

Dragons Don't Grow On Trees

A Magical Tail

By Greg Wagner

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Fenton, West Virginia

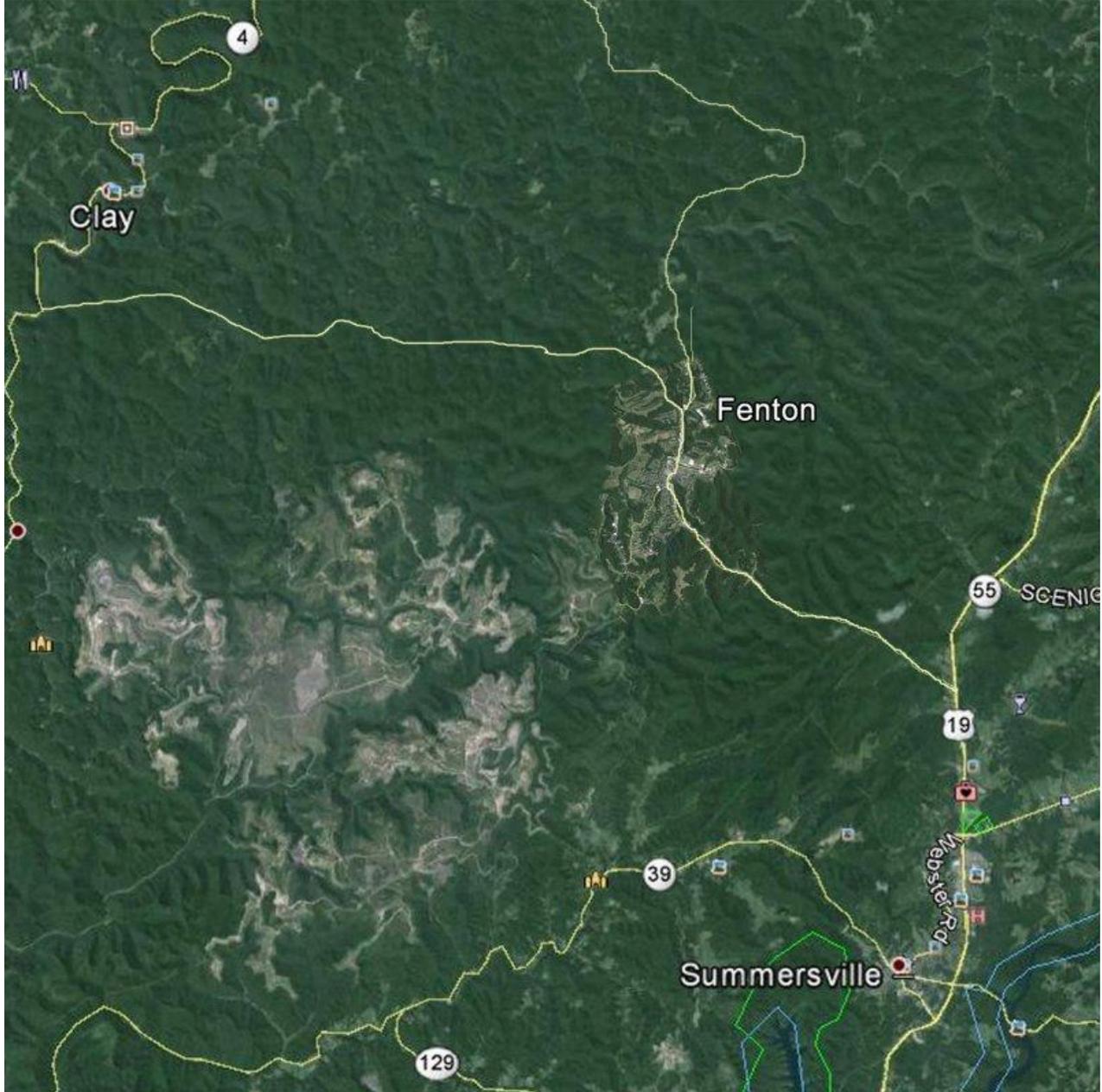


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Prelude

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

Sunlight glints off the clouds as errant breezes buffet against great leathery wings and an enormous body follows in time impossibly floating on the heated thermals. Armor plated scales the size of houses and back spikes like giant redwoods, rise and fall minutely with each gust. While the wings do their part swooping up and down at the great swathes of air, it is more the ancient dragon magic that keeps the city-sized beast in flight.

I grow weary of fleeing.

As one of the last of the great sky wyrms, it has witnessed 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 Dragon Lords track mercilessly now, fearing the dragon's very existence in this plane. Soon enough it will be discovered again and will be forced to fight or be murdered. The great sky wyrm hears their war cries, but doesn't bother to turn around and look, it knows they are there.

Widening its wingspan, the dragon strokes harder, pushing with what little strength remains of its tired old body. Climbing higher and higher, it slows and turns to look down at pursuit. The tiny specks spiraling below are humans riding the little firedrakes that they have captured and use as slaves. There are hundreds of them this time and while the dragon feels remorse for its tiny brethren, its lot remains the same.

The great sky wyrm slows and makes a turn at the dizzying height. Lowering its head, it blows a mile long lance of flame down at them. The dragon 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 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. Summoning its last bit of strength, it disappears.

This is the hard part.

It hears the humans below again.

The firebrakes are like scent dogs in that they can follow the sky wyrms between worlds, *but only so far*. The dragon disappears, but this time it jumps again, before pursuit reappears. As it slips into the new world, something strains inside 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 shockwave that rocks the countryside for miles around. The hills surrounding the impact site slide downward 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, the great sky wyrm slowly drifts off to sleep and dreams, for a long, long time.

Chapter 1 - New Beginnings

Amanda Wilson

Amanda Destiny Darkstar Amethyst Wilson refiled her already sharp and pointed black fingernails. "Summer sucks," she scowled at the light coming in through the cave entrance, "it's so sunny. I can't wait until winter when everything's dead, like it should be." She sat perched on a rock the size of a Volkswagen, while her two friends Tiffany Briallen Belladonna Trillium Smith and Justin Lucien Astaroth Kithslayer Jones sat together on a low rock wall and looked bored.

Tiffany pulled idly at a particularly stressed out lock of her straw like black hair, "I don't know, do you think my hair is dark enough?"

Amanda rolled her eyes. She hated to admit it, but she was jealous of both 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, was ultimately destined to be a redhead, *and there is no way in Hades my parents will ever let me dye it.* She thought, *Oh yeah, red is ok for punk, alternative, or even Emo in a pinch,* but the best she 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 has to wait until she is well away from the house, before she can even think about putting on her makeup 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 much.

Tiffany came over and patted her on the shoulder, "It's ok, I don't have any money anyway and the Dark Lord here is in the same boat."

Justin nodded sadly and handed a fancy wrapped package over to her, "Cheer up, 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. She did have to admit if anyone deserved to be considered Goth Elite, it would be Justin. At six foot six Justin barely tipped the scales at a hundred and eighty pounds soaking wet, leaving him with a physique that is strangely enough imposingly unimposing. He really goes out of the way to be authentic, right down to the black leather fetish and chains clothing that she 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, maybe I should dye it purple."

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

"Oh, screw that then," he said disgustingly, spitting out the words "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 while all of them have left her parents with indigestion, *which is fine by me*.

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

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

"I know, what a way to die," Justin added.

Tiffany scoffed, "Yeah, not like those Twilight posers."

Barbie

"Are you kidding me? A good looking 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 more like it.

"It's not as simple as that Sam and you know it."

The trip up from Charleston was less than an hour. Twenty-eight-year-old Barbie Hollister figured it was a fair enough tradeoff when she sat down and crunched 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 real psychic she can actually communicate with the spirit world, *unlike most of the charlatans out there.*

It was settlement day for the new house she's buying in the little town of Fenton and she didn't want to be late. *At last, I'm finally getting out of the 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 the house was 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 sneer that was a strange combination of part lip curl, part overbite, which he kept conspicuously covered with a sparse Wolfman Jack style goatee that she swore 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 signpost. One was an ornately adorned wooden sign, which 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 exactly one mile in the same direction.

Barbie shook her head and half listened as Sam went 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, Barbie was on the rebound from Klaus the biker and feeling lonely. One particularly depressed night after work, she was out with some friends when someone suggested they check out a promising new expressionist artist 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 and from that day on 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, she smirked, but even that gets old if there's nothing else there.

"And what makes you an expert all the sudden?" She shot back rubbing at the pain in her forehead. 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 replied, "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 the move to Fenton was going to change.

Growing up in rural West Virginia, Barbie had issues that the other kids didn't have to deal with. Most importantly was that she heard voices. Not the Kill Kill voices that your average psychotic 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 played 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 off to see the 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 an 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, because by the time she reached puberty, she learned to filter them out.

It was kind of like tuning a car radio.

On the dial, in between the voices and static, are little sections that aren't occupied by anything else. She found that if she focused just right on those empty 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 newly 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 freelance psychic.

Now she did have people beating down her door, but it was to talk to a deceased love one or to see what was next in their life. Opening her own facility 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 time up for, well, anything she wanted to do, *if I could only figure out what that is.*

Sam of course is a different story.

Barbie classified Sam as a tame poltergeist. *A very powerful and high maintenance, but not too particularly malevolent spirit with just enough power to possess someone as spiritually sensitive as me.*

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 financial bubble burst in 2006. Immediately upon learning the news of the crash, he committed suicide. As he lay dying, he remembered that in the very beginning he put stop orders on the majority of his investments, leaving him and his fortune pretty much intact. The stress of

that revelation sent a shock wave through him, knocking something psychically, and as far as Barbie was concerned, mentally loose.

Now for some reason Hershel goes by the name of Sam Stone, an infamous, but otherwise unknown gumshoe detective. While he stays in character most of the time, whenever he gets upset or nervous, he loses his 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 his time channeling through Barbie. So whenever he wants to talk, he does so using her mouth. The only advantage to this situation 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 the bridge she turned off and gave her little car more gas to go up the long grade to the top of Middle Creek Ridge. From there Route 21 goes over the old coalfields through Fenton and on to Summersville, where it merges with Route 19.

Route 21 otherwise known as Fenton Road, was one of those coal era compromises with the local municipalities. Back in the 80's, the coal companies came up with a plan that would net them a whole bunch of new mountain top removal permits and in return, the counties would get a new roadway over the mountains. So now, instead of the curvy round and round and up and down vomit inducing route that has existed for years, the new road easily shaves 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. From there she pulled up in front of the lawyer's office and shut off her car.

"Now I don't want any funny stuff 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.*

"Okay, sulk if you want, just please, don't embarrass me while we're here."

She crossed her fingers and climbed 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!"

The shouting was coming from a crusty old man dressed in rags standing in middle of the sidewalk. He had a sandwich board sign draped over his skinny shoulders that made him look even more deranged. The sign had words 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 abruptly and stared at her. Just as she was almost past 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, his eyes getting bigger with each word. "She knows. She can save us!" He threw his arms wide and prostrated himself on the ground in front of her, "Heaven help us all Lady! The end is coming!"

She edged past him in shock and hurried away. A steady headwind blowing down the main street gusseted Barbie as she made her way up the steps of the brick building where the settlement lawyer made his office. 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 light honey grey and wispy, floating about her head like a wraith's aura. Barbie stopped and held the door open for them.

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

"I'm back here," a tall scarecrow of man stood up and waved over a wood and glass partition.

"Sorry," he continued 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 lawyer's eyes were warm. 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 feel about him as if he was trying too hard to fit into a less than accommodating world. Barbie felt a mental jolt as she shook his hand.

"Nathanial Williams," he smiled, "you can call me Nate."

He turned to the older couple 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 finally meet you. We're so glad you're buying the old place." Clyde leaned in with a deep rumbling voice that betrayed his ancient body, "Yeah, now I won't have to cut the grass anymore."

"When are you moving in Dear?"

"I was planning on bringing the first load up tomorrow, as long as the weather cooperates."

Wild shouts of, "She knows! She does! She can save us! Oh thank the heavens, it's not too late!" interrupted the conversation. It sounded like the old man was right outside the window.

"Who is that?" Barbie asked

Gladys gestured nervously. "Oh him," she said, followed by a meaningful pause as she glanced at her husband, "that's just Cletus. Don't mind him. He used to be a preacher around here until a shelf full of bibles fell on him."

"Yeah," Clyde added with just a hint of a smirk, "I guess you could say he was struck by the truth."

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

After settlement, Gladys and Clyde offered to walk Barbie out to her car. When they reached the street, Cletus was gone, his absence leaving the sidewalk with a distinct deserted feel.

"If you ever need anything call us, we're just over the hill," Gladys said into Barbie's ear as she hugged her goodbye.

"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.

Nate pictured himself as the country lawyer. *No criminal or divorce cases for me, 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.

Nate 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 his teeth and on and on. He used to lay awake at night sweating over the implications.

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

Nate didn't care too much for hippies.

Having grown up with two of the hippiest parents around, left him 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 counterculture. *I honestly believe it is possible to commune too much with nature.*

Back when he was fourteen, his parents took him to a Peace, Love and Harmony, Reunion Festival™. The three-day long Woodstock-esque event was held on a huge farm up near Morgantown. A day of sun, music and love was just what Nate's father thought he needed at the time. The trip more or

less counted as extra credit towards Nate's home schooling classes, which his father labeled Cultural Studies.

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 just 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 hold, he followed a few of the people into the woods in hopes of relieving himself. On his way into the woods and back out again, he had to walk through an unusually thick cloud of smoke coming from somewhere close by.

The last thing Nate remembered was watching musical notes floating 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 and smearing leftover processed cheese on himself. Even now, many years later, just the thought of a peace sign makes him twitch.

Nate liked his life. It was safe and something that he could count on not to go changing on him while he wasn't looking. Just the way it should be.

That was all about to change.

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

Chapter 3 - Crossed Wires

Bud

Sheriff Dearborn "Bud" Wilson scratched his head and tried to make sense of the message his secretary scrawled on the Hello Kitty post it note that was stuck to his keyboard. He was getting a major headache. The day 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, staring up at the ceiling.

He knew Abigail was dyslexic, but he didn't think that applied to writing too. 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 she was trying to get across will just have to wait.*

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

They met at UCLA, where Bud was attending classes working on a degree in Civil Engineering. Maggie was a Liberal Arts major pursuing a minor in Advanced Pottery. They ran into each other at a rally protesting the first Gulf War.

There were over a hundred thousand 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. 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. Just as he was close to coming out the other side, he happened upon a group of girls wearing soccer uniforms, cheering, and waving signs. Their slogans were 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 caught Bud in the jaw, knocking him out cold. When he came to again, he stared into the eyes of an angel. Maggie was kneeling over him, massaging his shoulders and giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. As fate would have it, they started dating and shortly after graduation, Bud convinced Maggie to move back to West Virginia and be his wife.

So where did I go wrong? He wondered as he panned at the contents of his crowded office.

Confiscated rifles were propped up in one corner and a riot shotgun leaned against the wall. A stack of non-functioning walkie-talkies were haphazardly piled on an already overloaded folding table. An enormous stuffed ursine head and shoulders of a black bear that Sheriff Jenkins (five terms ago) shot while walking back from the outhouse, hung forever frozen in mid lunge over his desk. On the floor beside his gun safe sat a plastic bucket with three confiscated marijuana plants that the office ladies have been taking care of since late spring. He bent over for a closer look and noticed that the plants were 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.

I wish we hadn't argued this morning.

Maggie insisted that they both had a moral obligation to fight against the new coalmine. She immediately 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 the town and that had priority over any moral objections he might have. Maggie 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.

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

Clarence "Starman" Williams

Sixty-nine-year-old Clarence revved the engine of his antique Ford truck and watched the exhaust pipes blow 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 racing headers under his seat, not to mention the extra thirty horsepower they provided.

His wife said it was too noisy.

He scratched his head.

She liked it when we first got together, he thought, in fact Doris even once admitted how much it turned her on.

Soooo, it's the same truck, what happened?

He looked up at the rearview mirror, straightened his ponytail and rubbed at the shine that was coming from his bald forehead, where his receding hairline had inconveniently retreated back past his ears over the years.

I still got it, he thought, nodding at the man in the mirror, nothing's changed here.

The 1959 Ford short bed pickup was about the only thing left of the old days. Clarence bought the truck when he was still in high school. He spent that first whole summer fabricating the custom 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. It was only fitting that he brought the truck along 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/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 OEM replacement parts for my old body, he smiled wistfully, a new set of knees sure would be nice.

Doris climbed up into the cab smelling of coffee and flowers. She frowned 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 gear 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 and wagged her finger. "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 exactly what we came here to get away from. The last thing I want now is to lose my head over something that's going to happen anyway." He matched 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 we could and couldn't do with our farm?"

Doris bit her lip, "It's just not right, that mine will kill this town, then where will we go?"

When they arrived at the top of Tanner Ridge, he pulled the truck off the road in front of the gate. A small group of protesters had already gathered there and were making signs and practicing their chants. After he let Doris out, he backed up an access road that was just to the right of the locked gate. He parked up on the rise so he was out of the way, but still had a good view of things. As he watched his wife join the group he couldn't help thinking, *She is still so beautiful, even after all these years and everything we'd been through together.*

Clarence and Doris met in the tumultuous sixties, when just about everybody was protesting everything. They shared lofty ideals and longed to be a part of the new spiritual awakening, or so they thought. Then came the seventies when they both realized that 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 was perfect.

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

Clarence looked up just in time to see a pink stretch limousine pull up to the gate and disgorge a small cloud of glittery male bodies. Music 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 sequined dress with a high leg slit that came all the way up to her crotch and a plunged neck that prominently showed off her more than endearing double-D assets. The men surrounding her were all beefcake muscular and naked, except for their shiny, metal spiked leather collars and rainbow colored g-strings.

As soon as the dancers realized no one was filming them, they ceased 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 showed all of those assembled how 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 in the late eighties 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. A Save the Whales benefit here, a PETA fundraiser there. Clarence wasn't really surprised to see Hanna, just disappointed that it took her so long to get there.

The protest started a week ago when word got out that Old Man Tanner's grandson was having core samples drilled up on the ridge adjacent to town as part of the permitting process for a huge open pit coalmine. The protesters were hoping to gain enough publicity to delay the process as long as possible.

Well, if Hanna's involved in any way, 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 neck 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 always preferred classic rock, but couldn't get any

of those stations this far from civilization. As an alternative, he'd recently taken to listening to a conservative shock jock that the radio station up in Sutton has been 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 has quickly earned him syndication on the radio stations down in Charleston too and his face can be seen plastered on colorful billboards all along I-79.

"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? 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 as Shawn rattled on.

Chapter 4 - A Case of Mistaken Indemnity

Hanna Jackson

"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 Hanna stood up from the limo window, she glanced behind her and smiled. Much to her satisfaction, there were more than a few men in the crowd gawking at her. *That's right boys, eat it up*, she thought, *I gotta keep myself in the act as long as I can*.

Her assistants were waiting by the limo, smoking cigarettes and chatting amongst themselves. At her signal, two of them pulled out long lengths of shiny linked chain and a pair of pink fur-lined handcuffs. *Compliments of one of my patron's own personal collections*, she thought.

Hanna leaned back and hissed behind her hand to Matilda, the only female assistant in her employ. "Where are those camera crews? I thought they were supposed to be here waiting 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 satellite dish covered vans came pulling up the road, trailing a huge cloud of dust in their wake. Once stopped, the cloud continued traveling on, settling over the people who stood before the locked gates. The leader of the protest walked up to Hanna smiling and holding out her hand.

"Maggie Wilson, it's such a pleasure to see you again."

Hanna stared at her for a second, thinking, *we must have met before at another event, although I can't for the life of me remember which one*.

"Oh yes, Maggie my dear, it's so good to see you again." She leaned forward for a quick hug and a 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 noted that the camera crews were almost set up.

Showtime, she smiled.

Hanna waved a hand theatrically at her entourage and started walking toward the gate. The music began blaring again, something like a cross between meet-market club music and a burlesque striptease rag, 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. She bowed her head dramatically, while her boys wrapped chains around two very large and very old looking oak trees that stood on either side of the road. The music changed to a jungle drumbeat as the beefcakes theatrically attached the pink fur handcuffs to Hanna's wrists and locked them.

Clarence "Starman" Williams

Clarence woke up with a sputter at the sound of beating drums. He stared up at the headliner of his truck for a few seconds and made an attempt to shake the sleep away. It was at that point he realized the truck was moving.

He must have bumped the emergency brake 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.

He clawed the newspaper out of the way and desperately grabbed for the steering wheel. With the engine off, that also meant that along with the brakes, the power steering wasn't working and the truck steered like a...*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 pulled so hard on the old steering column mounted brake lever 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 prostrate on the ground, mock worshipping her while two others stood on either side waving giant ostrich feather fans. With the loud music playing and the show going on, no one but Maggie even 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 of time. The owner must have finally located the brakes, because suddenly the tires locked up and squealed like banshees, but the big truck still kept coming.

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, for just a second, Maggie remembered a t-shirt she saw once, 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 by the time it finally hit the old oak tree, it was with a slight thump. A couple of seconds after the impact, a sharp cracking noise interrupted the beating drums blasting out of the loudspeakers.

Apparently, the tree had been rotted out in the middle and was essentially hollow except for the inch or so of good wood, which until that moment was all that had kept the old oak upright. Maggie watched in horror as the tree started to fall over. It began like slow motion, but that changed quickly as the tree built up speed following its downward arc. Now Hanna and her assistants saw the tree. The diva fought frantically, pulling against the chains in vain, while her men fumbled with the handcuff keys.

...and then the tree hit Hanna Jackson.

Maggie watched helplessly as the 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 looking at each other for a few seconds. A puddle of some kind of fluid started leaking out from under the rotten wood and slowly spread across the gravel road. A muffled thumping and yelling came from the middle of the fallen tree.

"Mmmpphh! Mmma maaa mma ma!

Maggie snapped out of it, "Don't just stand there, people, let's get that thing off her."

The four beefcake strippers got together and heaved on the tree. It rolled a little, but settled back into place without much effect. They tried again, this time with the help of a few other men standing around, who up until then appeared to be deliberately keeping their distance from the perfumed boy toys. This time around when they all heaved, there was a sharp cracking noise and the tree split in half. It

collapsed in a pile over 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 me!" Hanna yelled.

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 draped off her shoulder by one flesh colored strap. The fake breasts had clearly popped when the tree fell on her and 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.

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

Hanna was naked underneath the dress and she was a he.

A unified gasp passed among the people 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 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 became. Finally he stopped, stood up straight and minced his way back to the limo, wig hanging crookedly off his head. He only made it a few feet before he tripped on the poorly stashed dress and fell flat on his face.

He hissed at his assistants and flailed about wildly until two of them ran to his aid, picking him up and practically carrying him the rest of the way to the limo, climbing in behind him and slamming the

door. The limo tore out with a roar, speeding away down the road in a cloud of dust, leaving Maggie and the rest of the crowd speechless and gaping.

Clarence

A pointy feminine elbow connected with his rib cage, causing him to bite down on his tongue that had been hanging out between his slacked jaws. Doris was standing right beside him, where he had jumped out of the truck to help the other men lift the tree off Hanna.

"You know, it isn't like you've haven't seen one of those before," she said deadpan.

"Not on her I haven't," he said with a chuckle. "Holy cow, who woulda thought?"

Another elbow connected with his ribs, *in the very same spot*. "Oww, hey, knock it off." He said nursing his side.

In spite of the situation, Hanna had done her job well. The huge tree had fallen right in front of the gate. The bulk of the old oak blocked the road with some of the larger branches tangled up in the gate itself. It looked like it was going to take several hours of cleanup with a full crew before anyone was going to think about getting those gates open for drilling anything.

