

Dragons Don't Grow On Trees

By Greg Wagner

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To my loving wife Roberta, thank you for everything.

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Here be dragons...

Prelude

Once upon a time, a long, long, time ago...

Sunlight glinted off the clouds as an errant breeze buffeted against great leathery wings, and an impossibly large body followed in time with the heated thermals. Armor plated scales the size of houses and back spikes like giant redwoods, rising and falling minutely with each gust. While the wings did their part visually, swooping up and down at the great swathes of air, it was more the ancient dragon magic that kept the city-sized beast in flight.

I grow weary of running.

As one of the last of the great sky wyrms, it has been forced to witness over the eons, as its kind has been systematically eradicated. The humans fear the great dragons. They fear the fact that they are so big. They fear them because they don't understand them. Most of all they fear them because they are magical.

The time of the dragons is coming to an end. Mankind and logic are the rulers of the land now, and the ways of the ancients will soon be forgotten.

The hunters track mercilessly now, fearing the dragon's very existence in this plane. Soon it will be discovered and then will be forced to fight or be murdered, but either way it will die.

The great sky wyrm hears their war cries, but doesn't bother to turn around and look...it knows they're there.

Widening its wingspan, it strokes harder, pushing with what little strength remains of its tired old body. Climbing higher and higher, it slows and turns to look down on pursuit. The tiny specks spiraling below are humans riding the little fire drakes that they have captured and use as slaves. There are hundreds of

them this time, and while it feels remorse for its tiny brethren, the dragon's lot remains the same.

The great wyrm slows and makes a turn at this dizzying height. Lowering its head, it blows a mile long lance of flame down at them. The riders scatter and retreat, pausing only briefly to recover from the searing blast.

Though it will only delay the inevitable; the dragon shoots another blast down at them and then flies on.

There still remains one last chance of escape. The only problem is that it will probably kill me, and it still might not work.

The dragon slows to a hover now, summons its last bit of strength..., and disappears.

This is the hard part.

It hears the humans below again.

The fire drakes are like scent dogs, in that they can follow the sky wyrms between worlds, *but only so far*. The dragon disappears again, but this time it jumps again right away, before its pursuers reappear. As it slips into the new world, something strains inside, kind of like a pulled muscle, only of the magical sort, and the great sky wyrm falters. So weakened by the "world slipping" that it can barely stay conscious, the magic that kept the dragon in flight is now gone. Suddenly it is plummeting to the ground, wings flapping uselessly in the wind. The last thing it sees is forest, endless forest.

It hits the ground with a shock that rocks the countryside for miles around. The hills surrounding the impact site slide downward, partially covering the now twisted body. When the dust settles, the dragon realizes that it has escaped pursuit and is still alive, but just barely.

Relieved, it slowly drifts off to sleep...and dreams, for a long time.

Chapter 1 - New Beginnings

Barbie

“A doll like you ought to have guys beatin down your door.” Sam opined without preamble.

Oh sure, beating down the door, she thought, and then running for their lives.

“It’s not as simple as that Sam and you know it.”

The trip up from Charleston was less than an hour. Barbie Hollister thought that it was a fair enough tradeoff when she sat down and did the numbers. As a Certified Spiritual Guide (certification from the American Psychics Association - West Virginia Chapter) Barbie is considered a pretty hot commodity in the capitol city, mainly because as a psychic she *can actually communicate* with the spirit world, *unlike most of the posers out there.*

Today is settlement day for the new house she’s buying in the little town of Fenton and she doesn’t want to be late.

At last, I’m finally getting out of the big city and back to nature again.

“The way I see it you should already be shackled up with some big lug of a guy and making little you’s all over the place. What was wrong with the last guy? Brian? Bill?”

“BRENT,” Barbie spouted a little too defensively, but kept going because she was on a roll, “and if you knew anything at all about me, you’d know what was wrong with him.”

Buying this house is the second step in starting her new life.

The first was to ditch her latest loser boyfriend.

Brent La Fleur is the most recent in the long line of dysfunctional relationships that Barbie had the displeasure of participating in. Brent played the part of the tortured artist all too well. He was perpetually in between shows and sported a permanent sneer, that was part lip curl, part over bite, that he kept conspicuously covered with a sparse “Wolfman Jack” beard, that she swore sometimes had a life of its own.

She drove down the off ramp at the Clay/Wallback exit and turned onto Route 36. Off to the left she saw two signs attached to the back of an already over loaded speed limit sign. One was an ornately adorned wooden sign, that proclaimed to all the world that “Wallback Lake” was just a mile over the hill, while the other was black painted metal and stated plainly in big yellow letters that “Lake Sampson” was one mile on the left in the same direction.

Barbie shook her head and half listened to Sam go on.

“You would have never known there was any problem between you two, with the way you fawned over him all the time. *Oh*, Brent this and *oh* Brent that.”

Sam was right, she did fall pretty hard for Brent in the beginning.

When they first met, she was on the rebound from Bart the biker and feeling lonely. One particularly depressed night after work, she was out with some friends, when someone suggested they check out the promising new expressionist artist that was featured at the Rutner Street Gallery.

Barbie found Brent’s art dark and disturbing, with its deep shadows and strong lines. When introduced, he swept her off her feet instantly, and from that day on, he became a semi

permanent fixture on her couch, sometimes resisting even her best efforts at dislodging him.

The fact that he had a body that just wouldn't quit had a lot to do with it too, she smirked, but even she was forced to admit that it gets old after a while if there's nothing else there.

"And what makes you an expert all the sudden?" She shot back rubbing her forehead. She closed her eyes for just a second and then looked up quickly and grabbed the steering wheel hard to make the sharp corner at the carwash. Sam was starting to work on her nerves now but as always, she found it hard to block him out.

"I had my share back in the day," he said. "I know a thing or two, but I'm just saying you gotta keep perspective." Now she heard a note of hurt tingeing his voice. "Lust blinds all, ya know, even a hard case like me."

That was another thing she hoped moving to Fenton was going to change.

Growing up in rural West Virginia Barbie had quite a few issues, that the other kids didn't have to deal with. Most important of her issues was that she heard voices. Not the "Kill Kill" voices that your average psychopathic serial murderer hears. She could *actually* hear voices of people in her head, real people.

Of course, it didn't help that those people were dead...and that they had questions, lots of questions, all the time.

"What ever happened to our Oliver?"

"How did I get here? This doesn't look like heaven."

"Where's the bathroom?"

"Why doesn't anyone want to talk to me?" and on and on, constantly day and night.

Her parents were convinced she was crazy.

At first, they would play along, referring to the voices as Barbie's imaginary friends. Sometimes they would even have parties and pretend that they could hear the voices too. In the end, they just gave up and sent her to see a whole battery of psychiatrists, whose answer to the problem was to dose her up with whatever new psychoactive drug that the pharmaceutical reps were pushing at the time.

After way too many years of living in a constant involuntary doped up fog, Barbie finally just told everyone that the voices went away and that she didn't hear them anymore. This was partially true, mainly because by the time she'd reached puberty, she had learned to filter most of the voices out.

It was kind of like tuning a car radio.

On the dial, in between the voices and static, were little sections that weren't occupied by anything else. She found, that if she focused just right on those places, she could find some peace, at least until they found her again. Later on, she learned how to listen to and reason with the recently deceased, figuring that if she could help them, they would go away and leave her alone. This eventually led her down the path to becoming a free lance psychic.

Now she *did* have people beating down her door, but it was to talk to a deceased love one, or to know what was next in their life, or if they will ever find true love. Opening up her own shop and working "by appointment only" was the best move she ever made. It allowed her to schedule all of her clients for just a few days a week, thus freeing her schedule up for...well, anything she wanted to do, *if she could only figure out what that is.*

Sam of course is a different story.

Barbie considered Sam a tame poltergeist. A *very powerful and high maintenance, but a not too particularly malevolent spirit*, that has just enough power to possess someone as spiritually sensitive as Barbie. When Sam; AKA Hershel Smith was alive, he was a big time stock broker on Wall Street, who thought that he lost it all when the bubble burst in 2006 and the financial markets collapsed.

Immediately upon learning the news of the crash, he subsequently committed suicide, only to find as he lay dying, that in the very beginning he had put “sell *before they get below a certain point* orders” on the majority of his investments, leaving him and his fortune pretty much unscathed when everything hit the fan. The stress of this revelation as he lay dying, sent a shock wave through him, knocking something psychically, (and as far as Barbie was concerned) mentally loose.

Now for some reason he goes by the name of Sam Stone, an infamous, but otherwise unknown gumshoe detective, and while he stays in character most of the time, whenever he gets upset or nervous, he loses the “hardcase” persona and drops back to what could only be described as his default New York businessman’s accent.

As a “spirit at large,” when he’s not floating around in the aether, Sam spends most of his time channeling through Barbie. So that whenever he wants to talk, he just says what he has to say, *using her mouth of course*, and then fades back again, leaving her with the taste of stale cigarette smoke and gin. The only advantage is that he also works for her, helping her to find errant spirits for her clients.

She turned her car onto the Hartland Bridge, where Route 16 crosses the Elk River and meets up with Route 21 on the other side. Once across she turned off and gave her little car more gas to go up the long grade to the top of Middle Creek Ridge. From here Route 21 goes over the old coalfields through

Fenton and then on to Summersville, where it merges with and becomes one with Route 19.

The old Hartland Bridge used to be a rattletrap of iron girders and cement that was almost condemned at one point, except it was the only bridge on the main road connecting Clay to the rest of the southern West Virginia. The solution at the time, was to make it one lane and lower the weight limit. They finally replaced it last year with a new super highway style poured concrete span.

Route 21 otherwise known as Fenton Road, was one of those coal era compromises with the local municipalities that gave a little bit to everyone involved. Back in the 80's, the coal companies came up with a plan that would get them a whole bunch of new mountain top removal permits and in return, the counties would get a whole new roadway over the mountains. So now, instead of the curvy round and round, and up and down route that existed for years, the new road easily shaved twenty minutes off the trip from Clay to Summersville and in the process, made the town of Fenton what it is today.

Barbie reached the last rise before the drop and sharp left turn, leading into town. She pulled up in front of the lawyer's office and turned her car off.

"Now I don't want any funny stuff out of you while we're in here Sam."

After a few seconds with no indignant protests, she grew concerned.

"Sam?"

She closed her eyes and waited. *That's funny he usually isn't this quiet.*

"Ok, sulk if you want, just please, don't embarrass me in front of the town folk."

She crossed her fingers and got out of the car.

“THERE ISN’T MUCH TIME LEFT I TELL YOU. IT’S OUT THERE. I CAN FEEL IT. IT COULD HAPPEN AT ANY MINUTE!”

A crusty old man was standing in middle of the sidewalk dressed in rags, with a sandwich board sign draped over his skinny shoulders. The sign had writing on both sides that looked like a child had scrawled them. In big black lettering, it shouted THE END IS NEAR! When Barbie approached, the man stopped suddenly and stared at her. Just as she was almost passed him, he grabbed her arm and spun her around.

“You, you’re the one. You know!” He said pointing at her, spittle flying from his lips and his eyes getting wider with each word. “She knows. She can save us!” Now his arms flew wide and he prostrated himself on the ground in front of her. “Heaven help us all Lady, the end is coming!”

Barbie edged past the man in shock and hurried up the sidewalk away from him.

A steady headwind blowing down the main street gusseting Barbie as she made her way up the steps of the old building where the settlement lawyer made his offices. Late August and the temperature was still in the seventies, but the air had a snap of fall to it, that hinted of the colder months to come. An older man and woman were coming up the steps behind her, the woman’s hair was a honey grey colored and wispy, floating about her head like a wraith’s aura. Barbie stopped and held the door open so that they could amble on past.

The desk in the reception area was empty, so the three of them were left standing for a moment.

“I’m back here.” A tall scarecrow of man had stood up and was waving at them, from over a wood and glass partition.

“Sorry,” he said apologetically, “I had some last minute information I needed to get from the bank, should be ready in another five. Come on in and sit down.” The man’s eyes were warm and Barbie felt a shock as she took his hand and looked up. Wavy brown hair curled off his head at just about every angle. A small pair of round John Lennon glasses rested a little uneasily on the tip of his nose and he had a “two sizes too big for everything” air about his personality, as if he was trying too hard to fit into the less than accommodating world that he was thrown into.

“Nathanial Williams,” he smiled, “you can call me Nate.”

He turned to the older man and woman and gestured between the three of them. “Gladys and Clyde Lee, this is Barbie Hollister, the young lady from Charleston, who is buying your place.”

“Oh my,” the older woman said, taking Barbie’s hand in hers. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you. We’re so glad you’re buying the old place.” Clyde leaned in and added with a deep rumbling voice that betrayed his fragile ancient body. “Yeah, now I won’t have to cut the grass anymore.”

The previous owners seemed like nice people and they even made an offer of dinner when Barbie finally got moved in. According to Gladys, they now lived just over the hill from the old homestead, in a house they had built just a few years ago.

“When are you moving in dear?”

“I was planning on bringing the first load up today, as long as the weather cooperates.”

Shouts of “SHE KNOWS! SHE DOES! SHE CAN SAVE US, OH THANK THE HEAVENS, IT’S NOT TOO LATE!” interrupted the conversation and could be heard coming

from right outside the picture window in front of the office building.

Still feeling a little shaken by the old man's prophecies, Barbie asked the room in general. "Who is that man?"

Gladys looked toward the window nervously. "Oh," she said, followed by a meaningful pause, as she looked at her husband, "that's just Cletus, don't mind him, he used to be a preacher around here till a shelf full of bibles fell on his head." She said shaking her head solemnly.

"Yeah," Clyde added with just a hint of a smirk. "I guess you could say he was stuck by the truth." He sobered up when Gladys gave him a look, and then both of them finished with, "and he hasn't been the same since."

"He started that racket a couple of days ago," Nate grumbled without looking up from the HUD settlement statements, that he was in the process of filling out. "Not sure *what's* got him so fired up."

After settlement, Gladys and Clyde offered to walk Barbie her out to the car.

When they got to the street, Cletus was gone, his absence leaving the sidewalk with a distinct deserted feel.

"If you ever need anything just call us." Gladys said into Barbie's ear as she hugged her.

"Thank you, Gladys, Clyde, I will."

Chapter 2 - Some Things Never Change

Nate

Once settlement was over and everyone had left, Nate sat down at his desk and leaned back in the old wooden chair with a sense of satisfaction of another deal done and another check in the bank. His law practice of the last seven years running, has been consistent, if a little slow from time to time, depending on the going need for wills and property law in the small out of the way town of Fenton.

Nate pictured himself as the country lawyer, no criminal or divorce jobs for him, *too messy*. He preferred the more non-confrontational areas of the field, *less chance of getting shot*. He earned the majority of his law degree on a basketball scholarship, which was strange, given that he really didn't like the sport much, in spite of the fact that he was a born natural at it.

If you only had one word to describe Nate, "apprehensive" would just about cover all the bases. He was born with a perpetually concerned look on his face. It served him well growing up, because in addition to making him look older, it also made him look more intelligent, even if he really wasn't. The majority of that concerned look however was real. Concern for the environment, for the children, for the economy, concern over whether he should floss before or after brushing, and on and on. He would lay awake at night sweating over the implications.

His parents were hard core hippies, that moved to West Virginia with the "back to the land" movement of the sixties, and then stayed here, when in the late nineties, the majority of their contemporaries got old, turned conservative republican, and then became part of the "back to the city" movement. Fenton

strangely enough, realized one of the greatest “hippie” population boosts at this time, mainly due to its secluded nature and less intrusive atmosphere.

Nate really didn’t care too much for hippies.

Having grown up in the midst of two of the hippest hippies around, left him looking for, and wanting structure, that was curiously absent from his upbringing.

Being dubbed the sober one in the family, going to festivals and renaissance fairs always left Nate with a rather bad taste for the culture. Nate was the type of person that seriously believed it was possible to commune *too much* with nature.

Once, when he was fourteen, his parents took him to a Peace, Love and Harmony, Reunion Music Festival™. The three-day long music event was held on a huge farm up near Morgantown. A day of sun, music, and love was just what his father thought he needed, not to mention the trip more or less counted as credit towards Nate’s home schooling classes, which his father referred to as “Cultural Studies” at the time.

A few hours into the concert Nate had to go to the bathroom, so being the “grown up” that he thought he was at fourteen, and in spite of his mother’s mild protests, he ventured off alone. Somewhere in between the mud, the sea of people and the noise, it took Nate over an hour to get to the port-a-potties located on the other side of the field. When he finally did get there, a quarter mile long line awaited his near bursting bladder. Knowing his bladder wouldn’t wait, he followed a few of the people that he saw behind the restrooms, and went off into the woods in hopes of relieving himself. On his way into the woods and back out again, he had to walk through many unusually thick clouds of smoke, that were coming from somewhere close by.

The last thing Nate remembered, was watching music notes coming out of the speakers near the stage. His parents

eventually found him many hours later, in front of the snack bar sitting on the ground in a pile of empty nacho containers, gibbering to himself and smearing leftover processed cheese all over his body.

Even now, many years later, just the *thought* of a peace sign makes him twitch.

Nate likes his life now. It's safe, predictable, something that he could count on not to go changing on him while he isn't looking. Just the way it should be.

That was about to change.

He looked down at the floor where Miss Hollister had been sitting and noticed a small necklace, laying bunched up beside the table leg. He picked it up and held it up to the light. The locket was a faceted quartz crystal, with a tiny silver unicorn embedded in its center. He stuck the necklace in his pocket and made a mental note to drop by the old Lee place to return it.

Amanda

Amanda “Destiny Darkstar Amethyst” Wilson refiled her already sharp and pointed black fingernails. “Summer sucks,” she scowled at the light coming through the cave entrance, “it’s soo sunny, I can’t wait until winter, when everything’s dead, like it ought to be.” She sat perched on a rock the size of a Volkswagen, while her two friends Tiffany “Briallen Belladonna Trillium” and Justin “Lucien Astaroth Kithslayer” sat together on a low rock wall that ran the whole length of the short cave and looked bored.

Tiffany pulled idly at a particularly stressed out lock of her straw like black hair and asked the room in general. “Do you think my hair is dark enough?”

Amanda rolled her eyes. She hated to admit it, but she was jealous of both of her friends. Their parents let them do

whatever they wanted. While Amanda, who was blessed with as pale a complexion as one would ever want to be a Goth Master, and between her Scottish and English ancestry, was ultimately destined to be a redhead, *and there was no way in Hades my parents would ever let me dye it.*

Oh yeah, the color is ok, for punk, alternative, and even Emo in a pinch, but, the best Amanda could ever hope for in “the culture” would be Pastel Goth, which as far as the “Elite” are concerned, isn’t real Goth.

She sighed; *it’s so hard to be cool when you live with your parents.* The whole “not while you’re living under my roof” thing has a way of seriously cramping one’s style. Most of the time, she had to wait until she was well away from the house, before she could even think about putting on her powder and eyeliner.

“I heard a Bauhaus tribute band is playing down in Charleston this weekend” Justin offered, “sounds dark and ghastly. You guys going?”

Amanda’s shoulders drooped and she mouthed her usual reply. “My parents won’t let me.”

At the tender age of sixteen, she was “of course” just old enough that she had to go to work, but still considered too young to do *anything* else, without mom and dad’s permission.

Dad being the town cop doesn’t help either.

Tiffany came over and patted her on the shoulder, “it’s ok, I don’t have any money anyway and the Darklord here is in the same boat.” Justin nodded in agreement and handed a fancy wrapped package to her.

“Cheer up, here want a clove?”

Amanda took one of the cigarettes, flicked the lighter, and took a long draw. Smoke burned her eyes as she handed the

lighter back. Amanda had to admit if anyone deserved to be considered Goth Elite, it would be Justin. At 6'6" Justin barely tipped the scales at a hundred and eighty pounds soaking wet, leaving him with a physique that was strangely, and imposingly *unimposing*. He really went out of the way to be authentic, right down to the black leather fetish and chains clothing, that Amanda knew he couldn't afford. He even rolls his own clove cigarettes, since in 2009 the government made it illegal to sell them in the US, and while Amanda found them nasty tasting, she wouldn't ever dare say so to his face.

Justin blew an errant patch of his dark black, Psychobilly flop hairdo out of his eyes. "Man, my hair is so fried," he said to the eye rolls of his friends, "maybe I should dye it purple."

"Justin," Amanda offered, "everyone's dying their hair purple this year."

"Oh, fuck that then," he said disgustingly, then spit out "Baby bats," like it was poison, referring to Goth wanna-bes and their childish antics.

Amanda tried really hard to fit in with the "flavor of the month" countercultures that the three of them have tried over the years. Some of them have been a lot of fun and all of them have left her parents with indigestion, *which was fine by her*.

Most of the time, it was just knowing the right thing to say.

Tiffany stared dreamily at the soot covered rock ceiling of the cave. "I love the Nosferatu, they're so romantic."

"I know, what a way to die."

"Yeah, not like those Twilight posers."

Chapter 3 - Crossed Wires

Bud

Sheriff Dearborn “Bud” Wilson scratched his head, and he tried to make sense of the message, his secretary had scrawled on the “Hello Kitty” post it note, that was stuck to his desk. He was getting a headache. The day had started out pretty crappy early on, and has been going downhill ever since.

He looked at the note again. “Portesting Taennr Rigide ta.” *What the hell is that supposed to mean?* He thought, looking at the ceiling.

He knew Abigail was dyslexic, but he didn’t think that applied to writing too, but along with the coke bottle glasses she was forced to wear, he figured *the poor girl was lucky if she even made it to work half the time. Either way, he shook his head, she’s out of the office right now, so whatever it was that she was trying to get across, would have to wait until she got back.*

He sat down at his desk and wiggled the mouse to wake his computer up out of standby mode. His wife Maggie always made fun of him for his backwards ways. She grew up as a privileged child in sunny California. While Bud grew up in the coalfields of Appalachia, where coal industry jobs were forever being shed, to the ongoing mechanization and constant “rollercoaster ride” of profit margins, in the extraction business.

The two of them met at UCLA, where Bud was attending classes working on a degree in civil engineering. Maggie was a Liberal Arts major and was also pursuing a minor in advanced pottery at the time. The two initially ran into each other at a rally protesting the gulf war.

There were over 100,000 people gathered that day, the overflow alone caused the mother of all traffic jams in the downtown Los Angeles area. Bud was stranded in the middle of

it by accident, and having no other way to get back to his dorm; he abandoned his car and started walking. It was all he could do that day just to traverse the outer layers of the crowd. Right as he was getting close to coming out the other side, he came upon a group of girls wearing soccer uniforms and waving signs. Their slogans were kind of catchy so he slowed down to watch. As he was walking past, one of the girls squealed, jumped back and swung her sign around. The sign came up and caught Bud in the jaw, knocking him out cold. When he came to, he was looking up into the eyes of an angel that was kneeling over him massaging his shoulders and giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Needless to say, they got together, and shortly after graduation Bud convinced Maggie to move back to West Virginia and be his wife.

Where did I go wrong? He thought, as he looked around his crowded office.

Confiscated guns were propped up in one corner, and a riot shotgun was leaning against the chair. A pile of non-functioning walkie-talkies was haphazardly sitting on an already overloaded folding table against the wall.

An enormous stuffed ursine head and shoulders of a black bear that Sheriff Jenkins, (five terms ago) had shot coming out of the outhouse of his hunting cabin, was forever frozen in mid lunge above his desk. On the floor beside his gun safe sat three confiscated Purple Haze/G13 Northern Lights hybrid marijuana plants that the office ladies had been taking care of since late spring. He bent over for a closer look, and noticed that the plants were now starting to go into their budding stage, with small white and purple hairs forming around the new growth.

Is that legal?

He cringed and made a mental note to get rid of the things before someone filed a complaint.

He wished they hadn't argued this morning.

Maggie insisted that they both had a moral obligation to fight against the new coalmine, that the powers that be were trying to bring to town. She signed up as the organizer of the protest, while Bud insisted that first and foremost, he had a financial and civil obligation to keep the peace in this town and right now, in this time and space, *that* had priority over any moral objections he might have. Needless to say, she stormed off right after that and took their daughter Amanda with her.

They have both been staying with *his mother* for the last two days, who in spite of her advanced years and social status, had also joined the protest.

He sighed again, checked his email, and waited for Abigail to get back.

Clarence “Starman” Williams

Clarence revved the engine of his antique ford truck, the exhaust made little smoke rings in the early morning mists. Occasional pops, cracks, and little blue balls of flame accompanied the rings coming out of the three-inch stainless steel “straight pipes,” where they stuck out just behind the door of the lifted truck's cab. Clarence liked the rumble of the racing headers under his seat, not to mention the extra thirty more horsepower they provided.

His wife thought it was *too noisy*.

He scratched his head.

She liked it when they first got together, as a matter of fact Doris even once admitted how much it turned her on back then, *soooo...same truck, what happened?*

He looked in the rearview mirror, straightened his ponytail, and rubbed at the shine that was coming from his bare

forehead, where the receding hairline had inconveniently retreated back past his ears, over the years, leaving him with a ghost of a white grey ring of hair going around either side of his head.

I still got it, he thought, nodding at the sixty-nine year old man in the mirror, *nothing's changed here*.

The 1959 Ford F-100 short bed pickup, was about all that was left of the old days. Clarence bought the truck while he was still in high school. He spent the first whole summer fabricating the four-inch lift kit, and putting the biggest tires on it, that he could find.

Vermont winters where he grew up, were snow filled more often than not and four-wheel drive was a *matter of survival* on the roads, not a luxury. He brought the truck with him, when he and Doris made the trip south. Over the years, "The Beast" has been repainted four times, on its second complete engine and transmission rebuild, and had new front and rear differentials and axles replaced just last year. Not much, other than the frame, is even close to original anymore.

I wish I could get some OEM replacement parts for my body, he smiled wistfully, *a new set of knees sure would be nice*.

Doris climbed up into the cab smelling of coffee and perfume and frowning at the chill of the morning air.

"You sure I can't convince you to join us?" she asked, giving him her best smile, "we really could use the support."

"I'm sorry dear, but we've been through this before. Haven't the sixties taught you anything? You stick your head up and the man's gonna chop it off. It's that simple." He shifted the truck into first and eased the clutch out. "It isn't like I don't agree with you all; I just don't think you can take on the machine and win."

“But this is different and you know it.” She looked him straight in the eyes. “If they start blasting on that ridge, bad things are going to happen, you mark my words.”

“I know dear, all I’m saying, is that this is what we came here to get away from, and the last thing I want now is to lose my head over something that’s going to happen anyway.” Now he locked her gaze and put his hand on her arm. “The law is in their favor. It’s their land and they own the mineral rights. Whether we like it or not, they have every right to do what they want. How would you feel if someone tried to tell us what to do with our farm?”

She bit her lip, “it’s just not right, that mine will kill this town, then where will we go?”

He shrugged and pulled the truck off the road in front of the gate at the top of Tanner Ridge. A small group had already gathered there and were making signs and practicing their chants. Clarence let her out, and then backed up an access road, that was just to the right of the gate. He parked on the rise, so he was out of the way, but still had a good view of things.

He watched Doris join the group, thinking how beautiful she still is, even after all these years and everything they’d been through together.

They met in the tumultuous sixties, when just about everybody was protesting everything...literally. They both had lofty ideals and had become part of the new spiritual awakening, or so they thought. Throughout the next few years together, they communed, meditated, smoked, screwed and awakened their way permanently into each other lives.

Then came the seventies, and they realized the answer was to disengage from it all, and try to make a life for themselves free of the heavy hand of authority, so they moved to Fenton.

It seemed perfect.

West Virginia had so much to offer compared to the already decimated suburban sprawl that he was used to. They adopted new names to express their newfound freedom. Clarence became “Starman” and Doris was “Moonbeam.”

They began with fifty acres of very hilly land and started building a dream. That dream included the auto repair business, that over the years Clarence has built into a local staple, the orchard and greenhouse, that has not only been feeding the family, but also makes a pretty comfortable profit every year to boot. It took a few cold winters and more than a few costly mistakes, but they eventually made it work and have been here ever since.

Clarence looked up just in time to see a pink stretch limo, pull up to the gate and disgorge a small cloud of bodies. Music suddenly filled the air as the group started gyrating wildly. He had trouble making out specifics, until an unusually tall black haired woman stood out from their midst.

She was wearing a long dress with a high slit skirt that came almost all the way up to her crotch and a black plunged neck, that showed off her more than endearing “double D” assets prominently. The men surrounding her were all beefcake muscular and naked, except for their shiny, metal spiked, leather collars and rainbow colored, Speedo style g-strings.

As soon as the dancers realized no one was filming them, they stopped their display and proceeded to take a smoke break, while Hanna Jackson minced around to the front of the limo to speak with the driver. Bending over into the window, she gave all of those assembled a good shot of the manner in which her *ample celebrity*, strained the fabric, of her already “stretched to the max” dress.

Clarence rolled his eyes.

Hanna Jackson is a local diva from down in Charleston, who made her fame performing at the many gay clubs that grace the downtown area. A big star in the chemical valley, she never really seemed to materialize anything beyond “B” movies in tinsel town, but that never stopped her. Now she fancies herself a fighter for the people, and constantly travels the countryside looking for photo ops, in order to stay in the lime light, and remain relevant. A save the whales benefit here, a PETA fundraiser there. Clarence really wasn’t surprised to see her this morning, just disappointed it took her so long to get here.

The protesting had started last week, when word got out that Old Man Tanner was having core samples drilled, as part of the permitting process, for a huge “open pit” coalmine, planned up on the ridge adjacent to town. The protesters were hoping to get enough publicity to delay the process as long as possible, hoping that they’ll just eventually give up and forget about the whole idea.

Well, if Hanna’s involved, they might just do that.

He shook his head and turned on the radio. Poking the scan button, he searched the dial. What passed for music in this part of the woods usually consisted of Country or something with the word “blue” in it, either as a prefix or in the plural form.

Clarence preferred classic rock, but couldn’t get any of those stations this far from civilization. Talk radio is big here though, and he’d recently taken to listening to a guy that the radio station in Sutton was playing.

Shawn O’Toole, prides himself on being what he calls “politically incorrect,” and considers himself a soldier, in what he has coined *and trademarked*, as “the fight, for right.” His popularity in the area has quickly earned him syndication on quite a few of the radio stations down in Charleston too, and his

face is plastered on the billboards all along I-79 that advertise for his show.

“This is Shawn O’Toole, (dramatic pause) and I’m here to give you the news that no one else will.” (dramatic pause) “What’s with this gay marriage thing?” (dramatic pause) “Now these liberal activist judges have declared the gay marriage ban unconstitutional.” (dramatic pause) “So what does this mean? I can have sex with cows now? Or maybe I should marry a monkey; liberals say we’re evolved from them after all.”

Clarence smiled, put his head back and closed his eyes, half listening to the conservative shock jock rattle on.

Chapter 4 - A Case of Mistaken Indemnity

Hanna

“Just pull off to the side of the road and wait for us; I’m going to need you to help me in a minute.”

When she stood back up, she glanced behind her and smiled. Much to her satisfaction, there were more than a couple of men in the crowd gawking at her. *That’s right, eat it up boys,* she thought, *I gotta keep myself in the act as long as I can.*

Her assistants had stood down and were waiting by the limo, smoking cigarettes and chatting amongst themselves. At her signal, two of them started pulling out long pieces of shiny linked chain and a pair of pink fur lined handcuffs, (compliments of one of Hanna’s patron’s own personal collections).

She leaned back and spoke behind her hand to Matilda, (the only female assistant in her employ). “Where *are those* camera crews at? I thought they were supposed to be ready when we arrived”

“I’m sorry Miss Jackson, I called all the major networks yesterday,” she said with a shrug, “they said they’d be here.”

As if on cue, two white satellite dish covered vans came pulling up the road, trailing a huge cloud of dust in their wake, that continued traveling on after they stopped, and settled over the gathering, that stood before the locked gates. The leader of the protest came over to Hanna smiling and put out her hand.

“Maggie Wilson, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

Hanna looked at her for a second, thinking that they must have met before at another event, *although I can’t remember which one.*

“Oh yes, Maggie my dear, it’s so good to see you again.” She leaned forward for a hug and a quick pat on the back. “Such a dreadful thing they’re doing here, dreadful and I plan to put a stop to it.” She glanced over her shoulder and saw that the camera crews were almost set up.

Showtime, she thought.

Hanna waved a hand theatrically at her entourage, and started walking toward the trees near the edge of the gate.

The music started blaring again, something like a cross between “meet market” club music and burlesque, with a heavy bass beat that rattled the windows of all the vehicles in the general vicinity. Hanna walked over in front of the gate and stood with her arms out at her sides. Then she bowed her head, while her crew wrapped chains around two very large and very old looking, oak trees, that stood on either side of the road. The music that the speakers played, changed now to a jungle drumbeat, as the beefcakes symbolically attached the pink fur handcuffs to Hanna’s wrists.

Clarence “Starman” Williams

He woke up with a sputter at the sound of beating drums.

He looked up at the headliner of the truck and made an attempt to shake the sleep away.

Then he realized the truck was moving.

He must have bumped the original style, steering column mounted, emergency brake lever, while he was resting his eyes, and now the old truck was rolling down the hill, slowly picking up speed as it headed unerringly towards the gate.

Clarence had been reading the newspaper when he fell asleep, and it was now tangled up in front of him, completely obstructing his view. He clawed it out of the way and grabbed

for the steering wheel. With the engine off, that meant that, along with the brakes, the power steering wasn't working and the truck steered like...*well, it steered like a truck.*

He struggled to turn the big wheel to the side, so that he at least *wasn't going to hit the gate head on*, and then he pulled on the brake lever so hard that it snapped right off in his hands.

Maggie Wilson

Maggie had just finished attaching another sign to a broomstick, when she looked up and saw the big red monster truck rolling down the hill to the right of the gate.

The muscle men had just finished cuffing Hanna, and two of them were now prostrate on the ground, "mock worshipping" her, while two others stood on either side with giant ostrich feather fans, waving them back and forth, cooling their mistress. With the loud music playing, no one but Maggie had noticed the truck.

She opened her mouth to warn somebody, but she was already too late. The old truck had picked up quite a bit of speed in such a short period time. The owner of the truck must have finally located the brakes, because suddenly the tires had locked up, and were squealing like banshees, and still the big truck kept coming, heading right for one of the trees that Hanna was chained to.

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, for just a second, Maggie was reminded of a t-shirt she saw once, and had to laugh, it read something like: "*Nice truck...sorry about your small penis*".

In the last couple of seconds, the truck had shed momentum considerably, so that when the oversized bumper finally hit the old oak tree, it was with a slight thump, and then the vehicle was stopped.

A couple of seconds after the impact, a sharp cracking noise could just barely be made out, over the sound of the beating drums blasting out of the loud speakers.

Apparently, the tree had been rotted out in the middle, and was essentially hollow, except for the inch or so of good wood, that was all that had kept the tree upright...until now.

Maggie stood frozen and watched in horror, as the old oak tree started to fall over. It started like slow motion, but that changed as the tree quickly built up speed following its downward arc. Now Hanna and her assistants were looking at the tree. The diva fought frantically and pulled against the chains, while her men searched their pockets trying to locate the handcuff keys.

Barbie

The road leading out of town was wet from the morning dew. A thick fog had settled persistently over the ridgeline and was slowly being dispersed by the rising sun. Barbie had a 10:00 appointment this morning and she was still worn out from moving.

She looked at her watch.

Holy Crap 9:30! Then she calmed down a little, realizing that freaking out wasn't going to get her there any faster. *Hopefully Mrs. Helms will be running behind too.*

She drove across the Hartland Bridge and got mentally sideswiped.

"Barbie good lord girl, where have you been? You had me worried!" Sam was exasperated.

"What are you talking about Sam?"

"You just disappeared. One minute we were talking and the next I was back in the void alone."

Confused and unconvinced, Barbie fell back on sarcasm. “Oh really,” she replied drolly, “I thought you were just pouting.”

“Be serious Doll, something’s going on, I can feel it in my bones, well, if I had any bones. Anyway, I’ve always been able to at least sense you, but this time you were gone...completely.”

“Oh come on Sam, are you sure you’re not just overreacting?”

“Overacting? Barbie I’m telling you, something’s fishy in Chinatown. I haven’t been able to sense you all night and there are some weird undercurrents showing up in the otherworld, that just don’t add up.”

“Like?” She asked doubtfully.

“Like all the lesser spirits are going into hiding and even the strong ones are looking for a place to hole up.”

Barbie was still a little upset with Sam, so she just let the silence hang.

“Think about it,” he continued, “I’ve been with you for how long now?”

“Long enough,” she quipped, but after she said it, she realized that she really wasn’t that mad at him after all, that and she was just now noticing how visibly shaken he was, when taking into consideration his usual hardboiled persona.

“We have been working together for eight years now,” he stated with a wounded tone.

“Working together?”

“Ok, I’ve been following you around and being a pain in your ass, for eight long torturous years now, happy?”

“All right Sam,” Barbie felt bad now. “Look I’m sorry, I’ll tell you what. I’ll look into it, but right now I need to stay focused on making money, *with your help of course.*”

Barbie had to admit, that she had come to rely on Sam to help her out in her chosen occupation over the years, and she would be hard pressed, if he ever decided to leave this veil of life, once and for all.

“Mrs. Helms is first up; you want to see if you can stir up Mr. Helms and have him ready when we get there? I’m kinda running late.” She looked at her watch again and cursed her ongoing addiction to the alarm clock’s snooze button.

Maggie

Then the tree hit Hanna Jackson.

Maggie watched helplessly as old oak simultaneously contacted with Hanna and the ground, with a dull thump and a crunch. A silence fell over the crowd and everyone stood around for a few seconds looking at each other helplessly. A puddle of some kind of fluid, had started leaking out from under the rotten wood, and was slowly spreading across the gravel road. Suddenly a muffled thumping and yelling could be heard, from the middle of the fallen tree.

“Mmmpphh! Mmma maaa mma ma!

Maggie snapped out of it. “Don’t just stand there, get that thing off of her.”

The four beefcake strippers got together and heaved on the tree. It rolled a little, but then settled back into position again without much effect.

They tried again, this time with the help of a few other men standing around, who up until now had appeared to be deliberately keeping their distance from the perfumed boy toys.

This time around when they all heaved in unison, there was a sharp cracking noise, and they watched, as the tree split in half, and collapsed on top of where Hanna had gone down.

A large chunk of the rotten wood flipped over violently.

“Ugh! God damn it, get this thing off of me!” Hanna could now be heard yelling.

From the look of it, the underside of the tree had broken into a perfectly “diva shaped” hole leaving Hanna relatively unhurt. When she stood up though, the crowd noticed a few significant changes.

First: Hanna’s dress was torn and hanging down at her waist.

Second: what looked like a prosthetic chest, was sadly hanging off of her shoulder by one flesh colored strap. The fake breasts had clearly popped when the tree fell on her, and now could be identified as the source of the liquid that soaked the ground at Hanna’s feet.

Third: the gathered crowd could now see that Hanna Jackson was in reality a very small “A” cup, as opposed to her usual 44” DD melons.

Hanna bent over and struggled to pull the apparatus up again, but only proceeded in making it worse. Then the dress fell down to her knees and the assembled crowd, was treated to a fourth revelation.

Hanna was naked underneath the dress, and that *she was a he*.

A unified gasp could be heard pass across all those assembled, and a barely perceptible background muttering started. Hanna tossed the wounded fake chest aside violently, and pulled the dress up around his legs like a roman soldier, girding his loins before battle, except that given the

circumstances, it ended up looking more like him putting on a giant diaper.

He whipped around at the crowd.

“What the hell are you all looking at?”

When there were no replies he continued. “Oh for god’s sake, it isn’t like I haven’t been giving you hints all along.” The longer he went on, the deeper his voice got, finally he stopped, stood up straight and started mincing his way back toward the limo, wig now hanging crookedly off his head. He only got a few more feet, when he tripped on the poorly stashed dress and fell flat on his face again.

Hissing at his assistants, he flailed about wildly, and two of them ran up to help, picking him up and practically carrying him the rest of the way to the limo, and then climbing in behind him and slamming the door. The limo tore out with a roar and sped away down the road in a cloud of dust, leaving Maggie and the rest of the crowd speechless and gaping.

Clarence

An elbow connected with his rib cage, causing him to bite his tongue, that had been hanging out between his slacked jaws.

Doris was standing beside him where he had jumped out of the truck, to help the other men get the tree off Hanna.

“You know, it isn’t like you’ve never seen one of *those* before.” She said deadpan.

“Not on her I haven’t,” he said with a chuckle. “Holy cow, who woulda thought?”

Clarence was having a hard time keeping the smirk off his face. It wasn’t like he had anything against gays, although Shawn O’Toole said that they were the cause of everything that’s

wrong today. While he didn't necessarily agree with that, he definitely thought that there had to be some kind of underlying issues, for a man that feels the need to dress and act like something he's not, *especially to those extremes*, he thought holding his hands up to his chest and smiling lasciviously.

Another elbow connected with his ribs, *in the same spot*.

"Oww, hey, knock it off." He said nursing his side.

Now Doris had a smirk on *her* face. "You know, come to think of it," she continued mock dreamily, "it actually *was* pretty big."

Clarence stood blinking for a second, until what she said sunk in. "Hey! You weren't supposed to be looking!"

"Well apparently you were." She came back quickly, standing on her tip toes, looking him face to face.

She backed down then, and they both were quiet, while they took in the scene before the gate.

In spite of the situation, Hanna had done her job. The huge tree had fallen right in front of the gate. The bulk of the old oak, was still lying across the road, with some of the larger branches tangled up in the gate itself. It looked like easily a few hours of cleanup with a chainsaw crew, before anybody was even going to think about getting those gates open for drilling anything.