

THE GRAY DRAKE
A BURR LAFAYETTE MYSTERY

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MURDER ON THE AU SABLE

A BURR LAFAYETTE MYSTERY

Charles Cutter

MISSION POINT PRESS

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*For
Christi*

*The grave's a fine and private place, but none I think
do there embrace.*

Andrew Marvell
"To His Coy Mistress"

CHAPTER ONE

June 21, 1989, Grayling, Michigan.

Traveler slipped through the river, two miles downstream from Chase Bridge, almost halfway to the High Banks. Quinn kept the boat in the fastest part of the river and the current carried them through the night. He didn't have to paddle. All he really had to do was steer.

As soon as the auction ended, Quinn had ducked out of the lodge. By the time he'd changed out of his tuxedo and made it to the river, it was past midnight. He'd have made it sooner except for what happened with Lizzie. At least she'd calmed down enough to help him launch the boat.

"Cassie, where's the big browns tonight?" he said.

His dog, an English setter with a black patch on her right ear, looked back at him. She sat in the bow seat, where the sports fished, and sniffed the night air. She always seemed to know where the fish were. Quinn thought she could smell them in the river.

The moon lit up the night, and the South Branch of the Au Sable River unwound in front of them. The moonlight gave the river a black sheen as it cut through the forest. They coasted through a riffle, then slowed when they hit the runout. The river bent to the east, a sandbar on the inside of the curve and a forty-foot bank on the outside. The moon made silhouettes of the cedar and black spruce on top of the bank. Snags had fallen down the bank where the river had cut it away.

A fat hen brown trout lived under that bank. Quinn had caught her once, lost her more times than he could count, but he wasn't going to fish here tonight. Tonight he wanted to get downstream to the High Banks, for the Hex hatch, if there was one.

The river pushed them into the bank, and he smelled the river smells—the wet sand, the dead leaves, the cedars. Cassie looked back at him again.

Quinn stuck the paddle back in the river. The boat turned away from the bank and swept back into the current.

They floated through the Mason Tract, past Daisy Bend and Durant's Castle. Then the moon set, and the river lost its sheen and turned an inky black. Quinn looked up at the strip of sky framed by the trees. The creamy band of the Milky Way stretched above and showed him the river in front of them. "Black water on a black night," he said.

* * *

Quinn Shepherd sat in the sprawling dining room of The Gray Drake and looked out at the river. Sometimes he sat on the bank just downstream and watched the kingfishers dive for the minnows, chased to the surface by the trout.

Tonight, though, as on every summer solstice for the past twenty-five years, all eyes—except Quinn's—looked at the auctioneer. Men in tuxedos and women in cocktail dresses filled The Gray Drake to overflowing. Two hundred strong and a waiting list three hundred deep. They were all there for The Gray Drake's Friends of the Au Sable charity auction. All Quinn wanted tonight was for the auction to end so he could get out on the river.

"Surely you can do better than seven hundred," said Wes Goodspeed, the once-a-year auctioneer. He raised a brook trout carving over his head.

Quinn looked at the hands wrapped around the carving, gnarled and arthritic from a lifetime in cold river water. Wes could still tie flies but probably not for much longer. Wes, his father-in-law, knew how to run The Gray Drake, but making money wasn't his strong suit. He paid Quinn to guide, which he would have done for free. He thought Wes probably knew that.

Wes stood behind a podium and studied the crowd, searching for anyone who would look him in the eye. "This was carved by our own Billy McDonough. Stand up, Billy." The old guide stood and waved.

"Who says eight? Eight, eight, eight. Who says eight hundred for this one-of-a-kind brook trout carving?"

The state senator from Roscommon nodded.

"Thank you, Senator." Wes took a drink from the glass on the podium. It looked like water but it was filled with gin. "Now who says nine hundred?"

Who will give nine hundred dollars for this brookie? It was carved from the white pine that went down at Lucy's Hole."

Joe Gleason, the oil and gas promoter from Grand Rapids, raised his hand.

"Thank you, Joe. Now, a thousand. One thousand dollars."

Wes carried the carving through the tables—birds-eye maple tops and matching chairs with spindly legs. The floor, worn-out oak tongue and groove, creaked underneath him. The floor ran downhill to the southeast corner where the foundation had settled. Christmas tree lights were strung all over the room. C-9s, the big old-fashioned kind that didn't blink. Red, orange, blue and green. Hot to the touch. An altogether old-fashioned dining room all done up.

"It's all for the Friends of the Au Sable." Well, almost. The food and booze cost a fortune, and it was Wes who counted the money.

"Who says a thousand?" The crowd was tired of the carving, and Wes had bid it way up. It wasn't worth more than two hundred. "Senator?" He shook his head no. "Any more bidders? Going once, twice. Sold to Joe Gleason for nine hundred dollars."

Wes walked back to the podium and set the carving down. "Let's take a short break." The tables emptied and the revelers made their way to the bar. He nodded at the string quartet. The cellist raised her bow and they started "Spring," the first movement of *The Four Seasons*.

Wes gave them fifteen minutes to refill their drinks, then stopped the quartet. He drank the rest of his gin then clinked the glass with the butter knife.

"We saved the best for last. Back by popular demand: a night on the South Branch with our own Quinn Shepherd during the Hex hatch." Wes pointed to Quinn. "Stand up, my boy."

Quinn turned back to the dining room but didn't stand. He had sandy hair, too long in the back, and his nose was peeling.

"Up, Quinn," Wes said. "Stand up."

Quinn waved but he didn't stand up.

"Lizzie, go get your husband to stand up," Wes said.

She wound her way through the tables to her husband and twirled in her little black dress. She pulled him to his feet and kissed him on the lips.

"Thank you, Lizzie," Wes said. He clinked his glass again. "Let's get started. Shall we say five thousand?"

Noah Osterman, the lawyer from Traverse City, raised his hand.

“Thank you, Noah.”

Quinn looked over at Osterman. He knew that Osterman had no intention of buying the trip, but he knew Osterman wanted his name in front of the crowd.

“Now who says six?”

George Feeny, the heir to Gratiot Stamping in Detroit, nodded. Then Frank Baxter, the judge from Lansing. They were at seven thousand already.

“Who says eight?”

Silence.

Wes swept the room with his hand. “Eight. Eight. Eight. Who says eight thousand dollars?”

A man sitting in the corner raised his hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, my accountant. Who says they’re all cheap,” Wes said, pointing at him. “Thank you, Charlie.” They all clapped.

“Who says nine?”

Silence again.

“Noah?” The lawyer shook his head. “George?” Another shake of the head. “Judge Baxter?”

“Too rich for the blood of a public servant,” the judge said.

The crowd roared. Quinn didn’t think the bidding could go much higher.

“It’s all for the river. Sand traps, bank control,” Wes said. “And lawyers.”

Another roar.

“I bid nine thousand,” Osterman said.

Another hand went up. “Ten thousand,” said Thompson Shepherd, Quinn’s father.

“Who says eleven?” Wes said. “This trip is for the Hex hatch. Tomorrow night. And I do believe Quinn is going to scout it tonight.” Wes looked over at his son-in-law. “Isn’t that right, Quinn?”

Quinn nodded.

Harley Hawken, the oil man from Traverse City, raised his hand.

“Now who says twelve? Who says twelve thousand dollars?” There were no takers. “Eleven-five then. Who says eleven-five?” Nothing. Wes scanned the room. “Going once. Twice.”

“I bid eleven-five.”

“Thank you, Thompson.”

Wes looked around the room. No one moved.

“Twelve thousand,” Harley Hawken said.

“Who says twelve-five?” Wes looked around the room one last time. “All in? All done?” He pointed at Harley. “Sold to Harley Hawken for twelve thousand dollars.”

The crowd applauded. Wes nodded at the cellist.

There were more trips to the bar. A woman snaked her way through the tables to Quinn. She whispered something in his ear, then left.

* * *

At 1:00 a.m., they coasted into the High Banks. Cassie started to whine just above Dead Man’s Hole.

“Is this where the fish are, girl?”

Quinn dropped the anchor chain over the side. It dragged on the bottom, then held. He lit a cigar to keep the mosquitoes off. Cassie whined again.

“Easy, girl. There’s no hatch yet.”

From his shirt pocket Quinn fished out a half-smoked joint and used his cigar to light it. He sucked in the smoke, held his breath, and then exhaled. Cassie looked back at him. She didn’t like the smell.

Twenty minutes later the first of the nymphs broke the surface. It struggled in the current, then flew up into the trees. Then another . . . and the Hex hatch was on.

The first trout rose. Quinn couldn’t see it, but it sounded like a small fish. Then the duns swarmed above the river. The beating of their wings sounded like the hum of a high-tension line.

He pulled up the chain, and they drifted twenty yards downstream. He slipped the chain back in, and *Traveler* settled upstream of the feeding fish. The dead flies—the spinners— started falling like snowflakes. He heard a slurp about twenty-five yards in front of them. “That’s the one we want.” He couldn’t see the fish rise. In the black of the night, he couldn’t see much at all.

Quinn grabbed his fly rod. He raised his rod tip and stripped line from the reel. He made two false casts and then a drift. It floated past the slurp. Nothing. He cast again. Still nothing. There were spinners everywhere. Browns, giant browns, rose to the dead bugs. He cast above a slurp. The feeding trout stayed where it was, finning in the current, waiting for the spinners to float

by. Quinn cast again and let out line on a dead drift. Another slurp, but not on his fly.

He cast again, a little further right. The fish slammed his fly. He held the line against the rod and set the hook. The fish ran downstream, the drag screaming as the line peeled off the reel. Cassie barked at the fish, still running line, down to the backing. If the fish ran much farther, there'd be no line left on the reel. Quinn touched the line with his finger, trying to slow the fish.

“Eight pounds, Cassie. Maybe more.”

There was nothing to do but follow the fish. He held the rod in his left hand, twisted behind him and pulled up the chain. The boat started to drift. He knew it was reckless, especially in the dark, but he was damned if he was going to lose this fish. He kept the pole in his left hand and tried to steer one-handed with the paddle. They bounced off a rock in the middle of the river, then they hit a deadfall. The boat turned sideways in the current and broached. The river poured in. The boat took on more water. All he had to do to save them was to give up on the fish.

* * *

Quinn didn't make it home for breakfast. He didn't make it home at all. He spent the night at the lower end of Dead Man's Hole, resting peacefully in the silt, the anchor chain wrapped around his left ankle.

CHAPTER TWO

Harbor Springs, Michigan. One Year Later.

At one in the afternoon, Burr Lafayette slept in the cockpit of *Spindrift*, covered by a Hudson Bay blanket. His dog lay at his feet, snoring. Burr woke up when the wind shifted and his boat swung on her mooring.

He looked to the right, and what had been a view of Little Traverse Bay was now the shoreline of downtown Harbor Springs, the ritziest old-money port of call on the Great Lakes.

“Zeke,” he said to his aging yellow lab, “an east wind bodes ill, but it’s not raining yet.” The dog looked up and cocked his ears. Burr lay back down and fell asleep again.

Half an hour later, “Burr. Stop that infernal snoring and wake up. I’m about to drown.”

Burr sat bolt upright. He looked all around but couldn’t see where the noise was coming from. He looked down at Zeke, who was still snoring. He shook his head and lay back down.

“Burr,” said the voice again. “Wake up. I know you’re there.”

“Am I finally losing my mind?” Burr said. Late forties, not quite six feet tall. Still lean. Hawk nose, now peeling. Sky blue eyes. His hair was still the color of an acorn. He had a few gray hairs, but he pulled out the ones he found.

There was a sharp rap on the hull, then another. “I’m down here,” said the voice. “Help me before I drown.”

Burr peered over the side. There was his law partner.

“Jacob, don’t bump my boat with the dinghy.”

“Get me out of this rowboat before I drown.”

“It’s not a rowboat, it’s a dinghy. And you are perfectly safe. And dry.”

“This infernal boat is about to capsize. Get me out,” Jacob said. He started to stand in the dinghy, an eight-foot, flat-bottomed pram.

“Sit down. You’ll tip over,” Burr said.

The dinghy tipped to port. Little Traverse Bay poured in.

“Help me, I’m drowning,” Jacob said.

“Your feet aren’t even wet.”

Burr reached down, grabbed Jacob by the wrist and hauled him onto the boat. Jacob lay face down on the deck like a dead man floating in water. Burr tied up the dinghy and climbed back into the cockpit. “How did you find me?”

“This is the only boat in the harbor.” Jacob sat up. He was short and wiry and so was his hair. His olive skin had turned a pea-soup shade of green. “How can it still be winter here?”

“Wrap yourself up in this blanket.”

Jacob pushed it away. “I’m sure it’s full of dog hair.”

Burr went down below and returned with a sandwich and a bottle of wine. “It’s too late in the season for Zinfandel, but it is a bit chilly and I thought a chewy, raspberry, chocolaty Zinfandel would go nicely with my sandwich.”

Jacob rethought the blanket and wrapped himself up in it. “There’s a reason I risked my life paddling out to this awful boat.” He made a show of picking a dog hair from his slacks. “This is what we must do.”

Burr never liked the sound of “This is what we must do,” especially from Jacob.

“My good friend, Wesley Goodspeed, owns The Gray Drake. He’s going to take us fly-fishing on the South Branch during the Hex hatch.”

Burr had no idea what Jacob was talking about.

“Surely you know what that is?”

Burr shook his head.

“It’s the most famous hatch on the most famous trout stream at the most famous lodge east of the Mississippi.” Jacob smiled at Burr.

Burr smiled back, waiting for the *quid pro quo*.

Jacob reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a joint, and lit it.

“How can you be seasick one minute and smoke a joint the next?”

“It’s the only thing that relaxes me.” Jacob smoked the joint.

Burr had another glass of wine. The two of them looked at each other. Neither one said a word. They had played out this little drama countless times. Burr always outlasted Jacob.

Jacob licked his fingertips, put out what little was left of the joint, and put it back in his pocket.

“No reason to waste anything,” Burr said.

Jacob ignored him. “If you aren’t going to ask me, I’ll tell you.”

“Please,” Burr said, triumphant.

“Wes has a daughter, Elizabeth. They call her Lizzie. She’s the chef at the lodge. Her husband, Quinn, is a guide. The best guide on the river. And they have a boy of six.”

“Of course,” Burr said.

“*Was*, actually, the best guide,” Jacob said.

Burr was afraid where this was headed but refused to say anything.

“It seems that last summer, Quinn drowned.”

Burr arched his eyebrows.

“Yes, drowned. During the Hex hatch.”

Burr finished his sandwich and poured himself another glass of wine. He drank half of it but didn’t feel any better for it.

“As if that’s not enough . . .”

Here it comes, Burr thought. He covered his ears with his hands.

“Stop that, Burr.”

Burr kept his hands on his ears.

“I know you can hear me.” Jacob spoke up, “Lizzie was just arrested for murder.” He stopped for effect. “Murder. She’s been accused of murdering her husband.”

Burr dropped his hands from his ears. “I knew it. I knew it had to be something like this. I knew it when I looked down and saw you in the dinghy. God himself couldn’t get you in a boat, let alone row yourself out to yet another boat.”

“Then you’ll defend Lizzie?”

Burr saw hope in Jacob’s eyes. “No, I won’t.”

“You’re the only one who can.”

“Am I the only one who can help because I’m the only one who would take his fee in fishing?”

“Of course not.”

“I’m not a criminal lawyer. No one knows that better than you. And I’m cash only.”

“You’d do it for cash? Wes has plenty of money. I’m sure he’d pay us in cash.”

“That’s not what I said.” Jacob started to say something, but Burr cut him

off. "All I wanted for today was a little peace and quiet. I launched my boat. I motored out to this buoy. I rigged the main. I bought myself a sandwich and a bottle of wine. I took a nap. I'm trying to live a simple life. And you're trying to ruin it."

"A simple life?" Jacob said. The color came back to his face. "Burr Lafayette, you have the most complicated life of anyone I know." Jacob raised a forefinger. "You have an ex-wife to support." He raised another finger. "You have a young son. You have a rundown office building. You have this cur of a dog. You always seem to have a rundown sailboat. You hunt ducks. Women like you. And you have no money."

"You're going to run out of fingers, and it's too cold to take off your socks and shoes," Burr said.

"You wouldn't know peace and quiet if it hit you in the face."

Burr ran his hands through his hair, front to back.

"You always do that thing with your hair when you're troubled," Jacob said.

"I'm not troubled, and I'm not a criminal lawyer." He finished his wine.

"And you drink too much."

Jacob ran a thumb and forefinger down the crease of his slacks, a crease like the edge of a knife. Then he pulled the sleeves of his sweater down just beyond the cuffs of his jacket.

He's natty, Burr thought. I'll give him that.

"If you won't take this on, at least help get Lizzie out on bail. I'm sure Wes will pay cash."

Burr looked to the east again. The clouds, now black, were rolling in. "I'll take you to the dock, so you don't have to row back." He turned the key in the ignition, pulled out the choke, pushed the throttle forward and pressed the starter button. Four tries later, the engine kicked over.

* * *

Three days later, Burr sat in a packed courtroom waiting for the judge. He tap-tap-tapped his No. 2 yellow pencil, just as he had done for the past twenty-odd years. As far as courtrooms go, this one was like all the others, only shabbier. His table was dinged up, his chair wobbled, and there was a hole the size of a paper plate in the linoleum underneath his chair.

Elizabeth Shepherd to his left, Jacob to her left. Elizabeth Shepherd was an almost beautiful blonde. Her face was a little too long. Her nose was a little too pointed and her lips were a little too full, but her eyes were the color of robins' eggs and that made up for everything. She was wearing an orange jumpsuit, and she was the reason the courtroom was packed. Her father, Wesley Goodspeed, sat behind them in the front row of the gallery.

The bailiff entered, a slight young man struggling to grow a mustache.

"All rise. The Court of the Honorable Judge Harold F. Skinner is now in session."

At last, the judge entered and sat down. He was a short, square, neckless man. He looked like a cigarette machine.

Judge Skinner put on a pair of glasses with black frames and surveyed the courtroom. Burr thought the judge was pleased to have such a full house.

"You may be seated," the bailiff said.

"Counsel, you may begin," Judge Skinner said.

Burr stood again. "Burr Lafayette for the defense, Your Honor." He pulled down the cuffs of his shirt, a baby blue button-down, pinpoint oxford that did not need pulling down. He straightened his tie, a red foulard with blue diamonds that did not need straightening.

"Mr. Lafayette, when you have finished grooming, please begin."

Burr had been one of the best commercial litigators in the state of Michigan, but he had given up his practice and his marriage over a client almost young enough to be his daughter. Over an affair that hadn't turned out. After the year it had taken to ruin the previous twenty, he had moved to East Lansing and started an appellate practice—complicated, esoteric litigation that had made him famous in select legal circles but didn't always pay the bills.

"Your Honor, we are here to request bail for my client, Elizabeth Shepherd."

"The answer is *no*. I said *no* at the arraignment and the answer is still *no*." The judge raised his gavel and was just about to bring it down.

"Your Honor, my client has not been charged with murder. The preliminary exam isn't for another two weeks. If at that time—"

"No," the judge said.

Burr walked around the defense table and took two steps toward the judge. He thought that if he pulled one of Skinner's arms down, a pack of Marlboros might pop out of his mouth. He looked back at his client. Lizzie looked down at her hands, just as he had coached her to do.

Burr took another step closer toward the judge. “Your Honor, as you know, there are two questions for determining bail, one.” Burr raised his index finger. “Is the accused dangerous to the community? And two.” He raised another finger. “Is the accused a risk to flee the jurisdiction?”

“Counsel, I ruled on this at Mrs. Shepherd’s arraignment.”

“May I finish, Your Honor?”

“Mr. Lafayette, I do not find your thousand-dollar suit persuasive,” the judge said. “There are at least one hundred fifty people in here, and the air conditioning doesn’t work very well. It’s going to get ripe in about five minutes. Please get on with it.”

“Thank you, Your Honor. My client has no criminal record. None whatsoever. She has never been charged with a crime.” Burr paused. “She’s never even had a parking ticket.”

“Mr. Lafayette, Crawford County is ninety percent woods. There are no parking meters in Grayling.”

There was a snicker from the gallery.

“Your Honor, Mrs. Shepherd is not a hardened criminal. She’s not a criminal at all. And she is not a danger to the community.”

“Objection, Your Honor.” The prosecutor popped up. “John Cullen for the State. Mrs. Shepherd murdered her husband and then tried to make it look like an accident. She is most certainly dangerous.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Judge Skinner said. “Sit down.”

Burr watched the prosecutor sit. He had a full head of curly blond hair and pockmarked cheeks, the remnants of an acne-filled puberty. What struck him most, though, was Cullen’s smile. A big, wide smile that showed off straight white teeth. *Why does he smile when he objects?*

“Your Honor, my client is not going to commit a crime, and she is absolutely not a threat to flee the jurisdiction. She has a job and a six-year-old son. Since her husband drowned, she is the only parent and the sole breadwinner.”

“Objection, Your Honor.” Cullen stood up again, still smiling. “The sheriff stopped her headed south on I-75, fleeing the jurisdiction.”

“Nonsense. She was on her way to Clare to see a friend,” Burr said.

“She was running away.”

Burr turned to Cullen. “Must you smile all the time?”

“That’s enough, Mr. Lafayette. He can’t help it,” Skinner said.

“Your Honor,” Burr said, “it is tragedy enough that Mrs. Shepherd lost her husband, and her son has lost his father. Please don’t make it worse by keeping her in jail. You are making an orphan out of her son.”

“That’s because she killed his father,” Cullen said.

“He drowned.” Burr considered turning around, but he wasn’t ready to deal with Cullen’s smile. “We will post a bond, Your Honor.”

Judge Skinner pressed his glasses back on his face.

“Your Honor, Elizabeth Shepherd ambushed her husband on the South Branch and murdered him with a canoe paddle. She is a murderess, and she is dangerous.”

“You have no proof,” Burr said.

“We’ll see about that.”

“Stop it. Both of you,” Skinner said. “Mr. Lafayette, I take you at your word. Bail is set at one million dollars.”

Burr didn’t miss a beat. “Considering the circumstances, I think the bail is too high.”

“Your client only needs to post ten percent,” the judge said.

Burr felt Cullen’s smile burning into the back of his head, but he turned around and looked at Wes. Wes shook his head *no*. Burr turned back to the judge. “Your Honor.”

“If you’re not going to post bail, I am going to adjourn.” Skinner picked up his gavel. “The defendant will be returned to the county jail to await the preliminary exam.” He cracked down the gavel. “We are adjourned.”

“I’ll pay the bond,” said a voice from the back of the courtroom.

Burr turned around. A tall, thin man with silver hair stood. Other than the lawyers, he was the only one in the courtroom wearing a suit.

“Thompson, are you sure you want to do this?” Skinner said.

Thompson, whoever he was, smiled at the judge. A grim smile, Burr thought. “Who should I make out the check to, Hal?”

“Mr. Lafayette, please approach the bench.”

The judge leaned over to Burr and spoke softly. “Counsel, the Main Branch is barely a hundred yards from my courtroom. There may be a blue-wing olive hatch this afternoon. I don’t want to miss it. You have your bail. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes, Your Honor.” Burr couldn’t imagine how Skinner could possibly fit into waders, much less wade a trout stream.

Judge Skinner looked at the thin man. "Make the check payable to Crawford County."

* * *

Burr sat at his desk in his office, a cherry desk the size of a '64 Buick 225. To his left, a walk-in cedar closet held his most treasured possessions: waders, decoys, shotguns. Zeke napped on a leather couch against the far wall. Burr looked at an envelope on his desk and drummed his fingers.

There were two knocks on the door, followed by Eve McGinty, Burr's longtime, long-suffering legal assistant.

"That letter won't open itself," she said.

"I know what's inside."

"How many payments are you behind this time?"

Eve had been Burr's longtime, long-suffering legal assistant at Fisher and Allen. He had begged her not to follow him to East Lansing, but she had divorced well and said she wanted a house close to work that had a yard with full sun, so she could have a perennial garden. Burr said there must be a full sun garden somewhere near the Renaissance Center, but she wouldn't hear of it.

"I'm only three months behind."

"Let me." She grabbed the envelope.

Eve was a year older than Burr, which she didn't like, and which he didn't let her forget. She had a hint of crow's feet, which she also didn't like.

She ripped open the envelope and read the letter. Then she tugged at her earring. "This one is nasty."

"There is nothing to worry about until we get one by certified mail."

"Why you ever bought this building is beyond me."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." Burr had bought the rundown Masonic Temple, circa 1937, when he moved to East Lansing. It was six stories, narrow, right in the middle of downtown East Lansing and had no parking. Replacing the elevator had almost bankrupted him. There was a restaurant on the first floor, his office and living quarters on the top floor and unoccupied in between.

"The elevator is broken again," Eve said.

"I don't take the elevator."

“How are you ever going to pay for all of this?”

“We have a new client. A rich client with a big problem. My favorite kind. Let me take you to dinner this evening, and we’ll figure it all out.”

“No, thank you.”

He had been asking her out as long as they had known each other, and she had refused him every time.

Eve turned to leave just as Jacob burst through the door carrying a four-foot cardboard tube. He was dressed to the nines even though he spent all day doing research and writing in the bowels of the Lafayette and Wertheim Law Library.

“This is for you.” Jacob handed the tube to Burr.

“Thank you, Jacob.” He set it on his desk.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

Always suspicious of gifts, Burr looked at the tube. “I don’t think so.” He ran both hands through his hair, front to back.

“It’s a gift. What could possibly be wrong with a gift?” Eve said.

“I have a bad feeling.”

“Nonsense.” Eve walked around Burr’s desk, opened the top right-hand drawer and took out a pair of scissors.

“I was wondering where those were,” Burr said.

She cut the tape off one end of the tube.

“I’ll take it from here.” Burr took hold of the tube and pulled out a crumpled newspaper. “The *Crawford County Avalanche*,” he said. He took out more newspaper, then slid out a fishing rod.

“My goodness, it’s magnificent,” Jacob said.

“It looks like a fishing rod to me,” Eve said.

“Eve, this is not just a fishing rod. It’s a Sage. A six weight,” Jacob said.

“Really,” Eve said.

“This is the finest fly-fishing rod there is,” Jacob said.

Burr had a sinking feeling.

“It’s from our new client, Wes Goodspeed, the owner of The Gray Drake,” Jacob said.

“This is from our new, rich client? Our new, rich client with a big problem is paying his bill with a fishing rod?” Eve said. She tugged at her earring. “Burr, why don’t you go ahead and catch up on your mortgage with this fly rod?”

“I thought we could help Wes and Lizzie this one time,” Jacob said.

“Jacob, what on Earth do I possibly need this for?” Burr picked up the rod and was about to break it over his knee.

Jacob ran over. “Good God, man. What are you doing?” He wrenched the endangered fly rod out of Burr’s hands. “This is a treasure.”

Burr stood. “You said we would be paid in cash.” He took a step toward Jacob, who took a step back.

“We simply must help Lizzie.”

“I said I would. If we got paid. Stay right where you are, and hand me that rod,” Burr said.

“You’re going to break it.”

“That’s right, Jacob. In about two hundred little pieces. And then you’re going to eat them.”

The color drained from Jacob’s face. “I can’t possibly eat a fishing rod.”

“That’s right, Jacob. You can’t eat a fly rod. I can’t pay the mortgage with a fly rod. I said I would take on a criminal case if we got paid. In cash.”

* * *

The next day, Burr sat at a corner table downstairs at Michelangelo’s, facing the door. He wasn’t in fear for his life. He didn’t think anyone in particular was out to get him, but he didn’t like having his back to the door. Any door. Zeke lay at his feet, on watch for what might find its way to the floor. The food at Michelangelo’s was quite good, especially considering that Scooter, the proprietor, had blond hair, a pasty complexion and not a drop of Italian blood.

Burr sipped on Scooter’s best Chianti. “It’s quite good, Zeke.” He picked up the glass, studied it, then drank the rest of it. He raised his glass and the waitress, a student no doubt, came over and set down a basket of breadsticks and refilled his glass.

“Are you ready to order, Mr. Lafayette?”

“No, but stand by with the Chianti.”

She nodded and left.

Burr scratched Zeke behind his left ear, his favorite spot, but the dog had bigger plans. “I get it.” Burr passed him a breadstick.

He took one more swallow, sighed and set down his glass. “This is silly.” He reached over to the chair next to him and picked up the black three-ring

binder that was none other than the Lafayette and Wertheim checkbook. Eve kept it hidden from Burr, but today Eve was mulching her garden and Burr had finally found where she had hidden it: in the law library behind the *United States Bankruptcy Code*. He stared at the checkbook. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he said out loud. Burr took another swallow and opened the checkbook, stubs on the left, long, light blue checks on the right, three to a page. He flipped to the last check that had been written. "Damn it all." He took one of the breadsticks, bit into it, then passed the rest to Zeke. "Damn it all," he said again, then slammed the checkbook shut.

At that moment, Scooter himself showed up. "Is something wrong, Mr. Lafayette?" The restaurateur had brought the bottle of Chianti with him.

"I'm upside down."

"I beg your pardon." Scooter looked a little nervous.

"About ten large. When the chickens come home to roost."

"I beg your pardon," Scooter said again.

"It's about money," Burr said. He finished off his wine.

Scooter looked a little more nervous. He refilled Burr's glass and changed the subject. "Mr. Lafayette, you know there are no dogs allowed in Michelangelo's."

"Scooter," Burr said.

Scooter raised a flabby, white hand and wagged his finger at Burr. "Mr. Lafayette, we have been through this many times." Scooter looked down at Zeke. "I know he is very talented, but he is not a seeing-eye dog. And you're not blind."

Burr turned the checkbook so that it faced Scooter and opened it. "Scooter, what we have here is the upside-down balance in the Lafayette and Wertheim checkbook."

Scooter looked very nervous.

"And the reason it's upside down, Scooter, is that you're six months late on the rent. And you owe me for the new oven I paid for. Which comes to about ten thousand dollars."

"I can't be the only reason."

"How are you going to pay me?"

"We can trade for the rent."

"I can't possibly eat that much pasta." Burr drank more of the Chianti. "Scooter, if you don't pay me, I'm going to get my padlock."

Scooter shuddered. "Not the padlock. How will I pay you if you lock me out?" He scurried away.

"Zeke, buying this building seemed like such a good idea at the time." Burr slammed the checkbook shut a second time.

* * *

Burr stewed over the stewed tomatoes on his clams with red sauce. He offered an angel hair noodle to Zeke, who sucked it in like he'd done it before. "Zeke, this is my own fault." Burr swirled the wine in his glass. "I spent all my money on wine, women, and boats. The rest, I wasted." He took a drink. "I know it's a cliché, but there is a place in the world for clichés." He finished the glass and stared out the window at MAC Avenue, the sidewalk empty, only the occasional car. Finals ended a week ago, and summer term hadn't started yet. "East Lansing is just about as empty as my wallet."

Burr almost jumped out of his skin. Elizabeth Shepherd stood right in front of him.

When he came to his senses, he stood, shook her hand and pulled out a chair for her. He sat back down.

"I wasn't expecting you," he said.

"I started at your office. Jacob told me where you were."

The waitress came to their table.

"Water for me," Lizzie said.

Burr switched to water, reluctantly.

"Will you help me?" she said.

"As much as I'd like to help you, I simply can't work for free."

"There's nothing free about that Sage."

"Your father owns the most famous fishing lodge on the most famous trout stream east of the Mississippi."

"That doesn't mean he has any money." She picked up her water. The glass shook in her hand, and she set it back down. "Will you please help me?" she said again.

"There are many fine lawyers," he said, although he didn't really believe it.

"I didn't kill my husband. My son doesn't have a father. I loved Quinn,

and now he's gone." She reached for her water, but then she put her hands in her lap. "I'll find a way to pay you."

Burr felt himself caving in. Jacob would be delighted. Eve would be furious, but Lizzie did say she'd pay him. Of course, they all said that.

"You'll help me then?"

She has a little boy, like Zeke. I've come this far. I suppose I could help.

Burr nodded. *Heaven help me.*

Lizzie reached across the table and put her hand on top of Burr's. "Thank you. Thank you so much. Now what do we do?"

Burr retrieved his hand. "Now we wait."

"We wait?" Lizzie tried to pick up her glass again, but her hand was still shaking. "It's been a year since Quinn died. Josh and I were just starting to get used to all this. And now I've been charged with murder."

"I need to know what evidence the prosecutor has. Until we know that, there is very little I can do."

"Don't you even want to know what happened?" she said.

"I read the coroner's report and the transcript of the arraignment. If that's all Cullen has, no jury will convict you."

Lizzie sat back in her chair. "Jury?"

Burr looked up at her. "The standard for indictment is low. Very low. To try you for murder, all Cullen has to show is that there is probable cause that you murdered your husband. That it's more likely than not that you killed him."

"I don't care about the ins and outs. I need you to stop it."

"According to the transcript of the arraignment, Cullen says he has the murder weapon. He says you were seen fighting with Quinn at a bar."

"I didn't kill my husband. I swear I didn't."

"At the moment, it doesn't matter if you did or didn't."

Burr watched Lizzie's cheeks turn red. She leaned in toward him.

"I'm about to lose what's left of my life, and all you care about are the rules."

"Unless someone can testify that you were with them the night Quinn was killed, it will be next to impossible to get the charges dropped at the preliminary exam."

Lizzie put her head in her hands.

For a lawyer with a silver tongue, I have just done a remarkable job of

putting my foot in my mouth, he thought. “I’ll do my best, but you need to be prepared for a trial.”

She sat back up, put her hands on the table and studied them. She had long thin fingers and short fingernails, but the skin on her hands was dry and rough. She looked up at him. “I do all the cooking at the lodge. That’s why my hands look like this.”

“They look fine to me.”

“They’re dry and cracked. My fingernails are chipped. I love cooking. It’s what I do.”

Burr couldn’t see where this was going.

“My son needs me, and so does my father. I want you to wake me up from this nightmare.”

Burr looked out the window, then back at her. “Lizzie, I’ll figure it out. Go back to the lodge. I’ll get started right away.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

Burr thought she looked relieved, but she was still scared. *But who wouldn’t be?*

Lizzie left for The Gray Drake. Burr and Zeke took the stairs up to his office. He stopped at the landing on the fourth floor to catch his breath. “She said she didn’t kill her husband, and she promised to pay.” Burr looked down at Zeke. “That’s what they all say.”

When he got to his office, Eve was nowhere in sight. Burr put the check-book back behind the Bankruptcy Code. Then he peeked in the library and saw Jacob hunched over a book of Michigan appellate decisions. *Keep up the good work*. Burr snuck into his office, shut the door quietly and lay down on his couch. He took a deep breath and smelled the leather. He kicked off his shoes and, with Zeke asleep on the oriental throw rug in front of the couch, readied himself to digest the clams and red sauce and sleep off the wine.

Burr woke up with Zeke licking his left cheek and Eve looking down at him, hands on her hips. He was groggy but awake enough to know that when Eve had her hands on her hips, things did not bode well. He scratched Zeke’s left ear, considered sitting up but decided against it.

“It’s bad enough that you’re taking a nap on a Tuesday afternoon, but must you snore?”

“I don’t snore,” Burr said, who did and knew it.

“This cavalier attitude toward work and money will be the end of us.”

“Jacob is hard at work on the Murphy appeal and I am about to bring in an important new case.”

“You mean the fishing rod client?”

Burr was afraid he was going to have to sit up to defend himself.

“At the time, it seemed like a good idea to leave Fisher and Allen, but you don’t pay attention to anything except Zeke and duck hunting. And I suspect you have another leaky sailboat,” Eve said.

Burr sat up and swung his legs to the floor. Zeke retrieved one of his shoes, then the other.

“There is nothing better than a well-trained dog.”

“You simply aren’t paying attention to anything that matters.”

“I am attentive to Zeke-the-Boy.”

“It was lunacy to name your son after a dog. Why Grace went along with it is beyond me.”

“Zeke is the finest retriever I’ve ever had.”

“That’s no reason to name your son after him.”

“I thought it would be an honor to name my son after Zeke.”

“I will never understand,” Eve said.

Burr walked to his desk and looked out the window. “A fine spring day,” he said. “All the leaves are out except the oaks.” He turned to Eve. “They’re always the last.”

“Thank you, Aldo Leopold.”

Burr sat down and studied the pile of papers stacked on a corner of his desk. It wasn’t quite tall enough to hide behind.

“That stack of papers is about to fall over and you have no idea what’s in there,” Eve said.

“This is an archeological filing system. Bottom to top in chronological order.”

“It’s going to fall on you.”

“We’ll take care of it when I can’t see over it.” Burr studied the pile. “Where is the transcript of Lizzie’s arraignment?”

Eve pulled a file from the stack. The pile swayed but didn’t collapse. She handed the file to Burr.

* * *

Early the next morning, Burr slipped a padlock on the door to Michelangelo's on the way out of his building. Then, he and Zeke drove to Jacob's house. Jacob opened the passenger door of Burr's Jeep, and Zeke, riding shotgun as always, licked Jacob's cheek.

"There he is again." Zeke licked Jacob's cheek again.

"Zeke, back seat," Burr said.

The dog licked Jacob squarely on the lips and jumped into the back.

"That is the most disgusting thing that has ever happened to me." Jacob took a white linen handkerchief from his pocket and wiped off his face. He wiped off the seat. "There is dog hair everywhere."

"It's shedding season."

"He is a cur, and this is an abomination of a vehicle."

"It's perfect except for the back window." This one didn't work any better than the back window on his last Jeep, and it had the added disadvantage of having a windshield wiper. Rather than fix it when it broke, Burr had seized the initiative and broken it off before it could break. "And it's better than that silly Peugeot you drive."

"It's a Renault."

"If you're going to drive a small car, why don't you at least drive an American car? Like a Corvair," Burr said.

"A Corvair is a deathtrap."

"At least it's an American deathtrap," Burr said.

"The last Corvair was made twenty years ago."

Burr and Jacob didn't say another word until they arrived at The Gray Drake.

* * *

Burr and Jacob met Wes Goodspeed on the riverbank in front of the lodge. The river hurried by, cloudy from last night's rain. The sun was well over the trees. There was a clear blue sky, but raindrops still dripped from the leaves.

"The river's not fishable now, but it will clear up pretty quick." Wes kicked a stick into the river. "Thank you for helping us. We're very grateful."

"We're glad to help," Jacob said.

What have I gotten myself into?

“Lizzie can’t be the one to take you down the river,” Wes said.

“Mr. Goodspeed, Lizzie has to take me. I need her to show me where she was that night.”

“She can’t go,” Wes said. He turned to Jacob. “You do agree.”

“I’m afraid I agree with Burr,” Jacob said. He was dressed like he had just stepped out of the Orvis catalog.

“Mr. Goodspeed....” Burr said.

“Call me Wes.”

“Wes, there is nothing in the inquest that remotely hints that your son-in-law was murdered. And certainly not by Lizzie.”

“That’s because he drowned.”

Burr looked over at Zeke, who had his eye on a chipmunk running in and out of a hole in the foundation of the lodge. “Zeke, stay.” Burr looked back at Wes. “But that’s not what the transcript of the arraignment says.”

“None of it’s true, and there’s no reason to put her through this,” Wes said.

“I need to know what happened, so I know what questions to ask at the preliminary exam.”

“I’ll take you. She’s been through enough.” Wes headed toward the parking lot. Burr and Jacob followed him.

“Zeke, heel,” Burr said. The dog walked beside Burr. He looked back at the chipmunk but didn’t break.

Wes climbed in a Suburban and backed it up to an Au Sable riverboat on a trailer. It had a forest-green bottom and three white seats, varnish everywhere else.

If this boat were a woman, she’d be a ten.

Lizzie came out from the lodge with a small boy, who didn’t look a bit like his mother. He was dressed just like his grandfather, from his boots all the way up to his Patagonia fishing hat.

“I’ll take them, Dad. You watch Josh.” She dropped the trailer hitch on the ball, locked it down, and hooked the chains.

“I don’t want to stay with Grandpa,” Joshua said. “I want to go in the boat with you.”

“I’m the one who was there that night. I’m the one who needs to go.” She took her son by the hand over to Wes, who put his hands in his pockets. “Take him. I’m the one who’s accused.” She stopped herself.

“Is this about Dad?” Josh said.

“No,” Wes said.

“Yes, Joshua, it’s about Dad,” Lizzie said.

“Then I want to go.”

Lizzie got down on one knee and hugged him. “I have to do this for Dad.” Josh hugged her around her neck. She kissed him, then took his hand and put it in his grandfather’s hand. “The pies need to come out in ten minutes.” She kissed Josh one more time, then climbed into the Suburban. “Follow me,” she said to Burr.

Burr and Zeke climbed into the Jeep. Seeing Lizzie with her son made Burr wish he was with his son.

Burr followed Lizzie through the woods, then past a scruffy-looking bar called the Two Track. *That must be the bar where Lizzie had the fight with Quinn that night.* About eight miles later, she turned into a gravel parking lot next to the river. Lizzie backed the trailer into the river and launched the boat. Just as Burr reached the boat, she climbed back into the Suburban.

“Follow me. We’re going to drop off the trailer at Smith Bridge, then bring your Jeep back here.”

When they got back to the Chase Bridge launch, Lizzie pushed the stern into the current, then pulled it to the bank, the bow facing downstream.

“Jacob, you take the middle seat. Burr, you take the bow. There really isn’t room for Zeke but he can sit between you.”

“Zeke can take my spot,” Jacob said.

“How are you going to see where everything happened?” Lizzie said.

“Jacob, you look like you just stepped out of the Orvis catalog. Get in the boat,” Burr said.

“I get deathly ill on all boats.”

“How do you fish without being in a boat?” Burr said.

“I fish from the bank.”

Jacob walked back to the Jeep. Lizzie sat in the stern, Zeke midships, Burr in the bow. Lizzie nosed the boat into the river. The current caught it and carried them through the runout. “The auction was over by ten-thirty. I dropped Quinn off here about midnight. I drove the trailer to Smith Bridge, picked up the Suburban and went home.”

The river bent to the east. They floated over a sandbar, then past a marsh. After that, tag alders grew down to the river. Then the river took a sharp bend

north. There was a thirty-foot bank on the east side, snags where the river ate away the bank, and the trees tipped over, their roots like so many snakes tangled up in each other. There were hardwoods and white pines on top of the bank.

“There’s fish in this bend,” Lizzie said. “It’s deep here, maybe ten feet, but no Hex. There’s not enough silt.”

They floated on through riffles, runs, and holes. A beaver lodge on their left. A bald eagle, coasting in the wind, followed them downstream. There was a cabin every now and then, but it was mostly wild, river country.

Lizzie pointed with her paddle. “Over there. On the right. You can put a boat in there, but you’ve got to push it the last hundred feet. It’s nothing you’d want to do in the dark.”

Burr looked at his watch. They’d been in the river for a half hour.

“We’re coming out of state land,” Lizzie said. “Now it’s mostly private. There are a couple holes here, but Quinn would have kept going. The best Hex hatch is up ahead.”

There were a few more cabins now, mostly old, mostly rundown. But here and there, a well-kept log home.

“Do you know anything about the *Hexagenia limbata*?”

“What?” Burr said.

“The Hex.” She pointed in about twenty feet in front of the boat.

“There’s a hole in front of us. Some current but not too much, and the bottom is muddy. The Hex nymphs bury themselves in the mud. When the water temperature is right, they dig their way out and float to the surface. Those are the emergers. They drift a little in the current. Then they fly off. They’re huge, especially for a mayfly. They swarm over the river and mate in the air. Then they die and fall back into the river. Those are the spinners. The trout get them as nymphs, emergers, and spinners.”

Burr had no idea what she was talking about.

“They hatch at night. In the dead of night. That’s why Quinn was here. The Hex hatch on the South Branch made The Gray Drake famous. That’s how Wes got his Orvis fly shop. And all the sports wanted to fish with Quinn.”

This seems like a lot of trouble just to catch a fish. I’d rather be sleeping in the dead of night. Burr turned and looked back at her. “If Quinn was murdered, someone must have met up with him on the river.”

“Quinn drowned.” She steered them around a deadhead in the current, then over to the bank. “There’s at least twenty places you could walk in from

the road. Four or five where you could bring a boat in on a two-track. But you'd have to drag the boat at least part of the way."

They passed a row of cabins on the west bank.

"Anyone from one of these cabins could have stopped him."

She nodded. "But no one did."

Burr thought she was awfully sure of herself. "Did Quinn have any enemies?"

Lizzie steered around a rock. "Quinn had rivals."

"Rivals?"

"He was the best guide on the river." Lizzie slipped the anchor chain over the side. The boat dragged downstream about ten feet, then the chain took hold. She pointed just past the bow. "See that? The dark water? That's Deadman's Hole, where Quinn drowned. The best Hex hatch on the South Branch comes off here. If you time it right."

How could Quinn have possibly drowned at a place called Dead Man's Hole?

"This hole's deep, maybe ten feet. And the current is tricky." She pointed with the paddle again. "And right there, that's where the riffles start. The hole ends just before there and the water shoals. That's where they found him. Cassie must have jumped out of the boat and swam to shore. Somehow she found her way back to the lodge."

"Cassie?"

"Quinn's dog."

Burr didn't know what to make of the dog. *Did she figure into this somehow?* Right now he needed to understand what happened on the river that night.

He swiveled in his seat and looked back at Lizzie again. The boat rocked. "Is this his boat?"

"No. The sheriff came and got it after they found the paddle." She ran her hand along the rail. "He loved his boat. *Traveler*." Lizzie looked up at Burr. "Do you know who *Traveler* was?"

"Robert E. Lee's horse."

Lizzie nodded at him. "Lee said that was the best battle horse he ever had. That's how Quinn felt about his boat."

"What do you think happened?"

"I think he must have slipped and cracked his head on the rail." She

ran her hand along the starboard rail again. “He must have been knocked out or at least dazed. The anchor chain got tangled on his ankle, and he fell over the side. Right about there.” She pointed off to her right. “The chain didn’t hold in the deep water, not with Quinn tangled up in it. The current dragged him and the boat downstream to the end of the hole, where the water shoaled.” She pointed downriver about fifty feet.

Burr could see where the water changed color from coffee to sand.

“The chain hung up there. That’s where they found him.”

“Who found him?”

“A fisherman. The next day.”

“How did he get in here?”

“He walked in from over there.” Lizzie pointed to her left. “A two-track comes in from the west. By the time it gets to the river it’s a path. There’s another way in over there. Downstream.” She pointed to the east side. “It’s just a path.”

Burr turned back around and looked at Lizzie. “How do you know he drowned?” Burr knew the answer, but he wanted to hear it from Lizzie.

She took off her sunglasses. Burr thought her eyes looked a little puffy.

“There was water in his lungs.” She stopped. “It’s so awful. I can’t think about it.” Her hands began to shake again. “I loved Quinn. More than anything. He loved me, and he loved fly-fishing. I never asked him to choose.”

Burr needed to get back to what happened that night. “I assumed Quinn hit his head on the rail, but the transcript of your arraignment said you killed him with a canoe paddle.”

Lizzie’s voice broke. “Quinn and I had some problems, but I loved him. It wasn’t a perfect marriage.”

That was just about the most non-answer answer he’d ever heard. “When you got the boat back, was the paddle in it?”

“No.”

“Did you wonder where it was?”

“I didn’t really think about it. But it probably fell in the river and floated away. Things fall in every day, and nobody ever sees them again.”

“We’re going to have to think about it now.”

“This was called Dead Man’s Hole,” she said. “Now they call it Quinn’s Hole.”

Lizzie pulled up the anchor chain, and they floated on.

“This paddle is going to be a problem. We’re going to have to figure it out,” Burr said.

Lizzie ignored him. “Over there,” she said, “you can drive almost all the way in from there.”

Burr looked to his right.

They kept going. Lizzie pointed out more Hex holes, but they didn’t stop. A little further on, Lizzie pointed to the west bank. “There,” she said. “That’s Quinn’s father’s cabin.”

Burr looked downstream. The river straightened out, higher ground with hardwoods and pines. This didn’t exactly fit Burr’s definition of a cabin. A two-story log home with shiny, varnished logs, paned windows and a shake roof. There was no grass, the yard filled with ferns, myrtle and wildflowers. There was a boathouse built on the dock with living quarters above.

“That must be worth a fortune,” Burr said.

“Quinn’s father lives there during the season,” Lizzie said.

“With all that money, why was Quinn a guide?”

“That’s how he could afford to be a guide,” Lizzie said.

They drifted on. The river widened and flattened out. There were a few more cabins, but it was mostly wild again, low and swampy, full of willows, dogwood and tag alders. Smith Bridge lay just ahead. They drifted another hundred yards, then Lizzie leaned into the paddle and pulled them ashore.

“This is where we dropped off the trailer and where I left it that night. And this is where Quinn would have landed.”

The boat nosed onto the shore. Zeke jumped out and found the nearest tree. Lizzie stepped into the river and pulled the boat over the bank. Burr stepped to the bow and onto the bank.

“How long would it have taken Quinn to get here?” Burr said. “In the dark.”

“It depends on how much you fish.”

“How about that night?”

Lizzie took off her sunglasses again. “That night, it took the rest of his life.”