

## A HOME ON THE RIVER

by

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The Marshal came up first and stood waiting and then The Government Man came separately in his sedan and left it parked at the end of the dirt road a hundred yards short of the house. The mist had settled down into the tree tops and they wore it there like a shawl. Through the pines the men could see the river slide past slow and silent, its surface taking on the complexion of the mist and the sky and all of it the color of gunmetal.

The Government Man reached up and felt the air between his thumb and two fingers as if testing a bolt of fabric. “Good God,” he said, “does it ever stop raining here?” He cinched up his tie and went to the back of the sedan.

“Where did you say you came in from?” The Marshal asked.

The Government Man told him.

The Marshal whistled. “That’s a long way to come just to throw a man out of his home.”

“What would you prefer we do, leave him there to be poisoned by his own land?” The Government Man opened the trunk of the sedan and took out the papers. “We gave you a chance to get him out of there.”

“You’ve got to give him a little time. You just can’t force a man like this.”

“We don’t have any more time, Marshal,” The Government Man said. He slammed the trunk closed. “Besides, you needn’t have come with me. It’s a federal order. It does not require your presence.”

The Marshal watched The Government Man. He did not look old enough to be ordering anyone to do anything. “You might feel different about having me along once you meet him.”

The Marshal and The Government Man walked toward the house. The road cut through thick timberland of second-growth pine and blackberry brush and low fern where the soil was a dark, soggy loam of decaying matter. The wind coming through the trees showered the men with water that had been clinging to the pines.

“Here’s the wellhead,” The Marshal said, pointing down to a ten-inch capped pipe coming out of the earth.

“It’s too close to the river, goddamn it,” The Government Man said.

The Marshal paused and watched the river moving narcotically through the trees. “And you’re sure it’s in the river?”

“We’re sure,” The Government Man said, squinting up through the pines to where dozens of mine shafts punctured the bare hillside as if tunneled out by giant, burrowing creatures. “It comes from up there.” He pointed up to where sediment cored from the earth spread out from the shafts in alluvial fans and fluids percolated from the mouths of the mines and drained down the hillside. “What did you call it, Marshal?”

“They call it Prairie Dog Town,” The Marshal said.

The Government Man studied the hillside. “Well, anyhow, that’s where it comes from. It gets into the riverbed and into the groundwater.”

“And you say it makes you drunk?” The Marshal asked.

“No. It makes you *look like* you’re drunk. It poisons the nervous system, among other things.”

“Then how come they don’t have it in Plattesville?”

“Listen,” The Government Man said, annoyed. “It comes from those silver mines. The mines are downriver of Plattesville.”

“Sure, it’s downriver all right,” said The Marshal, hoisting up his gun belt.

“That’s right.”

The Marshal bristled. “There’s no need for you to get short with me. We didn’t have this trouble until you federal boys showed up.”

“Oh, you’ve had it all along,” The Government Man said. He shook his head. “That’s just the problem with you people, you don’t understand what you can’t see.”

“No, I guess we don’t,” said The Marshal.

The Government Man turned back toward the house. “Like I said, you needn’t have come with me, Marshal. It’s a federal issue now.”

They went on down the road with The Government Man just ahead. The earth was like a sponge underfoot and The Marshal noted with some satisfaction that the leather of the man’s wing-tips had begun to darken from the moisture.

“What does he do out here?” The Government Man called over his shoulder.

“He’s a logger.”

“We should have talked to his union, then. They’ve helped us with this sort of thing before.”

The Marshal smiled grimly. “He’s no union man. Says he won’t be beholden to another man for his wages.”

“Who does he work for, then?”

“He works alone,” said The Marshal.

The Government Man stopped short. “What kind of logger works alone on trees like these?” he asked, motioning to the giants towering over them.

“He falls and marks the timber by himself and the union teams come through and drag it into the river. They pull it out in Leesburg and pay him by the board foot.”

The Government Man let out a long breath. “Am I going to have a problem with this man, Marshal?”

The Marshal looked past The Government Man to the little house sitting belligerently among the trees near the riverbank. “I want you to take a good look at something,” he said.

They came through the trees and stood between the river and the house with its pine siding, double-hung windows and sagging porch. Moss clung in patches to the roof shingles. The house sat on wood skids which in turn rested in deep ruts in the earth that ran all the way to where the land fell off into the river. The Marshal pointed down at the ruts. “Every three or four years we bring a tractor out here and tie a sling around that house and pull it back from the river another twenty feet. And every year the river creeps towards it again.” He turned to The Government Man. “Mister, that’s been going on for four generations with this family. So you tell me if you’re going to have a problem when you tell him he can’t live here no more.”

The Government Man chewed at his lip and peered through the trees. “What happened to his wife?”

“She died about five years ago. Some kind of cancer, they think.”

The Government Man paused, staring at the house. “They think,” he said flatly. “And what about the boy?”

The Marshal looked away. “He’s a cripple,” he said softly.

“And why do you think that is, Marshal?” The Government Man snapped.

“I wouldn’t know. First there were seizures and then he just stopped walking.”

“How old is he?”

“Six. Maybe seven.”

The Government Man stared up at the mines. “Jesus Christ.”

A flatbed came up the road, the big tractor lashed to the bed, its steel jaws thrust out in front of it. The driver and another man left the truck idling in the road and began to unhitch the chains holding the tractor down.

“What’s that goddamn tractor doing here?” The Marshal asked. “I thought we were just going to talk to him today?”

“We gave you a week to get him out of here,” The Government Man said. “I sent him the final notice to vacate three days ago.”

The Marshal turned quickly toward the house. “I told you, you just can’t do that to a man like this.” The Marshal started to the house in a fast gait with The Government Man hurrying behind. They stopped short of the porch. The Marshal stood back and cupped his hands to his mouth. “Jocko, would you come on out?” he called. “There’s a man here needs a word with you.”

They waited. “There are no lights on,” The Government Man said. “Maybe he cleared out without telling anyone. They do that sometimes.”

The Marshal did not answer. They went up to the porch and called for the man again. A pair of logger’s caulked boots sat beside the front door. A cold wind lifted the edge of a blue tarp briefly exposing the dull metal and rubber of a wheelchair beneath. The Marshal pushed the door back, waited, and then the two men stepped into the darkness. In the faded light of the front room they could see an empty plate on the table, a blanket crumpled in a chair, a small cloth bear on the sofa. The damp air smelled of bacon fat and tobacco smoke. There was a clock ticking somewhere in the house.

They found the lumberman in the rear bedroom lying on the bed, head thrown back, his blue eyes staring flatly at the ceiling. The small pistol lay on the floor where it had kicked out of his hand when he pulled the trigger. The Marshal bent down and studied the gun and then he walked to the bed and lifted the blanket and looked down at the boy lying at his father’s side. The Government Man gasped and stepped back when he saw it. The Marshal shook his head. “Good God,” he said. “What an awful thing to do.”

The Marshal and The Government Man walked together silently through a slow rain back out to the main road. The Marshal spoke to the men with the tractor and then he called on his radio. The Government Man got into his sedan and began to drive away, but then he swung the car around and pulled it up to where The Marshal was standing beside his truck. The Government Man leaned across the seat and rolled down the far window. “Marshal!” he called out through the window. “It wasn’t my fault.”

The Marshal studied the man. “No, I suppose not,” he said. “People like you just don’t understand what you can’t see.” The Marshal shoved his hands down into his pockets. “Well, you needn’t worry about it anymore, mister; it’s a local issue now.”

The Government Man looked out through the windshield at the river passing swollen within its banks. The wind swept through the tree tops and the rain drummed quietly off the hood of the sedan. The Government Man nodded silently and then he drove away, but The Marshal stayed and watched the river for a very long time until the darkness stole it from his sight.