

Heart of Stone

by

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Chapter One

Three Years Ago

The three men sitting in the cab of the pick-up truck were snickering like a bunch of high school jocks parked outside of the gym on prom night. They looked like the Three Stooges slightly gone to seed with approaching middle age. The man behind the wheel wore his dark hair long in back, but with a page

boy's cut in front. Beside him sat a stocky, powerfully built, man whose fair hair was cropped close to his skull. The last man had wiry hair; it stuck out like an Afro. He chain-smoked Camels and only stopped puffing long enough to drink from the bottle passed by his buddies.

The festive nature inside the cab contrasted sharply with the scene they were observing on Strait Street. The Cherry Creek Sawmill was closing down and over a hundred workers, their families and friends, as well as everybody else in the small Olympic Peninsula logging town of Port Talbot, were on hand to witness it. Though it was a weekend, the men wore their work clothes: ball caps, flannel shirts, bib overalls or jeans held up by suspenders, and heavy boots with lug soles. Their wives wore cleaner versions of their men's uniform, but with flat soled shoes. They held young children in their arms.

By the front gate stood a phalanx of trucks and vans with the four-letter signs of radio and television stations. A gaggle of reporters, inappropriately attired in suits and ties, their microphones shoved out at arm's length, were clustered around a makeshift podium.

A man and a woman, of the same generation as the three in the truck, were speaking to the reporters. They beamed with happiness and good health. They were the only happy people there. The man was tall and muscular with long and wavy hair and

a large nose. He dressed like a 1960s college professor in worn slacks and a corduroy jacket with leather patches on the elbows. His companion, an attractive blond woman with eyes the color of Erin, stood with her feet firmly planted as if nothing could knock her down.

Clustered around the two, like scared chicks, stood fifty of their supporters: outsiders; bearded, tie-dyed, Birkenstocked, and swathed in pile jackets from L.L. Bean, Patagonia, Eddie Bauer, and Land's End. Though it was a sunny spring day, a wind with the bite of arctic frost blew in from the north, over the bluff from the Strait of Juan de Fuca. From a row of tables with folding legs, the wind blew away the paper plates and plastic champagne glass remains of a picnic buffet.

Sheriff Tom Moody, his three deputies, and uniformed representatives from the United States Forest Service stood off to one side, observing the mood of the crowd. "It could get pretty ugly here," predicted Sheriff Moody. "If one of them environmentalists even giggles, someone's gonna get shot."

A young forest service worker, preppy even in uniform, replied grimly, "Blaming the Forest Watch people for closing the mill is like saying the victim of a crime is responsible for that crime. It's a new age, Sheriff. Politics, resource conservation, and international trade are competing with small town economies." He let his face soften. "On a global scale,

what happens here in Port Talbot doesn't really matter much."

"Well," the Sheriff grumbled, stamping his feet like a mule annoyed to be wearing a saddle, "they don't have to look so G-D, God-Damn, happy about it. That's all I have to say about it, thank you." He didn't like this man, this wildlife biologist who used big words. He always seemed to be forgetting who, and where, he was. "What do you want to do about this, Cliff?" the sheriff said to a pink-faced man who resembled an overstuffed chair.

Clifford Doty, the forest supervisor and nominal head of the Peninsula National Forest, waved a fat finger in the air.

"Nothin.' Let 'em hang themselves."

Contrary to Sheriff Moody's expectations, the town residents watching the media event had no malice in their hearts. They could have easily vandalized cars and caused fights. But they chose only to watch. Their faces didn't betray anger; just frustration tempered by resignation. It had all happened before. The older ones had seen it in their youth and now it was time for their children to see it come around again. When there are no trees to cut, for whatever reason - politics, spotted owls, over harvesting, a lumber market bottoming out, or whatever - mills close down and people lose their jobs.

The people of Port Talbot waited quietly, listening to the man and woman explain for the news reporters what a great day for

the forest this was. "One thousand year old trees will be safe from the rapacious chain saw," said the man with the big nose, "and spotted owls will no longer be endangered from habitat destruction."

The blond woman added, "A new day is dawning in America; a day when the needs of the environment will take primacy over short-term economic, market-driven, forces."

Ronald Lanier, the preppy-looking forest service wildlife biologist, felt the speakers were terribly naive. To no one in particular he spoke quietly, "The new day dawning isn't anything about the environment. It's about multinational corporations dictating what, and how much, should be cut in the forest. Only protective legislation is going to safeguard the trees and, thank God, we elected a president and congress intent on doing just that!"

Sheriff Moody wondered if people would leave Port Talbot as they did in the early 1980s, the last time logging went bust. For a short time, Port Talbot had looked like a ghost town. Then, Owen Owens started investing in Newtown, building houses for the Seattle and Port Angeles commuters. We could use more men in Port Talbot like the owner of the Owens Family Sawmill; that's what Tom Moody believed. Owen sure brought Port Talbot back from the brink, he did!

The three men in the truck wanted this whole media circus to

end and for the environmentalists to get into their car and drive away. The beer was gone, the whiskey bottle empty, and the men's bladders full. The stocky man with the crew cut crowed, "I'd like to see the face on that big-nosed son-of-a-bitch when the smoke bomb goes off and he's got to smell skunk and rotten eggs."

"Calm down, Billy. It'll happen soon enough," said the man in the driver's seat."

"What did you guys use this time, Owen?"

"Same as before; flash powder from Walter's stash."

"What did you do about the stink?"

Owen smiled. He'd taken chemistry in high school and college. As had Walter Payne, the third man in the truck. But Billy Budd had barely passed eighth grade physical science and didn't understand anything about organic molecules. "It'll stink. Ken Donatano mixed me up some stuff from the high school chem lab."

Billy bounced up and down in the seat with excitement and impatience. "It better be strong enough. I want that big-nosed dickhead to smell like Moses for a week."

"Billy!" Walter complained, "Do you think you can keep your racism under control for at least five minutes?"

Within the confines of the cab, Billy couldn't move much but he did manage to lift a cheek off the seat and bark a reply.

"Jesus-fucking-Christ," Walter shouted. "You trying to

asphyxiate us, or what?" He rolled down the window and a cloud of cigarette smoke poured out of the cab.

"Knock it off, you two," Owen ordered. "It looks like something is happening." He had noticed the press conference breaking up and the two principals, the happy speakers, moving to their car. They were being protected by their team of tree huggers but none of the Port Talbotites moved to intercept them. They got into their car, a yellow VW bug, and fired it up. The old German automobile puttered like a Model T. "Right on time," Owen said. He had discovered years ago that people, anxious to catch the ferry from Winslow, on Bainbridge Island, to Seattle, were always punctual about leaving Port Talbot two hours before the boat sailed. "You two sure you tied the smoke bomb on tight?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Billy said. "Let's get out of here. I got to piss like a big dog."

As the VW rolled past the pick-up, the man inside the little yellow car looked directly into Owen Owens eyes. Owen smiled and raised the middle finger of his right hand in a salute. The man in the VW smiled back at him, showing a perfect row of teeth.

"Hold on," Owen said. "I want to wait until the news hounds take off."

The newscasters made a desultory attempt to interview some of the displaced workers but nobody in town felt much like

talking. The rest of the tree huggers loaded up their tables, picked up their trash, got into their cars, and drove off. The media weren't far behind. They all had the same ferry to catch.

The three men got out of the cab and ducked behind an anemic-looking red cedar. One-by-one, Owen, Billy, and Walter returned to the truck, zipping up their flies, as the townspeople walked or drove by. They stood by the pick-up, waved to the brooding and sulky crowd and passed a remark or two.

Billy started playing with the empty beer cans the three men had accumulated in the cab. He pitched them at a dilapidated cardboard box Owen kept for trash. Drunk or sober, Billy couldn't hit a wall with a bazooka; the cans joined the rest of the mess in the truck bed: spare tires, tools, tarps, firewood. "How we gonna know if it worked?" he asked.

Owen thought about it for a moment. "We won't, until we hear about it."

"You sure they'll report it?"

Walter cut in with, "Billy, don't be such a lame-o."

Billy Budd reared up like an angry dog baring its fangs. "I ain't so stupid, just because I cut trees, Walter. I'm smart enough to know that you guys count too much on how cute you do things. Putting a clock on the bomb was a pretty stupid idea, if you ask me, when we coulda' lit a fuse just as easy. And sending 'em a letter saying we were gonna do something? Talk about lame.

Now they'll know who did it."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah," Walter replied, tired of hearing the same argument for over twenty years. Billy always thought Owen and Walter dumped on him for not being smart and going to college. "That's the point of it," Walter explained slowly. "Right, Owen? It doesn't do to mess with people if they don't know who you are."

A knot of people approached the three friends. Owen directed Billy and Walter to stop their bickering. He gave Billy a good-natured cuff behind the ear and the two of them broke into a boxing match, laughing like a couple of goofs. They slapped at each other with open hands.

One of the now out-of-work mill operators stopped to watch. After a respectful amount of time, he ventured, "What are you three so happy about?"

Owen remembered this guy from high school. He'd been a year ahead of him, Billy, and Walter. The guy had two first names: Robert Martin.

"Them environmentalists are going to have a big surprise when they get onto the ferry!" Billy exclaimed. He winced when Owen jabbed him in the side - shouldn't have let his guard down.

"Say what?"

"Don't listen to Billy," Owen called to Martin. "He's just blowing off steam."

"Yeah; well we'll see how funny he thinks it is in a week or two when there's no work to do and he's got no trees to fell," Martin sourly replied. "How's a man supposed to support a family?" He directed this comment to Owen Owens. Everybody in town knew Billy had children, but no wife, and that Walter only liked children. Owens was a single man. He owned property, ran the Owens Family Sawmill, built houses; he was an important member of the community.

Owen shook his head slowly, sadly.

"You gonna need anybody new at your mill, Owen?"

The sideways motion of Owen's head intensified slightly.
"Sorry, Martin. That fucking owl."

Martin nodded his understanding. The forest service had begun to close large tracts of federal timber land because the endangered Northern spotted owl had been found there. Those closures directly affected the Cherry Creek Mill, which relied exclusively on federal trees. There was talk in Seattle about extending governmental protection to owls found on private property too.

"Depending on what that wildlife biologist Lanier does with the rest of the timber around here, I may be closing down in a couple of months too."

"Tough break," commiserated Martin.

Owen agreed. He'd seen this coming for years. That's why

he'd let Cherry Creek go for the forest service timber while he cornered all the contracts for milling trees from private landowners. He hadn't made as much money on the lower volume but developing the Newtown property had kept him in the black. Using his own lumber, milled in his own mill, and hiring locals to build the houses had saved him a ton of money by eliminating a shitload of middlemen. His friends in county government, and on the building commission, had helped a lot too. Cherry Creek couldn't act that way because they were part of a nationwide company with a CEO, board of directors, and a listing on the stock market. Times like these, it paid to be small and family held. You could see the bad times coming faster than the guys in the corporate offices and move quicker to take advantage of the changes.

"Well..." said Owen.

"Well..." said Martin. He just stood there; a man with nothing to do, no place to go, and plenty of time to do it.
"Guess I'll head down to the Plaza."

"Most folks heading that way?"

Robert Martin looked around him, at his friends and neighbors as they filed past. "I s'pose. Not much else to do." He looked up and down the street again. "You?"

Owen silently consulted his two friends by looking from one to the other. "Why not?" he decided. As good a place as any to

wait.

The thirteen bars on the central town Plaza were kept busy that night by men who didn't know where their next paycheck would come from. By dinnertime that night, most of the wives knew their husbands wouldn't be home until after closing time, and all the girlfriends had gone down to the taverns to join in the wake.

When the facts concerning the explosion at the ferry dock reached Port Talbot on the eleven o'clock news, there were three people more interested than anyone else in town. One was happy at the tragic turn of events. One kept his worry at bay. And the third thought the world must surely end now. "I thought you said it was a smoke bomb, just like the other," Walter Payne whined.

Billy Budd laughed. "Fucking Jew bastard."

Owen Owens shrugged his shoulders, trying to hide his concern. "Something must have gone wrong."

"What are we going to do if the police investigate?" Walter felt himself pulling on his mop of wiry hair. "What about the note?"

Owen shrugged his shoulders again. That was a good question, he thought, but all he could say was, "I don't know."