

THE SONG OF
Jackass Creek

By Darby Lee Patterson

Bolton Road Publishing

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Acknowledgments

Without the great fortune of having lived in a forested hamlet near the grandeur of Yosemite National Park, this book would not have been written. The people, beliefs, and culture of a small town dependent on logging and mining for its existence were embedded in memory so fondly that I wanted to make it come to life again. The characters in my mystery tale are based on many people I came to know and admire during my years as a reporter and publisher in their community. Most of their names have been changed, but their personalities ring true. The events, of course, are completely fictionalized and solely the product of the writer's imagination. It's with appreciation to the town of North Fork, California, known by locals as "The exact geographic center of California," that this book is dedicated and to its diverse denizens who made it the unique mountain treasure I called home.

In the same vein, I intend for the story to impart the value of lifestyles and beliefs: from families embedded in the culture of forestry to the watchdogs of our environment, from Native Americans sentenced to life on marginalized 'rancherias' to the business owners, large and small, who sustain our small towns.

I am grateful to many people for their help and encouragement in making this book come to life. The late Ms. Mollie Burrows read a draft of the book and declared it, "Just as good as any of those you get at the bookstore!" I considered this high praise from an avid and very experienced reader of mysteries. I greatly benefitted from the help of graphic artist and long-time friend Hal Hammond who told me how awful my first cover design was and proceeded to fix it. My detail editor was my ever-encouraging husband, Randall Hagar, an exceptionally smart, handsome man. If you find any small errors in this edition, please hold him responsible. (Yes, I am joking.) The final version of this book was edited by twelve volunteer women readers from Curves Fitness who caught many small errors and few whoppers. They were a 'Village' of editors, and their input was invaluable.

Thank *you* for being a reader! Your comments and feedback and an Amazon review are sincerely appreciated.

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FOREWORD

I have always loved reading a good mystery, one with strong characters I grew to care about and a plot that drove me forward to the end with urgency. Then, somewhere over the last decade, many mystery adventures took a turn. They started focusing on graphic descriptions of deaths and gratuitous violence. Blood was dripping from the pages, body parts scattered, new and grotesque ways of killing were devised. I had a hard time finding mysteries that didn't force me to skip over many descriptive passages.

The Song of Jackass Creek is a return to that more gentle style of mystery writing. Yes, someone dies. After all, it is a murder mystery. But the spotlight is on the characters surrounding the event and the process of uncovering the guilty. If you'd like to be a voyeur in Redbud, population three hundred eighty-six, and get to know the characters who have made this hamlet their home; meet a big city transplant with a storied past and a young boy with big city dreams and follow the story as they tackle a crime that's anything but simple and straightforward, I think you'll enjoy *The Song of Jackass Creek*.

PRELUDE

Choker Anderson had been drinking since the afternoon whistle blew at the mill at five o'clock. The first hour, he'd put down several whiskey shooters and then moved on to a couple shots of tequila purchased for him by other guys from the mill who'd heard about the layoffs.

By nine p.m., he'd switched over to nursing a bottle of beer, figuring that if he didn't get home and tell his wife the bad news, she'd hear it from somebody else first and there'd be hell to pay. Choker wasn't alone. There were about a dozen other guys in the Silver Stag who'd heard they'd soon be out of a job. Each one of them had given years of labor to the sawmill and had families and homes in the tiny mountain community tucked in the folds of Northern California. They all knew there wasn't another job for them within a hundred miles, probably more.

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government dole.

Choker laughed and walked over to Hardesty. He laid his hand on the man's shoulder. "Well, my frien'," he said. "Looks like they got us again. Those folks from the city."

"Hey man, sorry about your job. I'm just waiting for the other shoe to fall," Hardesty answered, dropped his head and slowly rubbed the tip of his cue with a stub of chalk. "Heard they're gonna announce more layoffs in a couple of weeks. It's screwed man, really screwed." He squinted down the length of the cue, shot and dropped the ball in a side pocket. "It's a matter of time for us all."

Choker took another swallow of beer and leaned closer to Hardesty, whose family had worked at the mill for longer than anyone could remember. "You see what they're doin', don'cha? All those tree huggers from the cities pass their so-called environmental laws and they shut us down, chase us out. You know what's next, Hardesty? They come up here. Take over. Make bedroom towns. Sound familiar? Haven't your people been through this before?"

Hardesty picked up what was left of the chalk and worked it on his cue. He was thinking about an answer when suddenly chairs went flying away from one of the round tables that somebody quickly overturned to make room for the men who were shouting and squaring off to fight. Rita Mae, owner of the Stag, bolted from behind the bar holding a tire iron in her fist.

Choker assessed the situation through his alcoholic haze. It was young Birdsong and the Hazlett boy, drunk on their butts and ready to break up the place. Choker knew that Rita would handle it, no problem. He also knew it was definitely time to be moving on, before he did something stupid, like smash one of those city boys sipping imported beer at the bar smack in his clean-shaven face.

He walked out to the parking lot, looked over the tiny town, and then up at the sky. It was ablaze with stars, the kind you never get to see in the city. He swore out loud, crawled into his Ford F-150 pickup truck and headed home.

Choker and his family lived about fifteen miles from Redbud, five miles of which was dirt road that

meandered along Jackass Creek and led to his place. There were turnoffs to a smattering of other homes and to a popular camping spot that would be crowded with tourists in a few weeks with the coming of the annual Loggers' Jamboree. That's why the sight of someone walking along the pitch-black road didn't surprise him. Idiots from the flatlands were always doing something stupid. On closer examination, Choker realized he knew this particular idiot and, although he didn't like him one bit, he'd have to give the man a hand. It was a code in that part of the mountains.

"What the hell?" he said opening the passenger door from the inside. The man looked cautiously at Choker and clenched his fists nervously before stepping forward. Chris Lance had been one of the newcomers who was outspoken about environmental issues and had flat-out said that logging was a lost way of life and that the town had "better adapt or face extinction." This had not made Chris a favorite with the locals. Nonetheless, neighbors still put aside their differences – at least for the time – when there was trouble.

"I ... ahh ... guess I ran over something in the road and then I bounced into a rut. If you could help me out, I've got a spare." The young man seemed a little embarrassed by his predicament. Good, thought Choker. "No problem," he said. "Let's see how bad it's in there."

They rode in silence a short way, having little genuine to say to each other that wouldn't lead to a fight, especially in Choker's frame of mind. They rounded a bend and Chris pointed to a spot where the weeds had been crushed. "There, there it is," he directed. "Pull over anywhere."

Choker shut down the Ford and reached into the glove compartment for his flashlight. He joined the young man on the bank that overlooked Jackass Creek where spring thaws from the high country sent water rushing over granite rocks. The sound filled the night. The melody of the creek changed with the seasons and the weather. Choker had even noticed a difference between its voice in the night and day. In the dark, its tone seemed lower and more resonant, absorbing all around it.

Chris's compact pick-up had bounced into a depression of soft sand. No big deal, thought Choker. He returned to his truck and grabbed a length of chain. "I really appreciate this," Chris said. "I understand we don't agree about everything." He waited a moment. "And I heard about the layoffs today."

"Bad news travels fast, like they say." Choker really wasn't interested in conversation. "Though, I don't suspect you consider it bad news." He lowered himself under the rear axle of the small truck and wrapped the chain around it. Chris watched with his hands in his pockets. "It's not that I've got anything against you personally," the younger man said. "These are different times. If we don't protect our environment today, it won't be here for tomorrow. Species will become extinct."

"Yeah" Choker shot back, "species like me!" He continued to work at hitching up the two vehicles as fast as possible, wanting to get away from the jerk before his temper got the best of him. "Get in there and

steer.”

Chris did as told and with little effort, the F-150 pulled the small rig back onto the road. He craned his neck out the window. “Thanks a lot, can I give you something for your trouble?”

“Damn right,” Choker said, getting out of the pick-up to retrieve his heavy chain. “You can give me my life back. You and your friends from the city can take your flatland ideas back where they came from.”

Chris got out of the truck grabbing his tire iron and jack. “It’s easy to blame me,” he said. “But I’m not the one who’s destroying spotted owl habitat with a chainsaw. It’s too many years of logging without regard for the environment.”

Choker started seeing red. He wasn’t about to stand there in the dark on a dirt road and debate environmental policy with a snot-nosed kid he’d just pulled out of a ditch. “Don’t make me sorry I stopped,” he said and dropped down to unhook the chain from his truck. “I’ve been out there in the woods with those damn owls since before you were born. Don’t even start to give me no lecture about the environment.” In disgust, he dropped the heavy chain on the ground.

Now out of the ditch and more confident, Chris positioned a flashlight to focus on the flat tire. “This isn’t about you. This is about corporate greed. They don’t give a shit about the environmental future. All they want is to clear-cut trees and make money.”

Choker stood tall, in the dark resembling a bear. “Son, this operation has been owned by the same family for nearly a hundred years. You don’t have a clue what you’re talkin’ about. That family has given a paycheck to thousands of other families. They made jobs and a way of life that you and your kind just plain don’t understand! I’m going home before I say or do something that I’ll regret in the morning.” Choker crawled behind the wheel, locking his jaws like a vice grip.

“I appreciate the help,” Chris shouted again. “Especially since you’re apparently blaming me for your bad luck.”

Choker sat there for a moment thinking ... bad luck? Bad luck? The layoffs had nothing to do with luck and everything to do with people like him. Choker really wanted to teach this kid a lesson.

He started the big engine and gunned it for effect. He took a deep breath and headed slowly up the road, feeling his blood pressure rise. Even with a few drinks under his belt, he could make mincemeat of that green whiner. And, son-of-a-bitch, he’d left his chain back there on the ground.

1/ Mountain High

By the end of the week, all of Redbud had heard the news about the layoffs and a shadow fell over the town, despite the cloudless sky. The fate of the region was debated in the supermarket, the Christian bookstore, the pharmacy, the hardware store, the Silver Stag, and the post office, all of which lined the main street of town and accounted for more than half of the retail services available. There was also an antique and gift shop, a beauty salon, a well-stocked DVD store, pizza parlor and the lone cafe, each located on abbreviated roads off Main Street that, at a time of optimism, had been the start of more development.

Jesse Kilgore was at the counter in the Eagle Eye Cafe, sipping his mug of steaming coffee and listening to the old-timers reminisce about the days when lumber was like gold to the people who settled the rolling landscape. There had been no difference back then, between Indian and white. The mill needed workers and every muscled arm was employed. There was never great prosperity among mill workers and loggers, but families made a decent living. If the dollars never made them wealthy, the riches they drew from living among the ponderosa pines and cedar trees, breathing crystal clear air beneath a brilliant sky, more than compensated for limited wages.

Redbud did, of course, develop its own cadre of well-to-do. There were land developers, business owners, top brass from the lumber company, real estate agents, and others who grew wealthy on the strength of the lumbering industry and the town's natural beauty. Prior lay-offs at the mill had been short. Folks complained, but generally knew that work would come again.

This time was different. The tone of the early morning talk in the Eagle's Eye was dark, like a threatening cloud that promises more to come. Jesse kept an ear tuned to the conversation among the five men. The regulars were settled around the table that was unofficially reserved for the handful of old-timers. Their elbows were up on the table, rough hands clasped around mismatched mugs, and they leaned forward as if to keep their words quiet, although this was never the point. The men intended to have their conversations overheard and repeated around town throughout the day. Jesse liked them and was welcome to join them but preferred this morning to be objectively listening in his capacity as publisher of the local weekly newspaper.

Jesse noted that the news about the layoffs at the mill had energized the group, as if their expertise was needed now more than ever. Daisy, the waitress, owner, and occasional fry-cook at the Eagle's Eye, floated around the table pouring more hot coffee into waiting cups. She made no money at all on this convention of regulars but figured they were part of the local "color" and probably good PR for her place. Their ages ranged from sixty-something to well beyond eighty. Their memories reached back to the days when Redbud had been a wild and booming mill town with railroad tracks connecting to the valley city

sixty miles downhill. More than a century before, it had been gold that called men to the hills. Today, abandoned mines carved the landscape.

Down toward the far end of Main Street stood a log-constructed, two-story building that now housed a feed store, real estate office, Thompson's DVD Rental, and, upstairs, Jesse's newspaper, the *Timberline Times*. Sometime around the turn of the century, the same building had been a saloon with hospitality rooms upstairs. It stood perched on log posts and was best known as the Pole Building. Old Charlie, who was the unofficial spokesman for the Eagle's Eye's elders, would selectively take folks down to the Pole Building and show them a spot in the floor where a bullet was lodged.

He'd tell them how a burley logger caught his favorite saloon gal flirting with a miner who'd just struck gold and was scattering it like it was no more than a handful of acorns. Legend says the logger threw the drunken miner on the floor and pinned him down on his back. He put a six-gun to the man's chest and demanded to know where the mine was. In response, the miner spit at him. The logger shot him through the heart. That same bullet became Redbud's only historical site. The alleged mine was never found, though plenty of folks had tried and were still trying.

However, that day in the Eagle's Eye, the men were more concerned about the future than the past. Charlie took his hand off the cup and laid it flat on the table saying, "I tell you, this ain't at all like the other times. This just might be the beginning of the end."

The others chimed in with opinions about what should have been done, what could be done and then agreed that probably nothing would be done. Charlie nodded his head and leaned back once his point had been made. Jesse noticed that the old man's bulbous nose was a little bit redder than usual and figured Charlie had shared another night with the bottle.

Jesse stepped behind the counter and poured himself a second cup of coffee from the burner. Daisy brushed up against him and teasingly said, "Help yerself, why don't cha?"

Jesse smiled at her and thought quickly about how he'd changed. Back in L.A., it had been cappuccino, espresso, and lattes. Reporters in the newsroom even stored their own battery-operated coffee grinders and beans in a desk drawer. Here, Daisy just doubled the amount of Farmers Brothers Coffee to water. Instant dark roast, she claimed. Jesse put the stainless steel pot back on the warmer and slid back onto the stool, guessing where he'd be right now had he stayed in that fast-paced environment. If he were not six feet under, he'd be sipping stale coffee in the newsroom, worrying about how to beat the other metro paper to the day's top story, working fourteen to sixteen hours, and then meeting some buddies for drinks and a little dip into a gram of cocaine. Except Jesse knew he wouldn't have lasted this long. He'd be dead by now.

Instead, here he was, in the little cafe with dulled yellow walls and brown checkered curtains that hung over filmy windowpanes, being catered to by Daisy, a motherly round woman who liked to poke him in the solar plexus when he wasn't expecting it. Here, he was surrounded by plain folk who rolled their shirtsleeves up to work and had hands as rough as #4 sandpaper, who had accepted him despite the fact that he'd come from Cali-fornia's Tower of Babel, Los Angeles.

His thoughts turned to the present, to how he would write the story of the new layoffs. Naturally, the metro paper down the hill would get it first. By the time the *Timberline* was out, the news would be days old. It was easy, however, for Jesse, a seasoned and award-winning journalist, to develop a new slant on the story that would keep the mountain communities talking for days.

Over the past five years, Jesse had come to cherish the Eagle's Eye coffee club and, as a writer, regarded them as tribal elders in a quickly disappearing American culture. They were a repository of local history harboring memories that would soon fade with their passing. No matter that a lot of what they said had been said before, or that they had a gift for exaggeration. Here and there were fleeting moments of unintended wisdom.

Charlie, the long retired tree faller with his melon belly, was usually in the company of Flip, who was the long and lanky shadow of Charlie. He was a little introverted and none too bright, but a bona fide member of the unofficial city council. One talked, the other listened, and they both enjoyed a little Wild Turkey now and again. There was old Mr. Merryweather who opened the first real grocery market in town and retired a wealthy man. He could be counted on for an ultra-conservative statement on any and all topics.

Then there was Paul, a white-bearded man of unknown age, who had lived in the woods, off the land, for much of his life. He was an itinerant silversmith by trade, and said little, but what he said deserved listening ears. Jesse suspected the man had a secret past that included an advanced education that Paul clearly didn't want known. Three or four other regulars rotated around the table, each adding to the council of the Eagle Eye.

"What's happening here," pronounced Charlie, "is an extinction. Just like them dinosaurs. You see, the time has come when there won't be no more mills. The city folk who run everything will turn it into their personal playground. Wait and see."

Flip said "yep," and the others shook their heads in agreement or plain disgust at the state of things. Mr. Merryweather cleared his throat, and the men looked his way.

"That's the truth. And it's all because them damn liberals cozy up with those tree huggers. Ain't one of them environmentalists would last overnight in these mountains. They'd die of fright before they had a chance to freeze to death and go peacefully. That's the end of this economy," he added for good measure.

The conversation spun around that premise and captured the attention of the other people in the little café. Soon, the dimly lit room was vibrating with opinions and Jesse made a few notes for himself on a paper napkin.

Daisy saw him out of the corner of her eye and brought him a few more napkins. She calculated she was the only one who knew what Jesse was doing and the thought made her smile. She figured it was about time she made the Chicken and Dumplin' special again. It was Jesse's favorite and, though the man was young enough to be her son, he was sure easy on the eyes. And how he tightened that belly up every time she gave him a poke!

The debate rose and fell with Charlie instigating more when the talk threatened to mellow. Herb from the two-pump gas station had joined the gathering, warning Charlie to take it easy and not get his blood pressure up, when young Andy Winter burst through the door, wild-eyed and panting.

Chapter 2

Andy spoke with the soprano voice of an eleven-year-old boy on an urgent mission, "The sheriff here? Any deputies? You seen Herb anywhere? He ain't at the shop."

"Do you see any deputies here?" Daisy asked, hands on her hips. "Calm down, Andy. And, aren't you supposed to be in school?" Daisy knew the boy's habit of skipping school. He spotted Herb at the table and rushed over to him.

Andy was huffing as if he'd run for miles and, though he was an excitable kid, looked nearly panicked. Sensing this, all eyes turned toward the lanky, redheaded boy who was heading toward Jesse. "Mr. Kilgore, you the newspaperman. You gotta help me!"

Charlie decided the situation called for someone to take charge. He signaled to Andy. "Here, boy. Set here. I'll buy you a cup of coffee, and you tell us what's up."

Daisy cringed at the offer of coffee to an eleven-year-old, especially her coffee.

"I cain't, Mr. Charlie. I just seen somethin' awful up at Jackass Creek. Something I can't hardly describe."

Jesse walked over to the boy and joined him at the elder's table. Daisy put a glass of orange juice in front of the boy who ignored it. He turned his head to Jesse and blurted out, "It were hands I saw. Right there in the creek, lodged up against a rock. Two hands and they weren't connected to no body! My God, my Ma's gonna kill me."

The men looked at each other and raised their eyebrows in skepticism, knowing Andy's propensity for tale-telling and his infamously negligent mother. Jesse focused on the boy. "Exactly where were you

when you saw this Andy?" he asked.

"'Bout two miles off the turn, I was. Just hidin' out 'cause I didn't want to go to school." He looked around the table for understanding of how impossible school was. "Don't tell Ma, please! She'll get me good if she finds out."

"Just take a breath. Tell me exactly where you were and what you saw," Jesse encouraged. "That's-a-boy, just close your eyes and picture it like it was."

"Yes sir, Mr. Kilgore," And his green eyes shut, barely-there eyebrows creased in concentration.

Recalling details had never been one of Andy's strong suits. "Well, I think I was just walkin' long side the road by Jackass, not doin' nuthin', when I came on to this lil' truck sittin' kinda catty-wampus. I looked inside and seen the keys was there. I thought maybe he went down to the creek to fish or somethin' and forgot em'. I figured that since we got so many flatlanders up here with their crime and stuff, I better find him. No disrespect intended, Mr. Kilgore."

"Just go on, boy," Charlie coached, as Jesse acknowledged the exception.

"I looked around a little to see which direction a person might have headed. I saw some tracks leadin' straight down the bank – not a easy way to get there, ya know? Covered with poison oak. I hate that stuff. Once, my Ma"

"Get back to the subject, Andy," Herb urged knowing how easy it was for the boy to drift like a leaf on a stream.

"Oh yeah, sorry. I was just bein' back there like Mr. Kilgore said. I go down the slope bein' real careful not to touch that stuff. I hollered for somebody a coupla' times. The creek is runnin' pretty good and you can't hear much. So, I went down to the water, lookin' for a rock or sumpthin' to do. That's when I seen these white things waggin' up and down underwater between these two boulders. I waded in a ways, and Hell's Bells, it was a hand. A hand with its fingers flapping up and down at me like it was wavin'. Well, I'll tell you I moved outta there faster than a danged hummin' bird. I run all the way to town and realized I couldn't very well go home, so's I came here. Did I do the right thing, Mr. Herb?"

"You sure did, son," said the distinguished old man who was Redbud's closest thing to a gentleman. "What do you think about that, Jesse? Wouldn't that make your front page?"

Jesse realized no one had taken Andy seriously. The child had gotten darn good at telling tales, due to the regular need for making excuses for not being at school. However, the vivid picture the boy had painted, and the fact that Andy had begun scratching his forearm, made Jesse pause and look the boy in his bright green eyes.

"That's quite a story, Andy," he said gently. "And since it looks like you got a case of poison oak going

and wouldn't want to spread it around in school, I'd like to take a ride up to that place and have you show me what you saw." Andy was clearly pleased. Not only had somebody important believed him, but he now had an official excuse for his absence from school.

"Sure, Mr. Kilgore, I can do that," Andy replied, scratching the tiny bumps on his arm faster. The poison oak was beginning to swell into red blotches.

"Sure, he can," Charlie laughed. "Any dang thing but go to school or go home and get the belt!" The other men shook their heads and chuckled at the pair heading out the door. Andy had told many a tale in his eleven years, but this was one of the best. The whole town knew about Andy. Jesse, a newcomer with just five years under his belt as a local, hadn't caught on to the boy yet. But, Jesse was a keeper, they'd decided. Let him indulge the boy.

The pair headed toward the door and Charlie sent them off with, "Hey, Jesse, can you give me a hand later?" The bell on the door tinkled to the sound of laughter as it closed.

Andy had always done poorly in school and was consequently in trouble nearly every day. He didn't mean to make trouble but couldn't do the work and found other places to express his creative energy – like scribbling cartoons on the top of his desk when he was supposed to be reading. The child had found that he much preferred to spend his time with Herb at the gas station. Herb showed him how to make paper airplanes, which pleased Andy because he was very good at it. They also talked about old cars and engines. Andy was learning to love the feel of grease and fear the texture of the printed page. Needless to say, he'd never read one page of Jesse's newspaper but knew the publisher was somebody of note in Redbud.

They drove quickly to the turnoff from the paved road and onto dirt, bouncing over gravel and potholes as Andy pointed the way. But, the truck wasn't hard to locate and Andy breathed an audible sigh of relief, as if he'd begun to doubt himself. Jesse shut down the engine of the Wrangler. "It's right down that bank, Mr. Kilgore," Andy said, pointing to a place where the brush and grass had obviously been disturbed.

"Andy, I'd like you to stay in the car," Jesse said, realizing that the boy would feel cheated out of an adventure. "I wouldn't want anybody to come along and mess with the truck. Could be evidence. Okay?"

Andy wasn't totally convinced, but then considered looking at those hands again. "You bet, Mr. Kilgore. I'll keep an eye on it."

Jesse heard the automatic door locks engage and gave the boy a thumbs-up. The kid was actually scared.

Jesse first went over to the little pick-up. Right away, he saw the flat tire and tools lying on the ground. Then he noticed what from a distance looked like rust all over the truck's fender and hood. After years on the crime beat, Jesse knew blood when he saw it. He stood silently for a moment and then reached to his

belt and activated his cell phone. He punched in the number of the sheriff's office but didn't send the call.

The sound of the creek was constant, with highs and lows and ever-changing rhythms, like a tonal drum. Birds cried out their morning calls and Jesse walked over to the crushed trail. He would be careful not to disturb the scene, although he knew that if local law enforcement had to be called, most of the deputies wouldn't be so cautious.

He walked down to the creek alongside the grass that had been flattened, his eyes scanning the area, ears attuned to invasive sounds. The grasses had not just been walked upon, but crushed. At the edge of the bank, where the roar of the creek drowned out all else, Jesse spotted the rocks that Andy had spoken about. He carefully stood on top of a smooth granite boulder that thrust out over the rushing water. There, lodged between the rock and a partially submerged tree branch was the sight that had sent the young boy running for the company of men. The hand was as he had described, flapping with the motion of the clear water, blue-white sentinels seemingly disconnected from anything else.

Jesse punched the "send" button on his cell phone and asked for Sheriff Blair. The scene looked grim and he didn't want a band of cowboys pouncing on it. After briefly describing the discovery and the need for the sheriff to arrive first, Jesse signed off and worked his way along the bank for a closer look. He wasn't ready for what he found. The hand was not, as Andy had described, unattached. The body lay partially submerged, hidden by the outcropping and trapped by the branch.

Jesse had seen a lot in his days as a metropolitan reporter: shootings, stabbings, beatings, strangulations. But the sight of what had once been Chris Lance made him take a deep breath. The water had flushed the blood away from the body that undulated with the movement of the water, leaving gaping gashes of pale pink flesh. It was clearly a brutal beating made macabre by the lack of blood. Despite the damage, Jesse recognized him as the young man he'd recently interviewed at some length for a newspaper story on the timber wars. Once accustomed to the sight, Jesse looked closer and then surveyed the surrounding area. It was good, he thought, that Andy had bolted when he had. It would not be healthy for an eleven-year-old to live with an image such as this.

As he turned to leave, Jesse nearly stepped on the boy who stood transfixed behind him. Jesse took Andy by the shoulders and turned him around. "Thought I told you to stay in the Wrangler."

"I... I... got scared..." Andy stammered. "I kept seein' those fingers..."

Jesse guided him back up the bank, avoiding the trail where Chris Lance's body had likely been dragged. "Well, now you've seen a lot more than fingers," he said. "Pretty bad, huh, pal?" He could feel the boy's body shaking under his hands. It was important to get him to talk.

"I never seen nobody dead before," Andy said.

"I hope you never do, again," Jesse offered. "It's never a pretty sight. This one was about as bad as it

gets.”

“It was that guy, from them enviros, wasn’t it?” Andy asked. “I seen his truck in town.”

“Looks like it to me,” Jesse answered. “Know him?”

“Naw, I stay away from the flatlanders,” Andy declared.

Well, that’s at least something, Jesse thought. It would have been much worse had the boy been acquainted with what was now a grotesque dead body. “We need to wait for Sheriff Blair,” Jesse said. “Keep the crime scene secure.”

This got Andy’s attention. “Yeah, make sure nobody messes with it, huh? I seen that on TV once. You done this before Mr. Kilgore?”

“When I was a reporter in the big city, Andy. I worked with the police pretty often. I got to know a lot about crime.”

“What will they look for?”

With Andy’s curiosity piqued, Jesse hunched on his knees and pointed to tire marks that had crushed the weeds. Andy mimicked the posture. Andy pointed to broken branches leading down to the stream and talked about evidence gathering, securing a crime scene. It was a healthier conversation, Jesse figured, than trying to explain the dead body in the creek. It filled up the twenty minutes before they heard the sound of sirens and saw the clouds of dust rise on the dirt road. The sheriff pulled in first, followed by two deputies in a four-wheel drive vehicle. Sheriff Blair wedged his way out of a dusty sedan that he found decidedly uncomfortable. A well-meaning man with a taste for meat and potatoes, the sheriff had packed on the pounds driving the endless labyrinth of mountain roads. He directed the men in the second car to remain inside and approached Jesse.

“You better come with me, Jesse,” the sheriff said. “And, boy, you just stay put.”

“Yes sir, I wouldn’t want to be disturbin’ any evidence,” Andy responded.

Creekside, Jesse confided his concerns about the department’s expertise in gathering evidence and keeping it secure.

“Well, that’s why I brought the coroner and my two best men,” the sheriff answered with only a trifle of defensiveness. “I know some of the boys get a little over-enthused. I got no training budget, Jesse. Why don’t you put that in your paper?”

The sheriff and his men went to work, one of the “men” being a woman deputy. Jesse remained at the scene while the search took place, but kept Andy away from the water. The boy seemed captivated by the whole crime scene process and sat on the hood of the Wrangler taking it all in. Finally, the sheriff called for the department’s van to take away the body. Jesse decided Andy did not need to witness this and he

packed the boy up for the ride home.

“Are you doin’ all right?” Jesse asked the boy, whose face was flush red with excitement.

“I’m fine. I’m doin’ just fine, Mr. Kilgore,” he answered. “Mr. Kilgore, what would it take to be one of those people who comes to those crime scenes and looks for clues?”

Knowing this was not the answer that Andy wanted to hear, Jesse said; “It’d take a guy going to school and learning enough about science. It’d even take going to college if he wanted to be an expert.”

Andy was silent for a moment and looked at Jesse with the first smile he’d managed all day. “Well, I sure do got one heck-of-a excuse for not bein’ there today, don’t I, Mr. Kilgore?”

3/ Headline News

By mid-day, there was talk of little else in Redbud and the smattering of resort communities that surrounded it. The murder of Chris Lance, a twenty-four-year-old environmental activist, traveled word-of-mouth like a September wildfire. The facts suffered many twists and turns as the story meandered through the ponderosas. The body had been headless, handless, people said. The news even eclipsed the lay-offs at the mill, at least for the afternoon.

Jesse dropped Andy off at the trailer where he lived with his mother. It was noon and the woman was just getting out of bed. She was, Jesse thought, the very picture of the western euphemism “rode hard and put away wet.” Jesse explained that the boy had made a grim discovery on his his way to school and done the right thing by notifying the nearest adults. Jesse could almost hear an audible sigh of relief from the youngster. It was rumored that when Andy’s mom got high, she got mean. The boy had come to school with some pretty nasty welts, the fellows at the Eagle Eye had said. They felt sorry for the boy and now Jesse knew why.

“The police might want to talk to Andy some more. So, if it’s all right with you, I may be back to get him later on,” Jesse said, sensing that home seemed to hold little comfort for the eleven-year-old. Andy’s mother, who had introduced herself as Marsha, said she would be off to work at three in the afternoon anyway.

“Go wash that dirty little face of yours,” she barked at her son and then eyed Jesse up and down. Marsha appeared to be in her forties, though it was possible she was younger. She brushed her harsh blonde hair back with her hand once she had established that Jesse was, indeed, “good-looking.” Years ago, Marsha had been attractive, but her face now told a story of decades of cigarettes and long, hard-lived nights. Dark circles fell in half-moons beneath her eyes, which were green like Andy’s, but without the sparkle. She had

a provocative way of sliding her hands up and down her hips as she talked.

Having been around long enough to immediately read that kind of body language, Jesse excused himself and headed back to the scene at the creek. He'd called the newspaper's one photographer – Skipper Bell, who was best at taking sports photos – and told him to meet him at the murder scene. As Jesse swung the Wrangler around, he felt a knot in the pit of his stomach. He was having a hard time turning his back on Andy.

The road leading to the crime scene had become an armed camp. Deputies and volunteers with the department set up a roadblock to keep the curious out. Unfortunately, that appeared to include a reporter and photographer from the daily newspaper far down in the valley. Jesse pulled up and joined the debate.

“Deputy Strunk, what seems to be the problem?” Jesse asked, nodding to the daily's reporter whom he knew casually.

“Sheriff Blair told me that nobody, but nobody, but locals that live back here get on this road. Them and law enforcement,” Strunk said jutting out his square jaw. “Now, I don't suppose that means you, since you found the body and all, but this fella is from the city!” Strunk said “city” as if it were a curse word.

“I'm sure the sheriff would appreciate you following his orders,” Jesse said, “but I think you better let these reporters pass or there could be some trouble.”

“Trouble?”

“Yeah, Deputy Strunk, these fellas from the papers won't be the only reporters up here. I wouldn't be surprised if one or two of the TV stations from the valley didn't roll up pretty soon. It's customary to give the press access to places that you wouldn't want the general public to go. Some of that access is even in the Constitution, if I recall.”

“You vouch for these guys?” Strunk asked suspiciously.

“I will,” Jesse said. “And once we get back there, I'll have the sheriff radio you about the rest of them.”

Jesse nodded to the pair from the daily. The reporter was shaking his head. “There's nothing like these small town cops,” the reporter said. “Buncha cowboys throwing their weight around. Thanks, anyway. It avoided a hassle.”

“No problem,” Jesse said, recalling the days when he would have put roadblocks in front of the competition rather than open the door on a good story. But then, he wasn't in competition with a major daily newspaper. Jesse ran a weekly paper and they weren't in the same league. “I'd rather have you get it and get it right, than deal with the sensational stuff the TV guys will be doing. Let me know if I can help.”

“Didn't the cop say that you found the body?” the astute reporter asked.

“He did, but he was mistaken. A young boy found the body,” Jesse said, and saw an opportunity to get

Andy out of the trailer. "Tell you what, let's go back to the scene and do some work. Then, I'll go get the boy and meet you at my office. Say, in a couple of hours?"

"Address?"

"You won't need one. First log building on the right at the end of Main Street."

Unused to such cooperation from a competitor, the reporter said effusive thank you's, hopped in his four-wheel drive and followed Jesse down the road.

A tow truck had arrived to pull Chris Lance's truck to the yard where it might, or might not, get further analysis. Jesse wondered how thoroughly the pick-up had been dusted for prints. The sheriff was more than a little disgusted when Jesse told him about the snafu with the "Valley Sun" reporter. That's all he needed, bad press. He scurried over to the pair and apologized, trying to explain that some of his people weren't accustomed to dealing with events that attracted the big city press. Out of earshot, he quickly radioed Strunk and barked, "I didn't mean the press, deputy! You let them in and be polite about doing it! Draw them a damn map in the dirt!"

"But there's only one road in," Strunk whined.

"Do it anyway," the sheriff commanded.

It took a lot to get the major media up the hill. It wasn't as if Redbud held any real interest. There were no casinos. The local Indians didn't qualify for one yet. Nor was there skiing or nightlife. It was just a long and winding road to a sleepy little logging town. Reporters had been up for the first big environmental demonstration when there had been a fracas between the enviros and a handful of angry loggers. In the five years Jesse had been on the hill, that was the only other time that big city reporters had found the town newsworthy. The sheriff came up to his side.

"I hate talkin' to these guys. They always make us look bad." Just then, two trucks with cameras and remote broadcast equipment rolled up, driving too fast and sending billows of dust into the air. Skipper pulled up just after them, with the same effect.

"This is a crime scene," the sheriff hollered. "Take it easy!" He turned to Jesse. "Guess that's not a good start."

Skipper fumbled with his cameras and bag and scuttled over to Jesse. "What do you want?" he asked anxiously. He'd never shot anything like this before, and his pale complexion (complete with freckles) flushed red with excitement. Jesse instructed him to get a photo of the pick-up being pulled away and the deputies combing the creek side. He also suggested that Skipper get a shot of Deputy Strunk at the roadblock, for goodwill, if nothing else.

Jesse stayed in the background, leaning against a tree and listening. The creek had changed its tone.

It sounded busy, anxious.

He turned his attention to two deputies working as a team. Jesse knew one of them by reputation. His name was Fred Gorrington. Locals avoided him in general and the hometown Indians treated him like a one-man, white man plague. Gorrington was tough on everyone, but particularly hard on the Tomahs. There were rumors of beatings when an arrest wasn't possible. But no one filed any complaints, least of all a Tomah. The other deputy was young, a newcomer to the small force charged with policing a vast rural area. The mountainous county covered more than three thousand square miles, much of it unpaved roads that surrounded a handful of villages. There were two resort communities on the edge of a lake about fifteen miles from Redbud. That's where most of the action happened, particularly on weekend nights. Sheriff Blair had only twenty-eight men (including the "man" who was a woman) to police the entire area. All the communities, including Redbud, were on the lovely skirt tails of magnificent Yosemite National Park.

Gorrington's voice escalated. "Damn, Rose. You know who this is gonna get pinned on? Do you know?"

Deputy Rose just looked at him, waiting for him to answer his own question.

"This is gonna get blamed on a logger," Gorrington stated. "Just look at it. There's layoffs at the mill because of those new federal regulations. Those regulations are there because of people like this young buck that got hisself killed. Now, who do you think will get the blame?" he asked, having already stated the answer.

"I guess that's a possibility," Deputy Rose admitted. "But it's a little early to be deciding who's innocent and who's guilty, isn't it?"

"What? What are you sayin'?" Gorrington demanded. "I know each and every one of those guys at the mill and out in the woods. There's not a one of them that would do this. They hate those greens, and with good reason. But they wouldn't do that, not beat the hell outta some guy until he looked like pulp! No, this was the work of somebody crazy. Maybe crazy with firewater, the way some of those Tomahs can get."

Deputy Rose turned her head and rolled her eyes. Jesse saw that she was struggling to control herself in the face of Gorrington's opinions. He could also see the directions the rumors could take. In a small town already divided, there was trouble ahead and, with minds like Gorrington's on the job, regard for the truth and solid evidence would be at a premium.

Jesse herded his photographer around, pointing out possible angles for interesting shots. Skipper wasn't used to taking pictures of anything that wasn't running for a field goal or jumping for a basket. By 3:15, Jesse was back at Andy's trailer, deliberately timing his arrival to avoid the hot gaze of Andy's mother. They drove back to town in silence. Andy seemed to have lost some of his excitement for the day.

“Did you get in trouble for missing school?” Jesse asked.

“Naw, my Mom was mad, that’s all.”

“Mad about what?”

“She didn’t like me coming back home with you.”

“How come?”

“Cause she hadn’t put her makeup on yet,” Andy said. “It doesn’t take a whole lot to get my mom mad. I’m glad she’s at work. Hope she works all night.”

“But you’d be alone,” Jesse said.

“So what? I know how to be alone. I like to be alone.” Andy turned his face to the passenger window and looked out. He was quiet for a while. “The sheriff gonna talk to me? Am I gonna get in trouble?”

“The sheriff will want to talk to you; that’s right. You won’t get in any trouble ‘cause you didn’t do anything wrong, except for skip school. And then a big city newspaper reporter is going to want to talk to you, too.”

“Me?” This seemed to frighten Andy more than the idea of a talk with the sheriff.

“You were the one who found the body, young man. Could be the TV will want to talk with you, too. Don’t worry. I’ll be right by you.” Jesse saw the boy perk up a little at the thought of being important. This was one reason he’d made the suggestion. Seeing a body like Andy had that morning would be disturbing to any normal adult. It was true that Andy had rallied and been distracted by the police action. But Jesse was worried the vision might come back and haunt his young mind. Andy seemed like a pretty practical fellow, but he was so young.

“Will I be on the TV?”

“Maybe,” Jesse said. He wanted the boy to talk more about what had happened and who better to talk to than someone with a camera hoisted on his shoulder? They bounced across the dirt drive and onto the main road. Andy clearly liked to ride in the Wrangler. The wind tossed the boy’s hair like little flames and Jesse hoped it might also blow away some memories.

The *Timberline Times* office occupied the floor above what had once been an infamous saloon. Small rooms for entertaining the physical appetites and thirsts of rugged men from the mines and lumber mills had been remodeled into one large room with a small kitchen area and bathroom facilities. Jesse’s desk was by a big double window that looked out on the mountainside. His desk was made from a solid slab of redwood cut somewhere around the turn of the century. All the furniture was wood, a symbolic gesture for Jesse, who wanted to leave behind all the trappings of his life in the city. No sleek metal and glass or signs of the twenty-first century, except for four desktop computers, printers, a couple of laptops, and the

necessary electronics to keep them all humming.

Jesse had hired a part-time writer and one person to electronically lay out the newspaper each week. Skipper, the photographer, came in on an as-needed basis. He also hired two sales-people to work the circulation area and a couple with a reliable truck for weekly delivery. The newspaper had a long history, although it had gone through many owners. The last had decided to turn the community publication into a shopper, filled with little more than classified and display ads. This angered the locals, who felt a loss. The new owner pointed out that the paper hadn't been important enough for people to subscribe to or for businesses to buy ads. Now, all of a sudden, he pointed out, it was the area's only lifeline! He stuck with his new program and offered free classified ads, hoping to attract display ads from the area's handful of grocery stores. He'd succeeded, but townspeople never forgave him for turning the mountain's only newspaper into a shopper.

When Jesse bought the paper, it was only a matter of a few weeks before the news format was back. He introduced electronic publishing but made few other concessions to modernity. The time-honored "gossip" column was resurrected, written by an older woman who knew every local happening without ever leaving her house. He published plenty of sports photos from the local high school, allowed area churches and clubs to publicize their events and – for a small town newspaper – did everything right. That's perhaps why, when it ordinarily took about twenty years for a 'transplant' to be accepted into local culture, Jesse's probation lasted only until folks believed their cherished newspaper was back to stay.

Jesse wrote many of the news items. His journalistic standards remained high, but the locals he'd hired were not trained reporters. It would be nearly impossible, he knew, to attract a professional writer to a newspaper with such low circulation and pay. Instead, he served as a mentor for the part-time young reporter he'd hired, editing her stories and then explaining why he'd made the changes. She was coming along.

Jesse and Andy arrived at the same time as the sheriff pulled up in his cruiser. Skipper was already at the office, downloading photos he'd shot at the crime scene and of the basketball game the night before.

"Andy, you'll need to tell the sheriff what you found this morning. Think you can do that?" Jesse shut off the motor and turned to the boy.

"If I gotta," Andy said. Most of his encounters with law enforcement had been pretty negative, having to do with his absence from school.

Jesse caught the sheriff's eye and nodded to him. "You could talk up there in my office, or I'll bet Sheriff Blair would let you sit in the car with him. You could monitor the calls on the radio and such. What do you think?"

Andy eyed the cruiser with its light bar across the top and gold star on the door. It was a temptation. “We gonna go for a ride?”

“Not just yet,” Jesse grinned. “I think I’ll go up to my office while you and the sheriff talk. But maybe, if you asked just right, the sheriff might arrange a ride-along one of these days.”

The pair walked over to the cruiser. The radio squawked and lit up like a string of flashing Christmas lights that reflected in Andy’s eyes.

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