this demonstration is all about."

Jason watched a couple of policeman cut away at the chains fastening an old woman to the flatbed trailer.

"We need bigger cutters," one of the policemen shouted over to the sergeant.

"We have a friend who used to be a cop," Shanny explained. "He told us what type of chain would give them the most trouble to cut." He led Jason toward two men standing by a beat-up old truck.

The old Indian, who had been the spokesman for the protesters was talking to a short, round-faced man with serious dark eyes. They both turned as the boys approached. Shanny was almost apologetic as he introduced Jason to them. "Dad, Benny, this is Jason. He was the fella that stuck out his foot."

Wide grins appeared on the faces of both men. “So this is our secret weapon,” the younger of the two said. “I hope Shanny thanked you for your timely help.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jason said, returning Mr. Rupert’s smile.

“And I would certainly like to add my thanks,” Benny said, extending his hand. “I’m getting a little too old to sustain much of a beating, and I think you may have saved me from one.”

“I’m really glad I could help.”

“Jason’s going to spend the night at our place,” Shanny told his dad.

Mr. Rupert shrugged. “Sounds good.”

Shanny drew Jason away as the two men resumed their conversation.

“What’s the protest about, exactly?” Jason asked.

“A logging company has been clear-cutting the forest north of here. What’s upset the people of our village is the fact that several acres of old growth pine trees are going to be cut. Some are more than a hundred feet high and about as big around as a small car. The government promised us years ago that those trees would never be touched, but this past summer a logging company from southern Ontario received the timber rights to that whole section - including the entire old growth forest. We’ve been fighting it ever since. We were able to get a temporary court injunction to stop the logging of that particular stand of trees. Unfortunately the injunction runs out in a couple of days.”

“Is the forest far from here?” Jason asked.

“Not far at all. Our family goes camping up there every summer. It’s really beautiful. Trouble is, this is such an isolated area, not too many people even know

there's an old growth forest nearby.”

“What do you hope to prove here tonight?” Jason asked.

“Public education,” Shanny said with a grin. “If enough people hear that one of our last old growth forests is about to be destroyed, we hope they’ll put pressure on the government to stop the cutting. If we can get the court injunction extended, it will give us a chance to state our case.”

They walked closer to the flatbed. “I noticed that most of the people chained to the truck are quite old,” Jason said. “It was their idea. Years ago, when a railway was built through a corner of our land, we had a problem with the police. Some of our people got beat up pretty badly. Many of the same people wanted to be involved in this way, so that if the police beat them up again, the media will be here to record what happens.”

“The trees are on your land then?”

“Technically they’re not. Our ancestors let the government keep that stretch of forest, provided that the trees would never be cut.”

“In writing?”

“The old folk thought that it was put in writing, but they can’t find it covered in the treaty. Perhaps it was mentioned in a separate document.”

“Without having it in writing, though, you’re sunk.”

“I know. That’s why we’re protesting.”

“It looks like they’re bringing in reinforcements,” Jason said, pointing down the highway to a large yellow bus. The word, POLICE, was painted in black letters along the side, and the windows were barred. “Here comes the cavalry,” Shanny said, as more

than a dozen policemen emerged from the vehicle.

“Looks more like a SWAT Team,” Jason said.

The newcomers swarmed from the bus and scattered over the site. Two of them, brandishing powerful circular saws, made their way over to where the protestors were chained to the flatbed. The two boys watched silently as the screaming saws quickly zinged through the thick chains. Jason could see Shanny’s shoulders sag as more and more of the protestors were cut from the flatbed and hauled over to the police bus.

An eerie hush descended as the last circular saw fell silent.

“Well, I guess that’s about it then,” Shanny said.

“Where are they taking those people?” Jason asked.

“To jail. They’ll probably be turned loose in the morning.” Shanny shook his head. “I was hoping it would have lasted longer than this, but we did get quite a bit of free publicity.”

A police sergeant strode by the boys just then, talking animatedly with two burly constables. Suddenly he turned and pointed into the crowd. The constables nodded, then elbowed their way roughly through the protestors. Before anyone had time to react, they grabbed Benny and began dragging him toward the bus. At the door of the bus they pulled him to his feet and threw him inside.

With a howl Shanny sprinted across the parking lot.

“Shanny, take it easy,” Jason shouted, racing after the other boy. “Don’t do anything stupid. They’re cops.”

The closest policemen turned just as Shanny skidded to a stop a few feet from the

bus door. Before the enraged boy could even think of making a move, a policeman grabbed him from behind and shoved him roughly up the stairs and into the bus.

“Just saved you both a pile of trouble,” a policeman said, pushing Jason up the stairs behind Shanny and slamming the door shut.

Jason scrambled to his feet. Benny and several of the protestors gathered around the two boys. Shanny was breathing heavily, the anger still visible in his face.

He looked up at his grandfather. “Are you okay?”

“Sure I am. You boys oughtn’t to have got involved, though.”

Shanny turned to his new friend and drew in a deep, ragged breath. “Well,” he said. “Looks like you’ll be going back to North Bay after all.”

Chapter Six

The Ruperts

The smell of wet concrete and mould clung to the insides of Jason's head as he sat waiting in a corner of the small jail cell. He, Shanny, Benny, and six other male protestors, had been herded into the cell and left until morning.

Surprisingly, the mood had been upbeat throughout most of the night. A harmonica appeared from the pocket of one of the men, and for several hours they passed the time singing and listening to Benny's stories of the old days. When everyone's eyes grew too heavy, they sprawled out on the hard concrete, and did their best to catch a bit of sleep before morning.

Two hours past sunrise, Jason stood before a grim-looking desk sergeant. The police officer stared sullenly over a tiny pair of spectacles.

"What were you doing in that mess last night, boy?"

Jason cleared his throat. "Trying to keep a friend out of trouble, Sir."

"What's your name and where are you from?"

"Jason McCormick. I'm from Kirkland Lake."

The policeman removed his glasses. "What are you doing down here?"

"I'm staying with the Rupert family back at the Sandy Narrows Reservation."

"I see. Got any identification?"

Jason pulled out his student card and handed it across the table.

The policeman took a quick look and passed it back. "Is there anyone I should

notify about this little incident?”

“I’m sure the Ruperts will take care of that.”

“Okay, Son. Let this be a lesson. Don’t go sticking your nose in where it doesn’t belong. We’re not pressing the matter further with you people, but we’ve got your names, and if there’s any more trouble from any of you - there’ll be charges laid.”

The bus trip back to the village was a time of quiet reflection for most of the tired travellers. Benny sat near the front, arms folded across his chest, a deep frown etched across his forehead. Jason finally nudged Shanny. “Is your grandfather alright?”

“Oh yah,” Shanny said. “He’s probably wondering what kind of press coverage we got last night. If the blockade didn’t make the television news and the Toronto papers, we may have lost the battle.”

Shanny turned to look out the bus window. “Here we are. Ever been on a reservation before?”

Jason laughed. “Are you kidding? We were so poor, we never even got to *make* reservations.”

The bus rolled to a stop in front of a large white building with the words, COMMUNITY HALL, painted over the front entrance.

Shanny’s dad and a slim woman wearing a dark red coat hurried up to them as they emerged from the bus.

The woman put her hand on Shanny’s shoulder. “Are you alright, Son?”

“Just great.” He turned to Jason. “Mom, I’d like you to meet a new friend, Jason McCormick.”

Mrs. Rupert shook Jason's hand. "We're really pleased to have you stay with us."

Mrs. Rupert was a tall woman, with a long plain face, and large dark eyes that reminded Jason of her son's.

"They let us off with a warning," Shanny said.

Murray Rupert nodded. "So I heard. A cop was here an hour ago and laid down the law."

Benny gave Mrs. Rupert a hug.

"You okay, Dad?" She asked the old man.

Benny nodded. "Is there anything about the demonstration in the papers?"

"There sure was," Murray said, steering everyone down the street and away from the bus. "The Sudbury and North Bay newspapers gave us a big splash. We're just waiting to see if we made the Toronto papers."

"Sympathetic coverage by a Toronto newspaper would probably generate enough pressure on the government to get an extension of our injunction," Benny said as they walked up to the driveway of a white frame bungalow.

"What's the next move?" Shanny asked his dad.

"That's what we have to decide," Murray Rupert said with a worried look. "Some hotheads from the village would like nothing better than to go out and spike a few trees; damage some logging equipment; break open a few heads."

"What do you mean, spike some trees?" Jason asked.

"That's when a long spike is driven diagonally into a tree at about the height it would be sawn," Murray Rupert explained. "It's done in such a way that the spike is

hard to see. When a logger comes along with his chainsaw, the blade hits the hidden spike and it either ruins the chainsaw, or almost cuts off the logger's head."

"Ouch," Jason said. "That's playing hardball."

"It's very dangerous," Mrs. Rupert agreed.

Murray Rupert ran a hand through his thinning hair. "Whatever we decide to do next may very well determine the future, not only of those white pine, but of our people," he said. "Those trees are our last visible link to the past, and they've got to be saved."

* * * * *

The cold night air stung Jason's ears and bit through the thin lining of his jacket. He thrust his hands into his pockets and moved back behind the cab of the half-ton truck. "What's keeping them?" He asked for the third time.

No sooner had he got the words out, when Murray Rupert and old Benny emerged from the house, both dressed in heavy plaid jackets.

Shanny held his watch up to the light of a nearby streetlamp. "It's past midnight."

"Must be serious to get us up at this hour," Jason said as the two men joined them.

Murray Rupert threw a duffel bag into the back of the truck and opened the driver's door. "Sorry to get you boys up so late," he apologized. "But we may need your help. We got a phone call a few minutes ago. It looks like some men from the village may try to stir things up at the logging site tonight."

Jason stood rooted to the ground for a minute, trying to decide what the words meant to him.

"You guys can hop in the back," Mr. Rupert said. "Keep down behind the cab so

you're out of the wind - and hold on."

The boys vaulted over the tailgate and squatted down behind the cab.

"Bad publicity could really set us back," Shanny said.

Jason nodded. "The kind you get when someone spikes a few trees?"

"Uh huh. One step forward and two steps back."

The truck rolled quickly through the village then turned north onto a winding dirt road. Jason shivered as he watched the road trail out behind him, the cold night wind whistling through his thin clothing.

"Man it gets cold at night."

"Well, it is October. Winter will soon be here in earnest."

As they wound their way deeper into the forest, it soon became evident to Jason that the road was deteriorating rapidly. Almost every foot of the way soon became a bone-jarring exercise in perseverance. After a half hour of gritting his teeth and cushioning himself against the worst of the bumps, Jason felt the truck pull around an especially sharp corner - and the wall of trees that had towered high above them for most of the trip suddenly disappeared. Jason looked around him in surprise. The moon lit up a great empty field.

"Wow," Jason said, with a low whistle. "What happened here?"

"Clear cutting," Shanny said. "This is where the logging company started taking down the trees"

"They sure don't leave much, do they?"

On all sides there was nothing but scrub brush and the occasional birch tree.

A few minutes later Jason could feel the truck slowing. He turned and peered into the darkness ahead of them. His eyes opened wide in surprise. Only a couple of hundred yards ahead loomed a huge stand of uncut trees - rising high above them in the night sky.

“This is as far as the timber company cut,” Shanny observed. “The old growth area is just ahead of us.”

“They look awesome, even at night,” Jason said, bracing himself as the truck rolled to a stop. It was only then that he noticed a small trailer off to their right - a dim light emanating from one of the windows.

Two figures with flashlights emerged from the trailer and started toward them.

Murray Rupert and Benny stepped from the cab and waited.

“Who are they?” Jason whispered.

“Loggers.”

A large man with a thick handlebar moustache led the pair. His companion wore a white construction helmet and an ugly scowl.

“What do you want?” The leader asked in a loud voice. “This is private property.”

The glare of the truck’s headlights illuminated the angry faces of the men.

“Everything quiet?” Murray Rupert asked.

The leader stepped as close to Murray as possible without touching him. “Quiet as a graveyard,” he said.

There was dead silence.

The man with the white helmet stepped forward, shoving his face almost into

Benny's. "There's only one reason they could be here tonight, Mr. Robinson, and that's to cause trouble. Let's teach them a good lesson." He gave the old man a push, sending Benny stumbling backward several steps.

Murray Rupert stepped in front of the man. "Hold on now," he said. "We're here to prevent trouble - not start it. We heard you might be getting some visitors tonight. Benny, here, is our band chief. If anyone from our village is coming here to stir things up, we'd like to stop them - the last thing we want right now is trouble."

"And I say that's a crock of lies," the man in the white helmet challenged.

Robinson put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Settle down, Bob." He turned back to Murray. "Look, Mister. This timber is our livelihood. It's how we make our living. If you stop us from cutting the trees, how are we gonna feed our kids?"

Benny stepped back toward the lumbermen, paused, then looked up at the giant conifers. "I understand what you're saying," he finally said. "But there are other trees. The north is filled with trees. The Canadian government promised the Ojibwa people many years ago that this stand of timber would never be cut. This area has been a special place to our people for generations. There is no place more beautiful in the whole north - and we don't want it destroyed. It's certainly not our purpose to do anything that would hurt you or your families - that's why we are here this evening. We don't want anyone getting hurt."

There was silence for a few seconds. Suddenly the man in the white helmet leaned forward, pressing his face to within inches of Benny's. "I don't care what some stupid government big shot promised your grandfather a hundred years ago. We got the timber

rights to these trees and no fast-talking Indian chief is gonna take my job away from me.” With a quick upward thrust, he straight-armed Benny right in the face, driving the old man violently backward. Before anyone on either side could move, Murray Rupert’s left hand flickered in the darkness. He caught the logger by the back of the neck and yanked him hard toward him. As the surprised logger stumbled toward his attacker, Murray drove a straight right fist square into the man’s jaw. The logger’s legs gave out from under him and he crashed to the ground.

“Hold it!” Robinson stepped in front of his crumpled foreman. “Bob had that coming. We don’t want this kind of trouble.”

Jason and Shanny leapt from the back of the truck and hurried over to where Benny had fallen. The old man was sitting up, rubbing the back of his neck. A few feet away, Bob lay, moaning softly.

“I’m okay,” Benny said in a low voice as the two boys helped him to his feet.

Shanny turned toward the lumberman, his eyes blazing. “He’s an old man,” he shouted, his voice cracking.

Robinson lifted his arms apologetically. “Look. I’m sorry for what happened. Bob’s a hothead. And speaking of hotheads, we’ll have a look around. If any of your people are around tonight, we’ll find them, but I’m sure no one’s been here except us. One of my men is out patrolling the forest right now.”

“It may have been a rumour,” Murray acknowledged. “I didn’t see any sign of them on the way here, and this is the only road into these parts. I wish you’d let us take a look around, though, it might save you some grief.”

“We’ll handle it ourselves, thanks,” Robinson said. “You’d better get going before old Bob comes to. He’s got a shotgun back in the trailer.”

“This is just the thing we are trying to avoid,” Benny said, walking gingerly over to the cab of the truck.

When they arrived back at the village an hour later, Jason’s heart rate finally seemed to be slowing down.

“Mom’s still up,” Shanny said as they pulled into the driveway. “She worries.”

Mrs. Rupert was waiting for them inside the doorway. Jason could see that something was wrong as soon as they entered the house. Her hair was dishevelled, her eyes as large as saucers.

Shanny’s dad hurried over to her. “What’s the matter?” “Just now . . . Just before your truck pulled up, I heard a loud noise downstairs,” she paused to catch her breath. “I thought the cat might have knocked something over so I went down to check. When I turned on the light in the laundry room, two men were standing there.” She burst into sobs. Mr. Rupert held her tightly.

“Two men?” Benny asked. “Did you know them?”

Mrs. Rupert shook her head. “No. They were strangers.”

“Loggers?” Shanny said.

Mrs. Rupert shook her head again. “I don’t think so. One was portly, and the other scrawny - not like the loggers I’ve seen.”

The others were quiet as her words sunk in.

“And the worst part,” she continued between sobs. “When they saw me, they

didn't run away - they started coming toward me, like they wanted to hurt me. Their eyes were hard-looking. Really bad. I couldn't move! My feet seemed to be rooted to the ground! If your truck hadn't pulled into the driveway just then - no telling what would have happened."

Benny's eyes widened. "You mean it just happened a few minutes ago?"

Mrs. Rupert nodded her head. "They went out the basement door by the pantry."

Murray and Benny pushed by her, hurrying down the basement steps. "Stay with your mother," Mr. Rupert shouted over his shoulder.

Shanny put a hand on his mother's shoulder. "It's okay, Mom. They're long gone by now. Dad will lock the doors and windows so no one else can get in."

She nodded mutely, drawing in a deep breath. "But who were they?" She asked. "They looked like men who were out to do something very very bad."

Jason's brow furrowed. Who *could* they be? For some reason, he thought of his stepfather, and a chill rippled up his spine.

Chapter Seven

The Night Woods

The first light of dawn crept through the bedroom window and flickered softly over the two still forms. Jason pulled himself out from under the covers and stretched his way out of bed.

“Today must be Saturday,” he said with a huge yawn. “I’ve been losing track of time lately.”

Shanny grunted and swung down from the top bunk. “Get much sleep?”

“Not much.” Jason pulled on his sweater and reached for his jeans.

“Who could those intruders have been last night, do you think?” Shanny asked.

“Burglars?”

“That’s what the cops thought, but somehow I don’t think so.”

Mrs. Rupert’s voice sounded from the kitchen. “Are you fellas ready for breakfast?”

When the boys emerged from their room, Mrs. Rupert had just finished dishing out a platter full of bacon and eggs. Murray Rupert and Benny were already sitting at the table.

“Good morning,” Mrs. Rupert said cheerfully.

Shanny slid into the seat beside his grandfather. “How are you feeling, Benny?”

The old man flashed his wrinkled smile and slowly rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. “A little stiff.”

“Probably not as stiff as that guy Mr. Rupert smacked,” Jason said.

Murray Rupert gave him a warning glance, nodding in his wife’s direction.

“I hope you’re all hungry,” Mrs. Rupert said, taking her seat beside her husband.

“Benny, would you mind saying grace for us?” Murray asked.

The old man bowed his head and said a short prayer of thanks, while the smell of bacon and raspberry jam filled the room.

“What are your plans, Jason?” Murray asked, watching his guest spoon out a generous helping of bacon, eggs and oatmeal.

“I’m not sure.”

“Are you attending school this fall?” Mrs. Rupert asked.

“I was,” Jason said.

There was an awkward pause.

“Why don’t you want to go back to North Bay?” Shanny asked.

Jason finished spreading some raspberry jam over his toast before pulling his wallet out of his pocket. He flipped it open and drew out the small picture of his parents.

“I guess I might as well tell you the whole story. If I can’t trust you, who can I trust?”

“This is a picture of my parents,” he said, passing it to Mrs. Rupert. “They divorced when I was very young. My mom remarried a few years later to a man named Jack Palmer - he just about ruined her life. To make a long story short, my mom died of cancer a few days ago, leaving my stepfather as my legal guardian. If that’s not bad enough, my mother also left half a million dollars in insurance. The money is in trust to my stepfather until I’m eighteen, and I’ve got to cosign each withdrawal he makes. The

guy spends every cent he has on booze. So - I lit out.”

The four people around the table stared at him in silence.

“Do you think your stepfather will come after you?” Shanny finally asked.

“He’s got to. This is the biggest break he’s ever had, and if I’m not around to cosign the bank withdrawals, he won’t have any beer money.”

“What about your real dad?” Mr. Rupert asked, nodding at the picture in Shanny’s hand. “Could you go and live with him?”

Jason toyed with his fried eggs. “No one’s heard from him in years. My stepfather says he’s living as a hermit somewhere in the bush, but he’s probably lying.”

“Is your dad’s name McCormick?” Benny asked.

“It was - people used to call him ‘Mac’. But I heard my mother mention that he was now going by another name.”

Shanny handed the picture back to Jason. “Well, you’re safe with us,” he said. “I mean, we’re so far out of the way, no one will ever find you here.”

“That’s right,” Benny agreed.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you want,” Mrs. Rupert added with a big smile. “And you’re certainly not leaving this morning like you were planning.”

Jason could feel himself turning red. “Thanks. Maybe I could help out with this protest while I’m here.”

“Aren’t you going to go back to school?” Murray Rupert asked.

“I’ve missed so much this semester’s, it’s almost a hopeless case.”

“A smart boy like you oughta continue his education, though,” Benny objected.

“Anyway, it’s still fairly early in the school year.”

Jason nodded awkwardly.

“How old are you anyway?” Benny asked.

“Almost fifteen.”

“Well, you could pass for older than that,” Murray Rupert said.

“Maybe he could get a job around here,” Shanny suggested hopefully. “Or go to school with me.”

At that moment there was a loud rapping on the back door. Mr. Rupert rose from the table, crossed the room and swung the door open.

A tall, broad-shouldered man in a long, beige trench coat stood on the back steps. He thrust his right hand out toward Mr. Rupert.

“Morning, Sir,” he said in a booming voice. “Name’s MacPherson. I’m with the Toronto Telegram and I wonder if you could spare a few minutes of your time?”

Murray Rupert glanced back into the room, a wide grin spreading across his face. “You’re just in time for breakfast, Mr. MacPherson. Come on in.”

Jason stood by the railway siding watching as Murray Rupert made some last minute adjustments to a small yellow rail car parked on the tracks. He glanced over at Shanny. “Strange-looking contraption,” he said.

“Ain’t it though,” Shanny agreed, throwing a packsack onto a second car that was attached to the one his dad was working on. The lead car resembled a tiny two-seater passenger car, minus the exterior - just two seats perched on a small platform. The car it was pulling was almost twice as long, with a raised bench running down the middle.

MacPherson, the reporter from the *Toronto Telegram* was eyeing the rail cars with obvious suspicion. “This thing actually works?”

“It’s called a speeder,” Murray said with a grin. “We use it on the railway to get around and fix the track.”

“They don’t mind you using it today?” The reporter asked.

“No. Being a foreman has its privileges. Besides it’s a spare.”

“Decent of you to take me along,” MacPherson said. “I’m anxious to get in and see that stand of old growth timber for myself - it sure is causing enough excitement.”

“Listen, getting some national exposure is a real godsend,” Murray said. “Taking the rail line will get us into the forest without passing through the loggers we met last night. It means a bit more walking, but it should help us avoid another nasty confrontation. No telling how many thugs they’ll have brought in by now.”

Benny climbed into the motor car with Murray while MacPherson and the two boys hopped onto the second rail car. “Looks like we’ve got enough provisions to last a month,” MacPherson said, eyeing the large pile of supplies.

“We may need it,” Benny said. “The court injunction runs out tomorrow, so we need to get in there and make it as difficult as possible for the loggers. Having a representative from the media along to tell the outside world what’s going on should be a big help.”

The late morning breeze felt good on Jason’s face as they pulled out of the siding and started down the main stretch of track. The car rocked gently back and forth on the rails as they gradually picked up speed. Jason was seated on the long bench of the second

car between Shanny and MacPherson.

“Have you ever ridden on one of these things?” Jason asked Shanny, searching in vain for a handgrip.

Shanny nodded. “My dad and I use it in the spring to go fishing. We can get back to a lot of remote lakes this way.”

Jason tried his best to relax and enjoy the spectacular scenery - high towering faces of rock; beautiful stands of pine forest.

“Isn’t there a danger of meeting a train unexpectedly?” MacPherson asked.

Shanny shook his head. “The morning train’s already been through, the next one’s not due until after supper.”

As the car started into a corner, Jason noticed it begin to bank, tilting the passengers precariously forward. He pressed his hands flat on the bench beside him, bracing his feet.

“Corner,” Shanny explained, noting his friend’s wide eyes. “The tracks are banked on the corners to make it safer for the trains when they turn.”

Jason smiled sickly. “Not much to hold on to.”

Shanny nodded. “You get used to it.”

“How far to the forest?” MacPherson asked. “Your dad didn’t say.”

“About forty minutes by rail, then about an hour through the bush.”

“The scenery’s fantastic,” MacPherson said, snapping several pictures.

“Why do you want to see the stand of old growth trees?” Shanny asked the reporter.

“Two reasons,” MacPherson replied. “I want to be able to describe the trees first hand to my readers. And secondly, I want to be there when the loggers and the conservationists come head to head. The key to any good newspaper article is conflict - and it looks like we’ll have plenty of that here.”

“I’ve never thought of us as conservationists,” Shanny said. “I always think of conservationists as people from the city.”

MacPherson grinned. “Fortunately there are people everywhere who believe in conserving our wilderness areas.”

Jason scrambled for a handhold as the rail car began to bank around another corner, tilting him forward ever closer to the edge of the bench. He could feel his heart racing frantically - surely if the turn continued for much longer he would be pitched right off the car and down the embankment before him. He tried pushing himself back further on the bench, watching the ground flashing by inches below his feet. Suddenly, the earth beneath him simply vanished. In an instant he was staring straight into the mouth of a huge ravine. A bridge! They were crossing a bridge! Jason grabbed hold of the bench and pushed himself back on the seat, his heart pounding wildly as he stared down into the huge chasm. Then, as quickly as the terrifying ordeal had begun - it ended. They swept across the bridge, the track levelled out, and he was able to regain his position on the bench.

Shanny burst out laughing. “I had no idea that someone’s eyes could get so big,” he said. “Don’t worry, Partner. I’d have grabbed you before you plunged to your death.”

Jason grinned weakly. “I’m never sitting in the middle of one of these things

again,” he said. “You guys on the ends have railings to hold on to. I have nothing. I’ve never been so scared in my life.”

Shanny laughed again. “That’s the last bridge,” he said.

MacPherson gave a low whistle. “Would you look at that.”

Jason and Shanny glanced up. A great forest of pine trees now towered above them - reaching majestically into the bright morning sky.

“Beautiful, eh?” Shanny said. “It gives you an idea of what we’re fighting for.”

“Magnificent,” MacPherson said. “I’m beginning to see what all the fuss is about. I surely am.”

Chapter Eight

A Change of Plans

Jason McCormick jumped down from the rail car, grateful for the feel of solid ground beneath his feet.

“Glad we’re finally here, I’ll bet,” Shanny said, grinning mischievously at his friend.

Jason scowled.

MacPherson, Murray and Benny began stacking their supplies on the ground beside the railway siding.

“Okay guys,” Murray said. “Let’s lift these cars down from the tracks and load up. We don’t want to take more than one trip.”

“How’s the trail in there?” MacPherson asked after they had removed the two rail cars from the tracks and hid them in the nearby bush.

“Good most of the way,” Benny answered. “We oughta make it in about an hour.”

Jason shouldered his backpack into position, before following Murray Rupert down the embankment and into the timber.

“This looks like a well-used trail,” MacPherson said.

“It’s one of those trails that have always been here,” Benny said. “Even when I was a kid we used this trail.”

“What for?” Jason asked.

“To go back to where we’re going right now,” Benny explained. “That old stand

of timber has been a favourite gathering spot for generations.”

“That’s right,” Murray agreed. “I remember when I was about your age my parents took me back in here with Benny’s family. It was during moose season as I recall. The old growth forest was a great camping spot during the hunt.” He paused and chuckled. “If I remember correctly, that’s when I first realized that old Benny had a daughter.”

The others joined in the laughter.

Jason squirmed uncomfortably as the straps of his packsack bit into his shoulders. Despite his discomfort though, he felt strangely light-hearted as he followed the others down the winding path through the forest. So much had gone wrong lately that maybe he was due for a good spell. For the first time in weeks it felt like the cloud of gloom hanging over him was beginning to lighten. If nothing else, his detour onto the Sandy Narrows Indian Reservation had helped take his mind off his mother’s death and given him a feeling of safety.

He smiled as a thought came to him. What would his mother think if she could see him trudging through the bush like this? She always loved backpacking in the wilderness. She’d have fit right in with Shanny and his family. And the trees! She’d have been horrified at the destruction of these gentle giants. One thing that would have been very difficult to explain, though - his night in jail. He smiled again - yes, that would have been tough to explain.

“We’re almost there,” Murray announced, allowing the others to catch up.

Jason noticed that the trees were now much taller than most of the spruce and jack

pine they had been passing through.

“Wow,” Jason said.

MacPherson was digging into his packsack for a camera. “Fantastic.”

“How far are we from the loggers?” Jason asked as the reporter began taking pictures of the trees from various angles.

Benny pointed through the forest to their right. “About a quarter mile.”

“Are the other protestors getting here this afternoon, Dad?” Shanny asked.

“They should be,” Murray replied. “Most are driving part way in on the logging road - then walking; others are going cross-country in all-terrain-vehicles.”

“Where do we meet up?” Jason asked.

“In the middle of the old growth forest.”

With that Murray Rupert led the small party up the trail and into the stand of huge white pine. Almost immediately, the dense undergrowth surrounding the trail vanished, leaving the area as clean and beautiful as any park Jason had ever seen.

* * * * *

The late morning sunlight filtered down through the branches of the great white pine and lay in scattered shadows on the forest floor.

Jason sat with his back against one of the trees, sipping a can of Pepsi. He wiped the perspiration from his brow and poked Shanny in the ribs.

“I never knew that protecting a bunch of trees would be such hard work,” he said. He looked into the branches high above them to where the last of the platforms was being assembled. “Do you think that’ll slow the cutters down?”

“Well, the cops will have a problem getting people down from way up there,” Shanny said. “And the loggers can’t cut down a tree with someone in it.”

“This stand of timber is a lot bigger than I imagined,” Jason said.

“A hundred and fifty acres.”

“That’s a lot of lumber, gauging from the size of all these trees.”

“Lots of money for the timber companies,” Shanny agreed.

“Is this ground supposed to be sacred or something - to your people, I mean?”

“What people might that be?” Shanny asked with a grin. “My father’s mother was born in Edinburgh, Scotland.”

Jason raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yah. And you know Old Benny - my grandfather - the great Ojibwa chief?”

Shanny chuckled before continuing. “His mother’s family were Mennonites from Germany.”

“Is that right?” Jason thought for a moment. “So getting back to my question, is this ground supposed to be sacred?”

Shanny shook his head. “Not really. But it is special to the Ojibwa people. Our ancestors have lived in this area for hundreds - maybe thousands of years - and trees like this have always been a part of our heritage. Benny must have told me a dozen stories about things that have happened on this very spot,” Shanny continued. “Stories about the great wendigo spirit, for instance, and how he would terrorize every living thing in the forest.”

“That’s wild,” Jason said. “Tell me one.”

“Old Benny’s best friend was Wataway. When they were boys, Wataway’s grandfather was a shaman of great spirit power. The old man told Benny and Wataway a story of the wendigo and something which happened in this very spot more than a hundred years ago.

“The wendigo is a terrifying, wild cannibal, who rages through the cold and hunger of winters, and the famines of summer. He is so huge that he can tuck a caribou carcass into his belt; so heartless that he would pick the wigwam from a helpless Indian family, then pop the occupants into his mouth one by one.

“One day when Wawatay’s grandfather was a young man, he and his family were camping here. One morning he heard the wendigo approaching from a great way off. He was afraid for his family and hid them behind the white pine, and made them stay very quiet.

“He then took his muzzle-loader and charged it with powder and a bag of special glass beads which had spirit power. With great long strides he took the gun and walked across the surface of the lake just over that ridge to meet the monster. Three shots were heard in rapid succession, although the old man had only a single barrel muzzle-loader.

“Several hours later Wawatay’s grandfather returned to the camp from around the lake. His spirit power was exhausted, but he had killed the great wendigo!

“Benny thinks the old man must have gotten help to bury the giant wendigo, for he showed me the grave - it is just north of the clearing. You can still see it. It’s a sandy mound about 80 feet long, and higher than our heads.”

Jason stared at his friend for a moment. “Do you think it’s true?”

Shanny shrugged and looked back through the trees. “If it’s true, the bones of the wendigo are buried beneath the mound.”

Jason shook his head, still staring at his friend in disbelief.

Finally Shanny stirred. “It must have been rough - losing your mother like that,” he said in a quiet voice. “I can’t even imagine how terrible that would be.”

Jason glanced away in surprise, tears stinging his eyes. He hadn’t expected Shanny to be thinking of that just then. He tried to get a grip on the emotions that his friend had unintentionally stirred. “Meeting you and your family has been a big help. It’s given me something else to think about.”

“Was your mother ready to die?” Shanny asked.

Jason glanced up in surprise, pausing a moment before answering.

“She did a lot of reading when she was sick,” he said. “Especially the Bible. I guess cancer will do that to a person. She talked to me about it. She said her eyes had really been opened during the last few weeks.”

“What did she mean by that?”

“Well, she told me that she had always figured that if she died, God would let her into heaven because she was a good person - and she was a good person . . . But then she read in the Bible that God doesn’t accept someone on the basis of whether that person is good or bad, but whether he’s put his trust in His son, Jesus Christ.”

Shanny leaned back against the tree and smiled. “Do you know what she meant?”

“She said that according to the Bible, everyone has sinned, and that has put a large barrier between us and God. So to save us, God sent his son, Jesus, to die in our place. If

we believe that Christ has died for us in a personal way, we are saved.”

“Do you get the idea behind that?” Shanny asked.

“Not quite.”

“It would be like someone coming in here and saying to those lumbermen, ‘I’ll pay you one million dollars if you pack up your saws and leave these trees alone’.

However, if a tree were able to reply, ‘No thanks, I’m going to take my chances,’ well then, that tree would be at the mercy of the saws. The trees can only be saved by someone else taking a stand for them.”

“Do you believe all that?” Jason asked. “That we have to trust Christ to get to heaven?”

“I do.”

A quietness settled between the two boys for a few moments. Finally Shanny broke the silence.

“You said your real dad was still living. Do you know where he is? Maybe we could track him down.”

“We?” Jason laughed. “Naw. I really don’t remember my father at all. He dropped out of our lives when I was really small, and didn’t come back. I have no idea where he is now or how to find him. However, he’d be easy to spot with that big black beard of his.”

“The police might be able to help you locate him.”

“Maybe someday, but right now they’re probably looking for me.”

“Good point.”

Jason got to his feet. Thoughts of his mother brought a gloomy shadow back across his mind. He shuddered at the idea of returning to his small apartment in Kirkland Lake - to his stepfather . . . “Never,” he said to himself. “I’d rather die than go back to live with Jack, and I’ll do whatever it takes to see that it never happens.”

Chapter Nine

Riding the Rails

Jason McCormick stood at the edge of the grove of white pine watching the activity high above the forest floor. Supplies, hammocks, food and water were being hauled up into the trees, while the makeshift platforms were being roped together in one final effort to make it as difficult as possible for the loggers.

Shanny and his father swung down on a rope ladder from one of the platforms and joined Jason.

“You boys did really well,” Mr. Rupert said. “I think we’re just about set for tomorrow.”

“I’ve never worked so hard in my life,” Shanny said, wiping the back of his neck with his sleeve.

“And hopefully it won’t be for nothing,” Mr. Rupert said. “Hopefully our lawyer can convince the courts to extend the injunction beyond tomorrow. But it would help if we could put pressure on the government to force a permanent injunction against logging this area. Some of the conservation groups from the south are just starting to show some interest.”

Shanny glanced down at his watch. “Five-thirty,” he said. “The cooks must have that pot of chili ready by now. Come on, let’s grab a bite to eat.”

A large fire glowed through the trees ahead of them where at least two dozen people were crowded around a great iron kettle. There was no singing, no excited

chatter. Jason took his bowl of chili and found a quiet spot to think. Once again his mind returned to the conversation he'd had with Shanny about death and heaven. He thought of his mother's funeral. Surely his stepfather couldn't be right when he said, 'once you're dead, you're dead'. In fact, if Jack said something like that, the opposite was probably true.

"Don't rely on yourself," his mother had told him. "Simply trust yourself to the hands of the Saviour - Jesus."

Jason looked around him. What misadventures would tomorrow bring? One thing for sure - another run-in with the police, and they'd call his stepfather for sure. He shuddered.

Suddenly, from far in the distance a muffled explosion shattered the stillness.

The sound of the distant explosion slowly faded, soaked quickly into the myriad of trees surrounding the small clearing.

Jason turned to the others, "What was that?"

"Must be loggers, blasting stumps or rocks," Benny said. "Could be," Murray agreed. "They sometimes use dynamite when they're putting in a new road. Mostly, though, they just use bulldozers."

Everyone was silent for a moment.

Benny turned to Murray. "I'm going to have a look," he said, setting down his empty bowl. "Sounds like the blast came from the east."

Murray frowned. "Are you sure it was from the east? I thought it sounded more to the north than that."

Shanny got to his feet. “What if Jason and I check out the area to the north of here, Dad? I could use a change of scenery.”

His father looked over at the boys questioningly. “I suppose it would be okay, but be careful. Don’t go anywhere near those loggers.”

Shanny nodded.

“Scout the bush on the north end of the clearing,” Benny suggested. “That whole area north of here has been dissected with claim lines by some local prospector. If you get lost, walk until you come to a claim line, then follow it south. Meanwhile, your dad and I will take a look at the area to the east.”

“You’d better take this along with you,” Mr. Rupert said, handing Shanny a flashlight. “It’ll be dark soon.”

Shanny led the way through the great stand of timber, the thick carpet of pine needles squishing softly beneath his feet.

In the solitude of the darkening wilderness, Jason’s mother once again filtered through his thoughts. He remembered a picnic his mother had taken him on last spring - of her slipping and falling into a pond while feeding the ducks. Other thoughts crowded past him - teachers - his friends at school - finally his stepfather, Jack - the glaring face looming through the gathering shadows - the dark, piercing eyes, the sneering mouth - and the fists. He shuddered, forcing himself back to the present.

The forest grew more and more crowded as they made their way in a northeasterly direction. The trees shrank dramatically, the underbrush crowding the travellers, snarling their steps and catching at their clothing.

They had only walked for about twenty minutes when Shanny brought them to an abrupt halt. He pointed to a narrow slash through the trees. "This looks like a claim line," he said

"Claim line?"

"Mining claim," Shanny explained. "A prospector has gone through here marking the boundaries of his claims. Looks fairly fresh too, and it's running north - south."

"Maybe it was the same prospector who was doing the blasting," Jason suggested.

The boys stood for a moment catching their breath.

"Do you know where we are?" Jason finally asked.

"Oh yah," Shanny said with a quick nod. "If we take the claim line south, we'll end up in the cleared-out area next to our camp." He hesitated briefly. "Come on, let's follow the line north for a ways."

"This is like finding a needle in a haystack, don't you think?" Jason said.

"Probably," Shanny agreed. "But keep your ears open. There might be another blast, you never know."

Following the claim line was much easier than trudging through the forest without a trail to follow. Far to their left the sun had long-since dipped below the western horizon. Deep shadows now formed on the forest floor and the air was cooling noticeably.

"Look at this." Shanny pointed to a post driven into the ground in the middle of the claim line. Metal tags were nailed to the top of the post.

"*Staked by W. Sterling,*" Shanny read. "On the tenth of September of this year."

“Wow,” Jason said. “That was only a couple of weeks ago.”

“This area must have looked promising to Mr. Sterling,” Shanny said.

“Do you know him?”

“Never heard of him,” Shanny said, studying the area around the claim post. A gap in the trees stretched in all four directions from the post. “This is a corner post,” Shanny explained. “Sterling staked the four claims surrounding this spot.”

“Where do we go now?” Jason asked.

Shanny shrugged. “We’ve probably gone far enough north. Let’s go east for awhile. Benny thought the blast came from that direction. Maybe he was right.”

Jason looked up at the gathering darkness. “Are you sure we won’t get lost trying to find our way back?” He asked.

“No. All we have to do is backtrack to this claim post, and then go south.”

Shanny clicked on his flashlight, scanning the trail ahead of them before leading the way down the claim line.

Before another fifteen minutes had passed, daylight had all but vanished, making the way even more difficult.

“It’s getting too dark,” Shanny finally said as they slogged across a stretch of bog. “We’d better take the next claim line south. It should be coming up any minute.”

Suddenly he stopped. He shined his light between two large cedar trees just ahead of them. “What’s that?” A large silver tomato can was nestled in a pile of leaves between the two trees. He directed the beam of his flashlight into a gap just beyond the tin can. “Looks like a path,” he said.

“Let’s check it out.”

A darkening gloom now seemed to descend with each step. Only the occasional hoot from a far-off owl disturbed the stillness of the desolate surroundings. And still the trail wound deeper and deeper into the forest.

They had just skirted a large outcropping of granite when Shanny stopped suddenly and ducked behind the rock. “Look - there’s something up ahead,” he said in a low voice. “It looks like a light through the trees.”

They crept the final few feet, the light gradually becoming clearer and brighter.

“It’s a cabin,” Jason whispered. Shanny snapped off the flashlight.

A small log cabin was nestled amongst a grove of birch trees. A light from the window seemed to illuminate the entire area. Even in the darkness, the boys could see smoke drifting up from the stone chimney.

“Someone’s home,” Jason whispered. “But who would be living a way out here?”

“Maybe the prospector,” Shanny suggested. “You know, W. Sterling. Let’s have a closer look.”

Taking care to stay in the shadows, the boys crept silently to within a few feet from the window. “I hope he doesn’t have a dog,” Shanny whispered.

Without even the suggestion of a sound, Shanny sidled along the log wall until he reached the window. Swiftly he ducked below the window frame and came upright on the other side. Jason stood motionless across from him. From inside the cabin a faint rustling sound could be heard, then a dull *thump*.

Jason edged closer to the window, then slowly leaned forward. The room was

sparsely furnished; a table, chairs, woodstove, and then suddenly - he took a quick step backward - a man was crossing the room right in front of them.

The man was tall, with wide, strong shoulders. A head of bushy hair fell down past the collar of a plaid bush shirt. Although the man's back was partially turned, Jason could see that he was mostly clean-shaved.

Shanny nodded toward the door across the room from them. A number of prospecting tools were stacked by the entrance: an axe, a small rock pick, a large pair of work boots.

“Prospector,” Shanny mouthed. “Let's go!”

Jason was just beginning to turn from the cabin when the man suddenly spun in his tracks and looked straight out the window - right at him.

Jason froze. The man's eyes bore right into him. He could hear Shanny suck in his breath. “He sees us,” Jason whispered.

Chapter Ten

Bill Spencer

Jason stood frozen by the window of the cabin, his eyes locked on the man inside.

“He sees us,” Shanny repeated.

They watched the big man move toward the door, remove his bush jacket from a hook, and undo the latch.

“What do we do?” Jason whispered, looking frantically around for a place to hide. A couple of bushy spruce trees a few feet from the cabin caught his eye. “Come on!”

Both boys sprinted across the small clearing and ducked behind the thick foliage. Jason had only just settled himself when the woodsman rounded the corner of his cabin and strode into sight, a lantern swinging lazily back and forth in his right hand. The light from the lantern gave the big man an eerie glow as he stood looking slowly around him. He was a tall man, big-boned, and grim. An unruly shock of dark black hair seemed to erupt straight up from the top of his head. The man’s eyes settled on the bushes in front of the boys. He cleared his throat.

“Come on out,” he said in a deep rumbling voice. “You got nothing to fear from the likes of me.”

Jason held his breath, watching the dark silhouette in the glow of the lantern light. Finally, with his heart beating a wild tattoo, he rose to his feet and stepped out from the cover. Shanny followed. The man looked startled for a second. “I didn’t know there was two of you,” he said. “Well you might as well come on inside and tell me what

you're up to out here after dark, in the middle of nowhere." He turned and led them back to the cabin.

Jason was surprised at the warmth and coziness of the little building. It was evident, too, that their host was a meticulous man, for his cabin was spotless. The few pieces of furniture were orderly and well cared for: a woodstove, table, four chairs, and a single bed were all that the room held.

"Have a seat," their host invited. "You want a cup of tea or something?"

"Sure," Jason said. "Tea sounds good."

Shanny nodded in agreement.

The man didn't move. He just stood for a moment looking intently at Jason. "Tea it is," he finally acknowledged, moving to the small shelf above the stove. "So what are you boys doing out here?"

"We heard an explosion," Shanny said. "It seemed to come from this direction, so my dad sent us up this way to see if we could find out what it was."

"Are you with that logging company?" The man asked, setting a kettle of water down on the wood stove.

"No," Shanny said. "We're actually with the group that's protesting the logging of the old growth forest. We're from the Sandy Narrows Reservation."

The man dropped a piece of firewood into the stove before joining them at the table. He straddled a chair across from Jason. "So, you're with the protestors then."

Jason nodded, looking into his host's face. He was surprised at the paleness of the man's blue eyes - the iris' seemed almost transparent.

“You don’t look very native to me,” the man said, still staring at Jason.

Jason smiled. “I’m not - just visiting Shanny and his family.”

“What are your names?” The man asked.

“Jason McCormick. This is my friend, Shanny Rupert.”

A trace of a smile flitted across the man’s face. He sat there quietly for a moment or two before getting to his feet. “I didn’t hear any explosion this evening. But if it was a blast, it must have been those loggers.”

“Are you a prospector?” Shanny asked.

The man nodded. “Bill Spencer.”

“We were following your claim lines,” Jason said.

Spencer turned to the stove and checked to see if the water was boiling. When he determined it wasn’t, he resumed his seat. “I’ve been running lines all over this area for two years come spring,” he said in his deep rumbling voice. “I use this here cabin as my headquarters, but I prospect all over these parts.”

“Find anything?” Shanny asked.

Spencer shrugged. “I’ve staked most everything around here, including that grove of white pine that you’re all so concerned about.”

“What do you think about what the logging company is doing?” Jason asked.

Their host frowned. “These loggers run roughshod over everything with their heavy machines. They tear out my picket lines, bulldoze my claim posts . . . a lot of hard work’s gone down the drain, let me tell you. I wish they’d all just clear out and let me get my work done.” He paused for a moment, looking from one boy to the other.

“And another thing! I still have a lot of claims to stake south of here, and I don’t need this area opened up for every prospector in northern Ontario.” He shook his head and got to his feet, smiling apologetically. “Well, let’s have some of that tea. Then we’d better get you back home before your folks come looking for you.”

The morning sun was only a faint red line on the eastern horizon when Murray Rupert roused Jason and Shanny from their sleeping bags.

“Rise and shine.”

Jason rolled over and lifted his head. The cold morning air roused him almost instantly.

“Just be thankful it didn’t rain last night,” Mr. Rupert said, giving his son a nudge with his foot.

“Or snow,” Shanny mumbled. “It’s cold enough.”

“The sun will warm things up soon enough,” his father said.

Jason rubbed a tired hand across his face. Already several older women were busily preparing breakfast by a large fire. Others were carrying buckets of water down the trail from the nearby lake.

“We’ve got to be in position before the cops arrive,” Murray reminded them. “And they’ll probably be here real soon.”

“I thought you said the bridge was out,” Shanny said.

“They’ll figure out some way to get across,” Murray said.

Jason grimaced as he climbed stiffly to his feet and slipped into his jacket. The early morning chill seemed to knife right through his body.

“Breakfast should be ready shortly,” Murray said. “Then we’ll have to get everybody in position.”

MacPherson shuffled up to the little group. His collar was drawn past his ears and a heavy toque was pulled down over his forehead. “Good morning, folks. Everybody sleep well?” He beat his hands together for warmth.

“We were just planning strategy,” Murray Rupert said.

A large woman wearing several layers of clothing handed each of them a plate of scrambled eggs.

Shanny dug hungrily into his breakfast. “What can we do to help?” He asked.

“I’d like you boys to act as lookouts,” Mr. Rupert said. “It’s important to know as soon as possible how many cops are coming and what equipment they’ll be using. We’d like you and Jason to watch the main road by the bridge.”

“How do we communicate with you?” Shanny asked.

Murray Rupert set down his plate of eggs and pulled a small cellular phone from his jacket pocket.

“When the cops show up, just call the number taped to the back,” Mr. Rupert said, handing the phone to his son. “That’s my number.” He pointed to a second phone that was holstered to his belt.

“Would it be all right if I join the boys?” MacPherson asked. “I’d like to get a few shots of the activity at the bridge - then I’ll scoot back here.”

Jason looked down at his watch. “It’s only five-thirty,” he muttered as more protestors joined them by the fire.

When a good crowd had gathered, Benny stepped from the crowd and positioned himself so that most of the people could see him.

“All right, everyone,” he said loudly. “We probably have no more than an hour or two before the excitement starts. As soon as you’re finished breakfast you should get up into the platforms and make yourselves comfortable - it’s going to be a long day.”

There was a low murmur of assent.

“We’d better get going,” Shanny said. “It’ll take us at least a half an hour to get to the bridge.”

“And this time we’d better stay out of Mr. Spencer’s way,” Jason said with a laugh.

The morning sun was still cast in heavy shadows as Shanny led Jason and MacPherson through the grove of white pine and into the underbrush to the north of the clearing - a stone’s throw from the loggers’ camp.

A light shone from the window of the small trailer, and at least one heavy motor was already running noisily. “Looks like they’re getting ready to start cutting,” Jason said.

“We met a prospector up this way last night,” Shanny told MacPherson. “You might want to interview him sometime.”

“Does he live around here?”

“About a mile or so to the north.”

The reporter grunted approvingly as he climbed over a dead fall. “I might just do that, but for now I have enough excitement around here to keep me busy.”

They walked in silence for the next half-hour until Shanny ducked behind a dense thicket of tigalders and motioned for Jason and MacPherson to follow him.

“What is it?” MacPherson asked.

“The road,” Shanny said, pointing through the trees. “It’s right up there.”

Through the underbrush Jason could now see the gravel road stretching into the distance.

“The bridge should be straight ahead of us,” Shanny said.

They crept the last few feet, finally settling behind a spreading black spruce. Directly ahead, stretched the gaping chasm where the bridge had once stood.

MacPherson reached for his camera. “Somebody did quite a job!”

“Yah, but who?” Shanny asked.

“Maybe we’ve got some mysterious supporters, working on the outside,” Jason suggested.

They scrunched down in the soft layer of pine needles. The forest was deathly quiet. Even the birds, usually so raucous at that hour of the morning, were ominously silent.

Jason leaned his back against a nearby stump, grateful for the quiet and temporary solitude.

“Something’s coming,” Shanny hissed, springing to his feet. “Sounds like a diesel motor.”

“Heavy equipment most likely,” MacPherson said. “Ever heard of a bailey bridge?”

The others looked blankly at the reporter.

“It’s a prefabricated bridge. They’ll bring one of those babies in on a big flatbed truck and have it all set up in no time at all. I’ll bet you it’s one of those.”

The three friends crouched behind the brush, staring expectantly down the twisting gravel road.

As if on cue, a huge transport truck suddenly emerged from the forest across the river and lumbered down the road toward them. A long line of vehicles trailed out behind it.

“I was right,” MacPherson said with a chuckle. “Looks like that semi’s carrying a bailey bridge. I saw them drop one across a river in Africa when I was covering a civil war there. It was very slick.”

The truck pulled off the road across from them and parked, its motor idling noisily. Another flat bed truck pulled in tight behind it. “The crane on the second truck will lift the bailey bridge into place,” MacPherson explained. “They’ll be across the river in no more than a half-hour.”

Shanny removed the cell phone from his jacket pocket and punched the number taped to the back. He waited a few seconds.

“Hello, Dad.”

He gave his father a quick run-down on what was happening, listened for a minute, then pocketed the phone.

“My dad wants one of us to stay here and keep him updated on the equipment they’re bringing in and the number of cops. I guess there’s a problem at the campsite.

Some loggers came in during the night, and they're looking for trouble. Benny thinks if MacPherson is there with his camera, the possible bad publicity might keep the loggers from doing something stupid."

"That's all right with me," MacPherson said. "I'll get a few more pictures here, then hightail it back to the campsite."

Shanny handed Jason the phone. "I think I should get back there too. Someone's got to keep an eye on old Benny. You okay here by yourself?"

Jason nodded. "Sure. I'll phone your dad when I find out the information he needs."

Shanny patted his friend on the shoulder, turned and disappeared into the bushes. MacPherson took one last picture, then hurried off after Shanny.

Jason turned back to the river. Several uniformed policemen had gathered near the opposite bank, watching as the crane positioned itself over the flatbed. He strained his head for a better view, but the two big trucks were blocking his line of sight. Quickly he skirted the large spruce and threaded his way down to the river bank through the trees.

From his new vantage point, he could now make out a lineup of at least ten Suburban trucks backed up behind the two transports. Most of the vehicles were filled with police officers. "Forty," he said softly. "At least 40 cops and probably a lot more."

He pulled the cell phone from his pocket and dialled the number. It was answered on the first ring.

"Mr. Rupert. It's Jason. I'm at the bridge. There's at least forty cops here, and probably more. They're moving the bridge into place as I speak."

Mr. Rupert acknowledged the call and Jason pocketed the phone.

The huge crane was now being manoeuvred over the flatbed truck, where several workmen were attaching it to the bridge with a number of thick chains. The crane then stretched the chains taut, bracing itself against the tremendous task ahead of it. Then, with an ear-splitting roar it hauled the heavy piece of steel high into the air.

Jason edged back into the brush. As he did, he heard a faint rustle in the bush behind him. He spun around, his heart leaping into his mouth. Standing directly behind him stood Jack Palmer and two other men.

“Howdy, Stepson,” Jack said, a sickly smirk firmly planted on his face. He lifted a handgun and pointed it at Jason.

“The cell phone is a handy invention,” he said. “But one of its disadvantages is the fact that other people can listen in on your conversations.” He held up a small cellular phone, smirking. “You made it very easy for us - too bad we can’t return the favour.”

Chapter Eleven

The Bailey Bridge

Jason gaped at his stepfather in silence, his mind spinning in circles. How had this man simply appeared out of nowhere? He glanced down at the pistol clutched in Jack's right hand.

“Surprised to see me?”

A short, stocky man standing beside Jack, moved a step forward. “We knew you was around here,” he said. He nodded at the cell phone in Jason's hand. “Those things are handy for eavesdropping. We even heard you say you was at the bridge.”

Jack yanked the phone from Jason's pocket and tossed it into the bush. “Fred, here, figured it all out. Not bad for Fred.” He gave Jason a shove. “Come on, let's get moving. We're too close to the action here - we'd better go further into the woods until the cops get across that bridge.” He pointed to a gap through the trees and waved Jason forward with his pistol. “You first, Son,” he said with a sneer.

Jason had only gone about a hundred yards into the forest when the morning air was rent by a tremendous crash.

“They must have dropped that bridge into place,” Jack said, waving them to a halt. “We may as well stop here.” A thin smile flittered across his face as he cocked his revolver and pushed the muzzle up against his stepson's head.

Jason felt his heart race. They were going to kill him - here - now! His head suddenly felt light.

“We can’t do nothing here,” the taller of the two men said moving up beside Jack. “It’s too close to the road - they’d hear the shot.”

Jack scowled. “I know. I know!” He lowered the pistol. “Anyway, we gotta make it look like an accident - let’s take him to the car.”

Jack’s two partners nodded approvingly.

A chill coursed slowly up Jason’s spine as his stepfather’s words sunk in. They were taking him to a spot even more remote than this - and they’d kill him there. He glanced around desperately. He had to escape now - before they reached the car.

“Just a minute.” Jack pulled his cell phone from his pocket and handed it to George. “Give Harry a call,” he ordered. “Tell him we’re heading to the river. He can pick us up at the bridge.”

George scowled slightly as he took the phone.

“Call him from here. You can catch up.” Jack gave his stepson another shove. “Let’s go.”

Jason’s feet now seemed to weigh a hundred pounds each - yet he knew he had to make a move while they were separated from George. The pistol banged savagely into his ribs.

“Don’t even think about trying something funny,” Jack said. “You do and I’ll let you have it right here.” Jason’s mind began to cloud over as he stumbled through the bush toward the bridge. Great waves of panic swept over him, paralysing his thinking.

When they reached the river, Jason could see that the bailey bridge now spanned the narrow gorge - and all the vehicles were gone.

“Sit down,” Jack ordered. “Harry will be along with the car in a couple of minutes.”

Jason sagged to the ground, scanning the area around him. If he was going to make his move, it would have to be now.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I expect it to be so easy to track you down,” Jack said with a chuckle. “Especially with you hiding out in the middle of nowhere like this.” He turned to his partner. “Of course when Fred, here, spotted your picture in the local newspaper - things kinda speeded up a tad.”

Fred snorted loudly. “Like taking candy from a . . .”

Jason’s head snapped up. The heavysset man was staring open-mouthed past him in the direction of a small grove of cedar trees. Jason spun around. Partially sheltered by the branches of the cedar stood Bill Spencer, the barrels of a twelve-gauge shotgun levelled at Jack Palmer’s head.

“Howdy, Fellas,” Spencer said in his gruff voice. “Going somewhere?”

Jason scrambled to his feet. “He’s got a gun,” he warned Spencer.

“Better drop it,” Spencer said, moving the shotgun slightly. Jack Palmer hesitated for only a second before tossing the revolver to the ground.

“Come over here, boy,” Spencer said.

“There’s another man back in the bush,” Jason said. “He has a rifle.”

Jason had no sooner got the words out when the air was split by a sharp crack. Spencer flinched slightly, the shotgun almost falling from his hands. In the same instant, Jason, Jack and Fred all dove for the bush on opposite sides of the clearing.

“Quick, boy, quick,” Spencer yelled. “Someone’s shooting at us.”

Jason launched himself forward, dodging and weaving through the trees. Behind him, he could hear Spencer crashing through the tangled underbrush close at his heels. Over a rocky crest they raced, then down into the same swamp that Jason had passed only a few moments earlier.

“Hold it,” Spencer gasped as they scrambled to the top of another treeless knoll.

Jason slid to a stop. Spencer had dropped to one knee and was looking down at his left calf.

“What’s the matter?” Jason asked.

“I took a slug,” Spencer said, ripping open his pant leg. Blood was oozing from a wound about the size of a dime, halfway between his knee and ankle.

Spencer turned his head to look at the back of his calf, grimacing slightly. “Looks like the bullet passed clear through,” he said, pulling a white cloth handkerchief from his pocket and wrapping it around his calf. “Pull it tight and tie it,” He ordered.

Jason knelt beside the man and did as Spencer asked, tying off the flow of blood. The wounded man struggled to his feet, turned and looked back down the trail. “They’ll be here any minute,” he said.

“Thanks for your help,” Jason said, finally able to catch his breath. “How did you know I was in trouble?” “I was in the area - by the bridge,” Spencer said, picking up his shotgun. “I came down to see what the cops were up to when I saw those three characters go skulking by.”

Jason nodded. There was an awkward silence for a moment as they watched the

trail behind them.

“They’ll be after us,” Jason said.

“Who are they, anyway?” Spencer asked. “It looks like they want you dead.”

“The guy with the pistol was Jack Palmer, my stepfather,” Jason said. “I don’t know who the other two are - probably a couple of his drinking buddies.”

“Why do they want to kill you?”

Jason shifted uncomfortably. “Money,” he said simply. “My mother left me some money in her will, and my stepfather, wants it.”

There was a pause. Spencer looked intently into Jason’s face. “Your mother’s dead?” He finally said.

Jason nodded. “She passed away a week ago.” His words seemed to drain the colour from Spencer’s face.

Jason studied the man for a moment. He could see the big prospector’s Adam’s apple bobbing up and down, like he wanted to say something. Finally Spencer turned. “Sorry to hear that. It must be tough, losing your mother such a short time ago.”

“She was sick for quite a while.”

“Still.”

Spencer turned and took a couple of tentative steps on his wounded leg. “We’d better get you back to your friends,” he said. “And give those cops something better to do than roust a bunch of tree-huggers. But be careful - that’s a rough bunch on our trail, and if they snuff us out, no one will ever be the wiser.”

“What about your leg?” Jason asked.

“It’ll be alright for awhile. Doesn’t hurt much now, but it will in a few minutes”

He looked into Jason’s eyes for a brief second. A slow sad smile passed across the big man’s face, then he turned and hobbled off into the timber. Jason shook his head.

What was it about this stranger that made him feel so peculiar - like there was something about him that he should know? Had he met him before? What was it then? What was it?

Chapter Twelve

Another Change of Plans

Jason was bent almost double, great catches of air shuddered painfully from his lungs as he tried to recover his wind. He glanced back at Spencer. The prospector was down on one knee again, checking his wounded calf.

“How’s your leg holding up?” Jason asked.

Spencer leaned against an overturned tree for a moment before answering. “We’re almost there,” he said. “We’ve got to keep going. Those goons can’t be too far behind.”

“I don’t hear them,” Jason said.

“They’re there.”

“Are you sure we’re heading in the right direction?” Jason asked, an uneasy feeling creeping over him.

“I *am* taking you back to your friends,” Spencer said. “The cops should be there by now. They can protect you, and hopefully track down your stepfather. Let’s go.”

The terrain had become quite rugged, and it was now difficult for Spencer to manoeuvre through the thick underbrush. In some places Jason had to pause and wait as his companion struggled to keep up. After twenty minutes of heavy slogging, Jason brought them to a stop before a steep outcropping of rock at least twelve feet high.

“I hear a motor,” Spencer said. “We’re almost there.” Jason hoisted himself up the face of the steep cliff, his hands scrambling for finger holds. Suddenly he felt something grasp the collar of his jacket, yanking him savagely upward.

The helping hand was so unexpected that in one swift motion he cleared the top of the rock and found himself sprawling face-first on the ground. He clambered to his knees, his gaze travelling slowly upward. He gaped in disbelief. “Get out of the way,” Jack Palmer ordered, stepping past Jason to the edge of the precipice. He pointed his pistol down toward Spencer. “Get up here and keep your hands away from that shotgun,” he shouted, waving his revolver.

As Jason climbed to his feet, he noticed his stepfather’s two partners sidling up beside Jack. George leaned over the precipice, pointing the Winchester rifle in Spencer’s direction. “Hurry up,” Jack shouted.

Spencer lowered his eyes, then slowly began to haul himself to the top of the rock face.

“We’re only a hundred yards or so from half the cops in northern Ontario,” George said in a low voice.

“I know,” Jack said.

“So, what’re we going to do?”

“Shut up.” Jack said. He poked his revolver into Spencer’s midsection. “Who the devil are you, anyway?” He asked. “You look familiar.”

Spencer sat wearily down on the ground and pulled his pantleg away from his calf. He undid the makeshift bandage and studied the wound for a few seconds.

“Your stepson’s friend,” he finally said.

“What were you doing by the bridge?” George asked.

“Keeping an eye on you.”

George looked confused for a minute. “We’ll have to take him with us,” he said to Jack. “We can’t leave him here.”

Jack glared at his partner. “I know. I know.”

Spencer shook his head. “I can’t walk far on this leg.” He turned his calf so the others could see the bullet wound. Jack looked away, blanching slightly. “We’ll drag you to the car if we have to.” He took a few steps toward Spencer. “Fred, give me a hand,” he shouted. Fred cradled his rifle in the crook of his arm and moved over to the other side of Spencer.

As Jack reached down to haul the injured man to his feet, Spencer’s left hand shot out, grabbing Jack’s arm and pulling him hard toward him. In the space of a heartbeat Spencer was back on his feet. He snatched the rifle from Fred, and in the same lightning motion swung the butt of the gun right into the face of Jack Palmer. Jack reeled backward, stumbling into George, his arms waving wildly in the air.

“Run,” Spencer yelled, pushing Jason forward. Jason was a dozen strides into the forest before the echos of Spencer’s shout had faded from his hearing. Blindly, he crashed through the underbrush - the crunching of twigs and branches exploding under his feet as he wove in and out of the forest. Spencer was behind him the whole time, pushing and urging him on - even when Jason’s lungs felt like they were about to burst.

Somewhere behind them a shot rang out . . . Then another.

Jason could now see the cut-over area immediately ahead of them.

“Stay out of the clearing,” he heard Spencer say between gasps. “We need cover. They’d shoot us down for sure. The cops are just up ahead.”

In another instant Spencer and Jason burst through a gap in the trees and found themselves running through the park-like area of the old growth forest.

Even as he ran, Jason could see that there were policemen everywhere. Spencer grabbed his arm and steered him toward an officer with three stripes on his sleeve and a bull horn hanging from his fingers. The policeman gaped in astonishment at the newcomers.

“You’ve got to help us,” Spencer gasped, fighting for his breath. “Three men are trying to kill this boy. They’re right behind us.”

The policeman’s eyes narrowed. “This isn’t another red herring, is it? We don’t need any more distractions. You people are already in enough trouble.”

“I’m not even with these people,” Spencer said, his voice rising in anger. “Look!” He dropped to the ground beside the police officer and rolled up his pantleg. “That came from a Winchester 30-30, I believe.”

The policeman crouched down to get a better look at the fresh wound. He straightened quickly and shouted for a couple of his officers.

Jason felt a hand on his sleeve. He turned to see Shanny and Murray Rupert standing beside him.

“Your stepfather must have tracked you down,” Shanny said.

Jason nodded numbly.

The policeman looked down at Jason with renewed interest. “You say it’s your stepfather whose after you?” he asked.

Jason pointed back down the trail. “They can’t be more than a couple of hundred

yards - back in there.”

“How many?”

“At least three. I think they mentioned there was a fourth man waiting in the car.”

“Okay - you better fill me in on the details later.” He turned as several more policemen joined them. “We’re going to have to forget about these protestors for the time being,” he said. “We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Miller, take a dozen men and head into the bush in that direction. We’re looking for four men. They’re armed and dangerous. Take no chances. Marsh, take another dozen men with you and drive back to the bridge. I want a roadblock set up there.”

The sergeant waited until his men had dispersed before turning to a last police officer.

“Higginson. Get this man to the hospital. Use the ambulance.”

“You have an ambulance here?” Jason asked.

“We came prepared for trouble,” the policeman said. “And you, boy. You stick with me. We’re going to round up those men that were after you, make no mistake about that, but I’m going to need the whole story, and I don’t want anything happening to you in the meantime. Right now I gotta go talk to those loggers. They won’t be doing any more cutting today.”

Jason looked down at Spencer. The prospector was now propped up against one of the giant white pine. “Thanks,” Jason said. “I guess I owe you my life.”

Spencer looked up at him and smiled. “It was the least I could do,” he said. “The very least I could do.”

Epilogue

Jason stood at the foot of Spencer's hospital bed, grinning down at the gruff-looking prospector while MacPherson took another picture.

"Get that camera out of my face or I'll climb out of here and wrap it around your neck," Spencer fumed. "Bad enough I gotta stay in here until tomorrow."

MacPherson laughed. "We all have to earn a living, you know."

"He's camera shy," Shanny apologized with a small laugh. "Lived by himself in the bush too long."

"Just make sure my picture isn't plastered on the front page of your big city paper," Spencer continued.

Jason picked up a copy of the Toronto Telegram beside the bed, and read the headlines again. "Old Growth Timber Rights Revoked."

"And that's all thanks to you," Shanny said, looking over at the reporter.

"Amazing what a little friendly publicity can do," MacPherson said with a laugh.

"Hopefully this will give us enough time to put a permanent stop to the cutting of that stand of trees," Shanny said.

"Whatever the outcome," Spencer said. "You should always be on guard."

"That's a good motto to live by," Jason said. "Especially with a stepfather like mine."

"At least he's behind bars now," Shanny said.

Jason nodded. "For the time being, at least."

“So what are you going to do, Jay?” Shanny asked. Jason shrugged, pausing for a moment before he spoke. “I’m not sure, yet,” he said. “I’m thinking about attending a boarding school. Benny was telling me about one in Sudbury with a good outdoor education program. I guess the last few days have opened up my eyes to a lot of possibilities - and many other things too.” He looked over at Shanny and grinned.

“Have you given any more thought to your mother’s perspective on life?” Shanny asked.

“It’s something to consider,” he said. “I’m going home to get a few things - one of them being her Bible. It’s something I’ve got to decide for myself.”

Shanny nodded. “That’s true. We all have to decide for ourselves.”

“Just remember who your friends are,” Spencer said. Jason patted the prospector on the shoulder. “We will.”

“My mother’s invitation is still good, you know,” Shanny said. “You can always stay with us.”

Jason grinned. “Who knows - I may have to take you up on that.”

Spencer cleared his throat, fidgeting nervously with the hospital tag around his wrist. “Now if you boys are looking for someone to show you a thing or two about the outdoors - rocks, minerals and bush-living in general, I’m the one to see. And you already know where my shack is.”

“Yah - we’re probably the only people in the world who do,” Shanny said.

“And I wouldn’t mind knowing a little more about what your mother’s perspective on life was.”

“Sure,” Jason said in surprise.

There was an awkward pause for a moment while MacPherson put on his coat.

“Well, we’d better get going,” Jason said, reaching out and taking Spencer’s hand.

The big man wrapped his huge hand around Jason’s and gave it several solid shakes.

Their eyes locked for a few seconds.

“Don’t be a stranger, Mac,” the man said.

Jason hesitated, as the same strange feeling came washing over him. “I guess we’ll meet again,” he said.

“We will,” Spencer said with a nod, releasing Jason’s hand.

In the hall Jason turned to his two friends.

“Why do I get the most peculiar feeling whenever I’m talking to Spencer?” He asked.

“Is it like you’ve met him before and are trying to place him?” MacPherson asked.

“I guess so, kinda.”

“Well, I find when that sort of thing happens, it usually comes to me later, if I let it sit and percolate long enough.”

In the back seat of MacPherson’s car, Jason took out his wallet and flipped it open to the picture of his parents. It seemed like days since he had last looked at the photograph. He took a deep breath as his mother’s smiling eyes almost overwhelmed him with sadness. Finally he forced his attention to the face of his father. He looked at the man as for the first time - beyond the great black beard, and the rough woodsman clothing, deep into his eyes. His breath caught. He looked again. Couldn’t be! He sat

straight up, the picture falling from his fingers onto his lap. Shanny picked it up and looked at it. "Is everything alright?" He asked.

"Oh yah," Jason said. "Everything's fine."

Both boys were silent for a moment. Finally Jason turned to his friend. "You know what?" he asked. "I think Spencer was right. I just might be seeing a lot more of that old prospector than I ever thought I would." A smile crossed his face. "A lot more."