

Chapter 1

Evening, Wednesday, December 14

"And Number twelve, Mr. Wilker, bids twenty-five hundred dollars for the Harpers Ferry Hall Rifle. Will somebody bid three thousand for it? Ladies and gentlemen, this rifle came from right here in north Georgia almost two hundred years ago. Mr. Wilker knows its value. He's a collector of fine weapons. So will someone give me three thousand for it? Three thousand. That would still be highway robbery. Nobody? How about twenty-eight hundred?"

Harvey Goodridge, wearing a tuxedo with a royal blue cummerbund, stood at the podium of Witherston Inn's Gold Nugget Hall. In a voice hoarse from high-speed auctioneering, the New York auctioneer described the weapon his beautiful assistant held up.

"This gun has a thirty-two-inch-long barrel. State of the art in 1831. And it was used by your ancestors, folks, when they protected the ladies and children from Indians and bears. Let's end this bidding, ladies and gentlemen. twenty-seven hundred? Nobody? Twenty-six hundred? Nobody? Okay. Going...going...gone. Sold for twenty-five hundred to Mr. Red Wilker. Congratulations, sir."

Goodridge paused for breath and then in a monotone said, "Number twelve, please pick up your item and a certificate of provenance from Mr. Fairfield at the close of the auction."

Red Wilker stood up and waved to the crowd attending the town's first auction. He wore a red sweatshirt with a black hunting rifle on the front that advertised his store, Wilker Gun Shop.

Goodridge got his breath back. His assistant brought out a Cherokee weapon this time.

"Here, ladies and gentlemen, is a four-foot-long, river-cane Cherokee blowgun from the early nineteenth century. It's a prize. It's probably worth ten thousand dollars. You've had time to examine it and note the fine craftsmanship. And it comes with a thistledown dart."

He explained its use.

"The Cherokee Indians, who lived in north Georgia and the Carolinas for a thousand years, employed the blowgun mainly for hunting small game. But for battle they poisoned the darts with viper venom."

"That's poison from a silly, slippery snake," whispered Jorge Arroyo to his twin brother Jaime.

"That would slither across the floor and slip under your door," Jaime whispered back.

"And slide up your leg."

"Hijos, be quiet." Paco said.

Mev—Detective Emma Evelyn Arroyo of the Witherston Police Department—could tell that her twin sons were getting restless. After the hour-long cocktail reception and silent auction, they'd sat still for another hour watching Mr. Goodridge auction off expensive antiques before getting to the Cherokee artifacts.

Jorge and Jaime were genetically identical and indistinguishable from each other to most people. At almost fifteen years of age they were both five foot seven and a hundred and thirty-five pounds. They both had brown eyes and curly dark brown hair, which Jaime parted on the right side and Jorge on the left. They resembled their Spanish father more than their mother.

Paco had brown eyes and curly black hair. The twins were both good students and, Mev thought to herself, good boys, though not particularly obedient.

In the silent auction that preceded the live auction, Jaime had bid forty-one dollars on a faded pink silk rose for his girlfriend Annie Jerden. Jaime and Annie spent a lot of time with each other listening to sixties folk music, which Jaime was learning to play on his guitar. Jaime was trying to persuade Annie to sing, since he couldn't. His voice was still changing.

Jorge didn't have a girlfriend, but he liked Mona Pattison, who was this year's Miss Teenage Witherston. She was also the new president of Keep Nature Natural, Witherston High School's environmental organization.

"Pay attention, ladies and gentlemen, and young men. This blowgun has probably killed more than a few of your forebears. And it could kill again. Your parents may want to bid on it." Harvey Goodridge glared at the boys.

Jorge and Jaime looked at their parents.

Paco shook his head firmly. "No," he mouthed.

"I will start the bidding at three thousand. Who'll give me three thousand dollars for this fine Cherokee blowgun? Three thousand, three thousand. Do I hear three thousand?"

A wealthy Atlanta collector held up her paddle. She was number twenty-nine. Her money came from stock in Lockheed Martin.

"The lady in blue bids three thousand dollars. She's number twenty-nine. Who will give me four?"

"Four dollars." shouted Thom Rivers, who stood along the wall with Waya Gunter, Atohi Pace, Atohi's wife Ayita, and their seven-year-old son Moki.

"Who's he?" Hempton Fairfield demanded. The antique dealer rose out of chair at the side of the stage to point at Thom.

"I'll give you five dollars." Waya shouted. "That's more than you paid the Cherokees for it." He waved a hand-lettered cardboard sign with the words writ large CHEROKEES WERE ROBBED.

"May I ask you to arrest these delinquents for disturbing the peace?" Fairfield addressed the one policeman in the room.

"I'll bid thirty-five hundred dollars if you'll arrest them," shouted Red Wilker, waving paddle number twelve.

Deputy Ricky Hefner did not respond.

"Arrest them," Fairfield said. "Now."

Mev knew both Thom and Waya, who were now young men, and had spoken to them at the reception. She was amused by their antics. Obviously, Mr. Hempton Fairfield was not.

"Thirty-six hundred," shouted local attorney Grant Griggs, waving paddle number twenty-four.

"Thirty-six hundred, says the gentleman down front. Number twenty-four. Who will give me four thousand? Four thousand dollars for a rare blowgun. You'll never see one like it. Four thousand?"

"Thirty-seven hundred," Red Wilker yelled.

"Who will give me four thousand?"

The art collector raised paddle twenty-nine again.

"Four thousand dollars says the lady in blue. Do I hear five thousand?"

"Forty-five hundred." Grant Griggs held up paddle twenty-four.

"Forty-six hundred." A well-dressed older gentleman whom Mev had not seen before held up paddle number forty.

"Forty-six hundred dollars to the gentleman at the back table. Who will give me five thousand? It's a steal for five thousand. Five, do I hear five?"

"Right. It is a steal," Waya shouted. "First you wipe out our civilization because you think we're not civilized. Then you steal the things our civilization left behind, call them treasures, and sell them for thousands of dollars to rich people."

"That's enough," Fairfield responded. "Officer, I protest."

"You're selling our civilization. And we Indians have no money to buy it back. The only stuff we Indians own are memories passed down to us."

This time Deputy Hefner beckoned to Waya and Thom. Waya and Thom followed him out of the hall.

"Five thousand." Grant Griggs waved paddle number twenty-four again.

"Fifty-one hundred." That was paddle number twenty-eight. Mev recognized her as Carolyn Foster, the newly appointed director of the Cherokee-Witherston Museum still under construction.

"Let me hear six thousand," Goodridge called out.

"Fifty-two hundred," Grant Griggs said.

"Fifty-three hundred." Paddle number forty.

"Fifty-four hundred." Paddle number twenty-nine.

"Fifty-five hundred." Paddle number forty again. Who was that gentleman? Mev wondered.

"Fifty-six hundred." Paddle number twenty-nine.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let me hear six thousand dollars. Who will bid six thousand?" Goodridge got back into the game.

"Six thousand," Gifford Plains said from the table next to Mev's. He held up paddle number twenty.

"Okay. The anthropologist—right?—bids six thousand dollars for this Cherokee blowgun. And the anthropologist must know blowguns! So will someone give me seven thousand? Seven thousand dollars. This Cherokee relic is a steal at seven thousand. Let's end this bidding, ladies and gentlemen. Seven thousand? Nobody? How about sixty-five hundred? Nobody? ... Okay. Going...going...gone. Sold for six thousand dollars to the anthropologist. That's number twenty. Congratulations, sir."

"Woohoo," Jorge exclaimed. "Dr. Plains lives across the road from Aunt Lottie. We'll get to see the blowgun!"

"And the dart," Jaime said.

The auctioneer intoned automatically: "Number twenty, please pick up your item and a certificate of provenance from Mr. Fairfield at the close of the auction."

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Mev, Paco, and Jaime and Jorge had come to the auction just for fun. They had no interest in collecting art or antiques, but they took advantage of every form of public entertainment Witherston had to offer: high school sporting events during the school year, swim

meets during the summer, outdoor markets, movies, fishing and hiking, and now the Fairfield Antiquities auction, the first of its kind in town.

They were seated at a round table for eight with Mev's Aunt Lottie and their close friends the Lodges: Lauren, Jim, and son Beau. Although the Lodges were the only black and white couple in very whitish Witherston, they encountered little prejudice, for Dr. Lodge's patients cared less about his skin color than his medical skills and Judge Lodge's constituents cared more about their inheritance than her choice of a husband. Jim was a gynecologist, and Lauren was a probate judge. Mev believed that their acceptance in north Georgia signaled a decline in the racism that had long troubled the South.

Handsome, brown-skinned Beau, who was once excluded from his classmates' birthday parties, had been elected president of the ninth grade on the basis of his leadership ability, his kindness, and probably his good looks. A collector of Cherokee artifacts, Beau had bid sixty five dollars on an ancient flint arrowhead in the silent auction.

Like the Arroyos, the Lodges had come to Witherston to stay, even though Lauren had to commute daily to Lumpkin County Probate Court in Dahlonega twenty miles away.

Mev had counted interracial couples as well as same-sex couples among her friends at the University of Georgia. She herself had met the love of her life in Spain. She'd brought Paco back to Georgia before he could speak English, and she'd married him at her parents' home in Gainesville. A year later she gave birth to her boys.

Aunt Lottie—known as Charlotte Byrd to readers of Webby Witherston, or rather Witherston on the Web—had moved next door to the Arroyos after her only son Brian had been killed in Iraq on Memorial Day of 2009. She seldom spoke of her sorrow. Retired as a distinguished history professor from Hickory Mountain College Lottie devoted herself to the causes of animal rights, human rights, and a clean environment, whatever she believed would ease the suffering of this world. She drove a Smart Car, ate organic, and researched Cherokee history. In the evenings she worked on a book she planned to call "Invisible Persons."

Lottie once said to Mev, "If you build something outside yourself, you build yourself." She was still building things outside herself.

Lottie leaned over to whisper into Gifford Plains's ear.

"Congratulations, Giff. The blowgun is a great addition to your collection."

Gifford Plains and his wife Peg Marble were seated at the next table with twenty-one-year-old reporter Catherine Perry, Carolyn Foster, and two couples associated with the Cherokee-Witherston Museum.

"When Grant Griggs showed such desire for it, I decided I had to save it, for the sake of the Cherokees."

"I told Giff he was crazy. He didn't need more Cherokee weapons," Peg said.

Peg, Gifford's third wife who was half his age, had stayed in Atlanta when Gifford moved to Witherston upon his retirement from Emory University. She was a mystery writer and a collector of Cherokee antiquities, although she'd bid on nothing that evening. Meg thought she seemed more interested in reading and sending messages on her cell phone.

"Careful what you say, Peg," Gifford said. "Catherine is already writing an article about this auction for Webby Witherston."

Catherine smiled. "I am. I'll post it online before the evening is over. And then tomorrow I'll interview you, Dr. Plains."

A specialist in Cherokee culture, Gifford Plains was a fairly recent arrival to Witherston and the author of the widely acclaimed *A Nation Under Ground*. Although she didn't know him

well, Mev found him interesting. She didn't know Peg at all, but she'd read Peg's books. She was amazed that Peg the fashionista knew so much about crime.

"Do any of you know paddle number forty?" Mev asked.

"David Guelph, from Seattle. A good man," Gifford said. "I know him slightly."

While Harvey Goodridge auctioned off other Cherokee relics—including an early twentieth-century rivercane fishbasket which Carolyn Foster got and an early-nineteenth-century black wood Cherokee mask from the Trail of Tears era which David Guelph got—Mev thought about the Fairfields' recent arrival in Witherston. Hempton and Petal Fairfield had moved to Witherston within months of the small town's financial windfall. In the summer of 2015 every one of the town's four thousand residents had inherited approximately two hundred and fifty thousand dollars before taxes from the town's extraordinarily rich recluse Francis Hearty Withers. Upon his death, Withers had left one billion dollars to the municipality of Witherston and another billion dollars to the residents of Witherston to be divided equally among them regardless of age.

Mev, Paco, and their boys had each put their inheritance in the bank. She doubted that Jaime and Jorge would gamble away their fortune when they reached eighteen the way some of their older classmates had. The boys were already frugal.

Many Witherstonians said the Fairfields had smelled their money. But Mev figured the childless couple simply wanted to live in the beautiful north Georgia mountains. Hempton and Petal had bought Withers's hundred-and-fifty-year-old log home, gutted it, added decks and screen porches, reconfigured the interior, furnished it with Oriental rugs and Chinese antiques, and transformed it into a log mansion. They moved in on Halloween and promptly held an open house for Witherstonians to admire their achievement. Mev guessed that Fairfield Antiquities in Atlanta was doing well.

"Grant and Ruth Griggs have zero interest in the Cherokee people," Peg said loudly to her table. "They're parking their money in whatever they think will rise in value."

At this moment Hempton Fairfield himself approached the mic. "I will auction off the last item myself," he said. Hempton wore a tux with a black cummerbund. With his carefully groomed flowing white hair, he was the epitome of the well-heeled antique dealer.

"Petal, will you please bring out Doolittle?" he asked.

Fifty-year-old Petal emerged from behind the curtain wearing antique ruby-and-platinum earrings and necklace, a low-cut black velvet long dress that showed deep cleavage, and black patent leather high heels. She carried an eighteen-by-eighteen-by-twenty-four-inch silver bird cage to the podium.

The audience gasped. Inside the cage, with barely enough room to turn around, was a large gray parrot—well, mostly gray, Mev thought. The bird had no feathers on his chest. He still had gray feathers on his head and back, and red tail feathers, but he'd done serious damage to himself.

"Oh my god," Lottie gasped. "An African Grey Parrot!"

Hempton Fairfield spoke into the mic. "Ladies and Gentlemen. This is our beloved Doolittle. He is a young African Grey Parrot, a Congo African Grey Parrot, who has lived with us for about a year. He's eighteen months old."

Jaime held up his hand. "Mr. Fairfield? Does he talk?"

"He sure does," Hempton replied, laughing. "Wait till you hear him swear at you."

"Can he fly?" Beau asked.

"No, his flight feathers are clipped."

Jorge held up his hand. "Why doesn't he have feathers on his chest?"

"He is molting," Hempton explained. "He's perfectly healthy and happy. He's like our child. Petal and I are selling him for one reason only. We travel up and down the East Coast all year, and we can't take him with us."

"And he doesn't like Tigress, our cat," Petal said, laughing.

"He looks sick," Mev murmured.

"Pobrecito," Paco said.

From across the room Lottie's friend Gretchen Green, owner of Gretchen Green's Green Grocery, yelled, "The bird is not healthy. Just look at him. And he doesn't belong in a tiny cage."

Hempton ignored Gretchen. "We got Doolittle last Christmas. He was six months old. We paid fifteen hundred dollars for him. But since we can't keep him we have to sell him. Let's start the bidding at five hundred."

"You don't deserve to keep him," shouted Jon Finley, who was seated at a table with his life partner ecologist Gregory Bozeman, Gretchen, Gretchen's life partner Dr. Neel Kingfisher, Gretchen's Great Dane Gandhi, who lay quietly under the table, Gretchen's ex-husband Smitty Green, who was editor of Witherston on the Web, Smitty's wife Jane, and two young women Mev didn't recognize. Jon owned Scissors, Witherston's only beauty shop.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. Let's be civil here. Who will give me five hundred dollars for Doolittle?"

"You mean your child is for sale?" Jon asked. "Dear me. I thought the sale of children was illegal."

Lottie stood up. "I will give you two thousand to stop the bidding. And I will take Doolittle home with me now."

"Sold. And congratulations to Professor Byrd." Hempton Fairfield nodded to Petal.

"You will love Doolittle," Petal said to Lottie.

"I would have bid five thousand to take him out of your hands, Mrs. Fairfield," Lottie replied.

"Whoopee," Catherine Perry said. "I've got great stuff for my article."

"Does Doolittle come with a larger cage?" Gretchen asked.

"No," Hempton said. "But he does come with food."

Gretchen called out to Lottie, who used a cane, "I'll get him for you." She wove her way through the tables onto the platform, grabbed Doolittle's cage and the bag of Optimal Nutrition pellets, and spoke into the mic. "Before I die I hope to see you too in a cage, Mr. Hempton Fairfield."

"May I speak with you, Dr. Byrd?" The young reporter for Webby Witherston wanted a quote from Lottie for her late-breaking online news article.

"Yes, Catherine, dear."

*

Alpha

iMessage

Wednesday, December 14, 9:49 PM

Attention, Six.

Stay in Witherston.

You will receive your assignment
tonight.
Delete this message.
--Alpha

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"It's a cold, dark night for you all to be walking," Jon Finley said to Gifford and Peg as they exited the building into a stiff wind. "Let Gregory and me give you a ride."

"Thanks, Jon." Peg accepted the invitation before her husband could decline it. Gifford liked to walk everywhere despite his bad knee, no matter how inclement the weather.

Gifford protested briefly. "But my house is up near Lottie's. That's out of your way."

"No problem," Jon said.

The four of them climbed into Jon's white Ford Explorer, Gifford carrying the four-foot blowgun in his hand and Peg carrying the dart in a shoe box. As Jon turned on the engine he noticed the sleet beginning to hit his windshield.

"I'm glad I got this blowgun," Gifford said, "but I wonder where Hempton Fairfield got it. When Fairfield didn't tell us the provenance of the Ewi Katalsta pot, I started having doubts about the reported provenance of this blowgun."

"Well, you have a certificate listing previous owners," Gregory said. "You can do some historical research and check on them."

"And I will."

"I wonder about the provenance of little Doolittle," Jon said. "Lottie didn't get a certificate of provenance with him."

Jon slowly drove three blocks north on Immoookali Avenue, turned left on Ninovan Drive, turned right on Witherston Highway, and stopped in front of Gifford's A-frame house.

"Would you like to come in?" Gifford asked. "It's only ten o'clock, and nobody's going anywhere tomorrow."

"Do come in," Peg said. "I'm going upstairs to bed, but you all make a fire, open a bottle of wine, and enjoy the rest of the evening."

"Thanks, Peg. We'll watch the storm come in, but we'll leave before this house gets snowbound. We promise."

Peg went upstairs.

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Rhonda Rather took the ten o'clock call from Catherine Perry.

"Mayor Rather is in the shower, Catherine," she said. "May I help you?"

"Hi, Mrs. Rather. I just wanted to give you all a heads-up. Chief Atohi Pace has petitioned a judge in Dahlongega to name his yurt camp off Old Dirt Road 'Tayanita Village.' He says he wants the community to be on Georgia's maps."

"Dear me. Chief Pace must not like the name 'Free Rooster Village.'"

"Will Mayor Rather give me a comment for Webby Witherston?"

"I'll have him call you in fifteen minutes."

"You all should have been at the auction tonight, Mrs. Rather. Dr. Plains bid six thousand dollars for a Cherokee blowgun and a dart. And Dr. Byrd bid two thousand dollars for a parrot named Doolittle who has no chest feathers."

"So the Fairfields are traders of birds too? They will buy and sell anything. If they'd lived in the nineteenth century they'd have been traders of humans."

Rhonda loved animals—dogs, cats, donkeys, chickens. A year ago, well past the age of fifty, she'd unhappily gotten pregnant as a result of taking the drug Senextra. And then in June she'd given birth prematurely to a baby boy and lost him. And although she was close to her daughter Sandra, she still wept for him. Since then she'd devoted herself to the TLC Humane Society of Dahlonga. Giuliani, her female wire-haired terrier, was her constant companion. She spent more time with him than with her husband.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Mrs. Rather."

"Thanks, Catherine. That's okay. I'll tell Rich to call you. He'll probably be more interested in the blowgun than in the petition."

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Lottie was grateful for her friends' help with Doolittle. Gretchen and Neel put Doolittle on the back seat of their Jeep Wrangler because his cage, tiny though it was, wouldn't fit into Lottie's Smart Car. They squeezed Gandhi into Lottie's right front seat, to Gandhi's delight. Then they followed Lottie and Gandhi to Lottie's house, unloaded Doolittle, who had shrieked the whole way, and set the panicky parrot on the coffee table.

Gandhi promptly stretched out on the sofa.

As soon as Lottie opened the door to Doolittle's cage, Doolittle yelled, "Ugly bird!" His voice was unmistakably female.

"What? Did you hear that?" Lottie exclaimed.

"Bad bad bird!" Doolittle screeched. "Doolittle is a bad bad bird!"

Lottie tried to coax Doolittle out. "Come here, Doolittle," she said softly. "Do you want to go up?"

Doolittle lunged at Lottie from his one perch.

Lottie did not back off. After all, how much damage could an African Grey do if he bit? He could make her bleed a little but he couldn't take off her arm. Doolittle probably weighed a pound at most.

In September Lottie had lost Darwin, her darling Pacific Parrotlet. But she was ready to love another bird. She kept her left hand in front of the cage in a gentle invitation for Doolittle to hop up.

But Doolittle did not. Instead he cowered against the back bars.

"Let me try," Gretchen said. "Doolittle, we love you," she cooed, putting her hand in front of the cage.

"Shut up," Doolittle responded, this time in a man's voice. Doolittle lunged at Gretchen. "Shut up! Shut the fuck up!"

Gretchen covered her ears with her hands. Gandhi jumped off the sofa.

Lottie removed the food and water dishes from Doolittle's small cage, gave Doolittle some clean water and a helping of the multi-colored pellets.

From the stone hearth, where he was about to light a fire, Neel said, "Doolittle has been abused." Dr. Neel Kingfisher had retired in July from the directorship of Withers Retirement

Village and had bought a Cherokee bone knife in the silent auction. He offered the wisdom he'd inherited from his Cherokee parents. "Listen to Doolittle with your heart, not your ears. What does your heart hear?"

"Fear," Gretchen said.

"Pain and suffering," Lottie added.

"Shut the fuck up! I'm gonna kill you!" Doolittle shrieked again. In Petal Fairfield's voice.

Then Lottie heard a commotion outside her front door. She opened it and welcomed her nearest and dearest kin: Mev, Paco, Jaime, and Jorge.

"Hi, Aunt Lottie." Jaime hugged her.

"We've come to see Doolittle," Jorge announced.

Doolittle growled.

Lottie left Doolittle alone with his cage door open while she uncorked and served her most elegant Spanish wine, a Mas la Mola Priorat, in honor of Doolittle's adoption.

"Here's to you, Doolittle." Lottie raised her glass. "May today be happier than yesterday."

"And don't let yesterday use up too much of today, Doolittle," Neel said. He had just gotten the fire going.

"Salud," Paco said.

Jaime offered his right hand to Doolittle. Doolittle promptly bit his finger.

"Ouch. That hurt." Jaime exclaimed. But then he offered Doolittle his left hand.

Doolittle climbed down to the bottom of the cage, and looked up at Jaime.

"Doolittle wanna apple?" asked Jaime, offering the parrot a bite-size chunk of apple.

"Fuck you," Doolittle said to Jaime, but this time softly.

Jaime put the chunk of apple into Doolittle's food dish.

"Look, everybody," Jorge said. He had his iPad open. "Mizz Perry's already got her story up on Webby Witherston. And it mentions you, Aunt Lottie."

"What does it say?"

"That you would have paid five thousand dollars to save the, quote, feathery little person's life."

"Let's see," Lottie said.

"Good story," Gretchen said.

"So now all Webby Witherston's readers will know who paid what for those valuables," Mev said. "What if burglars read this?"

"They'll say, 'Thanks, Mizz Perry,'" Jorge said.

"Hijos, time to go home. It's eleven o'clock. Aunt Lottie has to get her beauty sleep."

"Aunt Lottie," Lottie said, "has to write her column for Webby Witherston."

As Jorge reluctantly closed his iPad, Doolittle stepped momentarily onto Jaime's wrist and then retreated into his cage.