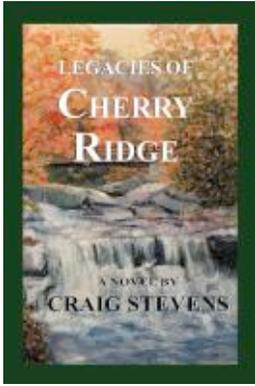
The background of the cover is a detailed oil painting of a waterfall. The water is depicted with white and grey brushstrokes, creating a sense of movement and texture as it falls over dark, layered rocks. The surrounding forest is filled with trees in various stages of autumn, with leaves in shades of red, orange, yellow, and green. The overall atmosphere is serene and naturalistic.

LEGACIES OF
**CHERRY
RIDGE**

A NOVEL BY
CRAIG STEVENS

Craig Stevens



Set largely in a decaying upstate New York village, this is the story of Christopher St. James, a depressed 39-year-old man without family who believes his only friend is his dog. His benefactor, mysterious billionaire Angus Ferguson, implores him "to be my redeemer." St. James's journey, accompanied by younger, troubled Meghan O'Connor, is fraught with the unexpected. Ferguson's legacy triggers two murders, a suicide, a violent assault, corruption...and a whimsical, old-fashioned romance.

Legacies of Cherry Ridge

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**LEGACIES OF
CHERRY RIDGE**

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First Edition

Chapter One

It Wasn't Quiet and Dull for Long

I awoke disoriented. The bed felt softer and lumpier than usual. There was something odd about the ceiling. The crack in the plaster that greeted me each morning was absent. Did I finally fix it? No. Okay, I am not at home. So where am I? Cherry Ridge. The realization made me sigh with resignation.

Gretchen lay beside me. She had not yet stirred so I slowly eased my way out of the bed. I stumbled to the blinds and peeked out. The early morning August sun made me squint my eyes.

After satisfying the usual bathroom needs, I took the hated pills: two for cholesterol, one for blood pressure and one for depression/anxiety. Plus a small aspirin and a fish oil jellybean. In my mind, I was way too young for such meds, but my doc had said otherwise.

While dressing I called out to Gretchen: "Hey, Bonehead, how about going to the diner for breakfast? Do you want to see Millie and Willy?" Gretchen rolled over, passed gas and twitched her tail.

By the time I had my sneakers on she was waiting next to her leash. As usual, she raced me out the door. She relieved herself and that led to a doggie smile and tail wag of satisfaction. Then she accepted the Breath buster she fully expected. She chewed it while I attached her leash. I said: "Let's walk around the house before we head out."

I wanted to circle the four-unit, two-story building. My father had inherited it a few years earlier. He was about to sell his house and move into one of its apartments when he died. As the executor of his small estate, I had made frequent journeys from my home near Albany to empty out his home and put it up for sale. I had planned to promptly sell the apartment building, too. I wanted to shake the muck of Cherry Ridge off my shoes for good, and I mean good. It was where I had been raised, but it is also where I where my shadow of gloom had begun to take shape. Every reluctant visit brought back the memories.

There was no quick escape. In a lousy, low-price market, the house lingered; so, I moved a few basics into the empty apartment and used it when I had to come to town. Wouldn't you know? As soon as I did, my dad's home sold. I closed the estate still owning the apartments.

Craig Stevens

The grass was freshly mowed. There was no trash on the grounds, the paint and windows looked good; the tenants who were seeing to the building's maintenance in return for reduced rent were following through.

"On to Millie's, Gretch," I said. We headed down to the sidewalk and turned toward Ridge Street.

I tell Gretchen that she walks with me like my grandmother did when I was a boy: slowly with great purpose and deliberation. Taking mild weather walks was pleasure for each of them. Neither missed anything of interest along the way, although, truth be told, what they considered of interest differed. They used different sensory organs. Gretchen tended to pause for new smells, where Nanna stopped to note the flora. Each enjoyed encountering both two- and four-legged creatures and, when possible, engaging with them. I think my grandmother was the first and maybe the one and only squirrel whisperer.

It was early in the sleepy town so we encountered no one. Save for the distant buzz of the occasional car or nearby bird there was no sound. A rare breeze had cleared the humidity and now it was still. A hint of skunk lingered in the air, which was probably why we didn't see any furry creatures about. During last night's walk, Gretchen had bolted through the backyard after a skunk. Or so I thought at the time. As bright as she is, Gretchen has never learned that skunks and dogs don't mix. She had already one smelly incident, yet she didn't fear another.

Since we hadn't been to Millie's in some time, I reminded Gretch of her special relationship with Millie. I didn't need to. Each time I said "Millie" I could see it registered with her and she quickened her pace.

In the spring more than two years earlier, we had been at the state park when a young girl fell off the wooden bridge and into the rocky Cherry Ridge Creek. Gretchen bolted then, too, leash and all, and dove into the cold, rushing water. True to her Labrador heritage, she grabbed the little one by her clothing and pulled her to shallow water. There, two or three others and I secured the girl and summoned help. The toddler had a broken arm and some abrasions. Several bruises emerged later. Eventually she would fully recover. A bystander caught Gretchen's plunge and the ensuing rescue on a phone video. Later it went, as they say, viral on the Internet.

Gretchen's celebrity was a mixed gift. For a brief time the demands were excessive. Fortunately, in the days of abbreviated news cycles, her fame was fleeting outside Cherry Ridge, but not to Millie, who is the rescued little girl's grandmother, nor to the rest of Cherry Ridge's residents who cherish Millie's family.

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Gretchen remained a hero. Willy Logan, Millie's husband who heads the Chamber of Commerce, led a movement to honor Gretchen. The mayor, the little girl's other grandfather, presented her the key to the village, the first time in anyone's memory such an honor was bestowed. Local wags couldn't help joking that there was only one key and finding it was the hardest part of the preparations: few people locked anything in Cherry Ridge.

The awarding of the key was more than ceremonial lip service. Gretchen received invitations to be a special guest at every major village event. In fact, the public reason we were present in Cherry Ridge was to attend the annual hot air balloon festival. Moreover, she was the only dog not only allowed but also cordially welcomed to venture into any place open to the public. On the occasions when we took advantage of her privilege, she often was offered gifts, usually, but not always, food.

The Diner

We used Gretchie's prominence at Millie's Diner whenever we were in town. It was nearly impossible for us to pass by the establishment without risking insult to the Logans. Typical of a dog, Gretchen did not mind milking her status for food; even it was a simple Milk Bone. She would and could eat almost anything, anytime, anywhere. It had become my job to help her maintain her health, figure and some dignity.

Millie's Diner is properly called The Cherry Ridge Inn, as the worn sign out front proclaims; but for three generations it has been called Millie's Diner in honor of its founder. She was Millie not for her first name of Mildred or Millicent—in fact, her name was Esther. She was Millie because she had been a milliner. Her daughter Ellen had become the next Millie. I know that the current Millie's real name is Arlene only because she had long ago been my babysitter. It could be very confusing to outsiders.

Millie's Diner has a wonderfully rich history full of diverse tales. At one time it housed a speakeasy. At another, it was a haven for gambling. Fights were once common. Stabbings in the early days. At least two shootings, one early on and one only a decade ago. Big business deals and political decisions. Romances blossoming and romances ending.

The building had first been an inn with a tavern anchored by an enormous, handcrafted mahogany bar. While the back bar had been removed to install a more modern grill and food preparation equipment, the Millies had taken great care to retain as many of the old features as possible or replace

them with modern equivalents. The red oak floors remained. The deep red leather booths on each side of the entry doors and along one entire wall had been reupholstered many times. The tables down the center still had bentwood, ice cream shop chairs. The Seeburg jukebox, a mid 1950's addition, still played selections from Willy's vast collection of 45-RPM records. Next to it was a modern CD player, but it was only used to "re-broadcast" radio shows from an even earlier period.

As to the food, it was largely vintage, small town diner food. Nothing Greek about it, as so often is the case with diners. While there were some concessions to modern tastes, the best selections came from the breakfast menu and the lunch specials: fresh-baked hams, locally made sausages, and baked goods from next door. Meat loaf and old-fashioned blue-plate specials. Good soups, good gravy, great coffee. And perhaps best of all, fountain cokes (with cherry or vanilla if you like), seltzers, sodas, floats and sundaes. Willy Logan called himself the last of the soda jerks. Millie said he was half right.

We cut the corner at the library. The stoplight changed over from blinking red to three colors. There was opening activity at the service station across the street. Out of one of the bays came Ed Peck: "Hey Gretchen, hey Chris," he roared. "Good to see you back in town. Goin' to Millie's? I'll be over for a coffee in a jiffy." "Hey yourself, Ed. See you there."

The diner is in the first structure past the library. The four-story, brick building with stone columns is typical of its 1870's origin. Its architectural uniqueness lies in three brass gargoyles, each overseeing one of the three sections of the building. Ask nearly any resident of Cherry Ridge about them and the answer will be a blank stare and something akin to "Huh? I hadn't noticed them before."

The three sections yield three ground-level storefronts. The diner is in the center. To the left is the bakery which Millie and Willy Logan also own. To the right is an erstwhile formal dining room. In the current recession, it is more a meeting room. The Rotary, Lions, Jaycees and others gather there for luncheons. In the evenings, when the diner serves only a limited menu, the meeting room hosts card and game players. The upper floors contain apartments, all vacant save one, and a couple of offices.

The Logans' youngest, a teenager, was outside sweeping as we approached. He lit up when he saw Gretchen approaching. He pulled open the door and shouted: "Mom, Gretchen is coming!" He bent down to grasp Gretchen as she trotted to him. "Hi ya, girl," he said, "How ya doin'?" I remembered Randy as a shy kid so I didn't take offense when he didn't speak directly to me. He did hold the door fully ajar and usher us in with a flourish.

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We had barely entered when Millie greeted us. We exchanged a few pleasantries with her and several of the patrons. The pleasantries included numerous pets and pats for Gretch. There were several familiar faces and a couple of names came to mind, but there was no one of close acquaintance. In truth I had very few personal ties in the village, whereas my late father knew nearly everyone.

Millie led us to the middle booth directly across from the flip-up opening in the bar/counter. She said that she had heard we were in town and noted that Willy was in the bakery. As to the first I noted that word gets around fast. As to the second I asked if Willy was making apple fritters this morning. "One apple fritter coming up," she said. "What else can I get our favorite customers? The ham is really good this morning and we have some homemade turkey sausage that Gretchen might like."

Gretchen's ears perked up when she heard the words turkey and sausage, so we knew that was a good choice. I agreed that a slice of ham along with a couple of eggs over easy with rye toast and OJ would do me fine. And, of course, some of Millie's eye-opening coffee.

In less than a New York minute, Millie came back with the coffee in a mug with my name on it. There were scores of similar ones lining a wall. She also had a water bowl inscribed "#1 Citizen" on one side and "Gretchen" on the other. I asked her if she had time to sit with us and bring me up to date on the local news. I knew there was no better source. She could be more detailed than an historian with a Ph.D.

Millie reported the recent marriages, deaths and births. She told me that Karen Shannon came back to town, her "tail between her legs." Something different, I thought. "Her ex is doing time for a 'Fonzi' scheme." I tried to picture what that might be. "I remember you two were an item in high school. She's living in the house next to her parents with her two kids."

"No, we weren't," I said while thinking that it was maybe true if only in my teenage dreams. "The Warren house? The one with the bomb shelter out back?"

"Yeah, I think that's right! I remember hearing stories about the bomb shelter, but I didn't know if they were true. Do you know for sure?"

"Pretty sure," I said, "I was outside the entrance when I was a kid." The place was known to "radiate" if you count teenage heat.

She told me that "Bung" Byers had died a few weeks earlier. I was probably one of the few people who could have read the obituary of Clair Jonathan Byers and known that it was Bung.

Bung was representative of a class of small town characters and eccentrics. He had been a daily presence on Ridge Street since before I was born. Wearing the same dark blue suit and blue tie he would move station to station along the two commercial blocks. At each stop he would hoarsely comment on the state of the world in general and Cherry Ridge in particular. His audience was anyone who listened. Few did. Kids mocked him and others avoided him. “In a way I kind of miss him,” said Millie, “but I won’t miss his spitting and the remains of his filthy cigars.”

Millie went on to say that a new antique shop had opened across the way, about the fifth to take space in the former W. T. Grant’s. The oxymoronic juxtaposition of “new” and “antique” amused me. She said the bank had changed its name again, and that Ed Peck had changed from Mobil to Sunoco. Coincidentally, as I was saying I had noticed that when I passed him earlier, Ed came in. I heard someone ask him if he was getting better mileage. He came by, stuck out his hand and then gave Gretchen a hearty, two-hand grasp.

By then, Gretchen had polished off her turkey sausage. I had eaten an enormous fritter and I was well into my ham and eggs. Millie described several changes and additions at the school: new bleachers at the football field, a new elementary school principal, a few new teachers, a new guidance counselor and a couple of coaching changes. Although Cherry Ridge is small, it takes its sports seriously. Several graduates had earned athletic scholarships and a few had become professional players or coaches at some level. It was a way out.

“Oh!” said Millie, “I haven’t told you what might interest you most. Mel Reeves is only publishing the paper once a week, on Friday instead of Tuesday and Friday.” I showed some surprise. I hold well-edited, small newspapers in a special place and Mel published such a paper. He was a throwback to the old-school editors of a century ago.

Millie explained: “Mel said that Mel Junior convinced him to make the change. Junior has been working with Mel during his break from college—you know that he is attending Northwestern, right? He said the paper would be more profitable if it published just once a week. The one edition is bigger, more pages. Mel Senior called it ‘edition by subtraction.’ I didn’t get that at first.”

Inevitably, I run into Mel when I am in town. He is as close as I ever had to a mentor. He encouraged me to write articles for the paper when I was in high school. I made a mental note to make sure I see him this visit.

It was getting busier so Millie excused herself to help the staff. A couple of patrons stopped by to fawn over Gretchen. Willy finally got free long

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enough to encourage me to come by when it was quieter so we could talk some politics and sports. He also said he had some new dandelion wine he would like me to try.

I was about to bid the diner adieu when Millie returned. “Chris, you like odd things, right?” I nodded and said, “I guess. It depends.” “Well, there is kind of an odd character in town.” “Odd how?” I asked. “Well, maybe not really odd, but peculiar.” I didn’t see the difference so I waited for Millie to go on.

“About two weeks ago this guy started coming in every morning at precisely the same time.” Glancing at the clock she said: “In fact he is due in about half an hour. The first day he came in he asked for porridge and bangers. Ginny told him we could do hot oatmeal and that we had link pork sausage and turkey sausage. He asked for the oatmeal, pork links, two soft-boiled eggs and rye toast and tea. He’s ordered the same thing every day since. Ginny thinks he is from down under, but I think he’s a Brit.”

“Could be either or South African or a New Zealander,” I said, “I guess he is kind of different from most of your usual patrons, but don’t you have others who come in at the same time and place the same order?”

“Well, yes, there are Sam, Donna Wilkins — a course she has the diabetes — and a couple of others, but there is more to tell. He seems to wear the same clothes — not many come in here for breakfast in a suit and tie ‘cept for old Doc Gamble and sometimes even he doesn’t in the heat of summer. But maybe this guy has more than one of the same color? He always brings a newspaper, he always sits in the back booth that no one ever wants, and he talks to no one except the waitress. Milt says he is staying at his motel. Says he has a rental car. Says the guy keeps his room like it’s been unused. Nobody seems to know why he is here. Maybe he’s lookin’ at property, maybe even the Hillside Castle. The rumors never end about the castle. Wouldn’t that be somethin’? Whaddya think?”

The “whaddya think” caught me off guard. I didn’t want to tell Millie that her imagination was running away from her. “I dunno, Millie,” I said, partly lapsing into local speech. “Maybe he’s waitin’ for something or someone. Maybe he just likes your food. Could be anything. Could be nothing.”

“Well,” Millie said, “If you are still here in 20 minutes or so you can see him yourself,” and then, going back to her original characterization, she added, “He’s an odd one, he is.”

I told Millie I sensed that Gretchen needed to go outside, but that I would be back for another cup of coffee. She said her daughter (probably the next

Millie) was due in any minute and that she would hold my booth for me. Millie was heading over to the bakery.

Gretchen did her stretchin' on the lawn of the library. I sat on the Malcolm J. Walker bench and for the umpteenth time wondered who Malcolm J. was or is. I was always forgetting to ask someone. Les Bowman, an 80ish friend of my father, came by walking Tessie and Nigel. For a few minutes Gretchen had a couple of little guys to cavort with. Les repeated some of the news I had gotten from Millie and added a bit more. He literally pointed out that Ed Peck had changed to Sunoco. Les asked if we were going to be in town for the hot air balloon show and I said that that was the plan. He said to look him up; he would be selling tee shirts for the seniors' center fund drive. I asked him who Malcolm J. Walker is/was. He said, "Hmm. Good question. You got me by the short hairs."

When we returned to the diner I could see the coffee klatchers were coming in, mostly seniors, mostly male. Then Officer Curt "Chub" Simmons came rushing in, clearly agitated. He called out: "A dozen ham and egg san'wiches and a dozen coffees, all regular. Right away!" "To go or eat here, Curt?" came the snickering reply.

Portly Curt was about to answer back when he spied us. "Chris, Gretchen!" he said. At least this time I got first billing. He came over quickly and plopped down across from me. The booth shook in response. My small hand got lost in his big fist. He was bursting to tell somebody something. I was going to be that somebody.

Curt was one of the athletes who had gone on to college success and played a few years of minor league football. Dumb as a box of hammers, the locals would say, but soft and sweet inside like the jelly donuts he favored. A knee injury brought him back home permanently.

He immediately began to argue with himself. "I shouldn't say anything," he said haltingly, "not yet, but I know I can trust you and it'll soon be all over town anyway ...". He leaned over as his whispered story came out rapidly: "There's been an, uh, incident. Over near your building. Right behind it in fact. Young woman, teacher we think. Well, maybe, we aren't sure. The chief and the whole force is there. They're waitin' for the sheriff's forensic team to arrive. Chief sent me here to get san'wiches and coffee."

Curt's words confused me. "Whaddya mean you aren't sure? Was a woman hurt or what?"

"We dunno. There's blood all over the place but we can't find a body! Look, Chris, I gotta get back. Keep it to yourself, buddy, right?"

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Curt hovered at the counter, nervously eating a bear claw. He had to wait another couple of minutes for his order. I heard one of the patrons say: "What's with Curt? It looks like he's about to pee his pants." To which another replied: "Oh, he probably hasn't eaten since breakfast."

For a minute or so I thought about the shocking news Curt had told me, then I noticed the old Westminster clock. As I expected, no check came my way. I put three 5's on the table and said: "C'mon Gretchen. It's almost nine, the bank will be opening."

I waved so long to everyone in general and to no one in particular. Once outside Gretchen stopped as if to ask which way we were going. I was eager to get to the bank, but my curiosity about "the incident" took hold. "Let's go back to the apartment. We can take the truck to the bank." Nearly always agreeable, Gretchen led the way. Instead of the leisurely pace we had taken to get to the diner, we strode along briskly on the return. My companion seemed to enjoy the pace.

On The Way to the Bank

Instead of continuing on to Poplar, our street, we turned on to Hemlock. Hemlock was the site of the "incident." That had us walking directly toward the sun, already three hours above East Hill. The brightness made it hard to see the "castle" Millie had referenced. It stretched along Castle Ridge two-thirds up the hill. I put on my sunglasses. The glasses helped me see the gathering of vehicles three blocks ahead. They were on both sides of the street.

I could see half a dozen official types standing by or sitting on the cars close to the house. A few were finishing sandwiches and drinking coffee. Curt had made his distribution. Mel Reeves, Sr. and Jr. were both there, armed with cameras and recorders. They were trying to overhear what Chief Charles Broadhurst was asking Icky Stone as Icky sat astride his classic Columbia bike, streamers, bell and all.

Quite a contrasting pair, those two: the gray-haired, uniformed former federal agent who had retired to his wife's hometown to become Cherry Ridge's Chief of Police and the unkempt "notorious Cherry Ridge pervert," Icky Stone.

Icky was in his late 30's. He worked around town as a nighttime janitor. When he was a pre-teen some yappy young girls thought it fun to claim he had tried "to look up their skirts." They called him Icky and the name stuck.

Worse, though, was that from time to time unsupported claims were circulated against him. He was accused of lurking, loitering, public exposure, public urination and peeking through windows. The evidence was always sketchy at most, and formal charges never came about.

My dad, who had lived two doors down from where Icky lived with his mother, thought he was a decent, misunderstood kid of limited intellect. Dad would say “The Ickster” was an odd duck, but he was good to his mother and was the first one on the street to arrive when a neighbor needed help with snow or leaf removal. “Anyways,” Dad would say, “Cherry Ridge has more odd ducks than even ones.”

A somber crowd of some 25 to 30 ducks was earnestly quacking and gawking from the side opposite the point of interest. Some of them had cameras. A couple of Cherry Ridge’s finest were keeping them at bay. Meaning, basically, they were involved in the speculations. Curt was one of them. We managed to slip behind most of the crowd. I only recognized a couple of faces and exchanged nods of greeting. Unlike at Millie’s, Gretchen drew little attention. When we reached the corner to cross the street Curt caught up with us.

“The lady’s name is Cassandra Cross. Mrs. Morgan said she moved in yesterday. She was at her sister’s overnight so she had Icky give her the key and help her move in. She didn’t have much stuff. Mostly baby things. Mrs. Morgan went to greet her when she got back this mornin’. She found the door open, looked in, saw blood everywhere, and called 911. Nobody knew about the boy until Mrs. Morgan asked about him. They found him hidin’ in a closet upstairs. Jeff heard cryin’. I guess they missed him the first pass through. Mrs. Morgan took him to her place to clean him, feed him and get him into some clothes. She’ll look after him ‘til Child Services can get here. Chief has been on the phone with Principal Kline. Kline said Miz Cross called in yesterday to say she had arrived and she had an appointment with him this afternoon.”

Spitting out so much so fast left Curt out of breath. I said something unmemorable about what he had related. Then he said, “Uh, Chris, we need to talk with all the neighbors so I hafta ask you if you heard or saw anything unusual last night or this morning.” Curt got out a notepad.

“No, I don’t think so. We got into town, got here, about 6:30. I picked up a pizza at Morelli’s on the way in. About 7:30 or so I took Gretchen on a walk down to the stream. We were back by sundown. We settled in and I was asleep by ten ... Oh, wait, there may be one thing. Just before I turned in I let Gretchen outside the door to pee. She bolted into the backyard. I think she

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was agitated by the smell of skunk in the air. I called her, but she didn't stop until she reached the hedgerow that separates the lots.

Let's see, I think I heard a metal clang like a trash can being toppled. Coulda been the skunk. There were porch lights on at the house but I didn't see anyone. Sorry I can't tell you more, but I was worried at the time about Gretchen getting sprayed."

"That could be useful info, Chris. The Chief will probably want to talk with you. You'll be around, right?"

I told him I would be in town at least through Saturday and I gave him my cell phone number.

"Thanks, Chris," he said, "I have a feeling it's goin' to be a really sad day. We gotta find a body."

Reference to the cell phone made me dig it out of my pocket. I hate the things. I only carry one for emergency use. Since I had given the number to Curt, I figured I better turn it on. Notice of a message popped up. I fumbled with the buttons. I heard Maggie's voice.

"Boss, your phone is never on! It is soooo frustrating. Anyway, I hope you are having a good trip. Some guy named J. Pierpoint Wadsworth, Jr. called," she said in a mocking imperious voice. "I told him you were out of town for a few days, but I didn't tell him where you'd gone. He said you should call him if you need assistance, whatever that means. Okay? Seeya."

A Look Back

Maggie is the young woman I hired a couple of years back, shortly after I started St. James Public Policy Research. Raven-haired Maggie O'Connor stands about 5' 11", over 6' in sneakers, her preferred footwear. She had been a high school standout in soccer, volleyball and softball. Her soccer play had earned her a college scholarship, but in the summer before her junior year she was the victim of an uninsured drunken driver who died in the crash. She suffered multiple injuries including near destruction of one knee. Competitive by nature, she endured two years of therapy and rehabilitation while completing a degree in math and accounting.

A few years later she had entered unannounced into my excuse for an office — shabby would be a compliment to it. I noticed she had a bit of a limp. "I didn't see anyone outside," she said, "Are you Mr. St. James, the person I see for this job? I'm Maggie O'Connor." She was holding a folder and several pieces of paper.

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“Yes, I’m Chris St. James. Do you have a resume?”

“Yes, and here are my references.” Then, seeing Gretchen lying a few feet away she said: “What a sweet Lab girl you have there. What’s her name? Can I pet her?”

After I spoke her name, Gretch got up and approached Maggie’s outstretched hands. “We have a Pekingese, Gretchen.” I was about to say that’s not a dog but an animated toupee when she added, “But I always wanted a big strong athletic dog like you.”

I asked her to be seated in the one other chair in the room. I scanned through the paperwork. “Meghan,” I began.

She interrupted with “It’s Maggie, Maggie O’Connor.”

“Okay, Maggie,” I said, “You would appear to be overqualified for what we have to offer. It says here you have honor grades at Siena and a couple of years working for a top New York City accounting firm. I’m looking for a jack-of-all trades: a bookkeeper, receptionist and I can’t pay all that much. You must have been making much more in the city. Do you know what we do here?”

She said she had done an Internet search and learned only a little about our fledgling enterprise. “It seems like useful, interesting work. I read some of what you have written, too.”

“And?” I said.

She didn’t comment on the writing. Instead, she said: “The thing is my mom is in a wheelchair. I came back home when she was stricken and I need to be able to look after her, take her to doctors’ appointments and such. But I also need a job. I can keep books, I can answer phones, I can do anything needed. I took a few poli sci courses. I’m good with computers. I can do research. I have had a couple of good interviews, but as soon as I ask about some flexible time they turn me away. I understand companies want people to be present but I really don’t want to go back to waiting tables. I came in hoping a small company could use me and be understanding.”

Her desperation was obvious, but her forthrightness was refreshing, and there was something about this young woman that sparked my interest. Besides, I was no slave to a clock and if she could do the work, I’d have no problem with her being absent from time to time. I certainly was. I asked her if she would like some coffee. She said she seldom drinks coffee, but she would have some if I did.

I asked her how she liked it and poured her a cup. She took a sip and tried not to make a face. “I know,” I said, “It’s not very good.”

“I can make better,” she offered confidently.

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We talked for another twenty minutes or so. I learned that her father, a police detective, had died in the car accident in which she was injured. He left a modest pension. Her mother had been a nurse. When Maggie finished college she went off to pursue her career. Now she had two brothers in college and a mother in need. Somewhere along the line I confirmed that we could be flexible with her work hours, so long as the necessary work got done.

“What do you think, Gretchen? Should we consider this young lady?” Gretchen had already made up her mind.

I excused myself and went out to confer with Vincent who had come into the outer office a few minutes earlier. Vincent DeSantis is my second-in-command and my only full-time employee at the time. He looked in at Maggie, smiled and shrugged.

When I returned to my desk Maggie spoke up. “Can I call you Boss? I can start tomorrow.”

She didn’t ask about the pay or benefits. Nevertheless, I offered \$2,000 more than the budget called for. She accepted. A few weeks later Vincent told me she’d noticed the discrepancy in the accounting records. Vincent said he told her not to be concerned, that I was a soft touch.

The caller to whom Maggie referred, the nobly named J. Pierpoint Wadsworth, Jr., is the son, obviously, of J. Pierpont Wadsworth, Sr., the catalyst for why I had a second and more important reason to be in Cherry Ridge. Three weeks earlier the senior Pierpoint called me at home at almost precisely the time a courier delivered me a package bearing his law firm’s name. He said a friend of my father’s was giving me a piece of property in Cherry Ridge. He asked if I had access to a facsimile machine. I said I did and that pleased him. He then asked me to review the contents of the package, sign where indicated and fax the papers to the number listed.

I asked cautiously: “Who is making this ‘gift?’ What is it going to cost me? How do I know this isn’t some kind of scam?” J. Pierpoint Wadsworth, Sr. replied: “I am very sorry, didn’t I say? Angus Ferguson is your benefactor ... and it is no scam, he is a very serious man.”

I thought, Angus Ferguson? Then dawn broke. “Could you mean ‘Scottie’ Ferguson?”

To which Pierpoint replied: “Yes, of course, you would know him by that name.”

I did. Scottie was indeed a friend of my dad’s. When I was a kid, Dad had taken me a few times to Scottie’s rough old camp in Brampton Woods outside of town. Over the many years Dad would occasionally mention he’d

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had a visit from Scottie. And I'd had a fairly long conversation with him right after my dad's funeral. I remembered it was friendly but a bit odd.

I figured the property I was being given must be Brampton Woods. My guess was that it was worth very little. As I recalled it was mostly rugged, wooded hillside land. I could probably sell it for a few thousand dollars to a hunter, maybe one of those that came down from the city to hunt turkey or deer.

While talking with Pierpoint I opened the envelope. The documents looked legitimate. There were counter signatures and witness signatures and stamps of various sorts. The papers certainly did not look like a printed version of a Nigerian e-mail fraud.

The conversation continued for a few more minutes. Pierpoint said Scottie had fallen quite ill and that doing so had triggered actions that had been in the works for some time. The dates alongside the signatures of one Angus Ferguson made this ring true. Pierpoint said that while the gift would hold up should Scottie die, it would be legally cleaner if he, Pierpoint, had signed documents in hand before such an event.

After clicking off the phone I sat down and read the papers with care. "Maybe I will get stuck with an unpaid bill for back taxes or something, but what the hell, Gretchen, let's take a chance that this is for real." I signed the papers and faxed them off.

Ten days later, the senior Wadsworth called me at work. Scottie had died peacefully at age 92. There would be no services. He asked if I was willing to fulfill one of Scottie's wishes. I said I would if I could. "Good," said Pierpoint, "He wants you to scatter his ashes over his mother's grave. It's on the property he gave you. I will have the ashes delivered to you by courier. I will also send you the deed to the property and a means to get into the property." At the time I thought that meant a key to a building or a gate, not the means to open a safety deposit box.

At the Bank

We reached our car without further interruption. Actually, the vehicle was not a car, but a big Chevrolet Silverado pickup. When I saw it on the lot I decided it might be more useful than the small SUV I had intended to rent in lieu of my little hybrid import. It was harder for Gretchen to get into, but she seemed to like riding higher and a little closer to the front seat. I liked that the high seat backs would deter her from jumping into the front, something she

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always did when I left her alone for even a few minutes. That would mean less hair to clean out later. Gretchen shed year around like the guy in the dandruff commercial.

We parked in front of the bank on Ridge Street. There were plenty of spaces available. It was close to 10 AM and yet the village seemed to still be mostly asleep. We were across from the New Moon Theatre. It was only open on weekends and the scheduled attraction was a second run. Years back the line of people waiting to get in could stretch three or four stores down, sometimes even on weeknights. The old theater held many memories. I probably learned as much or more there than in all the books I have read. There was that night in the balcony with ... but I digress.

I told Gretchen that I didn't want to test her privileges in the bank so I was going in alone. The Chevy was cool and the windows were halfway down. Her eyes stayed on me as I strode toward the bank.

Once inside I identified myself and asked to speak to the manager, a dour, sour Mrs. Kennedy. She had taken over many years ago when the then manager, my dad's oldest brother, had retired. Her office was just inside the entryway. I could see Gretchen through her window. She was in the front seat. Mrs. Kennedy noted that she hadn't seen me since my father had passed. She said she had received the proper paperwork from Pierpoint and all I had to do was to show identification, complete two transfer forms and fill in the signature cards. This took less than five minutes.

Mrs. Kennedy called her assistant, Lauren, and asked her to show me to the vault and deposit box 101. Lauren settled me into a small cubicle within the depository, then excused herself. On the table before me was the largest box they had available. It was far more than needed for simple keys to a gate or a locked cabin. Maybe there were a few keepsakes inside that would prove interesting.

I raised the lid gingerly. Immediately a sea of green struck my eyes. Greenbacks to be more specific. Stacked bills filled two-thirds of the box! My heart leaped and I started to shake. They were stacks of one thousand, five hundred and one hundred dollar bills. In one corner lay a flat envelope with my name on it. I opened it to find a folded sheet of paper and two DVD's. I unfolded the paper and read the handwritten words:

My dear Chris,

You have begun the journey I have set out for you. Where it takes you is in your hands. You will find an explanation when you view the DVD. You can do that at the camp. What you have found in this box and all that you find at

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the camp is now yours. There is no key to the camp entrance. When you go there Julia will let you in.

In case you have forgotten how to get to the camp, turn past Holy Sepulcher Cemetery and keep going until you reach the end of the road.

Beware the snakes.

Scottie

My mind raced from thought to thought. Could all this money be mine? I looked around me to make sure I was alone, as if I were a thief fearful of being caught in the act. If it really is mine, why would Scottie give it to me? And who is this Julia and why would she be at the camp when I go there? It was all really too much for me to take in.

In addition to the money and the envelope there were two velvet bags tied with leather cords resting upon a pile of documents. I opened the larger of the two. Even now, in hindsight, I am at a loss to describe how I felt. Astounded is inadequate. The bag held scads, maybe hundreds, of large diamonds! I pulled at the knot of the second bag. It held a small handgun, a .25 caliber Beretta as I determined later. I was nearly paralyzed. What's happening? Am I dreaming? What do I do?

I tried to gather myself. Lauren had said to buzz her when I finished or if I needed help. I hit the buzzer much harder and longer than necessary.

It occurred to me that thousand and five hundred dollars bills had not been in circulation for many years, so they had to be very old or fake. I removed one bill of each denomination and flipped the lid to close the box. Lauren arrived promptly. I handed her the bills. "Would you please verify that these are real?" I asked.

"Certainly," she said before looking a bit stunned to see the thousand-dollar bill. The bill seemed to prompt her to add, "It could take a few minutes."

"Could you also look out the window and see if my dog is okay? She is in the truck at the front of the building."

"You mean Gretchen? Would you like me to bring her in? I am sure no one here will object."

"Well, that would be nice, if you don't mind, and if she is willing to come in with you. Her leash is on the front seat. The truck isn't locked."

I lifted the lid for the second time. I half expected to find it empty, but the contents were still there. I leafed through the documents while waiting. I knew nothing of financial instruments but they appeared to be mostly bonds. I heard Gretchen's paws on the marble floor in the distance. In seconds she

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bounded in beside me. On her heels and in her heels, Lauren couldn't keep up. I thanked her. She said Mrs. Kennedy was doing the verification. They don't see 500 hundreds and thousands. I spread my hands apart and asked her if she could find me a container about "yay big" and she said she would.

I sat back, transfixed by the box. I had always had a reverse snobbery about money. I had tried to convince myself that it meant little to me, a common way of coping with having very little. Now with so much right in front of me I was having trouble restraining my impulses. I wanted to shout to the world: "I am rich, big time rich!"

Mrs. Kennedy came in with Lauren. Mrs. Kennedy was holding the bills; Lauren was carrying a box. "These bills appear to be good, Mr. St. James," said Mrs. Kennedy with a big smile. "We would have to send them out to be 100% sure. Would you like to make a transaction?"

She had called me *Mr. St. James* — the money had already had an impact.

My first impulse was to deposit all the cash into an account. That could take considerable time if Mrs. Kennedy decided each big bill needed checking, and she would be right to do so. Then I remembered reading somewhere that collectors would pay far more than face value for thousands and five hundreds. I decided to deposit only the hundreds.

The total came to exactly half a million dollars. I had a thing for doing mental calculations. The hundreds had occupied about half the space all the currency occupied. At face value the remaining half of thousands and five hundreds had to be worth five and 10 times the hundreds, respectively. Add in the diamonds, about which I knew nothing, and I guessed that the value of the contents of the box might exceed ten million dollars! It was like winning the lottery without buying a ticket. And tax-free at that!

A half an hour later Gretchen and I emerged from the bank with a brand new money management account, some temporary checks, the stack of Scottie's papers, a thousand dollars in cash and the all-important DVD.

On the Way to the "Camp"

We drove two blocks and parked in front of my family church. For many years my church attendance has been sporadic. I have issues. Christianity has had the perfect guide for over 2,000 years and the same time to get it right; still it hasn't. Way too many institutions and individuals pick and choose from the Bible to justify their own agendas. My tendency is to follow the New

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Testament as the best source of what is right and adhere to my Eleventh Commandment: Thou Shalt Not Be a Hypocrite.

Nowadays I am more likely to drop in on a midweek afternoon than a Sunday morning. I feel that God, my grandmother and now my dad are able to hear me better then. I like going into a dim, muted church to give thanks, ask for guidance or simply meditate. This day I had reason to do all three.

I walked across the old bricks as I had hundreds of times before. I reached for the door handle and pulled. The big mahogany door didn't give. Locked! I tried the adjoining handle. Also locked. To protect against vagrants, thieves? I wasn't in some urban slum. What the hell good is a church if it can't be entered?

I was upset. No, I was angry, a feeling I rarely experienced. I started toward the rectory next door. Then I thought, what good will it do? Was I going to find someone to open the church just for me? Not likely.

Instantly I was transported back nearly a decade, back to when my wife of two years suddenly announced she was leaving. She had found someone else. Shocked and humbled, I had gone to a church then and found it locked. That time I did go to the rectory where I was summarily told to make an appointment.

Yes, I have issues, some profound and philosophical, some very personal.

I returned to the pickup and I saw the warm eyes waiting for me. I got into the back beside Gretchen. "I need to talk, Sweetie."

Gretchen extended a paw and dropped her head on my lap. It was nearly noon when I finally realized even good listeners can need a pee break.

We stopped at the drive-up window of a hamburger joint at the end of the village. My breakfast had been more than ample but I wasn't sure when I would get a chance to eat again. I ordered a cheeseburger with extra onions — Gretchen wouldn't care if I ate onions — and a plain one for the Bonehead. No, no fries with either. With the burgers and a shake I pulled into a parking spot. We ate in silence. I poured water from a plastic container into Gretchen's travel bowl and placed it at one end of her seat. Lying flat, she extended both her front legs to first embrace and then tip the bowl. After a few lapping sounds we were on our way.

It wasn't far to the right turn off the main road. I slowed as we passed Holy Sepulcher Cemetery. I told Gretchen we would stop by the gravesites later. The road narrowed to one lane and turned to gravel at the end of the cemetery. Before us were heavy woods. It was as if we were entering a tunnel.

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I took off my sunglasses. Two signs announced “Private Property.” We were entering Scottie’s land. Hmm, my land.

The road began to rise. The wooded drop-off to our right grew deeper and steeper. I could no longer see through the trees to the valley to the north. Bird warbling and squirrel chattering announced our intrusion. Gretchen had her head out the window looking for the pesky squirrels and chipmunks.

We had to drive slowly to avoid numerous fallen branches. Still, it wasn’t long before we stopped. We had gone maybe a quarter mile. Straight ahead the road was no more than an old logging path continuing along the drop-off deeper into the woods. The main road, such as it was, turned left and more steeply up the hillside. Guarding it was a very serious looking gate attached to a small concrete building. Going around them would not be an option.

Built into the building was something that looked a bit like an automatic teller machine. I approached it gingerly. I was maybe three feet in front of it when I was startled to hear “Please state your name.” I hesitated. The disembodied voice repeated: “Please state your name.”

“Chris St. James,” I replied.

“Welcome, Christopher, I am Julia,” came the response. “Please put your hands on my screen.” I did so. “Thank you. Now look into my screen. Thank you again. Is there anyone with you?”

I told “her” Gretchen, my dog, was in the truck.

“Fine,” said Julia, “I will now open the gate for you. Do you want me to open the gatehouse? The entrance is inside the gate.” I said no. “Fine. You will find me at the end of the road.”

Scottie’s “Camp”

Another half mile later we were at that end to the road. We had traveled higher, but at times we nearly leveled off on what seemed to be tiers or ledges. There were many twists and turns as the road sought the best way around or through to the next level. Now we seemed to be at the last tier, maybe 150 feet below the crest of the hill. To the left was a narrow debris-strewn walking path. To our right there was a gap in a thick row of evergreens. We eased through the opening and came to a stop. There before us were two large buildings and several smaller ones.

It was nothing like I remembered. The camp of my youth was little more than a shack. In its stead was a compact, formidable structure built tightly to

the rock wall behind it. Its roof was covered with solar panels except in the center where a cupola stood. The building's sidewalls were punctuated with a single row of small thick blocks of glass. As I stepped out of and away from the truck I could see a wing on one side.

A large, two-story building rested about 50 yards farther down at the edge of where the woods began again. It was wide enough to have four double-car doors. Between the two large structures was a series of solidly constructed sheds.

Gretchen whimpered. She didn't like the gravel under her paws. She moved toward the evergreens, found a bare spot, and deposited her breakfast. At that moment, we had different priorities. I walked across the gravel on to the narrow deck that fronted the house. The door looked like it could stand up to a bomb. Maybe that was the idea. To one side there was a box similar to the one on the gatehouse. "Julia, it's Chris St. James and Gretchen," I said as I approached. "Can you open the door?"

Julia immediately responded, "Yes, Christopher, I have voice recognition."

The door slid to one side. I took a deep breath. Gretchen had reached my side. "C'mon, Bonehead, let's see what we find inside Scottie's version of Farnhan's Freehold."

Due to the great contrast with the glaring sunlight, the inside registered as nearly solid black. Passing the threshold seemed to trigger the indirect lighting surrounding the room. It took a few seconds for my eyes to make an adjustment. There seemed to be but one large room.

The first thing I focused on was something hanging above the center, some kind of pull-down stairway leading to the cupola. To the right of the center were kitchen fixtures. To the left there were shelves, cases and a long dark sofa. More immediately to my left was a workstation. Without further examining the room I strode toward it, looking for a way to play the DVD.

"Are you there, Julia? I want to play a DVD."

"I am here, Christopher. Insert the disc into the slot on the right of the monitor."

My hand trembled as I located the slot and inserted the DVD. The monitor changed from "Standby" to "Encrypted File." Julia underscored the situation orally. I said "Julia? This is Chris. Open the file, please."

She responded: "Opening encrypted file."

A date ran across the screen. It was about 18 months ago. Scottie's face appeared nearly full screen. Then he settled back into an armchair and began to speak in a matter-of-fact tone.

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Hello, Christopher. You seeing this would give me great pleasure. Maybe I am somewhere where I am taking that great pleasure. I assume you are in the camp and viewing this with Julia's help. Indeed, Julia can help you in many ways. She is a magnificent creation, if I do say so myself. Talk to her like you would a person. She can be stiff at times, but you will learn to cope with her.

I should begin by saying that I set up the camera and arranged all this without any assistance. That should prove I am competent. And I am under no duress unless one counts the duress of time.

Scottie sipped from a glass and cleared his throat. He looked old, but how should I describe him? Feisty is the best I can come up with. Certainly he was still a big man.

I trust you like the camp. It is different from when you visited with your father as a child. It is now all yours including everything you find in and on it, along with a few other things that are elsewhere, like what you found in the bank.

You are no doubt asking yourself why I have given you these things. It is a bit complicated. Our lives are intertwined more than you know. You do know your father was my friend. He was my only real friend in Cherry Ridge and he always made time for me when I came to town. He was a lousy fisherman, but a decent and honest man. We always had a good time when we were together.

What you probably don't know is that his mother, your grandmother, took me in for a time when I was a youngster and had no place to live. She was always very kind to me and to my mother. I have come to regret not repaying her when she was alive. I was too busy ... I was always too busy doing more important things, or so I thought.

You will remember our talking for a while after your father's funeral. I was very pleased to hear what you said earlier during your eulogy. I regret not having a relationship with my son so that he would speak of me as you did your father. I also could tell how much you loved your grandmother. Afterwards I began to take more interest in you. I had already seen to it that you got the grant to start your business . . .

"What?" I said to the screen. "The grant? The Magnus Foundation grant? You were responsible for that?" I was stunned.

Scottie continued to speak and I was missing words. "Julia, stop and back up 15 seconds." Julia did as I requested.

It is easy to give you the camp. The little rented shack where I lived with my mother was on the property. When I got the chance, I bought it along with

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the whole damn hill. About three square miles. The history of the property showed that some of it belonged to your grandmother's ancestors back in the early 1800's. They tilled the south side. You will find a stone cross where they likely worshipped. I think they were swindled out of the land. By giving it to you the land is back in the right family."

Scottie paused as if his thoughts had gone elsewhere. "I learned a lot about you and I decided you are the one to redeem me. Chris, I spent a very full life, but not a good one. I accumulated a very large fortune, not always by the most ... by the most, uh, ethical means. If I did any good with the money it was by accident.

I failed as a husband and father and in countless other ways. Now I am giving you a blessing ... and a burden. The blessing is great wealth. The burden, too, is great wealth, the responsibility that comes with it, a responsibility I never understood, but I am confident you will.

A longer pause.

Pierpoint has worked hard to assure that this gift took place before I expired. 'Expired,' that's Pierpoint's word. Like a license that has run out and can't be renewed.

Another sip from the glass.

He is confident that it is protected from the scavengers who will come after my estate. My offspring—save one—cannot be trusted, but Pierpoint can be. He is a dull man, but he is capable and scrupulously honest and I have paid him millions over the years. Turn to him if you need to, but rely first on your own instincts.

That's about it. I wish I could see the look on your face now and as you explore the property. There will be surprises. Leave no stone unturned. I wish I could watch you over the coming years. Maybe I can? No doubt I will soon know.

One more thing, no, two. There is single malt Scotch sitting on the counter. Raise a glass to me, no, not to me, to the future good you will do for me. And there is a Morgan in the barn. Your dad loved that car. Crank it up for us, will you?

I stared at the darkened screen for I don't know how long. My heart was pounding. My body was shaking. I took in two or three deep breaths. Thoughts swirled through my head. Am I in some extended dream state? Had I been drugged? Is this fantasy? Slowly I slumped from the chair onto the carpeted floor next to Gretchen. I hugged her close. She looked at me with her big eyes. I said: "Sweetie, I'm scared. I'm not sure what is happening but I am pretty sure our lives have changed forever." I decided to find the Scotch.

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The 30-year-old Glenfiddich was bracing, especially neat. I rarely drank, especially since my military days. There had been far too much of that in my family. Nevertheless, I could appreciate smooth whisky, a friendly St. Emilion or a well-brewed lager. I poured a second shot into the water glass I had found in the cupboard. This time I ran the tap water. It looked clear so I poured some over the whisky.

I surveyed the room. It was sparse. The workspace bordered on a series of cabinets against one wall. I could see that one case held weapons. In front of the cases was a large brown leather sofa with a blanket resting on it. These items faced the kitchenette where I was standing. Sink, refrigerator, cook top, microwave and a few cabinets. I opened a few doors and found very little and nothing unusual. There were several more cherry wood boxes containing the same rare Scotch and a few bottles of XO cognac. Scottie had good taste.

There was a small island with cabinets, a countertop and a single stool. A television monitor resided in the island directly across from the sofa. No oven, no dishwasher. In the front corner opposite the work space there was a wooden table, simple pine by the looks of it, and a single chair.

The entire back third of the room was empty. To the left of the kitchen area there was a wide doorway. I assumed it might lead to a bedroom and a bathroom. I entered and found a toilet, a sink, a shower stall and laundry equipment to the right. The rest of the space, to the left, was taken up with a sophisticated array of technology: household mechanicals to one side, computer equipment to the other. Between the two areas there was a windowless door with a peephole through which I could see the storage sheds. There was no bed, no sleeping area.

I turned my attention to the cabinets across the way. There were only a handful of books at the top. Nearly all were scientific reference books. No dictionary, no Bible, no anything to indicate Scottie's reading preferences. There were eight framed, signed, glossy photos. I immediately recognized a young Willy Mays, Satchel Paige, Winston Churchill, and Ernest Hemingway. I couldn't identify the others.

There was a framed snapshot of a young girl, maybe 13 or 14 years old. There was a photo of four men and a woman in front of a yacht. The first two letters of the yacht's name appeared behind the people: HA. Maybe Hawaii? Pairs of initials had been hand printed alongside each of subjects. I assumed AF stood for Angus Ferguson. There is no way I could recognize him. The picture must have been taken 50 or more years ago. I removed both photos from their frames and looked at their backs. There was nothing written on them. All they said was Kodak paper.

The large, two-level, glass-doored cabinet of rifles and shotguns was not a surprising find in a woodland camp. The presence of two assault weapons in it was. I moved to the second piece, a highboy of drawers of varying depth. The highest and the one below it contained a variety of handguns. Some were older revolvers, most were semi-automatics. I gingerly picked up one, then a second. Both were fully loaded.

Except for the bottom drawer, the rest of the cabinet contained ammunition, holsters, and cleaning tools. The bottom drawer, the deepest, was nearly filled with letters, address books, notebooks and what looked like journals or diaries. I was tempted to settle on to the floor and begin reading. The first two letters I grabbed were written in French, the third in what looked like Russian. It was the same with the journals. No linguist, I moved to the third cabinet.

In the top drawer were architectural drawings, schematics and sketches. The drawings on top seemed to be for the building I was in and the barn. The next drawer was not nearly so full. On one side were vehicle titles and transfers; on the other side were tax and historical documents related to the property.

The next drawer had my heart pounding once again. It contained layers of velvet trays holding gemstones: diamonds, emeralds and rubies. All cut but none in settings. Hundreds of them. Tiffany himself would be envious. I was stupefied.

Finding more greenbacks in the two bottom drawers was almost anticlimactic. I was already overwhelmed.

After a few staggering minutes I called out: "Julia? Are you listening?"

Her reply came immediately: "I am."

I began to engage her in conversation. It quickly became clear that she was far more than a sophisticated security system. She had an advanced level of artificial intelligence that I had only seen in movies. She was downright scary. I began to question her about her identity, capabilities and functions.

She called herself an "Angus Model 7," the successor to an "Angus Model 6," named Uncle Andy. Uncle Andy manages the garage and its activities. The garage, she said, contains vehicles on the first floor and Angus' workshop on the second. I asked if I could see inside the garage and she said I could. Her monitor broke into two sections. One showed a variety of vehicles, the other a well-lit, elaborate array that looked more like a laboratory than a tinkerer's shop.

I asked her what would happen if she had a malfunction. She said she routinely runs system diagnoses on herself and all the camp sub-systems. She

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said that her clone and replacement parts are in the utility room. She said the camp is fully independent: the camp and its state-of-the-art systems are entirely “off the grid.”

Was Scottie a survivalist? A paranoid schizophrenic? I surely did not know. The one thing I was certain about was that Angus “Scottie” Ferguson was a man of achievement and mystery, and I was almost certain that more mysteries were to come. In essence, he had told me just that.

At the end of my dialogue with Julia I made a facetious reference to Star Trek. I asked if she had a “Prime Directive.” To my surprise, she said she had four. I asked her to state them. She replied: “1) Obey the commands of Angus Ferguson; 2) Protect the Property; 3) Avoid detection; and 4) Obey the commands of Christopher St. James.”

No doubt the last had been recently added.

I had lost track of the time. More than two hours had passed. I asked Gretchen if she wanted to go out. She had clambered on to the sofa and was more-or-less asleep. Her tail twitched when I spoke to her; otherwise, she made no effort to move. Afternoon naps were her specialty.

I made a decision. “Julia? Can you make a phone call? I would like to speak with J. Pierpoint Wadsworth, Sr.” Before I could tell her the number, it popped up on the monitor.

I told Pierpoint that I was calling from the camp. I told him about the DVD. He said he had a copy and had viewed it. He didn’t directly mention the wealth Angus had talked about, but he reiterated that everything in the camp is mine. I told him I had found some documents that I didn’t comprehend (a vast understatement). He also advised that I should hire an attorney so there would be no conflict of interests.

He then said the estate would take time to go through probate. “We are talking about an *estate* worth at least a billion dollars. I emphasize estate because I don’t know how much Angus gave you, squirreled away or whatever. And I don’t need to know. I was his attorney for nearly forty years but I can’t say I really knew him. I know almost nothing about his early years. He was truly a man of secrecy. Perhaps you will learn more about him.”

Pierpoint said Scottie had bequeathed a portion of his estate to a grandchild, but Pierpoint’s people had been unable to locate her. There would be the heavy estate taxes and any challenges brought by other family or third parties. The extent of Angus’ family was unclear. Another portion of the holdings was to go to employees. A third portion was to go the Magnus Foundation, which Angus had begun funding five years earlier.

A single bequest was to *me* with a specific caveat. The bequest was the ownership of Auracle Media, which Angus had acquired only a year ago. The caveat was that I would be willing to head the Magnus Foundation. Since these and other holdings would require management during the interval before probate, a judge's order would be required to assume leadership.

I ended the conversation knowing I had acquired even more wealth and more responsibility, but I had learned very little more about my benefactor.

I felt very alone and isolated. Mom and Dad were the last of their generation and they were gone. My one sister had preceded them. No one had heard from my older brother in many years. The last time Dad knew his whereabouts was when Mom was near death. He called from some place in the Middle East. When I had settled Dad's estate his share was set aside.

I had never been a social magnet, but I had had some good, close friends over the years. My best friend from Cherry Ridge had died in a useless war. My service friends had scattered like my college friends that followed. And then, when my erstwhile marriage ended I had gone into a sustained funk that effectively cut me off from whatever social network I had.

At present, the best I could say is that I had good relations with my professional acquaintances, but I didn't hang out with or confide in any of them. There was only Gretchen. It would be fair for an objective person to say I was a depressed but functional loner. I decided that had to change, but now the prospect of doing so was muddled by the money. How could I know another's friendliness wouldn't be based on my wealth?

I asked Julia to call Maggie, a decision that I guess had been brewing all along.

"St. James Policy Research," she answered, "How can I help you?"

"Hello, Maggie, it's Chris. It's good to hear your voice."

"Huh?" she said, "You hear my voice almost every day."

"Yeah, well, this is kind of a different day. A lot has happened."

"You okay, Boss? You sound, uh, different yourself."

"Maggie, I need a really big favor. I need your help. I need you to come out here to Cherry Ridge right away for two, maybe three days. I know it can be hard with your mom and all, but you will get a big bonus ... and a big raise, too. If you need someone to stay with your mom I will gladly pay for it. Trust me, this will be a good thing."

She didn't hesitate: "I trust you, Boss. Tonight might be hard. Is tomorrow morning soon enough? My brothers are still home from college. They can see to Mom, but I may have to rent a car. We're sharing mine right now."

Legacies of Cherry Ridge

“Rent yourself the best car you can, Maggie. I mean it; the sky’s the limit. Book a room in the Ridgeview Motor Inn. It’s decent. If it’s full try Milt’s Motel. Bring some hiking clothes and that nice new summer suit you wore the last time we had VIP’s in the office.”

“Okay, I can do that. You noticed the suit, huh? Will you keep your phone on? I’ll call you later, tonight, when I have things arranged, if that is okay.”

I said, “Definitely, Maggie, the phone is on and will stay on. We’ll talk later.” We ended the conversation there. She hadn’t asked me why I needed her to come. I guess she meant it when she said she trusted me.

I suddenly felt very tired. Despite the enticements of learning more about the place, about Julia, about the garage contents, all I wanted to do was get outside, get in the truck and return to reality. I left everything as it was except for the open bottle of Scotch. That came with me.

Reality was Ed Peck’s Sunoco station and the Cherry Ridge convenience store next to it. I gassed up. I picked up some food items. We returned to the apartment. I was feeding Gretchen her dinner when my cell phone rang. The call was from the Cherry Ridge PD. Could I come by the station in the morning and speak with Chief Broadhurst? We agreed upon 10 AM.

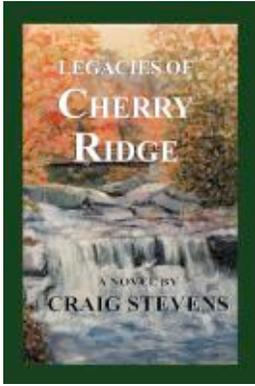
I was trying to divert my mind by watching Rachel Maddow on television when Maggie called. She said she had made the preparations. She wanted to know if I had talked with Vincent. I said no, but that I would get in touch with him in the morning. I told her I had a 10:00 AM appointment. I told her to call me when she got to town and to head for the Cherry Ridge Inn next to the library on Ridge Street.

She asked, “Is there anything else I should know, anything else I should bring along?”

I said it was too complicated for the phone and that I would fill her in the next day. She could bring along a camera if she had one handy.

She said: “You know your phone has a camera, don’t you?” then added: “Whatever is going on you sound really stressed and beat. You should get some sleep.”

I said that was my goal, right after taking Gretchen out for her evening walk.



Set largely in a decaying upstate New York village, this is the story of Christopher St. James, a depressed 39-year-old man without family who believes his only friend is his dog. His benefactor, mysterious billionaire Angus Ferguson, implores him "to be my redeemer." St. James's journey, accompanied by younger, troubled Meghan O'Connor, is fraught with the unexpected. Ferguson's legacy triggers two murders, a suicide, a violent assault, corruption...and a whimsical, old-fashioned romance.

Legacies of Cherry Ridge

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