

Little Brother of War

by
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Chapter One

Copperhead Drive was the worst of a long line of bad roads Jamie had driven on in the two months he'd had his driver's license. Having his mother in the passenger seat didn't make the ride any smoother.

"Jamie! Pothole!" His mother's normally high voice hit a new level. Obediently he swerved, then looked over to see her expression. Her face had turned as gray as her hair. "James...Bently...slow...down," she said softly.

"Yes, ma'am." Jamie knew better than to say anything else at this point.

Several minutes passed with both of them focusing on the road ahead. With every mile closer to his uncle's house, Jamie felt more unsure about joining the group of archaeologists preparing to excavate his uncle's cotton field.

"Mom? Do you think this is such a good idea?" Jamie stared straight ahead while his mother looked at him questioningly. "I mean, they're all college students and everything..."

"You'll do fine, honey," she assured him. Then her face changed slightly. "You won't be living with them or anything, so you can't get in any trouble."

"Yeah. I didn't mean they might be trouble," Jamie said. "What I meant was, you know, do you think they mind my joining them?"

"Honey," his mother said, "they'll be glad for the help, I'm sure."

Jamie pulled up and saw a dozen or so students milling around his uncle and a man he had not seen before.

His uncle looked up and saw them. "Betty! Good to see you! Hello, Jamie." He turned back to the man he was speaking to, a tall and wiry person just entering middle age.

"This is Dr. Bell. Meet my sister, Betty Bently, and Jamie. He's the one who wants to work with you."

Dr. Bell flashed a grin. "Always happy to have another shovel, Jamie. Mrs. Bently, pleased to meet you." He quickly turned back to finish his business, and Jamie wandered toward the rest of the students.

Suddenly self-conscious about his slight stature and carefully done hair, he examined the people around him. He glanced sideways to see his mother look disapprovingly at the ratty clothing most of the students were wearing. Jamie wore immaculate khaki shorts, freshly ironed, and a button-down shirt. Feeling overdressed, he shoved his hands way down in his pockets and stared at the ground.

"Hello, I'm Laurie," a voice said somewhere nearby. He looked up to see a dark-haired woman with remarkable blue eyes. She was wearing cutoffs, a flannel shirt, and a pair of battered work boots.

“Jamie. Pleased to meet you,” he replied. “Do you go to school in Rome?” Laurie asked. “Yep. Coosa high,” Jamie said.

“Well, you may as well meet the rest of us,” she deftly moved him into the group. “This is Scot.” She gestured toward a towering man with a strawberry blonde goatee. On his head he wore a baseball cap with Savannah Nuclear Plant on it.

“Howdy,” Scot drawled, holding out a huge freckled hand. Jamie stuck out his own and had it pumped firmly. Retrieving his hand finally, he turned to Laurie.

“Scot, this is Jamie. He's the one the Good Doctor was talking about,” she told him. Scot grinned.

“Ever been at an excavation before?” he asked. Jamie shook his head. “It's great,” Scot said. “Really fun.” Then he turned to talk to someone else.

“Over there is Farmer Trey,” Laurie said, gesturing toward a preppy-looking man chewing on a grass shoot. Jamie's eyebrows shot up. If Trey were cleaned up a bit, he wouldn't be out of place in a business office. Jamie began to revise his ideas about archaeologists.

“And this is Mark.” Laurie pointed to a blond boy hammering two boards together in something approaching a right angle.

Jamie pointed to a blonde girl who stood out from the other students both by her careful makeup and her obviously new L.L.Bean clothing. “Who is that?”

“Oh, that's Melanie, she's a high school student from around here, too.” Before she could say any more, Dr. Bell began his announcements.

“All right. Before we get started, is there anyone who has not filled out one of the release forms?” Clutching a paper-loaded clipboard, he brushed his gray-peppered hair from his forehead. His already stained tee-shirt proclaimed the 450th anniversary of the DeSoto expedition. A few hands shot up, and he paused to hand out the forms before resuming his talk.

“We're here to continue excavations begun in 1971. This site holds the remains of an Indian town that was populated in the early to mid sixteenth century. It was part of the Coosa paramount chiefdom, a collection of towns ranging from the middle of Alabama through northwest Georgia up to northeast Tennessee, with the paramount town itself located near what is now Carter's Dam. The town here was fairly small, and it was occupied for only a few generations.

“What we hope to gain from this field season is a better understanding of what one of these small towns was like by completely excavating it instead of taking a sample and filling the rest with guesswork. We will look at the burials, the post holes, and the palisade among other things.” Dr. Bell gestured to an indistinguishable spot in the cotton field where Indians had lived so long ago, and Jamie turned to see the other students' reaction. Little of what the professor said made any sense to him. To begin with, he couldn't fathom how they could dig up post holes.

Meanwhile Dr. Bell continued his lecture, touching on the different types of pottery they could expect to find, as well as the presence of metal of both native and European origin. Jamie called to mind the Spanish sword that a local had found on this site. Although corroded by centuries under the constantly

plowed field, the rough beauty of the object had fascinated him since his class had visited the Chieftain's Museum in Rome, Georgia, where it had been exhibited.

They boarded the van for the final leg of the trip. Jamie's mother waved, but thankfully she did not blow him kisses as they drove away. They bumped and bounced down the dirt road leading to the middle of the huge bend in the river which was now completely covered in knee-high cotton plants. The van stopped.

“Is this it?” Jamie turned to Laurie. She nodded, gesturing to the small patch of stubble where not long ago cotton had stood.

“You should have seen it before they cut the cotton. It looked exactly like the rest of the field,” Laurie said.

As a group they fanned out through the cotton stubble and searched row by row for surface artifacts. Exclamations and comments of those who found something particularly interesting punctuated the silence of the midmorning air. Jamie found pieces of black plastic mostly. These shreds of plastic caught the light in precisely the same way as the black chert used for projectile points. With mounting frustration Jamie kicked the ground, stubbing his toe on a largish pebble hidden by mud. Laurie laughed at his response to this indignity. She turned to the offending rock, picked it up, and rubbed the round stone against her shirt, cleaning away the hardened orange mud.

“Hey! All right! You just found a hammerstone!” She slapped him on his back. “A what?” Jamie responded.

“A hammerstone. You hold it like this...” She placed her thumb in the slight depression on one flat side of the rock and her forefinger on the other side. “See these marks? They're from where this stone was used to hit others.” She demonstrated with a whacking motion of her wrist. Jamie shrugged. Laurie smiled. Jamie wandered off staring at the ground and thinking that Laurie didn't have to act like she knew everything. She made him feel stupid. He found a few bits of pottery and a couple of arrowheads, but he was not going to show them to Laurie and receive another lecture.

He watched surreptitiously as the pretty blonde showed Laurie a piece of pottery she had found. Jamie listened while Laurie gave her a lengthy explanation of its significance.

“Now this is a rimsherd, see the smoothly curved edge? And just look at those incised lines. That and the tempering--stuff mixed in with the clay--tell you it's a type of pottery known as Lamar incised. The smoothness and curvature of this edge tell you which part of the pot it was from and roughly how big the original pot was...”

Jamie laughed to himself. At least he wasn't the only one to be spoken down to, and judging from Melanie's reaction to the impromptu lecture, he wasn't the only one who resented it. He was beginning to think that he and Melanie might have more in common than he had initially observed.

They milled around a place where Dr. Bell indicated that they should open a trench. Their shovels bit into the earth, moving great globs of dark dirt until they reached the pale orangish clay beneath.

“This is the subsoil,” said Dr. Bell. “This is what we are looking for right now. Once you hit this, stop and move to another place. Eventually we will trowel away all of the plow zone to reveal a smooth

layer of subsoil.” He indicated a five-by-ten foot rectangle to be opened, and immediately no fewer than ten people pounced on the area, quickly stripping the surface from the soil and then leaning on their shovel handles, awaiting further orders.

Laurie approached Jamie, squinting against the glare of the hot July afternoon. “Ho hum,” she said. “Having fun yet?”

Jamie stifled a spontaneous yawn. “Loads. You?” His glance fell to the ground, looking for further surface artifacts, and they both wandered through the field stubble.

Laurie looked at Jamie. “So, are you planning on majoring in anthropology? Do you want to be an archaeologist?” She dropped to a squat to examine a stone, then tossed it away.

“I don't know,” Jamie replied. “I don't even know if I'm going to college.”

“Why not?” She asked.

“I don't know. It's a long way off, even if I do decide to go.” Jamie skipped a flat pebble in the dirt, sending up puffs of dust.

“It'll be sooner than you think,” she said. “And the excavation will get more interesting when we sort out our bearings and start finding things. If we start finding things.”

“If?” he asked. “I thought all kinds of stuff had been found here. I mean, what about the sword and all?”

“If. The sword and the flint blades and pottery that were taken from here made it quite famous among pothunters and looters. We'll be lucky if they left anything.” She saw the look on Jamie's face. “Oh, we'll find something. Don't worry.”

Shadows lengthened considerably before Jamie realized how much time had passed.

The guys reclaimed the shirts they had discarded during the more intense bouts of shoveling, and sweaty bodies piled into the van for the return trip. When Jamie got to his car and said good-bye to the crew, he looked at himself. His nicely pressed shorts were dirty and wrinkled, and he had lost a button from his shirt. His muscles ached. He felt wonderful.

His mother had caught a ride to their house with her sister-in-law, so Jamie had some time to himself as he drove home. Driving in the late afternoon sun with the radio blaring, Jamie thought about his first day at the site. He had already begun to look like the other people on the dig. And they had become more familiar, even friendly toward him. Perhaps he would think about college. For some reason it no longer seemed so distant and unattainable. Jamie smiled to himself.

The introduction to archaeology had stirred something in him, made him begin to ask questions about the place he had lived all of his life. How many times had he been through that field, been fishing in the river near there without any knowledge of the site? What else had lain untouched for centuries, waiting to be rediscovered? How many other ancient Indian towns were forgotten under the fields he passed every day on the way to town and back? Even his own carefully manicured lawn seemed to be hiding something as he pulled in his driveway. Parking the car, Jamie laughed at his runaway

imagination. Leaving his daydreams at the door, he walked into the thick smell of his mother's cooking in the kitchen.

“Well, how was it? Are you tired?” She was grating cheese for the casserole topping, and she turned to appraise his filthy clothing. “I think you have time to take a shower before dinner.”

Jamie grabbed a handful of chips from the dinner tray and inhaled the supper smells wistfully, but he went to the bathroom, peeled off his dirty clothes, and threw them in the corner for his mother to wash after supper.

He turned the shower faucet on full force, twisting his head away from the pressure of the spray. Slowly he reached down and turned the hot water gradually off until the shower water was freezing cold. He shuddered and shut the water completely off, standing naked and dripping for a long minute before reaching for the towel to dry himself.

After dressing, he combed his hair in the mirror until his mother called for him. He was slightly sunburned, which sharpened his already thin face. For the moment his eyes looked gray and he thought about Laurie's eyes, so much bluer and more mobile. He examined his face from the corners of his eyes, and noticed how much he was beginning to resemble his father. That is, what he remembered his father looking like years ago, back when they had been a family.

“James Bently, this is the last time I'm going to call you to come to supper!” his mother shouted up the stairs. Laying his thoughts aside, he went downstairs and sat at the brightly lit dining room table for dinner with his mother. Their habit of silence at the dinner table had begun seven years ago. When Jamie's father left, he took most of the casual noise of the family with him. Supper, like many other things, had become business. And business was not meant to be enjoyed.

They made it halfway through dinner before the phone in the kitchen rang. Jamie gratefully answered it. His mother looked disapproving.

“H'lo.” He avoided his mother's flat stare.

“Hey, Jay!” Jamie recognized his best friend's exuberant drawl.

“Hey Robert.” Jamie shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth. “What's up?”

Perturbed, his mother rose and began clearing the dishes from the table. Jamie rushed to fill his plate again before she removed the rest of the food. Clinking china and the whoosh of the faucet filled the kitchen while Jamie talked unconcernedly into the receiver.

“Nothing much. Heard you started hanging out with those college people at your uncle's place,” Robert said. “How is it?”

“Pretty cool,” Jamie said. “I sure didn't know archaeology was so much work.” He paused to gulp down some tea. “I guess I thought it was like finding a bunch of arrowheads out in the field. Did you know there was a whole town right there by the river?”

“Really?” Robert didn't sound particularly curious.

Jamie continued to shovel food into his mouth as he answered. "A bunch of Indians lived there about the time the Spanish first came to Georgia. They were somehow linked with those mound people at Etowah."

"Exciting," Robert said. "So...any babes?"

"What do you care? You're not into shoveling. And they're all anthropologists." Jamie wasn't ready for the turn of conversation.

"So. Yeah?" Robert pressed him.

"Well, yeah." Jamie toyed with his fork.

"And?" Robert's voice drawled suggestively.

"It's the first day, give me a break." Jamie suddenly realized that Robert was not the person with whom he could share his newfound intellectual interest. The silence stretched and the line crackled to itself. Jamie thought about all he could say, about Laurie, about Melanie. While Laurie had befriended him, he wasn't quite willing to share this with even his best friend from high school. And Melanie was still at the fringes, unapproachable.

"Who is she?" Robert's insinuation bothered Jamie for some reason. "Go for it. She'll do you good."

Jamie glanced over at his mother doing dishes. He could tell her ears were pricked to catch any snippets of the conversation. Blushing, fearing she had heard Robert's suggestion, Jamie diverted his attention again to his plate. Silence, uncomfortable this time, again isolated them.

A beep interrupted the lull in their conversation. Jamie told Robert good-bye and handed the phone to his mother.

His full belly and his weariness made him sleepy. As he crawled into bed he glanced at the clock. He looked again. Eight forty-five! The last time he had been to bed this early was when he was twelve. He drifted quickly to sleep.

#

The next day promised to be hot even before the sun had risen above the trees at the eastern edge of the field. None of the crew rushed to shovel the way they had done the day before. They all worked more slowly and deliberately. Blisters stiffened Jamie's hands, and the tenderness of sunburn touched his back. He liked the hurt of it the same way he had enjoyed his tiredness the day before.

Laurie leaned against her shovel and wiped the sweat from her eyes. "Your back is really red," she said. "Does it hurt?"

"No." Jamie shrugged. "Not particularly."

Laurie obviously didn't believe him. She pushed her shovel into the pile of dirt beside them and walked away. When she returned from the van she handed him a large tube of sunscreen and again began hefting her shovel.

As Jamie spread the greasy stuff on his arms and chest, he looked along the row of shovelers glistening under the burning sun. All were young. All were taking as much joy in the work as he was, reveling in youth and fitness. And Melanie had unbuttoned her sleeveless shirt to reveal the tank top underneath. He watched her pause to wipe the sweat from her face, smearing her mascara a little. Jamie forced himself to return to the job at hand.

Lunchtime finally dragged around, and Jamie wolfed down both of his sandwiches. Laurie flopped beside him, eyeing his sunburn as she nibbled her peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

"I'd wear my shirt this afternoon if I were you." She pressed a finger against his back, leaving a white print on the red.

"Well, you're not me. I don't want a farmer tan like Scot's." Jamie glanced at the towering redhead whose acquaintance he had made on the first day. Still wearing his cap, now turned backward, he was sporting red forearms and neck with his fishbelly white torso. His freckles had multiplied into the thousands. Scot noticed Jamie and Laurie were looking in his direction and he walked over to join them.

"Hey, Jamie. You're getting sunburned," Scot said. Laurie laughed. "It's unanimous!"

"I don't care," Jamie said. "I'm not wearing a shirt!"

"Fine," she said, laughing. "You're the one who's going to have all his skin peel off." She took her last bite of sandwich and began smearing sunscreen over every exposed surface of her body. After going for yet another cup of water, she crawled into the van and emerged with a pair of odd-looking sticks. They were about the length of his arm, slender, and had bent ends with pockets woven out of thin strips of leather. She yelled over to Scot to bring his own racquets and the ball. Jamie was miffed, and he felt purposefully excluded. His curiosity got the better of him, however, and he invited himself over to where the two were playing.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Playing Choctaw stickball," Scot replied in his surprisingly mild voice. "Toli," Laurie said.

"Did you make this up?" Jamie asked suspiciously, and both of them laughed.

"Not hardly," Laurie said, coming closer and offering him her sticks. "It's a really old game the Southeastern Indians play. Goes way back, no one's sure quite how far. Some of the Indians called it 'Little Brother of War', because it was a part of their tradition of warfare, but was usually played between towns within the same group. People still got killed in the game, but the competition allowed men to practice the skills they would need in warfare without actually being at war. It was probably played in Indian towns like the one we're working on right here. In the center of their village they would have a giant pole and ballcourt."

"Little Brother of War?" Jamie repeated, gingerly holding the two-and-a-half foot sticks. "What are the rules?"

“Don't kill anybody who doesn't have the ball,” Laurie said.

“Don't kill anybody period,” Scot said, looking at Laurie.

“Yeah, in addition to the ambulance they usually have at the championship matches the Choctaw Indians have every year, they now have policemen to arrest anyone who is using excessive violence. The players can be charged with assault and battery if they start fighting instead of playing,” Laurie said.

“Sounds lovely,” Jamie said sarcastically. “Does that take all the violence out of the game?”

“Not hardly,” Laurie and Scot said at the same time.

“It just kind of limits the number of casualties,” Laurie continued.

“Anything else I need to know?” Jamie asked.

“You can't use your hands to pick up the ball,” Scot said.

“You hit the pole to score,” Laurie said. “Try throwing the ball. You use the stick as a kind of extension of your throwing arm.” She tossed him what appeared to be a leather golfball. Jamie picked it up between the sticks, and he managed to toss it about twenty feet.

Laurie smiled her approval. “Not bad. Not bad at all.”

By the time Jamie could lob the ball with some degree of skill, lunchtime was over. Laurie and Scot patted him on his burned back and invited him to come play with them after supper that evening. Jamie accepted. The rest of the day flew, the rhythms of shoveling taking Jamie over completely until the sun was lowering in the west and they all packed to return home.

#

The afternoon was hot, and the sun struck him right in the eyes as Jamie drove through the heavy traffic of highway 20 to the apartments where Laurie and the others were staying. He was smeared with dirt from the day's work and, even with all the windows down in the little blue Mazda, he was sweating. Where the seat touched his sunburned back, pain shot through his skin. He felt that he was taking another step towards inclusion into this strange group of archaeology students, another step closer to acceptance by adults.

“They're no different from me, really,” Jamie told himself. But in fact there was a difference, though he couldn't put his finger on what it was. There was obviously more to being grown up than passing some series of educational hurdles, or even some arbitrary age designation. What was it that caused him to think about this now? A picture of Laurie, glancing at him quizzically, flashed through his mind. What could it be besides the years that separated them? Why were those years suddenly so important?

Lost in thought, Jamie almost missed the turnoff to the Georgian Apartments. He slammed on his brakes and swerved into the parking lot, ignoring the angry honks from the cars that had to brake behind him. As he pulled around the central square with the swimming pool and the playground, he saw Laurie

and Scot goofing around, throwing the tiny ball at a basketball goal, trying to hit inside the orange square and send the ball through the hoop.

The only available parking space was reserved for the handicapped. Jamie hesitated a moment before parking. True, he had seen numerous people taking advantage of this prime parking spot who were also completely able-bodied, but something about the act bothered him. It did not bother him enough to move his car. Just as Jamie was getting out of his car he heard a metallic thunk and a shout.

Laurie had hit within the square of a basketball goal and sent the ball through the net. She swung her sticks over her head in triumph and turned the gesture into a salute to Jamie when she saw him. Scot grinned and picked up the ball between his sticks. He tossed it lightly to Laurie, who almost caught it. Unfazed, she scooped up the ball and threw it to Jamie. He caught it in his hands and looked again at the tiny basketlike thing.

“Did you have a good drive?” Laurie stood well away from him, picking up pine cones with her ballsticks and tossing them. “I almost fell asleep on the way home. Don't you ever get tired of driving all the way there and back?”

“I like the drive.” Jamie juggled the ball. “I don't even think about it anymore. I mean, I have been driving this road forever.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot this is where you're from.” She indicated for him to throw her the ball, which she deftly caught in the pockets of her sticks. “Have you been to Athens?”

“I've been once or twice.” Jamie wondered what she was getting at. He figured every high school student in Georgia knew what “going to Athens” meant and wondered what her angle was. Since she lived there, she probably didn't have the same shimmering view of crowded nightclubs and illicit underage drinking that he did.

“I was thinking you might like to come over one weekend and play stickball with the whole lot of us,” she said.

“Sure,” he said, his pleasant reverie giving way to what he knew his mother would say. “I'd love to.”

“You want to take a shot?” Laurie asked Jamie, gesturing at the basketball goal.

“Do you usually play on a basketball court?” Jamie asked. Laurie looked surprised, and Scot laughed.

“You really do need to come see how the game is properly played,” Scot said. “We usually have our own ballpoles, they're P.V.C. pipe about this big,” Scot held his hands in a circle about twelve inches across. “The Choctaw use wooden poles, sometimes a tree trunk, sometimes hollow. But plastic works just as well.”

“Oh,” Jamie said. He tried to aim for the orange square on the backboard, as he had seen Laurie do. He missed by about three feet. By the fourth throw he was already beginning to get the hang of how to control his throws, but his aim was still way off. They threw the ball around until they were all flushed from the exertion and Jamie's skin was slickly red from sweat and sunburn. When he touched his

shoulders to wipe away the salty film, he cringed with the unexpected pain of his scorched skin. Laurie gave him a pitying look.

“I warned you.” She clicked her tongue in exasperation. “The sun doesn't like white-skinned folks. She thinks we're weak. So she turns us red to amuse herself and remind us of our weakness.”

“What?” Jamie replied in confusion. “Is that some myth you're talking about?”

Jamie gently brushed his fingertips along his shoulder, feeling areas of more and less pain. “The sun is female?”

“Hashi,” Laurie said. “The Choctaw sun. The Choctaw don't consider the sun female any more, but many of the Southeastern Indians used to think the sun was a woman. She and the moon, her brother, were once equally bright. Funny how most Europeans assume the sun to be male and the moon to be female” Laurie shook her head. “Anyway, the moon tricked her into committing incest with him. She wanted to find out who her mystery lover was, and one night she covered her hands with ashes and caressed his face. The next day she saw her brother with ashes smeared on his face, and she was horrified. Then his light dimmed in shame and he had to leave her presence, so now the sun and moon are always on opposite sides of the sky.”

“So the sun became sole ruler of the heavens and her children became the leaders of the people on the earth.” Laurie finished her tale.

“Uh-huh,” Jamie turned to Scot. “Where do these stories come from?”

Scot shrugged. “That one was Cherokee. But they come from different places,” he said.

“Like the town we're working on now?” Jamie asked.

“No,” Laurie said. “The Spanish who came through here didn't care much for stories. They wanted loot. By the time anthropologist began recording the stories the Indians of the Southeast told, hundreds of years had passed and the societies had changed drastically.”

“But couldn't the stories have stayed the same?” Jamie looked at the sticks he was holding. “Like the ballgame?”

“The way we play today is different from the way they played it in the past,” Laurie said, “even less than a hundred years ago. We don't really know which parts of the game are the same as they were before any more than we know if any parts of stories remained the same through the generations. People change, their needs become different. That is true with us, why wouldn't it be true with any other group?” Laurie took her sticks back from Jamie. “When you stop growing you die,” she said.

Jamie nodded slowly. Here it was, only two days since he had met Laurie and the others, and he felt that he was being asked to change more rapidly than he ever had. He was being exposed to new ideas, and he wasn't sure how many of them to believe. He said good-bye and crawled into his car mulling over these stories.

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“Jamie! What took you so long? I was worried sick!” Jamie's mother said as he opened the door.

“Worked late,” he replied, heading toward his room.

“I called the apartments and they said they had gotten back forty-five minutes ago.” She blocked his path. “Have you been drinking?”

“No, Mom,” He looked her straight in the eye and saw her disbelief. “I went to play ball with some of the people on the dig. Really.”

“Why didn't you call?” She crossed her arms.

“I didn't think of it. Honest.” Jamie was tired of this inquisition and wanted to take a shower.

“Well, think of it next time!” She returned to her supper, and Jamie practically ran toward the shower.

He stood in the chilly spray thinking. If this is how she responds to my being a little late getting home, what will she think about my going to Athens? What would she think about my moving away? Why did she have to call? Makes me sound like a baby.

When he got down to supper, it was reheated and waiting for him.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said. She gave him a pinched look. They ate in silence for a while. “Mom, I want to go to Athens this weekend to play ball.”

“Why can't you play ball here?” She looked at her empty plate.

“This is a special kind of ball. It's an Indian game called toli. Nobody plays it around here.” He tried to keep his voice neutral.

“And what's wrong with baseball? Why do you have to go away to have fun? Why can't you have fun here?” Her voice started to tremble, and Jamie knew if she began crying, he wouldn't have the heart to go against her wishes.

“Mom. It's just a weekend. You'll do fine. I'll do fine. Please?” Jamie tried to keep himself from getting too hopeful.

“Do you promise you won't get in any trouble?” she said finally.

“Of course, Mom.” They lapsed back into silence.

“All right,” she said quietly. Jamie could hardly believe his ears.

“You mean I can go?” Jamie leaned across the table and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Thanks, Mom!” He was going to Athens!

Chapter Two

They left Friday after work, driving east with the late sun slanting through the rear window. Laurie drove, drinking scalding hot coffee, sometimes sloshing it into her lap as she changed gears.

“Crap!” she exclaimed. Jamie smiled.

“Again?” Scot said from the back seat. The two young men exchanged glances. “Women drivers.” Jeff snorted and pulled the bill of his cap down over his eyes.

“One more comment like that and this coffee's going to be in your lap, you freak!” Laurie laughed.

Jamie caught sight of a large bird perched high in a dead tree near the Oostanula River. At first he thought it was an owl, then he caught a glimpse of the red tail on the huge bird. The hawk seemed to stare right at the car.

“Look,” he said, pointing, “hawk.” A smile lit Laurie's face as she saw the bird, and Scot almost fell over himself following the sight of it as the car passed. “Redtail,” Scot said. Laurie nodded.

“I remember when people were always shooting them because they were supposed to kill chickens,” she said. “You used to never see hawks, just hear them sometimes. Always from far away.” The memory of a hawk's cry filled Jamie's head.

Laurie continued, “Now peregrine falcons are nesting on skyscrapers in Atlanta, and redtails are on every other fencepost in the Southeast. I love it.”

Jamie felt his heart swell with the sight of the hawk, with the feel of it watching them.

“How could anyone shoot them?” He wondered aloud.

“A guy once told me that he used to kill them because he thought they were beautiful. He could never touch them, couldn't see them up close, so he shot them. He killed all kinds of hawks because he liked them,” Laurie said. “People like to have beautiful things in their control, even if they have to kill the thing they love.”

“Gruesome,” Scot said. “Don Juan with a semi-automatic.”

“That's not what I mean.” Laurie turned to stare at him. Scot diverted her attention from him to the road ahead. “All the national parks out West, they took beautiful land and spoiled it by putting up signs and RV parking lots and paved walking trails.”

“So you'd rather not see Yosemite at all?” Scot asked.

“I would like to see it, but I don't want to be surrounded by souvenir shops and people in RVs with their televisions going,” Laurie replied.

“Elitist,” Scot said.

“Hey, there's a Taco Bell. Want to stop?” Jamie leaned over between the front seats. “I'm starved!”

Laurie looked at him and then at Scot. “Y'all are filthy. Want to drive through?” “The spotless one speaks,” Scot poked her ribs through her muddy shirt. “I want to go in.”

“Whatever.” Laurie obediently pulled in to the parking lot.

When they resumed their trip, Laurie said, “That hawk we saw. Maybe it was an omen.”

“An omen of what?” Jamie asked.

“Maybe we'll have a good day for stickball tomorrow. I don't know. Falcons and hawks were held in high regard by Southeastern Indians, you know. Did you ever hear the story about the boy who couldn't hunt?” She took a drink from the Coke she had gotten at the Taco Bell.

“I think so,” Scot said.

“Well, I haven't,” Jamie said. “Scot, do you mind hearing it again?” Scot shook his head. Laurie smiled and put her cup firmly into the holder.

“Once there was a boy, or so the Indians said, and he didn't have any family. He was old enough to hunt, but he was terrible at it. He would go out early in the morning and come back to the village late in the evening and he never killed anything at all to eat. Since he had no family, he turned to the people in the town to give him food. Maybe at first they took pity on the orphan, but because he was old enough to hunt for himself and share meat with others, they stopped sharing their meat with him. Finally they said 'Get away from us. You don't know how to hunt. You have no family. Go away. We have no use for you here.' So the boy had to leave the town and go by himself into the woods.” Laurie's voice was soothing as the sun began to touch the tops of the trees and the streetlights began to flicker on.

Jamie found himself identifying with the boy, the useless one. Without his family he was nothing. Without his mother he was afraid he would not be able to deal with the problems of life. He, too, had no way to make a living, to put food on the table. He listened attentively as Laurie continued the tale.

“That night after the sun went down, the orphan sat by the fire he had made. His stomach was tight with hunger. Night noises were all around him, and he was terrified. Suddenly he heard the rush of wings. The eyes of a falcon met his own.

“'Protect me,' the falcon said. 'Hide me under your blanket.' The boy was puzzled, but he did as he was told. Moments later he saw a huge pair of round yellow owl's eyes staring at him from across the fire.

“'Give me that which is under your blanket.' The owl said. The boy strained to see the huge form of the bird in the shadows on the other side of the fire. 'Give him to me and I will give you what you most desire. Power. Power to kill anything; game, enemies.' The boy heard a flutter under the blanket.”

“'Don't listen to him!' The falcon said.

“Why not?’ the boy asked. ‘I am hungry and I’m no good at hunting.’

“He will give you the power of witchery and you will no longer be a person,’ the falcon said. The boy was silent for a minute.

“Well, will you give him to me?’ Asked the owl impatiently.

“I am thinking. Give me a little while to make up my mind,’ the boy said. “Hurry up,’ the owl said.

“Tell him you want to know exactly what he will give you,” the falcon whispered.

“Stall. When the sun is about to come up, tell him you will give me to him. Wait until the sun is above the trees and then release me.’

“I want to know exactly what you will give me,’ the boy said. The owl told him, and it was wonderful. The boy kept asking questions until the sun was about to come up.

“Have you decided yet?’ asked the owl, as the sun was about to peek over the horizon.

“Yes,’ said the boy. ‘Now you can have him.’

“In the instant the boy lifted the blanket to expose the falcon, the edge of the sun appeared, lighting the sky. The owl blinked in the light and the falcon flew from under the blanket with a rush of wings and talons, and he tore the owl’s head from its body and threw it to the ground.

“Thank you,’ the falcon told the boy. ‘Now you will have luck when you hunt.’ “And so it was. When he returned to the village, he brought all kinds of meat and shared it with everyone. When he went out to hunt he was always successful and the people were jealous with admiration.” Laurie finished the story and they rode into the growing darkness quietly.

“The people who told that story thought it was important to do one’s work above board, in the light of day. What was hidden aroused suspicion. If you play by the rules, you will be admired. If you play under the cover of darkness, no matter how powerful you may become, you will be despised.” Laurie sighed. “Maybe not everybody followed the rules, but at least they were clearly defined. In our society, everybody has to figure it out for themselves.”

“It sounded to me like that boy in the story had a hard time figuring it out,” Jamie said quietly. Laurie looked at him sharply.

“You’re absolutely right!” She laughed. “Maybe even with rigidly defined rules of behavior, each person has to come to terms with his own morality.” She looked at Jamie. “You know, it’s very perceptive of you to say that,” she said. Jamie shrugged and turned toward the window, watching the house lights flicker past.

The three were silent for some time, and soon the lights of Atlanta Highway became brighter and Athens lay right in front of them. Laurie took the perimeter, giving them a few more minutes of darkness before they came to the end of their trip. Laurie careened down Scot’s driveway, jarring everything in the car with the roughness of the road.

When they pulled up to the house by the Oconee river, two yellow dogs bounded up. Scot practically leapt out of the car into their doggy embrace.

“Killer! Muffin! How you doin', guys?” He scratched and squeezed both dogs at once. In turn, they were a jumble of tongues and wagging tails, whimpers and snorts. Jamie looked on with envy. His mother had always insisted that dogs were messy and noisy, and she would never allow them in her yard. Jamie had always wanted one. The yellow Labrador named Killer came to the car window and sniffed Jamie's hand. The dog's tail wagged hopefully.

Scot grabbed his backpack from the trunk. “Well, Jamie, you getting out?” He leaned into the car again. “Come inside for a spell, Laurie?” Jamie gathered his belongings and crawled from the car while Laurie shook her head.

“No. I'm going home. I'm completely exhausted and I have to get some rest if I'm going to play tomorrow.” She sighed, emphasizing the tiredness they all felt. Jamie had a hard time imagining any of them wanting to do anything that required them to stay up a minute longer than necessary. On the other hand, now that he was away from home he felt obliged to take advantage of it.

“Do you live here by yourself?” Jamie asked.

“Nope,” Scot replied, “but my roommate is out for the weekend.” He unlocked the door. “The place is ours!” He gestured broadly for Jamie to enter.

Jamie walked through the door into the pleasant squalor within. Scot tossed his bag of dirty clothes on a pile of others which cluttered the couch. He shoved papers and books from the coffee table to the floor, searching for something.

“Ah!” he exclaimed. “Found it!” “Found what?” Jamie asked.

“The remote,” Scot said as the screen flickered to life. They flopped on the floor in front of the screen and the dogs lay beside them, tails wagging furiously. Jamie absently scratched behind Killer's ear and Scot sent Muffin's leg waving with a belly rub. They watched the people on the screen in silence for several minutes.

“Is there anything to eat here?” Jamie asked.

“Dunno. Let me check.” Scot bounded up during a commercial and opened the refrigerator. “Eeeew.” He said, “Nope.” He moved away from the refrigerator door. “You know, you would think my roommate might take the rotten food out of the 'fridge after several weeks.” He sighed. “No such luck.” He thought for a minute. “There's beer. And we could order pizza,” He said.

“That's OK,” said Jamie. “I lost my appetite.” Scot returned to the floor beside him, opening a beer.

“I'm kind of surprised your mother let you come here. She sure doesn't seem to think too highly of us,” Scot said, flipping channels and taking a huge swig from the can.

“She didn't want me to come here,” Jamie said.

“Figures,” Scot said. “Want one?” He lifted the can, gesturing toward the refrigerator.

“Um,” Jamie responded. “Yes and no.”

“Help yourself.” Scot shrugged noncommittally. “No skin off my nose either way.” “Maybe later,” Jamie said. “Change the channel?”

“Go ahead,” replied Scot, handing Jamie the remote.

#

Laurie came and picked them up at three-fifteen the next day. She had already packed her car to return to Rome after their game, so it was a tight fit to get all three of them into the car. Sticks poked Jamie in the back as he slid into the back seat along with a laundry basket full of clean clothes and a few overdue library books.

“What a gorgeous day!” Laurie took both hands off the wheel in a broad gesture, causing both the male occupants of the car to turn white.

“Yep. Lovely,” Scot said nervously. “You can take the wheel again. Now. Please.”

She looked at him from the side of her eye and grasped the wheel tightly. “Spoilsport!” she hissed.

Jamie laughed.

They started for the field where two towering white poles made of lengths of plastic pipe were the goals for their game. Laurie hit her sticks together once and whooped at the people who were clustered toward the northwest end of the field. Most of the people on the team were wearing biking shorts or cutoffs, and some were wearing tee-shirts with the team's mascot, a frisky looking dog, on them. She was answered by greetings and waved sticks. A young man with crossed arms apparently called her name, although Jamie could not hear his voice, for Laurie walked toward him somewhat reluctantly. He took her shoulder in a way which could be either affectionate or aggressive, Jamie couldn't tell from his vantage point. About the time he decided to intervene, Laurie moved back toward him. The bounce had left her step and her voice was somewhat subdued.

“This is Neal. He's the one who started this group up. He's an archaeologist, too.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jamie, glad you're going to play.” The fairly short but muscular man took his hand with a firm, hard shake. Like most of the other male players, he was shirtless and shoeless. Neal crossed his heavy arms in a fluid motion as he sized Jamie up. His dark brown eyes seemed to be looking at something deeper down in Jamie than his appearance. His expression did not betray what he had found, but his friendliness made Jamie feel at ease. Laurie was touching his arm to direct his attention to the people she named for him, and Jamie quickly forgot his earlier concern for her. Faces flashed in front of him, and all of them were friendly or indifferent. Except one.

He glanced up to meet a pair of narrowed brown eyes from halfway across the field. Even at that distance, the animosity struck him like a fist. The young man Laurie had been talking to was shirtless and

his chest was wiry and darkly tanned. Jamie thought about his own torso, splotted red and white with peeling sunburn. Unconsciously he moved closer to Laurie, but whether for protection or to see this stranger's reaction he wasn't sure. The response was an immediate stiffening on the part of brown-eyes, a slight scowl. Jamie missed half the names Laurie told him.

As they gathered to divvy up teams, the dark-skinned boy approached Jamie. His hands were clenched so tightly around his sticks that his knuckles were white.

“Where'd you come from?” the boy asked, as if Jamie were a new kind of disease. “Rome, Georgia,” Jamie responded as civilly as he could, but the other boy's malice made him defensive. “My name's Jamie.” He held out a hand to shake, but the other boy just stared at him.

“You at field school?” His dark eyes narrowed, sizing Jamie up. “Yeah,” Jamie responded. “Kind of.”

“You Laurie's new friend?” The boy demanded. Jamie was startled at this level of insinuation in such an innocent word.

“I reckon I am,” Jamie said, defensiveness beginning to turn to anger. “What of it?” “Nothing,” the boy said. “I just thought she had a little taste left.”

Laurie walked up behind Jamie. “I see you two have already met,” she said. Jamie shrugged and the other boy left without a word.

“Ray,” Laurie called after him, but he ignored her. She shook her head.

The divvying of teams was a tradition which Laurie said helped keep everybody friendly. Jamie was no longer sure. He had half expected a highly ritualized selection process. But they used One Potato-Two Potato.

“This way nobody feels that someone is out to get them specifically. When people are always switching up teams it makes for better playing and more fun,” she whispered, leaning toward him. Brown-eyes looked at him through slits again.

“Who is that?” He whispered to Laurie.

“Oh, him. That's Ray. He's from North Carolina, part Cherokee. He's kind of touchy. Everything you say is probably going to offend him, so be prepared.” Laurie sighed.

“He's a good player now, but he used to throw fits when we all decided we wanted to play Choctaw stickball instead of Cherokee stickball. It was hard for him to learn the new way of playing. Cherokee stickball is more like street fighting, and he basically had to relearn the sport,” she said. “He's strong, though. And fast. He could be a great player if he didn't have such a temper.”

“Nice-looking, too,” Jamie said.

“Yes, he is,” Laurie replied. She looked at Jamie, and her usually open face was flat and emotionless. “We went out a couple of times.” She shrugged. “No big deal. Not to me, anyway.”

“Really?” Jamie said.

Her potato was called and she moved to one side of the field. It was down to three people besides Neal, who was doing the potatoing. Ray was one, and another was a smallish but well-built woman with red-brown hair tied into a bun at the base of her neck. Ray and Jamie eyed each other suspiciously.

“Three potato, four...” Neal said. “Five potato, six potato, seven potato more.” He pointed Ray to go on the side Laurie was not on. The two avoided exchanging glances.

“One potato, two potato...”

Jamie looked at the teams, each already with more than ten people twiddling their sticks and wrestling with each other. The sticks Laurie had handed him from the general use pile were heavier and had larger pockets than hers. She assured him this was an advantage.

“Seven potato, more.” The redhead went to Laurie's side.

“Hey, Jeannie, come here,” Laurie said. The two of them started talking quietly but animatedly. Jamie thought of two birds, a woodpecker and a yellowhammer, exchanging opinions.

“One potato, two potato...”

Ray was not looking at him then, his dark head was bent over his sticks, retightening the leather strips which formed the pockets. He yanked the thongs with a ferocity that Jamie could almost feel around his own neck. He suddenly hoped they would be on the same side. To play against Laurie was preferable to playing against this person who already had so much hostility toward him. His thoughts drifted off. He wouldn't mind having Laurie tackle him, nor the redhead.

“More.” His potato was called and he moved towards Ray's team. Again he looked into those narrowed eyes. This time there was a grin behind them.

“You lucked out, buddy,” a surprisingly soft voice issued from the tight lips as a friendly slap stung Jamie's sunburned shoulder. Then they all lined up, team facing team, with their sticks neatly laid on the ground in front of them. Each line included a complete assortment of tall and short, thick and thin, light and dark. Jamie's eyes moved up and down across the line of faces opposing him, trying to remember all the faces of the opposite team. Laurie grinned and waved at him.

At some imperceptible signal, a ring of players formed around the center of the field and two players retreated, each to guard a goal. Jamie noticed that Laurie was one of the people playing the defensive position on the northwest side of the field. That meant the sun was at her back, and she seemed quite pleased about this.

“Hashi be praised!” She yelled. “She's in your face!” Scot was on her side as well, and he assumed the goalie position.

“Hell,” he breathed. “I hate playing goalie. This is going to hurt.”

The moment the ball was thrown into the air seemed to linger for Jamie. The ball was making its smooth arc, every attention focused on this tiny flying sphere. It hovered there, for a moment in balance

with the opposing forces around it. It almost winked. Something awoke in Jamie and then came the crash as the sphere descended into the fray. The ball was bounced and snagged and rolled and smacked. The clatter of sticks and the grunts of the absorbed players surrounded Jamie. The teams had become two organisms, struggling, suddenly stretching out across the field on flying feet, and just as suddenly clustering immobile around the tiny leather ball.

Jamie found himself with the ball, and he was running before he knew it, right into the sun. His feet flew and his lungs felt they were about to burst from the unexpectedness of his sprint. The goal post loomed near, tall and white before him. He caught a flash of brown next to him.

“Give me the ball,” Raymond demanded. Jamie almost stumbled in confusion. He wanted to throw so badly, yet...

His indecision cost him, and the last thing that went through his mind as the ground hit him, knocking his breath away was that he probably should have thrown Ray the ball.

By the time Jamie had picked himself up off the grass, feeling for any injuries, Raymond had taken the ball from the large fellow who had tackled Jamie and had scored a point. The hearty thunk of ball against the goal pounded in Jamie's head like a drum. No pause. Again the circle, and again the ball described its exquisite arc.

“Scream, Jamie!” Laurie yelled, and she let loose with a high pitched cry which somehow made him think of the ball hanging in the air. The sound of it made his blood race. His sticks plucked the ball from the ground and launched it toward the goal. The motion felt so good, so natural to Jamie that he laughed out loud. He had truly become part of the game.

#

Neal flopped next to Jamie, who lay with his knees in the air gasping for breath. Moments later Laurie joined them, handed them a water bottle. They greedily accepted it.

“Well, what did you think?” Neal asked between gulps.

“You played really well, Jamie,” Laurie assured him, her face flushed from exertion, chest heaving for oxygen.

“Man...this is a great game,” said Jamie. He tilted up the water bottle and sucked at the coolness, watching Laurie pull her hair from her sweaty face and coil it behind her neck.

“So, are you coming back next week?” Neal pressed him gently. Jamie turned for permission to Laurie, who nodded at him ever so slightly. “Sure,” he closed his eyes, relaxing. “I'd love to.”

#

The car was dark as they drove to Rome. The rich smell of coffee filled the close atmosphere and the lights of evening flashed by around them. Scot was already asleep thirty minutes into the trip.

“Actually, next weekend we play in Columbus. You up for playing at a powwow?”

Laurie kept her eyes on the road.

“Uh, do you think they'll want me on the team? I mean, this was my first time to play,” Jamie pressed his cheek against the chilly glass. He wanted her to say something, but he wasn't sure what. He absently touched his sunburned neck. She smiled slightly.

“Neal wants everyone. It's not a matter of winning and losing, it's a matter of playing the game. The more people who play, the better. The more who learn, who become part of the playing, the stronger we all are. Even if they did only pick up sticks last week.”

She gave a little laugh. “At least you haven't had time to pick up any bad habits.” Silence lengthened in the car. He wanted to tell her how much he had loved playing, but he figured she knew that. Besides, how can you put into words the feeling of flying, of being a creature of the game? You either understood it or you didn't.

“You have the gift,” she said suddenly. “Some people have played for a long time and it is just exercise to them. They don't live the game. But you are already part of it. You should come to Columbus with us. Try playing with the Choctaw. We are a part of the game, but none of us has been playing for more than a few years. They grew up with it, and it is a part of them completely. You'll love it.” She said more, but Jamie's eyes were already closing in sleep. The last thing he saw before he fell completely asleep was a pair of narrowed brown eyes. Did they see something in him he could not see in himself?

Chapter Three

Late morning sun flooded through Jamie's window into his face. He groaned and tried to roll over, but his body was completely unresponsive. Even his sunburn was a dull throbbing ache instead of the searing pain it had been for the past several days.

Without opening his eyes, he carefully flexed his arm and leg muscles one by one. He couldn't believe it was possible to be this sore.

He finally sat up in bed, swinging his legs over the side. He bent to rub the muscles in his calves, but the blisters on his hands prevented him from doing so. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and stared at his hands. They were swollen and stiff with blisters. That was from the shoveling, he thought. But why was the rest of his body so sore? He staggered toward the bathroom and began running water into the tub as hot as he could stand it. Through the steam he lowered himself into the heat, where he soaked the stiffness from his muscles. His blistered hands and back stung, but the relief he felt was worth the initial discomfort. He relaxed into the embrace of the bath.

Much later, when he was out of the tub and dressed, he went downstairs to see what breakfast he could find. His mother had not returned from church yet, so he poured a bowl of corn flakes and began eating. Jamie glanced at the clock. It was eleven thirty.

His mother wouldn't be home for nearly an hour. He thought about carrying his food into the living room, a forbidden luxury when his mother was around, but decided instead to try to read several articles from scholarly journals assigned for the archaeology class. Laurie had xeroxed them for him while they were in Athens, and he felt obliged to muddle through them. Actually, he had wanted to impress the others with how much he understood about the site they were excavating, but when he had first tried reading the articles, they made no sense to him at all. But this time it was different.

The crunch of gravel in the driveway startled Jamie from his reading about the Lamar pottery in northwest Georgia by the car pulling into the driveway. Looking at the clock, he was amazed at how much time had passed since he began reading. He had learned more about the archaeology of his hometown area in the past hour than he had learned in ten years of public school.

"Hi, Mom," Jamie said when she opened the door. She looked a little tired as she stood in the kitchen in her Sunday best, running her fingers through her graying hair. "Good morning, Jamie," she said. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah. Great," he replied. "How was church?"

"The usual," she said. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and at the fine creases around her eyes. "Mrs. Williams asked why she never sees my heathen son any more."

Jamie sighed. "Old Mrs. Williams. Always looking out for me."

"What do you want for lunch? We have chicken or that leftover ham." Jamie's mother left the room to change her clothing.

“Ham sandwiches are fine,” he said. He again began reading. A smile lingered at the edge of his mind while he concentrated on Mississippian settlement patterns in northwest Georgia.

His mother came into the room dressed in tee shirt and khaki shorts and began fixing lunch. She glanced over his shoulder. “What are you reading?” she asked.

“Oh. It's something for that archaeology class,” he said.

“You sure have been spending a lot of time with that.” She returned to the sandwiches. “Two?”

“Please,” he said. “I like field school a lot. It makes me feel”--he tried to find words for the kind of satisfaction he found working on the site--“like I can touch what I'm reading about. It makes the study real.” He shrugged. “I love it.”

“I guess that means you're going to go back next week.” His mother did not look up from the ham she was slicing. Jamie looked up in surprise. He had never considered not going back.

“I sure am,” he said.

“It's just,” his mother began hesitantly, “I heard there was a job opening at that new store in the mall. The pay's pretty good for a high school student. I thought, since school's out for the summer...” She trailed off.

Jamie closed the notebook and gave his full attention to his mother. “Do you want me to get a job?”

“I want whatever is best for you, honey. You have been putting so much time and energy into this archaeology thing. I mean, you come home completely exhausted every day, and what have you been getting out of it?” She handed him his sandwiches without meeting his eyes.

“What would you think if I decided to go to college?” Jamie asked. “That's years away,” his mother said.

“Two years. I mean, would you think the dig is a waste of time then?” He bit into his sandwich.

“What does that have to do with...?” Then it dawned on her. “You aren't thinking of studying archaeology at the university are you?”

“Why not?”

“Why on earth would you go to college for four years to get a degree that won't get you a good job when you get out? Do they even have an archaeology department at the university?” Jamie's mother looked like she was starting to wish she had never talked him into going to see the excavation at her brother's farm.

“They have an anthropology department in Athens.” As he spoke, Jamie watched his mother frown.

“You would do that?” She said. “You would take my money and move away just so you could major in the most impractical thing you could think of?”

“Hey, I'm not wanting to go into art!” He held up his hands defensively. His mother stared at him, then burst out laughing.

“Silly boy!” she said. She sat beside him and started eating her sandwich. “Is that really what you want?”

“I don't know,” Jamie said, shrugging. “I love the work. I really enjoy learning about the Indians, and the land, and the way people lived before all this.” He gestured around the kitchen. “Before ham sandwiches.” He took a bite. “But it's like trying to solve a puzzle, too. A puzzle you don't have all the pieces for. But at least the pieces you do have are something you can touch, can hold in your hand.”

“So I should give up on the idea that you'll become a lawyer, huh?” She finished her sandwich and leaned her chin on her hand, looking at Jamie.

“Fraid so.” Jamie grinned weakly. “Lawyers are wordy people, I'm not.”

“Well, whatever makes you happy.” She rose and cleared the table.

Jamie gathered his papers and went to his room. Was he sure this was a good idea? He wondered. He loved doing archaeology, but was it going to make him happy for the rest of his life? Either way there was plenty of time to decide.

#

“Hey Jamie!” Laurie waved Jamie over when he drove up to the site on Monday morning. Jamie got out of his car slowly and waved at his aunt who was holding his tiny adopted cousin in her arms.

“Come on,” Laurie shouted.

“Just a minute!” Jamie shouted back. He made a few funny faces at his little cousin before trotting over to where Laurie and Scot were waiting.

“You sore?” Laurie asked when he got near.

“About what?” He asked.

“Stiff?” She asked patiently.

“Yeah, a little,” Jamie admitted.

“I'm not surprised. You played really hard on Saturday,” Laurie said. “I'm sore and I didn't even play that hard,” Scot said.

“You know how it is when you first play,” Laurie said. “You feel like you can't move for nearly a week.”

“It's not that bad,” Jamie said. “No worse than the stiffness from shoveling last week.”

“That's right,” Laurie said. “Shovel shaving uses such odd muscles. And I got a bruise here.” She pointed through her cutoff jeans to the place on her thigh where she had braced the shovel much of last week.

“How's the sunburn?” Scot asked.

Jamie wrinkled his nose. “Not too bad anymore. It's tender.”

“What a sorry-looking crew we are,” Laurie said, laughing. “Let's get to work.”

With gloves on, Jamie could hardly feel the blisters from last week. His sunburned skin rubbed against his shirt and the sweat was pouring down his body well before midday. The work made him forget his worries about what his mother expected of him.

As the week progressed, Jamie began to notice how he could tell what time it was by the movement of the sun. Otherwise time had stopped having much meaning. Some of the group began working on burials, which first showed up as dark splotches of disturbed dirt in the orangish subsoil. Jamie shoveled. Beside him, Laurie and Scot worked, sometimes talking, sometimes quiet.

Laurie pointed out the difference between pieces of wood and splinters of bone. Jamie gained new respect for her ability to recognize artifacts, sometimes solely from the sound they made when the shovel hit them.

Before Jamie knew it, it was Friday and they were packing up to leave early. “You still up for going to Columbus tomorrow?” Laurie asked Jamie.

“Tomorrow? Oh. That's right,” Jamie hit his head with his palm. He had forgotten all about the powwow. His mother was going to throw a fit. “Yeah. Looking forward to it.”

“Pick you up at four-thirty?” She asked.

“Four-thirty?” Jamie couldn't believe his ears. “In the morning?” “Tomorrow morning,” Laurie said patiently.

“Four-thirty tomorrow morning?” Jamie's voice cracked and hit a high note from his childhood.

“That is, if you still want to go,” Laurie said.

“Yeah. See you then, I guess,” Jamie replied.

As he drove home, he groaned aloud at the thought of having to get up so early in the morning. And he realized that he was still going to have to deal with his mother when he got home. He had forgotten to mention that he was planning to go out of town that weekend, and he could already hear what his mother would say about that. Surely she would let him go, she had to.

#

When they finally got to Columbus, Georgia, Jamie was halfway asleep, and the sun was fairly high in the sky. When Laurie said someone should try to figure out where they were going, he and Scot came wide awake.

Laurie sighed and turned the car in to a Chevron station. She got out of the car and shuffled over to a newspaper machine. On the cover of the local paper she bought was a garish photo of an Indian dancer in dyed feathers. She tossed it to Jamie as she restarted the car.

“See if you can figure out where the powwow is.” She stared ahead, trying to calculate their position relative to the interstate.

Jamie scanned the newspaper, but the article seemed to be limited to a photo caption describing the Indian dances at the powwow.

“I don't see anything,” Jamie finally had to admit. As much as he loathed asking directions, the look that Laurie gave him at that point sent him out of the car and through the door of the Chevron.

The man at the counter gave one look at Jamie and turned his head. Jamie heard the unmistakable sound of chewing tobacco spit hitting into a tin-can spittoon.

“Excuse me,” Jamie began, “but could you please tell us where the powwow is?” The man stared at him. Jamie felt that he could almost see the gears of the man's brain shifting to form his reply.

“The what?” A dribble of brown colored drool seeped out of the side of his mouth until he wiped it on his cotton sleeve.

“There's supposed to be an Indian powwow somewhere around here today,” Jamie said quickly.

“Wa-el,” he drawled, appraising Jamie, “it's prob'ly down at the park,” and he gave him instructions with a string of right-left-left-stoplight-rights which Jamie repeated.

“Thanks.” Jamie waved on his way out the door. “Shore. Anytime,” and the spittoon pinged again.

Laurie followed the directions as given, and Jamie was positive that he remembered them correctly. He usually could remember such things with unerring accuracy. There were roads where none should have been, and lights were not at the intersections indicated, but somehow they found themselves pulling into the massive parking area of the powwow. The sheer number of people around made Jamie balk, but Scot and Laurie grabbed their things and pulled him directly into the thick of the crowd.

“Have you ever had 'gator tail before?” asked Scot, leading Jamie to where a dark skinned woman was stirring a pot as huge and round as herself, and others were tossing plates of dough into vats of boiling grease. “Seminole,” he said.

Fry-bread two dollars, the sign read. Gator tails five. Hominy two-fifty.

“Two bucks for fry bread,” Laurie groaned. Jamie's stomach rumbled.

“Wait 'til after we've played and see if you still feel like eating,” Scot advised him.

“Every time we make a trip like this I'm always famished when we get to the powwow,” Laurie complained, “and the food's so expensive I can't stand to eat it.”

“I can stand it,” Scot said, eyeing one of the other booths where a lovely girl with curly black hair and almond eyes was working.

Some of the Indians at the powwow were as fantastic and exotic as Jamie had imagined, their lean bodies decked in feathers and bells. Others were rather unimpressive, sporting tee shirts airbrushed with horses or teddy bears stretched over prodigious beer bellies. On the whole, the people at the powwow were much like the people in Rome. There was just more variation in skin color. As they wandered around, they finally noticed the stickball poles jutting above the tents toward the center of the park.

A few of the members of the Athens team were already there, and Laurie and Jamie made a beeline for their friends while Scot faded into the crowd.

“Are the Coehomma here yet?” Laurie turned to the slightly older man who was their team leader.

“The who?” asked Jamie at Laurie's elbow.

The small but athletic-looking man turned his sharp eyes to Jamie. “The Choctaws we're playing with are the Coehommans from Mississippi. And no,” he turned to Laurie, “they're not here yet.”

“Bet they got lost again,” Laurie said. “Happens every time.” She turned back to

Jamie, “Do you remember Neal?”

“Yeah. Hey.” He shook the man's hand.

“So Laurie put you up to playing here? Did she at least warn you about the Choctaws?” Neal grinned through Laurie's hushing motions. “No. Why?” Jamie looked at Laurie.

“Well, there's a lot you ought to know, but suffice it to say that we're going to get our butts kicked, and you need to know what to do to avoid unnecessary scoring on their part and pain on yours.” Neal ticked the points off on his stubby fingers. “One: don't run with the ball. Throw it as soon as you get it, preferably to one of our players. Two: If you want to tackle someone, do it. Don't just stand in front of them holding up your arms.”

“They'll run you down like a railroad train,” Laurie interjected. Neal groaned, remembering the pain of previous mistakes.

“Three: don't be afraid to throw your sticks down to tackle someone. Sometimes that is the only thing you can do to prevent scoring. Four: if you see someone about to throw the ball at you, get the hell out of the way.”

“Unless you're goalie,” Laurie interrupted.

“Do you have insurance?” Neal asked.

“C'mon, Laurie, it's not that bad. Is it?” Jamie tried to keep up his enthusiasm. “It's all part of the game,” Neal said. “We play it, but the Coehomma live it. They can't hold themselves back to our playing level, and we wouldn't ask them to. One day we will give them a real challenge. Today we will play the best we can and let the game take care of the rest.

“The Choctaw probably won't be here for another hour, so why don't y'all look around the powwow. The dancing had already started when I went by.” Neal then turned back to restringing his sticks. Laurie grabbed Jamie's arm.

“Let's go see what there is to see.” She tugged him toward the thickest part of the crowd. “Hey, there's Scot!” They waved and joined their friend who had split from them earlier. He already had a giant paper plate of gator tail, hominy, and fry bread.

“I couldn't wait any longer,” he said through a mouthful.

“I thought you told me to wait and see if I felt like eating after the game,” Jamie said. “Right. I told you to wait. But I've played the Choctaw before, and I want a last meal,” Scot shoveled another bite into his mouth. “Besides, I'm probably going to have to be goalie again, and I need all the strength I can get.”

“Is there anything you're supposed to avoid before the game?” Jamie remembered stories of pre-game rituals.

“If you eat just before playing, you could get sick,” Laurie said.

“No, I mean like taboos on avoiding meat or something.” Jamie couldn't remember where he had heard this.

“Oh,” Laurie said. Scot laughed.

“Stay away from women. They're polluting.” Scot poked Laurie.

“We don't observe rituals like that for obvious reasons,” Laurie said, grabbing Scot's plate and taking a large bite of his fry bread.

“Traditionally fasting, purification, and remaining up all night help prepare the player for the game. Urn, don't lean against trees or lean your sticks against things. Avoid women, especially menstruating ones.” Laurie searched her mind for other taboos. “Ask Neal, he knows all of the things that pollute players.”

Scot grabbed his plate back. Laurie grabbed Jamie's hand and tugged him toward the circle where people were dancing.

“Do you ever feel like you're doing things wrong?” Jamie said. “That by breaking the traditions you're messing with serious beliefs? Aren't you kind of superstitious?”

Laurie looked at him. “No,” she said. They walked on for a minute before she continued: “I’ve thought about this, too. Traditions all stem from something important that people need. People’s needs change, though, and different people have different needs. We are Anglo, and following Indian traditions holds no personal meaning for us. When it is a matter of being polite, yes, we’ll follow the traditions of the people we play with. You know I’m not going to play with y’all here. None of the women are. The Choctaw don’t like it. End of story. Their reasons for not wanting me to play are irrelevant.”

“You don’t feel kind of like you’re going to Catholic mass wearing Bermuda shorts and carrying a video camera? Don’t you respect their beliefs?” Jamie asked.

“I respect them completely. I just don’t believe them. You don’t have to believe in something to respect it,” Laurie replied. “Now come on, these dances are fantastic!” They wove through the people surrounding the dance arena to get a better view of the juniors division of fancy dance. Boys spun and hopped looking for all the world like brightly feathered baby birds trying to fly. Rattles and bells on their legs jangled in time to the drums.

“All these familiar faces,” Laurie mused. “The same people come to dance at all of these powwows. It’s their business, whole families traveling around. It’s almost like a circus culture.”

“Some of those dancers look white,” Jamie pointed to one blond-haired blue-eyed dancer. Laurie laughed.

“Yep. One of the guys who goes around to these things has gotten quite a reputation because he’s an Anglo who does fancy dance. He’s hilarious. He came to the Helen, Georgia, powwow when the Choctaw were there last, and he and some cronies did some Plains Indian songs. The Choctaw laughed so much! These Anglos were trying so hard, being so deeply spiritual, and the Indians were laughing their butts off. Heritage is not something you can simply adopt or buy. It is something you have as a part of you,” Laurie whispered.

“So why do you play toli?” Jamie whispered back.

Laurie shrugged “I like it. When you play you’re completely swept up in the action. I played it long before I was seriously interested in anthropology,” Laurie said. “The way our group is with the Choctaw, we have a mutual interest. We aren’t trying to pretend we are Indian. We are Nahollo, which is what they call white people. Why should we try to be something we aren’t?”

Jamie replied with silence. There really was something to the game, something he couldn’t really put his finger on that drew him into it. When he played he was totally lost in it. Of course, he thought to himself, having Laurie play was pretty important in his love of the game. From behind where she was standing, he watched her shift her weight from one foot to the other. Grinning, he thought the Choctaw must be crazy not to allow women to play.

“The dancing is changing. Look, the shawl dance! I love this one,” Laurie did not turn to see if he was watching. He was, but he was watching Laurie more than he was the dancers.

“If you like it so much, why don’t you dance?” He moved beside her. “That doesn’t look too hard.” She gave him a reproving look.

“It’s not my place, for one thing. I wouldn’t be an Anglo dancer at a powwow if you paid me. For another thing, the shawl dance is mostly done by young girls. Do you see a single girl out there over

thirteen?" Her expression shifted abruptly. "The Choctaw have some lovely dances we do sometimes at the parties after games. They're better than all of these combined."

"We?" Jamie asked.

"We. They taught me how to do some dances a couple years ago. I practice every chance I get, which," she sighed, "is not often."

"I thought you didn't like the idea of Anglos taking on Native American culture," Jamie prodded her.

"Who said anything about culture. Fun is fun," Laurie laughed. "And dancing is, well..."

"Fun?"

"Better than fun." Laurie smiled and ducked her head. Jamie averted his attention to the swirling dancers whose feet struck the earth rhythmically. Dark braids and brightly colored shawls flickered around them. Laurie was right, all of them were young, and all of this group appeared to be Native American. Jamie was startled when Scot appeared.

"Hi, guys. The Coehomma just pulled in," He poked Laurie "Thought you might want to know."

"You comin', Jamie?" Laurie asked as she and Scot moved back toward the white poles jutting above the crowd. Jamie nodded, taking one last look at the dancers before following their rapid progress.

Two white vans with Mississippi plates were parked just outside the edge of the playing field. Clustered in and around the vans were over a dozen men ranging in age from fifty to fifteen. They were looking around and talking to themselves.

"Halitó," Laurie moved around to greet some friends in the group. Jamie followed hesitantly.

"Halitó," two or three of them replied, grinning. "What?" Jamie whispered to Laurie.

"It means 'Well met.'" Laurie turned to him briefly. "Guys, this is Jamie. He just started playing."

"We supposed to go easy on him?" One of the larger men asked. He was as broad as he was tall, but muscular, not fat. He winked at Laurie "He your brother?"

Laurie gently laid her arm around Jamie's shoulder. "My little brother. He can take care of himself." She returned his wink. That set them off laughing. Jamie fidgeted.

"Don't call me that, Laurie," Jamie said.

"Sorry, Jamie," Laurie said. "It's a Choctaw joke."

"You're all right." The big man smiled and slapped Jamie's shoulder. "You a shooter?"

"Shooter?" Jamie asked.

“He's a shooter. He just doesn't know it yet,” Laurie said. This prompted another burst of laughter.

“I haven't decided what position I want to play,” Jamie said. Laurie smiled at him. “You don't really choose your position. Certain people are suited for certain positions. Just be glad you're not like Scot, suited for goalie.” She smiled. “Poor Scot.” just then Neal appeared. “Everybody here? Want to start soon?”

“Hey Brother-in-law!” The big guy threw his arm around Neal's shoulders. “You got a shooter you didn't tell us about.”

“He just started. I wasn't sure he would come.” Neal grinned at Jamie.

“Uh, Neal, can I talk to you for a minute?” Jamie asked. Neal nodded.

“Whenever y'all are ready,” he said to the Choctaw. He turned to Jamie after they had left the circle of the Coehomma team. “Yes?”

“What's all this about me being a shooter? I can hardly throw the ball. And is that guy really your brother-in-law?” Jamie had a dozen more questions, but waited for these answers first.

“You're a shooter. You just need practice to bring out your talent. You already throw the ball better than some people who have been playing for months,” Neal said.

“And no, in our definition of the word I'm not his brother-in-law. In Coehomma practically everyone is related to everyone else in some way. They use a kind of fictive kinship for friends outside of the community. Get Laurie to tell you about it sometime.” Neal smiled. “I bet she'll tell you all about it.” He began moving away. “Get ready to play!”

#

As the team slowly gathered, stretching to loosen their muscles, Jamie looked over to the group clustered on the other side of the field. They were a patch of darkness among the bright patterns of people at the powwow, turning only to each other, speaking among themselves in a combination of English and Choctaw.

Each team walked past their opponents' goal, hitting it with their sticks and yelling. They then lined up stick to stick as they had in practice. Jamie was across from one of the young skinny Choctaw who would not make eye contact with him. Down the Anglo line, Jamie glimpsed Ray with his arms folded and his face set. An older Choctaw man held the ball in the center of the field and everyone circled him. He threw the ball up into the air and then quickly got out of the way as the tiny thing descended into the shouts and sticks below.

Jamie was shoulder to shoulder with the big man who had spoken to him earlier. The ball went from stick to stick amidst groans of pain. In an instant, the ball was right in front of Jamie, and he got his sticks around it quickly. He barely had time to flick the ball away from himself before he was knocked to the ground. Hard. He looked up to see the skinny Choctaw who had tackled him--he had already retrieved

his sticks and was heading downfield. He turned in time to see Laurie's huge friend fling the ball unerringly at the goal. A shout went up from the powwow crowd.

When they circled around for the ball to be thrown up again, the person who had scored turned to Jamie and said, "That is how a shooter plays." Jamie clenched his jaw with determination and looked over to see the simmering fury that was always on Ray's face. Then the ball was in the air again.

Jamie felt a shove. "If you can't hold onto the ball, give it to someone who can," Ray spat. Jamie shrank away. This time the ball had fallen directly into someone's sticks. A Choctaw who was so fat it looked as though he couldn't run at all shook off all those who attempted to stop him as he trotted toward the goal. Jamie threw down his sticks and grabbed the man around the belly as he passed. He was dragged for nearly ten feet before he fell off, much to the amusement of the crowd.

"Hey, boy! Make 'em eat grass!" Jamie thought he heard Laurie shout. He was unsure if it was for him or for the guy he had been unable to tackle. While he was finding his sticks, he heard the ball strike the goal.

Again they were in the middle of the field and, again the ball was airborne. Neal caught it this time and threw to Ray who was already halfway down the field. Jamie, Neal, and a few others on their team raced to where Ray was already being borne down on by several large players. Ray made a desperate throw toward the goal, missing by several feet.

Neal sprinted over to where the ball had fallen.

"Back me up!" He yelled to Jamie. Obliging, Jamie raced to the other side of the goal from where the man was even now aiming the ball. The goalie stretched his sticks up to cover as much of the goal as he could reach.

Neal missed by an inch. Jamie snapped the ball between his sticks and let fly, again missing the pole by inches. Neal neatly caught the ball in his sticks. This time he did not miss.

A resounding thunk was followed by cheers from the people all around them. Jamie caught his breath as they all rounded up for the throw. This game was far more physically punishing than practice had prepared him for. Jamie felt that he was two steps behind every action, never fully living the moment of play as he had before. The play was so fast that it was really all he could do to keep up.

And then it was over. The teams lined up for congratulations and jibes, slapping sticks together in a friendly fashion. Laurie carried jugs of water for them to share around. Scot came over with a pained look on his face.

"Laurie, look what your friend did to me." He held up his tee shirt to reveal a perfect red imprint of the toli ball on the skin above his lower ribs.

"Ooooh." Laurie touched it gently. "Does it hurt?" "Not much," Scot replied.

"That's good," she said.

They packed up fairly quickly to return to Rome. The teams exchanged brief goodbyes.

“How do you say good-bye in Choctaw?” Jamie asked Laurie

“Uh. You don't,” she replied. “Meet you at the car.”

Scot steered Jamie toward the parking lot. “She says good-bye all right.” Scot laughed. Jamie craned his head to catch sight of the group. Scot diverted Jamie's attention back to him.

“There used to be a way of saying good-bye,” Scot said after a moment's thought. “

At least that's what Laurie told me. They don't really use Choctaw words for that anymore. They use English.”

“Is English a second language to them?” Jamie asked.

“From what Laurie says,” Scot said. “They use both languages, sometimes in the same sentence.”

“Oh,” Jamie said.

Laurie bounded up, “Y'all going to be ready to shovel shave on Monday?” Scot and Jamie groaned.

“Well, I'm already aching so much it won't really feel any different,” Scot said. Laurie laughed. Then they all piled into the car and began the long drive home.

Chapter Four

“Why not call a spade a spade?” Jamie asked himself during one of those long, quiet Monday afternoons.

“Say what?” Laurie was working about ten feet from him and had overheard his remark.

“Nothing,” Jamie said.

“Oh, come on.” Laurie laid her sweaty face sideways on the shovel handle and looked at him.

“While I was shoveling I thought about that phrase.” Jamie shoveled harder as he spoke.

“Yeah, 'call a shovel a shovel' doesn't quite have the same ring to it.” Laurie looked at her blistered hands and then resumed shoveling.

“No-one seems to like what I'm doing with myself these days,” he said. “They're wanting me to think about what I'm going to do when I graduate, and that seems so far away. And my mom wants me to stay with her forever.”

“What else is new? People haven't been liking what their kids have been doing since time began,” Laurie said, laughing.

“She's all I've got,” Jamie said quietly. “If she gives up on me...” His voice trailed off.

Laurie looked at him skeptically. “What about us?” She said, planting the shovel in the ground and leaving it. “Don't your friends count?” Her voice gentled. “Don't deny what you enjoy just because your family doesn't understand it. Help them to understand it. Family pretty much has to put up with you even if they would rather you were a lawyer instead of an archaeologist. Even if they'd rather you played golf than tali. And you do have friends outside of your family.”

“You don't understand, you're not from Georgia,” Jamie began, but was interrupted by

Laurie's laughter.

She came over and whispered conspiratorially to him, “Listen, I'm from Alabama. Where I come from, Rome, Georgia, would be considered a metropolis. My family,” here she straightened her shoulders proudly, “has been in Alabama since before history.

“They were Indians?” Jamie gasped, looking again at her dark hair framing her pale face.

“Nope. It's just that they couldn't read or write, and there wasn't a soul around who could. Nobody knows how long my people have been living in the same area, because there is no known historical record of them until well after the Civil War. History is kind of limited like that,” she concluded. “We have family stories,” she said slowly. “Some of them are better than any fiction, but then they probably are fiction after all these years. I know stories my grandmother's grandmother told her when she was a little girl.” Laurie returned slowly to the present, “So my family has firm ideas about what one of their own

should and shouldn't do. And they weren't too pleased that I went into anthropology...but they dealt with it.”

“But my mother,” Jamie began and was quickly interrupted by Laurie.

“What has she said? Did she forbid you to go into archaeology?”

“Well, not exactly.” Jamie struggled to describe his mother's disapproval.

“What did she say exactly?” Laurie pressed.

“Something like 'Do what you want', but in a tone of voice that implied that if I did, she'd never forgive me.” Jamie felt stupid.

“So what does your dad think about all this?” Laurie asked.

“If I ever hear from him, I'll ask.” Jamie started shoveling with enthusiasm born of frustration.

“I'm sorry,” Laurie said softly.

They shoveled in silence while the sun slid across the sky. Then it was late afternoon and time to return home.

“Laurie.” Jamie caught her attention as they loaded to leave. “Would you like to come meet my mother one day after work?”

Laurie set the mapping table into the truck then looked at Jamie searchingly. She gave him a quick smile. “I'd like that,” she said. Then she turned and started gathering buckets to be put in the truck.

Jamie's heart beat faster, and from more than the day's exertion. The look she had given him before agreeing was much like the one that Ray had given him when they first met, searching for something in him. While Ray responded with hostility, Laurie had responded with something like affection. With a light step, Jamie put the last load of shovels into the truck, and they started for home.

On the ride back, Jamie rode in the truck with Laurie, Dr. Bell, and Melanie. Laurie had grabbed the front seat and Jamie was uncomfortable sitting with Melanie, who was ignoring him.

“Tired of driving your own car?” Laurie turned around in the front seat to speak to him.

“Mom thought it was a waste of gas,” Jamie explained. He glanced toward Melanie,

who faced away from him. “Oh,” Laurie replied.

“How are you enjoying the dig so far?” asked Dr. Bell.

“It's great,” Jamie said. He knew better than to try to articulate the exultation he felt in the work. It was something you either knew or you didn't, and he knew the professor did. Laurie smiled approvingly, understanding.

Then they let him off at his house, and he went through the daily ritual of wash-eat-sleep. The week passed, the sun crossing the sky time and again. Sometimes Scot and Laurie would bring their sticks and play ball during the break. Mostly, though, the exhaustion of work sent them down to the coolness of the Coosa River, where they ate in silence and eyed the tiny island that lay some twenty feet out in the water.

“If only we had more time, we could swim out,” Laurie said, munching on an apple. “And if only we weren't so tired.”

“If-onlies aren't ever going to get you anywhere,” Scot said, lazily.

“True,” Laurie agreed, then pointed to two sparrow hawks swooping around each other above the opposite bank.

Jamie didn't say anything. The if-onlies in his life were starting to pile up, and he was thinking about the future. One thing he was absolutely sure about was that he did not want to be looking back ten or twenty years from now thinking, “If only I had gone into archaeology.”

That Friday afternoon dragged more slowly than the rest of the week put together. Jamie was on a team which had begun opening what might be a burial, and their trowels dug ever deeper into the dark stain which spread lengthwise north to south. They were a foot and a half down without finding anything, and then it was time to pack up and leave for the weekend. Jamie sighed and began spreading the black plastic across the depression in case of rain. The other team members piled a levee of dirt around the pit

to give it more protection. Jamie was tired and disappointed. He felt there was something he was leaving undone as he stood over the plastic staring at the ground. He glanced up at the dark gray clouds blowing in from the north. The first fingers of the storm system were dosing around the sun, and the wind began to pick up. A gentle rumble seemed to shake the ground, and lightning arced across the sky. Jamie felt someone touch his shoulder. Laurie stood silently beside him, watching the storm.

“You ready?” She asked.

“Yeah. I guess so,” he replied. They finished protecting the site from the rain that would fall over the weekend, and then they piled into the trucks. Jamie sat in the back seat with Laurie, drowsing to the drone of the motor.

The plaza appeared to him. Shadows of clouds rushed across the ground. The black plastic fluttered silently in the breeze. Beneath the plastic, beneath the ground, a skeletal hand curled chest high away from its body. The chin rested gently on the cushion of the other hand, and the skull grinned its patience. It would be waiting for him.

Jamie woke with a start. Laurie was looking at him. “Will you be ready to go in an hour?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh sure.” He rubbed his eyes and got out of the truck, waving at Laurie and

Professor Bell. He stood on his lawn as they drove away, watching them. He shivered, but whether from the chill or something else he wasn't sure.

Suddenly, he snapped out of it and went inside to the light and noise of his mother cooking supper. He felt safe and warm. Eating quickly, he packed for another weekend in Athens.

“Why couldn't you just stay here and play softball?” His mother asked. Jamie responded with the usual shrug. He was drawn to the game, drawn to Athens, in the same way he was attracted to archaeology. It was a love, a passion unlike any other he had ever known. He thought of the way the clouds had played across Laurie's face as she looked into the sky, seeing what he saw. That was a part of it, too, part of the new life he was being born into. The old ways just didn't work anymore. When he kissed his mother good-bye, she looked sad. He knew she felt she was losing her child, but Jamie didn't know what to say. He loved her. But there were other loves blooming in him. How do you tell someone that?

#

Faces had already begun to become familiar to Jamie as he and Scot and Laurie joined the rest of the stickball team that Saturday. It was overcast and windy. Neal waved and Laurie abruptly rushed over to him.

Jamie turned toward the pile of general-use sticks to find himself a pair. His eyes met Ray's. Ray was sitting by a tree over near the pile, tightening the strings on his sticks with his usual ferocity. Jamie tried to shake off the feeling in his gut, and smiled cautiously at Ray. The dark skinned boy's eyes narrowed, and he did not smile.

Jamie dropped his eyes and reached for the first matched set of sticks he could find. He held them, examining the curved pockets for splinters and the thongs for tightness. He snapped the two sticks together experimentally. They felt wrong somehow, although Jamie couldn't tell why. He set them aside and tried again. He found one stick he liked, but its mate was completely unstrung. Struck by something about this pair, he picked them up. They fit together perfectly.

Jamie carried the sticks over to Scot. “Hey, Scot, can you help me string these?” He asked.

“Nope,” Scot pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose. “You are asking the wrong guy. First off, I don't have any cord. Secondly, I get Laurie to do my sticks.” He stuck the handkerchief back in his pocket and thought for a minute. “Ask Ray. He's good at it.”

Jamie looked over at Ray, who was wrapping his cross-strip to keep the thongs of one of his sticks in place.

“Uh, thanks,” Jamie said, “I think.”

He approached Ray slowly, not wishing to interrupt him. He stood for a minute, watching. Ray stopped pulling on the leather. He looked up.

“What?” he asked.

“Urn, I was wondering if you could help me with these sticks,” Jamie mumbled. “Why don't you ask Laurie?” Ray resumed his stringing.

“She's busy,” Jamie replied. Ray stopped again and looked at Jamie.

“Let me see them,” he demanded. He looked them over. “Weren't there any strung ones over there?” he asked as he examined them.

“I kind of wanted these,” Jamie said. He fidgeted as Ray stared at him. Jamie did not want to say anything about how good these sticks felt in his hands, how the weight was just right for him. Ray handed him the sticks back.

“Here's some leather. Watch me.” He did not even glance to see if Jamie had picked up the strips he had flung at him. Jamie watched as Ray tightened his other stick, seeing how the cords went through the holes and around, doubling back for added strength. Ray did not slow down or explain anything, but Jamie learned the right way to wrap the leather strips into the cross in the pocket of the stick. He strung his stick, and it felt right. He tested it, pushing to see if it would hold. Ray inspected his work. “Too loose,” he said. He dropped the stick to the ground in front of Jamie as he turned to leave.

Jamie tested the pocket again, and felt that it would hold. He watched Ray walk over to the center of the field, where people were already congregating for the dividing up into teams. Jamie fit the sticks together. Perfect.

He joined the circle of players beside Laurie. She smiled at him. One by one the teams grew. Jamie ended up on the team on the south side of the field. He looked at his teammates, memorizing their faces. He readied himself for the game. When the two teams were chosen, they lined up stick to stick. Jamie looked along the faces of the opposing team, setting them in his mind as those he would be struggling against. As he looked down the line, Ray's eyes met his. Jamie thought he could see the other boy's muscles tighten. His face was unreadable, and his dark eyes quickly slid away. So that was it. For the first time, they would be in direct competition.

Each player grabbed his or her sticks, and they circled around the center of the field. Scot went to defend the goal that Jamie would be shooting against, and another tall young man went to protect the other goal. The ball was thrown into the air. Silhouetted against the sky, the tiny leather sphere spun lazily upwards, paused, and then came rushing down to the waiting players.

A large, hairy man on the opposing team caught the ball squarely in his sticks, but before he could throw it, two of Jamie's teammates had thrown their sticks to the ground and jumped on him. The ball was free again and rolling directly toward Jamie. His sticks became an extension of his body, and he easily grabbed the ball. He cocked as he ran toward the goal, ducking between the outstretched arms. He threw. Scot blocked his shot and the ball was in midfield again. A circle of players ringed the ball, sticks and knees banging together. Jamie thought his sticks might encircle the ball again, but he saw Ray next to him.

“Cherokee rules,” Ray hissed to him, dropping his sticks. His tackle was so sudden that Jamie was caught completely unaware. As he fell, the breath was knocked out of him, and he felt his head strike the ground. Jamie bit his tongue, and the coppery taste of blood filled his mouth. Ray's weight was crushing his diaphragm, and Jamie looked up through unfocused eyes at the wiry boy.

“I don't have the ball,” Jamie gasped. Ray grinned mockingly as he got up, releasing Jamie to rise as he could.

“Cherokee rules,” Ray repeated. He grabbed his sticks and ran down the field. “You OK, Jay?” Laurie asked as she passed.

“Fine,” Jamie whispered. “Just great.” He rose painfully, spitting the blood from his mouth. He found his sticks about the time he heard the resounding thunk of the ball striking the goal. Dazed, he saw Neal swing his sticks over his head in victory.

Then again the teams clustered in the center for the ball to be thrown. Jamie's face was clouded, and the next time he met Ray's eyes, there was equal animosity between them. This game was rougher than any other Jamie had played. There was more shoving, more tackling, more sticks swinging into people's faces. Jamie found himself between Ray and the goal. He ran forward to tackle, but Ray had already launched the ball. The downswing of the sticks changed direction slightly, hitting Jamie full in the face. He dropped to the ground in pain, trying to staunch the spurt of blood from his nose.

People clustered around, a shirt was handed to him to hold in front of his face. Blood was everywhere, dripping through Jamie's tee-shirt, clotting in his hair. Laurie put an arm around his shoulders, wiping some of the blood away with her shirt. She had smudged some of it on her cheek. Through Jamie's pain and anger, she seemed to be some other kind of being, away from all this. He noticed the wind whipping through her dark hair as the pain throbbed in his face. Where was Ray?

At the sidelines while he stopped the bleeding, Jamie scanned the field. Towards one end, Ray was tightening his sticks, unconcerned.

“Do you want to go home?” Laurie asked gently. Jamie looked at her, uncomprehending. A thought dawned on her. “You aren't going to keep playing, are you?”

Jamie's blood-streaked face twisted into a smile. “You'd better believe it, sister,” he said.

Something had tightened in Jamie. He walked onto the field, paying no notice to the looks given to his red-splashed shirt and smeared face. He felt above all of that. He was above all the pain, all the physical parts of the playing. He was anger incarnate. He was a ballplayer. He was going to beat the shit out of Ray. And he was going to do it in the daylight, by the rules.

When the ball was thrown up in the center, he waited at the periphery of the circle of players. He watched two things only, the ball and the dark head of his enemy. He saw the head bob and straighten, the sign that Ray had the ball between his sticks. Jamie's own sticks clattered to the ground as he launched himself, grabbing Ray's upper legs and throwing him to the ground. Ray looked dazed. Jamie picked up his sticks. “Choctaw rules,” Jamie said flatly. Then he turned and ran toward the ball.

Jamie's sticks were a perfect fit. They were made for his hands, made to cradle the ball in their pockets, then send it hurtling straight to its target. He heard the ball strike the goal, then watched it ricochet halfway back across the field. Scot gave a low whistle. Jamie knew the feel of it now, the way the body felt when the sticks and ball were completely in control.

The ball was thrown midfield. This time it was Jamie who caught it as it fell. He ducked and spun and darted through the people surrounding him like a bat flying this way and that through a swarm of insects. Fingers grasped at him, brushing his shoulders and arms, but he shook them off. The pain and breathlessness worked together to make him more aware, more careful. He threw the ball and missed. Before anyone on the opposite team could get to his overshoot, he was around again, and the ball was again in his sticks. This throw could not miss. It didn't.

Again the ball flew midfield. Someone on the other team had it and lobbed it to Ray, who was already down toward the goal. Jamie was on him in a second, and the two of them hit the ground hard. Ray rolled over beneath him, trying to position his sticks to throw. Jamie yanked the sticks away, ball and all, and he threw them far downfield. Ray looked at him with pure rage.

“You son-of-a bitch!” Ray yelled and swung simultaneously. Jamie felt his left cheekbone explode in pain. Instinctively, he held Ray down while he threw a punch, a hard right into his mouth. They rolled together in an embrace of pain and anger, fists flying. The teams converged, pulling the combatants apart.

“You two! Off the field!” Neal roared. Scot and Laurie escorted Jamie off, while some other people took Ray to the other side. Jamie looked at Laurie through his right eye. He grinned sheepishly.

“Uh. Sorry,” he said meekly.

“Are you all right?” Scot and Laurie asked simultaneously.

“Yeah,” Jamie said, gently feeling out his various wounds. “Where are my sticks?” Scot chuckled and Laurie smiled.

“You are some ballplayer,” she said. “Your face is a bloody mess, your clothes are shredded, and you're worrying about where your sticks are.” Scot went and got Jamie's sticks. When they were back in his hands, all of the energy drained out of Jamie. The sticks became just wood again, and Jamie hurt all over.

#

The water ran brown when Jamie took a hot shower at Scot's before they left to return to Rome. The hot spray made his cuts and scrapes sting, but his muscles loosened. The last of Jamie's anger and emotional hurt washed down the drain with the dirt and dried blood.

He dried and dressed, then walked into the living room where Scot was watching television. Scot looked up and gave a low whistle when he saw Jamie's face.

“Do you think maybe we should wait 'til tomorrow to take you home? Your mom's going to throw a fit,” Scot said.

Jamie pulled wet strings of hair out of his face and looked at Scot. “Is it that bad?” he asked.

“Worse,” Scot replied. “See for yourself.” He pointed to a mirror hanging on the wall.

Jamie looked. Even in the dim light, he could see the swollen purple ring around his left eye. His face was cross-hatched with cuts, and his burst lip had swollen enormously. He grinned at himself, and his good eye shone clear. He had followed the rules of the game. He had nothing to be ashamed of. He pictured Ray, alone with his anger. He was probably licking his wounds in his own way, like a coyote who lost his fight with a dog. Jamie could at least wear his bruises with honor.

None of this would help with his mother, however. Jamie knew that her concern for his well-being would not allow her to understand this victory.

“No. We're going home tonight. She's got to know eventually, anyhow,” Jamie said. “Your call.” Scot shrugged. Jamie left his torn clothes at Scot's house, and they loaded up Scot's car for the drive back. It was after dark when they started, and they both were quiet most of the way.

About the time they turned off 285 onto 75 North, Scot looked sidelong at Jamie. “What is it between you and Ray, anyway? You two don't even know each other.”

“We seem to know each other well enough,” Jamie replied tersely. “Oh,” Scot said. They watched the streetlights flash by for a while.

“Laurie was afraid,” Scot began, but then caught himself. Jamie looked at him through his good eye, unblinking. Scot shrugged. “She thought maybe it was something she had said to you about her and Ray. He's not that bad a sort, really, just kind of high strung.”

“High strung?” Jamie said. “Maybe I'm high strung, too.”

The lights were already out in Jamie's house when they pulled in about eleven o'clock. He fumbled with the keys as Scot drove off to the apartments. Jamie let himself into the silent house and stood for a moment in the darkened kitchen, relishing the stillness. Breathing it in for a moment, he thought about what noise and commotion there would be the next day when his mother saw his face. He smiled to himself, and the darkness receded.

#

Sometime in the predawn, Jamie woke up out of a dream and sat up. He looked around the room, trying to find the dream he had left behind. His body hurt all over, and he felt his nose to see if it was crooked. Then he drifted back into sleep.

His mother came to him in his dream. She was excited.

“Jamie! While I was doing some research into our family history, I found out that there was another ballplayer in our family. Your great-grandfather played stickball. He wants to see you,” she said. Clutching a handful of papers, she looked so young!

Jamie looked at her with new eyes, seeing for the first time the person who was “Mother” to him. She smiled, as if she understood what he was thinking. Then she pointed to the room where his great-grandfather was waiting for him.

If he was Indian, he was unlike the Choctaws Jamie had met at the powwow. For one thing he was incredibly thin, built more like Jamie himself than the heavy-set Indians. His skin, too, seemed wrong for an Indian. Rather than being brown, the papery covering of his face was a sort of grayish color. His eyes were bright and dear, almost a colorless blue. The thing that struck Jamie the most was his age. The years hung like a thundercloud in the room, electrifying the air. He was a man washed colorless by age, but strong beneath the weight of it. He threw back his emaciated head with its wisp of white hair and laughed heartily.

“Come,” he told Jamie. Jamie came. He was drawn to him by the force of the command. The sharp blue eyes pierced him to the bone, and Jamie felt his young flesh pulsing.

“The young one tells me you play ball. Show me your sticks,” he said.

Jamie held out his hands to the old man, and miraculously they held his sticks. His withered grasp was strong, and wiry muscles tensed beneath the pale skin. The blue eyes were now riveted on the wooden sticks, examining them in much the same way Jamie had the day before. And like Jamie, he liked the way the sticks fit together.

“These kapuchas will serve you well, shooter.” He looked at Jamie critically. “You feel it, don't you? The strength in your arm is waiting for you to accept it, to call it out.”

Jamie nodded, awed. The man laughed his huge, booming laugh again.

“You are my child. Flesh of my flesh, spirit of my spirit. Maybe I was wrong before, that pink skin showed a pale heart.” The old man smiled fiercely. “You must earn this always. The power is in the choice. The testing will be hard and last your lifetime.

Live the game. Now get out of here, boy!”

Jamie took the sticks that fit so well in his hands, and left quickly, stepping into the darkness outside the old man's room. Somewhere he knew his mother was smiling. Jamie woke up to the sun slanting into his window, feeling a strange ache all through his body. His muscles felt taut, coiled like a spring. He rubbed his eyes, remembering the dream. Pain shot through his face as he touched his black eye. Jamie grinned, looking at the light slanting through the window. He was ready for the day.

Chapter Five

“Good Lord, Jamie, what happened to your face?” Dressed in her Sunday best, Jamie's mother had just opened the kitchen door. Jamie flinched. He had spent a good part of the morning alternately staring into the mirror and icing his face. It hadn't helped.

“Um, well,” Jamie began, “I kind of got into a fight.”

Jamie's mother stood in the doorway with her hands on her hips. “You got in a fight in that game you play, didn't you?”

“Not exactly,” Jamie tried to evade what he knew was coming, not quite meeting his mother's eyes. His mother came into the room and sat beside him. She grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her.

“Young man, I have enough worries keeping food on the table for you while you spend every day out digging up some cotton field. And lately I have to worry while you go off doing God-knows-what in Athens. But I never, not in my worst fears, expected you to be tom-fool enough to do something like this.” Her voice was quiet but intense, and her eyes were shining and hard. She released his chin and turned her back on him. “You're a big boy. You can take care of yourself, but so help me God, if this happens again, I will personally blacken your other eye.”

At first Jamie didn't realize that she was joking. When he did, he grinned and put a tentative hand on her shoulder, which she patted absently. She seemed to wipe her eyes, but since her back was turned, Jamie wasn't sure if she was crying.

#

A thought hovered at the edge of Jamie's mind. But when he tried to focus on it, it would evaporate. Something about the site. Something was different about this day. But what was it?

They jounced in silence along Copperhead Drive. Mark, the other boy riding in the back seat, was dozing, while Laurie sat in the front seat with her cheek against the window. When they had picked him up that morning, Dr. Bell had looked at his face in surprise. Jamie's eye had already started to turn black, and other bruises on his face had darkened as well. Jamie had blushed, and Laurie had refused to meet his eyes.

“You should be the University of Georgia mascot,” Dr. Bell had said. “Your face is red and black.” Jamie had stared at him uncomfortably, then climbed in the land cruiser without response. Dr. Bell shrugged, and they drove to the site in silence.

It wasn't until the excavation opened in front of them, in all its black-plastic covered splendor, that Jamie caught the thought that had been nagging him. He was going to be working on a burial instead

of shoveling. He remembered the dream he had about the skeleton resting peacefully under the ground, waiting for him.

After clearing the plastic away, he and the others circled the pit, carefully clearing the dirt away. Trey, the tall boy with preppy-cut dark hair set himself up on the southeast corner of the pit.

“I'm betting there will be a cache of points!” he said, mostly to himself. “What?” Jamie asked, confused. Dr. Bell overheard him.

“He's betting that the burial will have a bunch of points close to the cranium,” the professor said. “And there might be blades on the chest.”

“How does he know the head will be there?” Jamie pointed to the south side of the oblong dark blotch. “Couldn't it just as easily be to the north?”

“None of us knows if the cranium will be anywhere,” Dr. Bell said wryly. “It might even have been scoured away in one of those plow scars.” He pointed to the dark stripes made by the points of plows criss-crossing the burial pit. He shrugged. “We'll see.”

By midmorning they had hit wooden slats crossing the burial lying roughly east-west in three places. Jamie, who was working the north side, was the first to clear his slat off. Morning break rolled around, but he stayed at the pit clearing the dirt from around the wood. When he was sure no one was looking, he put his trowel down and stroked the wood. It was soft, but not rotten. He pressed it with his thumbnail, then leaned into the pit to sniff it. It smelled like dirt. Jamie sneezed.

The spell of the moment broken, Jamie covered the burial with plastic and walked over to see if any Little Debbie snacks were left. He grabbed the last jelly roll and looked around for Laurie and Scot. Figuring they must have gone down to the riverbank, he started down the path in that direction. He heard them ahead.

“Someone's going to have to talk to him,” Scot said quietly.

“Well, it's not going to be me. If he had any sense, he wouldn't have to be told. At any rate, since when do we go around choosing who to allow to do what?” Laurie's voice was defensive.

“You know he's really not a part of the group. He doesn't belong,” Scot replied evenly.

“Is that what everyone thinks?” She sounded tired. Jamie didn't hear the reply, because at that moment he stepped in a patch of mud, fell on his butt, and slid down the path to the bank. When he held out his hands to break his fall, he grabbed one of the gigantic greenbriar vines fringing the way. The vine caught his weight, driving its thorns deep into his fingers and palm before he could let go. He bit his lip and muffled his cry of pain, but the noise of his fall had alerted Laurie and Scot to his presence.

Carefully, Jamie picked himself up and continued down the path with what little dignity he could muster. Sitting on the other side of Scot, he opened his thoroughly crushed jelly roll and began eating in silence.

“You sure know how to make an entrance,” Scot said. Neither of them had stopped looking at Jamie since he fell.

“Thanks. I try,” Jamie said.

“You look terrible,” Laurie said.

“Gee, thanks,” Jamie turned his full attention to the last bite of jelly roll.

“We were just talking about Ray. Do you know you knocked one of his teeth out,” Laurie said, looking toward the little island in the middle of the river. Jamie breathed a sigh of relief that Scot and Laurie had not been talking about him.

“Oops,” Jamie said, showing no regret. Looking in the mirror the last few days had only reinforced his hope that Ray had fared even worse. He wondered if bruises were as noticeable on dark skin.

“You don't sound very sorry,” Scot observed.

“I'm not,” Jamie said. He faltered a little. “Not very sorry. He hit first, anyway.” Laurie and Scot exchanged glances. They burst out laughing at the exact same minute.

“You and Ray are two sides of the same coin!” Laurie said through her laughter.

“As long as I'm the head and he's the tail,” Jamie said, grinning. This sent them off into gales of laughter.

“I'm glad you're OK,” Laurie said, wiping the tears of mirth from her eyes. “You sound just as unrepentant as Ray.”

“Ray? He threw the first punch!” Jamie exclaimed.

“He said you deserved it,” Laurie looked him straight in the eye. Scot groaned at her lack of tact.

“I deserved it?” Jamie absently rubbed one of the bruises on his chin. His eyes fell.

“Well, you both got hurt, so aren't you even?” Scot said.

Jamie threw pebbles into the river, wondering why his friends were being so unsupportive. They couldn't possibly think he had wanted to fight with Ray, could they? Maybe on one level he had wanted to prove himself to Ray, but he had always thought he would do it with ball playing instead of fighting.

Scot broke the silence. “How's the burial?” he asked.

Jamie's self-absorption vanished. “Oh, he's fine.. We haven't reached him yet, but we did find some wood slats over him.” His eyes glinted. “Dr. Bell says this is part of the public burial space, where some of the really high-status people are buried.”

Laurie laughed, “So what are you going to do with the sword when you find it?” Jamie blushed, “You know what I mean.” Laurie and Scot nodded in unison. “Maybe he'll have a blade with him,” Scot began.

“Why do you two keep saying 'he'?” Laurie demanded petulantly. “You haven't even found the person yet, and already he's a he.”

Jamie was surprised at Laurie's vehemence. “Better than saying 'it,’” he said. “He or she is a person.” He caught himself. “Was a person.”

“You just want it to be a he because you want blades and stuff,” Scot ribbed him. “That's not necessarily true,” Laurie began. “I mean, your assumption that the males always have neater stuff buried with them than the females do. One of the nicest burials excavated here in the '70s was a male and female interred together. And the points appeared to be associated with the female. And the rattlesnake gorgets! They're always found with women.”

“To be completely honest, I don't care who or what we find,” Jamie said. “But I have this feeling that there's someone there just under the dirt. I wish he or she or whatever could talk to us literally instead of just through what we can learn about through the physical remains.”

“I bet he'd have some great stories to tell,” Laurie agreed.

“Laurie, quit putting romantic notions in the boy's head,” Scot said. “He's got enough already.”

Jamie knew that Scot was right, but he had no control over his daydreams. As far as Jamie was concerned, if the combination of archaeological knowledge and imagination could give him any insight into the lives of the Indians they were studying, what harm could there be in it?

#

It only took a few scrapes with the trowel to get Jamie back into the burial crew's mood of anticipation and concentration. About two inches down and three inches north, Jamie's trowel pulled a clump of dirt away from a smooth, curved surface.

“More wood?” Jamie muttered to himself. This didn't look like the other wood, although it appeared to be about the size and shape of a branch. He followed the edge of the object, carefully pulling the dirt away. It was a thighbone, and a big one.

“That femoral head is gigantic!” Dr. Bell said when Jamie showed him the bone. “Why don't you clear some more of the dirt away and let us take a look at it.”

Jamie switched back and forth between using cane picks and his trowel to remove the dirt from around the bone. The bone was cracked about halfway down and a small root ran its length. As the lower end of the thighbone was hidden somewhere under the wooden slats, Jamie turned his attention to the bones of the lower leg. They were long and relatively smooth. Then he reached the foot.

He was only starting to clear the bones of the ankle when lunch was called. Looking up in confusion, he realized that in his complete concentration he had lost track of the passage of time. Suddenly, his stomach rumbled in hunger, and he quickly placed the plastic over the burial. He ate in a daze, not tasting his food.

“Hey, Jamie, how's the burial going?” Scot asked.

“Good,” Jamie said through a mouthful of sandwich. “Found the feet.”

“How do they look?” Scot tore open his sandwich wrapper and began eating.

“They look, uh, pretty good, I guess.” The sandwich made Jamie's mouth dry. “Good for someone who's been dead five hundred years.”

He got up to get a drink of water. Three cups later, he returned to the pile of dirt where Scot sprawled. Laurie joined them a few minutes later.

“Jamie, are you feeling all right?” Laurie said, delicately nibbling her sandwich. Actually, his face was throbbing and he felt cross-eyed and a little dizzy.

“Fine,” he lied.

“You don't look so good,” she said. “Maybe you should take a break from that burial and help us shovel.” She pushed a strand of sweat-dampened hair away from her face.

“Thanks a lot,” Jamie said. “I think I'll stay where I am.” He left his other sandwich untouched. Something was causing a knot in the pit of his stomach, but it had nothing to do with hunger. He left Laurie and Scot and walked down the river to his favorite spot to relieve himself.

Afterwards, he walked a little further on, until he reached a gully which ran from the field to the river. The water was low and it had hollowed a kind of cave out in the clay bank. He crawled into the close space under the tree roots. He curled up, his face pressed against the ground, his right hand pillowing his chin. His other hand was slightly flexed, lying flat on the ground about a foot from his face. He shut his eyes. The yellowish clay seemed to press against him. Did it press the same way nearly five hundred years ago when the body they were unearthing was buried?

Gasping, he got up and looked out across the water. An enormous great blue heron flew low across the river, making a strange cry. A wind, heavy with moisture, played in the trees, tossing the upper branches all around. A rain drop splashed into the river a foot in front of Jamie. It was followed by another and another. Thunder rumbled, and Jamie crawled from his hidey-hole and dashed back to the site. The other people working on the burial were already hard at work, trying to protect the delicate wood and exposed bones from the rain.

After covering the burial with plastic and a layer of dirt and another sheet of plastic, they made a little levee around the burial. Jamie paused as he threw another shovelful of dirt onto the burial they had just spent so many hours clearing the dirt from. He shook his head and redoubled his efforts.

Jamie and Dr. Bell were the last to seek shelter in the truck as the wall of rain swept across the field, sending rivulets of yellow mud across the uncovered parts of the excavation. They were soaked to the bone as they jumped into the front seat of the land cruiser. Jamie looked at Dr. Bell, who returned his amused gaze. The professor, who Jamie always viewed with respect, bordering on awe, had his hair plastered to his head, and his tee shirt was hanging low with water. Jamie realized that his bruises were standing out against his soaked skin. Wet, his hair scraggled down his face to his chin. They grinned at each other, and Jamie felt that the water had washed away more than surface dirt. He had never felt so refreshed.

Flashes of lightning became more frequent and the thunder rolled almost continuously as the crew drove home for the day. They drove through varying patterns of rain, from light splatterings to a full downpour. The window next to where Jamie was sitting leaked, and the drip created a new cold trickle down his shirt.

“Hey, Jamie,” Laurie said from the back seat, “some of us may go see a movie. Do you want to come?”

Jamie thought about it. “Nah. Thanks. Mom'll be home soon. We'll probably do something.”

“Suit yourself,” she said.

Jamie turned to Dr. Bell. “Do you have anything that has a list of all the bones of a skeleton on it? I guess I didn't realize what people really look like underneath.”

“Sure. Sure,” Dr. Bell said. “There's an anatomical chart somewhere in the back of the cruiser.” He looked over at Jamie. “Getting interested?”

“Yeah.” Jamie felt an overpowering desire to know, to be able to put the pieces together. Halloween skeletons suddenly seemed incredibly silly, with the real thing so complex and beautiful. “I really want to see what a full skeleton looks like. What we look like underneath.”

“Superstitious?” Dr. Bell asked with a grin.

“No,” Jamie caught the tease and smiled. “You just forget that there's a skeleton just like the ones we're excavating holding us up. Skeletons are kind of an expression of death, but we've all got one inside”—he squeezed the bones of his fingers—“all through life. And before those were in the ground, they wore muscles and flesh and clothes. All that we see now, all we are is just going to melt away.”

“Don't forget the brain snails,” Laurie interjected. Jamie shivered with more than the chill. “Sorry.” She actually did sound contrite. “Is that too morbid?”

“Ugh,” Jamie said.

“Y'all think too much,” said Mark, who had been silent. Dr. Bell looked at him through the rear-view mirror. Jamie turned and stared at him, while Laurie gave him an amused glance. The blond-haired boy held up his hands defensively. “Sorry!” He said. “I'm just jealous.” He sniffed. “I can't get metaphysical about shoveling.”

Laurie had giggled appreciatively. “Well, Mark, what about Sisyphus?”

“Ain't no sissy!” Mark joked.

“Life is endless toil for no reward, save the interminable struggle,” Laurie placed her right hand over her heart and her left wrist to her forehead in a melodramatic gesture.

“Camus,” Dr. Bell said. “Existentialism.” He looked at Jamie, who grinned.

“You're born, you live, you get milked, you die. Philosophy courtesy of Cow-moo,” Jamie said. The land cruiser filled with groans and boos.

“Tonight I wanna see a really bad mindless movie,” Laurie said after a few minutes of silence.

“That's not hard,” Mark said. She hit him playfully.

They pulled into Jamie's driveway. He turned as he got out. “Want to come over for supper?” Jamie asked Laurie.

“Yes!” Mark said.

“Sure,” Laurie said, pausing to hit Mark again. “What time?” “Let me ask my mom. I'll call.” Jamie turned and shut the door.

Everyone waved as they drove away, and Jamie went into the empty house.

His mother came home about an hour later. She opened the door without looking around. Jamie sat still as a rabbit and waited. His mother walked into the kitchen, not noticing him. He waited for her to come through the door and into the den. She was flipping through the mail.

“Boo!” He yelled. She dropped the mail.

“Good heavens! What are you doing home, honey?” Her hands flew to her shirt, which

Jamie noticed she had halfway unbuttoned. “It's raining,” he said gently.

“Oh. That's right.” She rebuttoned her blouse. “How silly of me.”

“How was your day?” he asked her.

She sighed in response. “Hateful. I really despise my job.” She sank into a chair across the table.

“So why do you do it?” Jamie asked. He didn't mean to be impertinent, but the words were out before he could stop them.

“I do it so we can have food on the table, gas in the car, and clothes on our backs,” she said angrily. “We can't all go off doing whatever we want all the time. Somebody has to pay for it. And since your father is not of that opinion, I have to do it.”

“Surely there's something you could do to earn money that you would enjoy more,” Jamie said.

“Like what?” She sighed, defeated. “The only thing I ever really wanted to do besides being a good wife and mother was write. But you can't make a living at that. And your father ruined my chances of being the other.”

“You write? Why didn't you ever tell me this before?” Jamie wondered what else his mother did that he didn't know about. He was also anxious to divert her attention from another tirade about how his father had destroyed her life. During her periodic bouts of depression, she would drop her demure,

conventional exterior and rail against her former husband, blaming him for everything from flat tires to drought. Now that he was looking more and more like his father, he wondered if he was going to become the scapegoat for some of her antagonism.

“Wrote. I tried to have a few stories published before you were born. I was so young,” she smiled faintly, remembering.

“Can I read one?” He asked. She seemed to be sharing something secret with him, and there was no hint of the anger he feared.

“Maybe sometime,” she responded. “They weren't terribly good.”

“My mother wrote,” Jamie mused out loud. “Weird.” He examined his mother in a new light. It was almost like in his dream, where she was young and interested in something. “So how can you stand it? I mean your job, and cooking supper, and cleaning up?”

“Well, I can't stand my job,” she said. “The rest?” She shrugged. “I just do it. No problem. Speaking of which, though, what would you like for supper?”

“Whatever,” Jamie said. He suddenly remembered having asked Laurie to dinner. “Could I invite a friend over?” he asked belatedly.

“Sure, sweetie. Who?” She got up and lost her animation as she began to prepare for supper. Jamie watched the day-to-day mother settle over this new and wonderful person he had just been introduced to.

“Laurie. She plays stickball and is on the dig,” he replied.

“Ask her to come over about seven?” His mother shouted from the kitchen. “How about baked chicken and spinach casserole?”

“Sounds good,” Jamie said. “Thanks.”

“She your sweetie?” his mother asked.

“Mom!” Jamie said indignantly.

#

“This is a great meal, Mrs. Bently, thanks!” Laurie said as she got up to fill her plate with seconds.

“Thanks, dear, and please, call me Betty,” Jamie's mother said. “How was your movie?” Jamie asked.

Laurie made a face. “Bad. It was so bad I couldn't even laugh at it.”

“Sorry,” Jamie said “but isn't that what you wanted?”

“No,” Laurie replied, wrinkling her nose in distaste. “I wanted a bad movie to laugh at, not to be disgusted with.” She set her plate down and began eating.

“What was it?” Jamie's mother asked.

“Something like Bodily Functions of Evidence. It was lousy.” She stared at her fork, “Yuck.”

“I heard that movie was supposed to challenge censorship, or something,” Jamie's mother said.

“All it challenged was good taste,” Laurie replied. “I mean, I'm all for freedom of expression, but this movie just sucks.”

Jamie's mother hid a smile. Jamie felt left out of the conversation, and started playing with his food.

“The stickball team is going to Mississippi to play the Choctaws next week. Dr. Bell is going to a conference, so we have the week off. Would you like to come? Both of you?” Laurie looked to each in turn.

Jamie looked at his mother for permission. “I'd like to go.”

“I think a few days off from my wretched job is exactly what I need,” Jamie's mother said. “It sounds lovely.”

“If you want to drive, I can ride with you and show you how to get there. It's the big Choctaw Fair in Philadelphia where they play the world championship stickball match. It's really great,” she said. “Too bad Scot can't go.”

“He can't?” Jamie asked in surprise. “Why not?”

“He's busy,” Laurie said, shrugging. “That's what he said, anyway.” Jamie's mother nodded. “When do we leave?” she asked.

“This Saturday. Our team plays theirs on Saturday afternoon, and the championship match starts on Monday. Sound good?” Laurie finished off her supper.

“Good. Dessert?” Jamie's mother asked.

“Oh, yes, please,” Laurie replied. Jamie felt even more excluded from the women's company. To think he was worried that his mother might feel left out. Well, at least there was stickball to think about. The world championship, no less. Jamie wondered how many people actually played stickball in the world. But to travel with these two women all the way to Mississippi. They probably would talk the whole way there and back.

Finally supper was over. Laurie turned to Jamie as she got ready to leave. “Thanks for everything,” she said. “See you tomorrow.” He watched the lights from her car disappear down the road.

#

Jamie squinted into the sun, which was nearing its zenith. They had finally exposed the skeleton almost completely, and Jamie had swapped with the person working at the head. A thick gray clay enclosed the hands, both of which were near the head. The skeleton's chin was pillowed on one of his hands, and Jamie could not help but think about how gentle a gesture it was, how human.

The clay was hard to remove from the finger bones, but they slowly began to emerge. Jamie rested his chin on his hand without thinking as he worked, tilting his head sideways as he gently cleared away the mud. His eyes wandered for a minute to the empty eye sockets directly in front of him. The skeleton grinned at him. Jamie shuddered involuntarily as he realized that he and the skeleton were in just about the same position. It seemed to be examining him while he examined it. Jamie imagined he could feel the bones beneath his muscle and he could see the living flesh which had covered the bones in front of him. Lucid eyes met his from a wrinkled face as brown as aged cedar. Black tattoos danced in front of Jamie's eyes, seeming to slither in and out of the wrinkles on the man's face. When he tried to focus on them, they shimmered. But when he looked into those clear, intelligent eyes, the tattoos seemed plain at the edge of his vision.

Jamie got up and wiped his hands on his shorts again and again. He was sweating profusely, even though a breeze kept the day from being particularly hot. He shook his head to get rid of the pictures of his imagination. He wiped his face with his shirt, feeling the tingling as the skin dried. He walked over to get a drink of water from the cooler and lingered there, letting the cool liquid spread through his body.

Chapter Six

“All the animals escaped the hero twins,” Laurie said, “They couldn't catch even one. But then they saw rat and they caught him. They held him tight and burned the hair from his tail. They squeezed him until his eyes bugged out.

“Stop! Stop!” Rat said. ‘I’ll talk!’

“Why have you animals destroyed our corn fields?’ Hunahpu demanded. “You have made us very angry!’ Xbalanque said, squeezing a bit harder.

“I will tell you!’ Rat squeaked. ‘We have destroyed your crops because you twins are not meant to be farmers. You should not work in the fields. You are ballplayers!’”

Laurie laughed. “That’s about my favorite part of the Mayan Popul Yuh story.”

“For the ballplaying twins the game was an expression of the act of death and rebirth. Every group had its own game, its own way of telling stories. But all of the stories worked as metaphors for life and the best way of living it,” Laurie said as though talking to herself.

Jamie watched his mother, the conventional Christian, to see how she would respond to the story of heathen ballplaying gods. She seemed interested. He was glad, for he enjoyed Laurie’s stories, and hearing them made the trip pass quickly. If his mother had become defensive or angry, everyone would be uncomfortable for the next couple of hours.

He thought about the idea of the ballgame being an expression of the cycle of death and rebirth. The Mayan ballgame shared that with Choctaw stickball. In a sense, even the more contemporary games of baseball and soccer resembled ancient, more ritualized games. To a ballplayer, the game was an expression of life as well as a part of it. Jamie remembered the exhilaration of playing stickball. Anyone who is too wrapped up in himself, too worried about the future, could not be a ballplayer. Such indulgences have to die so the ballplayer can be born on the field. The clarity of that feeling shook him. The movements of throwing, catching, running--all were movements which ballplayers had repeated through centuries of time.

The ballgame was completely independent of the culture that invented it. It had nothing to do with heritage, or race or education. It had to do with life, with rebirth. Jamie glowed with the thought, “I am a ballplayer.”

He looked at Laurie. She was staring out the window, still lost in thoughts of the story she had told. Story-telling was her game. Her stories were her way of experiencing rebirth. Jamie turned to his mother. What was her rebirth? Was it her religion? Did going to church give her the same exhilaration Jamie felt on the ballfield?

They skirted Birmingham, Alabama, stopping for food at a Burger King. Then they took the interstate to Tuscaloosa, and from there to Meridian, Mississippi. They passed two turnoffs to Tuscaloosa. Laurie looked at her watch.

“We've been making really good time. We're going to be early,” she said. “That's good,” Jamie's mother murmured.

“Next exit goes to Moundville. Have you ever been there?” Laurie asked. Jamie's mother turned to him and raised her eyebrows.

“No,” she said.

“Well, I think we have time. That is, if you would like to see it,” Laurie said. “Here's the exit.” They turned off toward Moundville.

“What does Tuscaloosa mean?” Jamie asked. “It sounds like an Indian word.”

“It is,” Laurie said quickly. “It means 'black warrior' in Choctaw.” She grinned at him. “Tashka, 'warrior,' and lusa, 'black.' Lots of current place names in the South come from Indian words. Some were Muscogee-based, like Choctaw and Chickasaw, but others were very different, like Yuchi and Cherokee. When the Europeans came, there were so many languages spoken in the Southeast regions they explored that they had to have interpreters for their interpreters.”

“Kind of like we need when you talk,” Jamie said.

“Oh, you.” Laurie rolled her eyes. She made sure his mother wasn't looking and shook her fist at him. Then she pointed out the turnoff for Moundville. They stopped to read the historic marker.

“Black Warrior may have been the man's social position as well as his personal name,” Laurie said. “Tuscaloosa” pops up elsewhere, so it may have been the name of a rank.”

“How interesting,” Jamie's mother said absently, still reading the historic marker. Laurie shut up. She looked over to the fenced-in yard across the street and watched the angora goats playfully butting each other.

In the car again, they wound along the tiny driveway leading to the mounds. They crossed a raised railroad track, and when they bumped over it, the mounds spread before them in all their grassy splendor. Laurie sighed in wonder.

“Haven't you seen them before?” Jamie asked, curious.

“Oh, yes,” Laurie said as they pulled to the ticket booth. “Dozens of times. But they always seem amazing to me.”

A large woman smoking a cigarette stopped the car. “Three bucks a head,” she said. “Hi, Sandy!” Laurie said. “We're going to the archaeology lab.”

“You got your ID?” the woman demanded, flicking her ash onto the ground.

“I don't have it with me,” Laurie looked genuinely apologetic. Sandy grunted and gestured them into the park, looking less than pleased. They drove on, and Laurie showed them where to turn off for the lab.

“Goodwill gesture for getting in free,” she said. They parked in front of the laboratory building and walked to the tallest of the mounds. Laurie practically skipped up the steep incline. Jamie and his mother walked up the steps at a slower pace.

It was somewhat windy at the top of the mound. Laurie's dark hair blew in her face as she looked down and out at the other mounds. Another storm front rumbled along to the south of them, and a fork of lightning flashed in the distance.

“Oh,” Laurie breathed. “May I live to be a hundred and stand here a thousand times more, I will never get tired of this sight!”

“Some site,” Jamie said, standing at her side. “Are they excavating that little one over there?” Laurie nodded. “What luck!”

Laurie looked at him curiously, brushing her hair from her face. “What?” she asked.

“Well, that whole mound is just one gigantic feature, isn't it?” Jamie said. “I bet they hardly have to lift a shovel.” Laurie smiled at him.

“More like a whole bunch of features stacked up like huge layer cake,” she said after a moment. She took his arm and pointed. “Some of us played stickball out there in the plaza once.”

“Wow,” Jamie said, acutely conscious of Laurie's fingers touching his arm.

“What's this?” Jamie's mother said loudly as she finally crested the mound. Jamie jumped, startled. Laurie turned around.

“What's what?” She asked.

“This shed-thing. What is it?” Jamie's mother asked, breathless from the climb.

“Oh, that's a reconstruction of what the temple on top of the mound may have looked like,” Laurie responded.

“Oh,” Jamie's mother said, catching her breath. “I guess they didn't have wire and stucco construction, though, did they?”

“No,” Laurie said. “The Indians would have planted some large posts in the ground...” “Like the postholes we find at the site?” Jamie interrupted.

“Yeah, that's what's left of them,” she said. “Anyway, then they would either weave saplings between the posts or hang mats on the outside to form the walls, which they would cover with daub. Fancy word for mud. The houses had thatched roofs, and a chimney in the middle.”

Jamie's mother took one last look at the building before moving to see the view of the plaza from the top of the mound. "How pretty," she said.

"Isn't it," Laurie agreed. "There's so much to see, but we'd better hurry so you'll get to see the museum before we have to go." She bounded down the stairs and back toward the car. Jamie thought he heard his mother groan softly, but he was following close behind Laurie, so he wasn't sure.

"Why don't y'all go on in to the museum. I've seen it so many times that I'd probably ruin it for you," she said regretfully. "I have memorized every word on the labels on things in there. I've seen every video. Also, they have a gift shop and I don't want to spend any more money."

"Suit yourself." Jamie's mother shrugged. Together she and Jamie looked over all the displays and compared them to the ones they had seen at Etowah.

"Amazing pottery," Jamie's mother said, pressing a finger against the glass in front of a graceful wood duck effigy bowl.

"Where's the copper? Jamie murmured to himself, "And is this all the shell?"

The door to the outside opened, flooding part of the museum with daylight. Laurie's curly head was silhouetted against the light.

"Um, it's getting close to time to be leaving," Laurie said.

"Can we take a look at the excavation first?" Jamie asked.

"I'm staying here. I want to look at the gift shop," Jamie's mother chimed in. "Come on!" Laurie gestured to Jamie. They ran toward the little mound which was being excavated. Although covered with plastic, it was clear that the archaeologists working here were working from the top down the middle of the mound, as well as looking at one of the three steeper sides and the more sloping side.

"It's so small," Jamie said quietly. Laurie looked amused. "I mean compared to how much area we have covered."

"True," Laurie said. She shrugged. "I was talking to a professor once who had done his first field school at Teotihuacan, in Mexico. They basically walked into the stone temples there and just recorded all of the stuff they found. Other people worked for ages shuffling through boring shell midden piles. Where's the justice? But all of that is part of archaeology. It's all important." They stood, looking.

"Time to go," Laurie said. They walked back to the car, where Jamie's mother was already waiting.

They still had a couple of hours before they were expected at Meridian, Mississippi, and they traveled quietly most of the way. Laurie commented on a change in their geological surroundings, but then she lapsed into silence, just watching. She let Jamie's mother know when they approached the turnoff which led to the Choctaw Reservation.

Then it was another forty-five minutes to the community where they were going to be playing. Laurie gestured left by a church, and then they took the next right to the community center where they

would be staying while in Mississippi. Maybe two dozen cars were parked in the lot, some with Georgia tags and some with Mississippi tags. They heard the click of sticks and voices rising and falling in English and Choctaw.

“Halitó!” Laurie said when they approached. She was greeted with a chorus of heys, how are yous, halitos, and howdees as she approached. Jamie stood somewhat behind her and his mother lagged a little farther behind him. Neal and a couple of extremely large Choctaws came over.

“Hey! Glad you could make it! We're going to wait another few minutes to see if anyone else is going to show up,” Neal said. Laurie nodded. One of the Choctaws looked at Jamie's partially healed bruises.

“That from kapucha,” he asked, “or have you been fighting?”

“A little of both,” Jamie responded sheepishly.

“Doesn't have anything to do with that other one, does it?” The other Choctaw asked. He gestured with his head toward Ray, who was leaning against his car, tightening his sticks. His bruises had purpled darkly and were still clearly visible against his skin. Jamie nodded. The Choctaw laughed heartily.

“Looks like you won?” The first one asked.

Jamie grinned. “Looks like,” he agreed.

Neal did not look pleased. “There won't be any more of that here, will there?”

Jamie shook his head. “You don't fight on the field,” Jamie said. “But if you get slugged?” He shrugged. The Choctaws whooped with laughter.

“Hey, Neal, got your hands full?” The first Choctaw nudged him and smiled. Neal shook his head in disgust, but smiled. What else could he do?

Jamie noticed that Laurie had gone over to Ray, so he turned to his mother. She, too, was displeased. She also looked ill at ease. She gestured for Jamie to join her near their car.

“You're going to be playing against them?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yep,” Jamie said.

“They're huge!” Her eyes got big. “Are you sure you want to do this?” “Yep,” Jamie repeated.

“How close is the nearest hospital?”

“Mom,” Jamie shook his head. “We're ballplayers. This is part of the game.” “Just so long as you don't get killed.”

“Death and rebirth,” Jamie said. “All in a day's work for the intrepid stickball player.”

She shook her head. "I'm not sure I can watch this," she said, biting her lower lip. Laurie joined them. "I'm worried about Ray."

"Me too," Jamie said. "Do you think he'll start a fight again?"

"If he does he's going to get killed," she said, looking toward Ray. "I wouldn't hit him that hard," Jamie assured her.

"It's not you I'm worried about," she said quickly. "He's mad at them," she gestured toward the Choctaws who were talking to Neal. "He thought they were going to be friendly with him because he's Indian. But he's Cherokee, and they aren't crazy about Cherokees."

"What? Why?" Jamie asked. Laurie shrugged.

"Beats me, I never asked them," she replied. "But you know how Ray's temper is." His hand reached up to his face in an involuntary gesture. He nodded.

"What a merry crew y'all have," Jamie's mother said, sighing. Worry creased her face. "Are you going to be playing?" She asked Laurie.

"Heck, no." Laurie laughed. "Women don't play with Choctaw men. Besides, those guys are huge!" This did nothing to ease the worry on Jamie's mother's face.

"Hey, Neal!" Laurie shouted. "Where's Jeannie?" "Beer run!" Neal shouted back.

"Who's Jeannie?" Jamie's mother asked.

"Short woman, red hair, pretty," Laurie said, searching for words to describe her friend. A face matched the name for Jamie. Jeannie was the girl who Laurie had been talking to on the first day he had played.

"There's going to be alcohol?" Jamie's mother made a disapproving noise and gave him a significant look.

"We're of age," Laurie shrugged, then caught herself. "Most of us."

"Those who aren't won't drink, right?" Jamie's mother stared at him.

"Right," Jamie said. "No problem." Actually, the last thing on Jamie's mind was alcohol. The game gave him the best high he'd ever experienced, and dulled nerves and reflexes could only hamper him. Somehow, though, Jamie missed the women players on the team. The group seemed incomplete without them.

Jeannie pulled up in a green pickup. "Y'all ready?" she shouted. The large group of people split up and flowed into the various vehicles to go to the field. He and Laurie jumped in his mother's car.

"Mrs. Bently, would you like me to drive? I know where we're going," Laurie offered.

"That's fine, dear," Jamie's mother said as she took the driver's seat. "I'll just follow the crowd."

It took them about five minutes to drive to the dirt road where everyone abandoned their cars. It took over ten minutes of brisk walking to reach the clearing in the woods where they would be playing. The field was perfect. Two trees had been left on the field as goals, stripped of their branches. The rest had been cleared away, leaving a smooth and level playing surface.

Laurie and Jeannie were way behind the rest of the group, each lugging a case of beer. They finally reached the clearing, and collapsed, exhausted. Jeannie opened her case first.

“Consolation prize,” she said, pushing her hair out of her face. “If women can't play, at least we can drink!” She tossed a beer to Laurie who held it up as a toast.

“Coehomma!” she said. The teams whooped. Laurie and Jeannie drank. Jamie's mother sat a little way from them, casting looks that were neither approving nor disapproving at the girls, who leaned their heads toward each other, whispering. A few minutes later three other women who were also carrying beer joined them.

The men lined up on the field, stick to stick, Coehomma versus Nahollo. The extras on the Coehomma team went to the sidelines and stood, arms folded. A man with a face like sun-baked black mud and a whistle around his neck took the middle of the field. He threw the ball in the air, then shambled over to the sidelines.

A shout went up from players and spectators alike. The game was afoot. A young Choctaw was the first to get the ball. He sent it flying toward the Nahollos' goal. It missed by a foot, but by then there were a dozen players clustered around the goal. Neal and Jamie waited near their opponents' goal, on opposite sides, for the ball to return their way. Suddenly, Ray wormed the ball away from the circle of players and slung it downfield. Neal pounced on it in a moment and threw it at the goal. The goalie deflected it, but Jamie had it in his sticks and launched for the goal before the goalie could turn to confront this new attack. Jamie aimed high above the man's head, above the reach of his sticks. The ball struck the goal and ricocheted halfway back across the field.

The Nahollo team yelled triumph. Jamie swung his sticks over his head as the teams clustered in the center, and the ball was once again thrown into the air. The Choctaw began to get serious. One of the Nahollo grabbed the ball and was immediately thrown to the ground. A Coehomma easily took the free ball and ran toward the goal. Several Nahollos tried to tackle him, but he knocked them to the ground. One small player got a good grip around the Choctaw's prodigious belly and tried to throw him down. Unsuccessful at that, he held on, trying to impair the other man's aim.

“Knees!” Ray yelled, launching himself at the man's chest. The other Nahollo obeyed, throwing himself at the man's knees. With both of the boys impacting in opposite directions, the huge man went down. The boys got up, but the ball was still between the man's sticks, and he threw it. A Coehomma shooter plucked the ball from the air and sent it flying directly for the goal.

That score sent up another round of yells. With hardly a moment's pause, the ball was in the center of the court again. Jamie reveled in the feel of the game. He circled the goal, waiting for the opportunity to get the ball to strike the pole again.

“Here,” he shouted at the ball. “Come here!” And the tiny ball came arcing in his direction. It bounced, and there were five players around it in a heartbeat. Jamie thrust his sticks between all the others. The leather sphere was in the pockets of his sticks, and he yanked them out of the jumble and threw.

Neal backed up his shot, so when the ball flew past the goal it landed directly in front of him. Neal easily scooped up the ball, feinting past the defense to line up his shot. Jamie threw his sticks down and launched himself at the goalie, knocking him away for the split second it took for Neal to hit the goal with the ball in his sticks.

The goalie turned to Neal. "Hey, Chief, where you been hiding this guy? You sure he's not Choctaw?" Neal laughed.

"He's only been playing a couple of months," he said.

"Then he must be Choctaw. He's too good." The huge man grunted.

Jamie blushed with pleasure. He was good and he was not Choctaw. Not by any stretch of definition was this his heritage. None of that mattered. He was a ballplayer, with the spirit of the father of ballplayers guiding his movements.

And so the players danced the ballet of death and rebirth. The small victories and defeats balancing themselves out on the field as they do in life. Feet flashing beneath the centers, the ball flitting from one side of the field to the other, the game played itself out. The Coehomma substitutes eventually won the day for their team. While the Nahollos began to run out of energy, the first-string Choctaw players who had been waiting their turn finally got to exercise their prowess. The score was ten to seven.

All the players clustered for the last time at centerfield. Nahollo and Coehomma alike congratulated one another.

Laurie's Choctaw friend whom Jamie had met in Columbus approached the boy. "So you figured out you are a shooter, huh?" He said, slapping his back. "You're a good player, little brother!"

"Don't call me that," Jamie said. "But thanks. Actually, I didn't figure out that I was a shooter. Somebody told me." "What?" The Choctaw asked.

"It was a dream. This old man looked me over and told me I was a shooter," Jamie explained.

"Flesh of my flesh?" he asked.

"Spirit of my spirit," Jamie completed, amazed. The Choctaw whooped. "No wonder!" he exclaimed. "So there are still a few left!"

"What?" Now it was Jamie's turn to be confused.

"Ballplayers! When ballplayers die, they don't stay dead, they get reborn. You are a real ballplayer!" He said. "Like me." He looked at Jamie suspiciously. "You sure you're not Choctaw?"

"I'm as white as a fishbelly," Jamie insisted for the umpteenth time. "And what's more, the old ballplayer in my dream wasn't Indian either!" The Choctaw stared at him and laughed.

"You're all right, white boy," he said. "A ballplayer is a ballplayer!" He walked with Jamie off the field. "You going to play on our team in the tournament?"

“The tournament?” Jamie asked, incredulous. “Do you mean it?”

“I mean it, little brother” The man said. “You can never have too many ballplayers on the team!”

Chapter Seven

A huge pot of hominy bubbled over the fire. The slight breeze changed direction, sending the smoke into Jamie's eyes. He coughed and wiped his eyes, opening them to see his mother standing to the side of the serving table. She waved him over. Jamie looked for but could not pick out Laurie among the white people standing and sitting out of the range of the fire's heat. Shrugging, he joined his mother. She looked uncomfortable.

"You do this every week?" she asked when he came over. Jamie grinned.

"Not quite," he said. "This was a really good game. I'm exhausted." He flopped on the ground at his mother's feet, carefully cradling his sticks next to his chest. Jamie shut his eyes, content to be resting. Everything was right in his world.

"Are you hungry?" Jamie's mother's voice interrupted his pleasant tiredness. He thought about it. "Yeah," he said. "I'll get up in a minute."

"Where would you like to go?" she asked. "Back to Meridian?" Jamie looked up in confusion. She said, "is there something closer?"

"Right there," he pointed to the pot ten feet away from them.

"Have you seen what's in there?" she asked.

"It's hominy. And there's some fry-bread over there, too, I think." Jamie shut his eyes and relaxed again. "Have you seen Laurie?"

"She's over there with those people," she said, not hiding her disapproval. Once again Jamie forced his eyes open to see what she was talking about. Laurie was standing next to a Choctaw woman, whispering in her ear and looking at the large Choctaw man on the other side of her. The woman chuckled and nodded. Other people in that group were talking to each other, but Jamie couldn't hear them very well. He figured they were speaking Choctaw, and he couldn't understand it anyhow. Now Laurie was saying something to the man next to her. "You didn't tell me they don't speak English," Jamie's mother said.

"They do," he said, "when they want to."

"How long do you want to stay here?" His mother asked abruptly. Every muscle in Jamie's body was sore. Why was his mother being so demanding?

"They want me to play in the tournament later this week, so I guess I'll stay until then," he replied.

"You want to play with them again?" she asked, incredulous. "On their team," Jamie said. "You bet."

“What will your friend be doing all this while?” She looked at Laurie again. “She isn't playing, is she?”

“Not stickball,” Jamie said. “Mom, is there something wrong?”

“Honey, I don't think these people are very friendly,” his mother began. They both turned to where Laurie was laughing with her Choctaw friends. She continued, “And this game, somebody could really get hurt.”

“Mom.” Jamie rolled his eyes. Then he laughed. “They look pretty friendly to me,” he gestured to where Neal had joined Laurie and her Choctaw friends. They were serving up hot bowls of hominy and joking with one another.

“I already hurt,” said Jamie, “and what difference is a few more bruises?”

“Jamie, I don't want to stay here. I don't want you to stay here,” she said. “Let's go get a hotel room in Meridian and drive back tomorrow.”

Jamie looked his mother over. She really did seem miserable. But to miss this chance to play in the tournament would be unthinkable.

“You go,” he said finally. “I think Neal has room in his car to take us back.”

“I am not leaving without you,” she said firmly. “What kind of mother would leave her son in the middle of this?” She gestured to the people laughing and drinking beer.

Jamie looked around, and the friendly group of people lined up for food. He tried to see it the way his mother did, as a bunch of lowlifes indulging their coarse sense of fun. But he couldn't. “No,” he said slowly. “I'm staying.” He looked at the ground, torn between his desire not to hurt her and his own feeling of companionship with the people she despised. “You wanted to come,” he reminded her.

“I didn't think this was what was going to happen. If I had known these were the sort of people you would be with, I wouldn't have let you come here either.”

“Well, you knew it wasn't going to be a church picnic,” Jamie said.

“Come on, Jamie, tell Laurie we're leaving.”

“No.”

“James Bently, you get into the car. I'll tell her we're going,” she said firmly.

“No,” he said, with equal determination. Their eyes locked for a long, silent minute. “If you make me go, you know what that will mean to me. To us. It will be just like it was with Dad. You forced him into your model of propriety, and he had to leave. Don't try to force me into the same mold. I'm never going to make you proud in the way you want me to. Can't you be proud of me for what I am?” Jamie rubbed his bruised eye. It seemed to be particularly puffy for some reason.

“But, honey,” she began, then caught herself. Mother and son looked at each other for a long time. “Ask Neal and make sure,” she said. He pulled himself up obediently and stood beside her, looking down. She seemed suddenly small and fragile.

“Yes, ma'am,” he said, giving her a spontaneous peck on her cheek. She smiled sadly as he ambled over to where Neal was sitting with a cup of water in his hand.

“Hey Neal!” He flopped down beside him.

“Hey Jamie. Good game.” He looked at the boy, shading his eyes with his hand. “What's up? Don't you want any hominy?”

“Too tired to eat,” he replied. “Why aren't you having some?” “Too hot and thirsty. I will in a minute. What's up?”

“My mom was thinking about going home now, and she wonders if Laurie and I can get a ride back with someone. Do you have enough room?”

“Sure. You and Laurie, right? No problem.” Neal finished the water in one giant gulp. “Tell your mom everything'll be fine.”

“Thanks,” Jamie said. “I'd better go ahead and tell her. I think she's going to leave pretty soon.” Neal nodded his consent.

Jamie once again pulled his aching muscles up and walked back to his mother. She stood apart from everyone else, looking lost. Jamie felt a twinge of guilt. He had wanted so badly to share this part of his life with her, but she just didn't enjoy it the way he did. He should go back home with her, but he knew he wouldn't. He started to feel lonely, looking at her there, ready to leave him. The whole thing reminded him of when he was a kid and couldn't stand to be away from her for a minute. But this time it was something different. His life was diverging from hers, was growing on its own. From now on, even when they would be together, this change would be there.

“He said it was fine,” Jamie said when he got to her.

“Good,” she nodded. “I'll help you put your stuff in his car.” They moved all the bags and sundries to Neal's car. Jamie's mother got in her car and left quickly, hoping to make Meridian before dark. After she had gone, Jamie stood watching the road where she had driven away. Laurie walked up from behind and stood beside him.

“Where'd your mom go?” she asked. Jamie looked at her and shrugged.

“Home,” he said.

“The community center?” Laurie looked confused. “She didn't take you?” “Home.” Jamie stressed the word. “And she didn't take me.”

“Oh,” Laurie said. She followed his eyes down the road where even the dust raised by his mother's car had settled. Laurie linked her arm through his. “Let's get you some hominy. I bet you're exhausted.” Jamie walked with her over to the huge pot where Laurie scooped him a bowl of the steaming

corn. She held up a spoon with a piece of pork, offering. He nodded, and the lump of meat was in with the lumps of corn already in his bowl. Jamie grabbed two neatly cut triangular pieces of fry-bread. Then he got a Coke from the communal cooler and collapsed onto a log in the shade. Laurie sat beside him.

“They were really impressed with how well you played,” Laurie said after a while.

“We lost,” Jamie said.

“You have been playing maybe two months, tops. They've been playing since they could hold their uncle's or their daddy's sticks. You just need time for your mind and body to learn the moves better. That comes with practice. In a couple of years, even your bones will know the plays,” Laurie said. The offhanded comment about bones knowing the ballgame made Jamie think of the skeleton they had finished removing at the site. Had those bones known the game?

“Depends on how many times they get broken before then,” Jamie said. Laurie laughed. They fell silent again, and Jamie noticed Laurie looking over toward the people she had been speaking to. “You don't have to stay here on my account.” He gestured toward the group. Laurie looked at him skeptically.

“Don't you want to come over and talk to them?” she asked.

“Nope. I want to eat, rest, and take a shower,” Jamie said. “In that order. We have the whole of next week to talk.” Laurie shook her head and smiled.

“You do. You're in the tournament. I'm going to be hanging out with my women friends the whole time, but there are a few guys I want to talk to first.” She looked at the group clustered around the hominy.

“They avoid women?” Jamie looked surprised. “Ceremonially?”

Laurie shrugged. “They disappear. When you do see them, all they talk about is the game. Even if we were around I don't think it would matter. It's kind of their male-bonding time. Stickball is the only thing they think about during the tournament.” Laurie did not look concerned. “It gets kind of boring after a while, just talking about it.”

Jamie couldn't imagine ever getting bored with stickball. It would be like getting bored with life itself. Laurie got up and looked at him.

“If you're sure you don't want to hang out”-she looked him in the eye-“I'll see ya later.” She walked unhurriedly toward the group of Choctaws standing with Neal by the hominy. He watched her listen to what they were saying. Laurie was as far from him, as incomprehensible to him as he was to his mother. She loved language - spoken, chatted, or written. Jamie loved the dance of action, playing the game, holding the artifact in his hand, touching history. He could see that to Laurie it was the idea of the thing that was beautiful. It was the name that gave it meaning. Could the two ever find a common ground?

#

The next day stank with heat before midmorning. Jamie woke early and showered while the rest of the people in the Choctaw community center slept. The cool water invigorated him. When he dressed,

he got his sticks and went to the parking lot to practice his throws against the telephone pole there. There was an empty feeling in his stomach; he quieted it with the thought that there really wasn't anywhere he could get any food. There was an emptier feeling when he thought about how his mother had driven away and left him. He had wanted so badly for her to understand why he had to play stickball, but she needed words like Laurie did, and he didn't have any. No words could capture the feel of a throw, when you knew it was just right and would hit the goal squarely. The feel of playing was indefinable. He threw the ball and it hit the pole, bouncing into the playground to the side of the building.

He watched where it fell and went to retrieve it. As he passed the swings, he impulsively dropped his sticks. He hadn't swung in ages. He sat on one of the swings, and pumping higher and higher, he felt the rhythmic wind on his face. Forward and back, the motion of the swing lulled him, and he forgot about all the complexities smothering him. No words would mess with this, at least.

Jamie heard a noise behind him. Laurie vaulted over the low fence into the playground and walked up behind him.

"Morning," she said.

"Good morning," Jamie said, still swinging.

"You're up early." Laurie rubbed her eyes and looked at him. "Oh, my head."

Jamie slowed the swing, dragging his feet along the ground. "Headache?" he asked.

Laurie nodded. "It's my fault. I shouldn't have been drinking," she said, gently massaging her temples.

"How late did you stay out after we came back to the community center?" Jamie asked, as he twisted the swing around and spun back lazily.

"Late. Beats me," Laurie sat on the ground near Jamie, plucking at the grass.

"I didn't know you drank much." Jamie looked down at her. He couldn't imagine her drunk. He was actually sorry he had missed it.

"I don't," she said. "Much." She rubbed her temples. "Ouch."

"The tournament starts tomorrow?" Jamie asked. Laurie nodded. "It's going to be hot," he said.

"The games are at night. But yeah, it'll be hot." Laurie yawned. "I'm thirsty. Want to get something to eat?"

"Where?"

"We'll have to drive. Let me see if Jeannie's up. We could take her truck." Laurie pulled herself from the ground and looked at Jamie. "You sore?"

"What do you think?" Jamie asked. Laurie gave a small laugh.

“You just wait. If Coehomma plays well this year, you're going to be an invalid by the end of the week.” She walked into the community center and disappeared. She emerged a few minutes later. The two of them climbed into the cab of the truck and Laurie drove the windy roads that seemed to lead nowhere.

“Where are we going?” Jamie asked after about ten minutes.

“A little town on the way to Philadelphia. They have a greasy spoon that'll probably be good for breakfast,” Laurie replied.

“I wonder if they have a telephone?” Jamie wondered aloud. He thought his mother was probably up by now, and he wanted to call her.

They finally hit the city limits, marked by houses which could easily have been on the outskirts of Rome, Georgia, instead of Wherever, Mississippi. The town itself resembled exactly any of a number of small towns in Georgia, and Jamie felt right at home.

The restaurant that Laurie had in mind was indeed a greasy spoon of the sort found exclusively in small towns. The threesome walked in and ordered. Everyone seemed to be staring at them as they walked in and sat down. Jamie felt acutely uncomfortable, while Laurie noticed but apparently didn't care that they were being watched. Jamie finished his coffee about the same time Laurie finished hers, and she scooped up both cups for refills.

“We're a couple of coffee addicts,” Laurie confided to the large woman at the counter. Jamie looked at the woman with blue eyeshadow up to her eyebrows and huge rolls of fat pushing her airbrushed tee-shirt clear out to the counter. The woman nodded.

“We git a lot of that here,” she drawled. “Y'all from out of town?”

“Yep,” Laurie said. “We're here for the Choctaw fair. That boy over there is going to be playing on one of the Choctaw stickball teams.”

“No! Really? How 'bout that?” she said, crossing her arms over her belly and looking at Jamie. “Those Indians are rough. You take care.”

“Thanks,” Jamie said. When Laurie had returned with the coffee he whispered to her, “What was that all about?”

“She was curious. I was just being friendly.” Laurie smiled brightly at him.

“Great,” Jamie said. “You want to say anything else to call attention to us?”

“Attention was already on us, if you'll notice,” Laurie said quietly. “Better to tell them what we're doing here than to let them make it up for themselves. It would be rude to come in here and eat and pretend they don't exist.”

“Why?” Jamie” stared sullenly at his coffee. Once again Laurie was reminding him of his mother, telling him to be polite and friendly. He didn't feel any great affection for these country people,

and he expected nothing in return. Laurie gave Jamie a hard look. He looked around for a pay phone, ignoring her. He couldn't find one.

“You ready for the tournament?” She resumed her usual speaking volume.

“Ready to get my butt kicked, you mean? Sure. I guess.” Jamie was still burning from her reproach.

“You'll do great,” Laurie said. “Oh, come on, you were so excited about it earlier.”

“I don't want to talk about it,” he said.

“Last night a couple of people asked me what tribe you were,” Laurie laughed.

“What did you say?” Jamie asked.

“I said you were of the Nahollo tribe, the white people,” she said. “And they didn't believe me. They said you were Indian and just didn't know it.”

“I didn't know you had to be Indian to be a good player,” Jamie said.

“You don't,” Laurie responded. “Do you really think that?”

“Of course not. I think the rest of our team feels the same way. We just want to play them, we don't want to be them,” Jamie said, picking at his food.

“Good thing,” Laurie said. She shrugged. “More coffee?”

A cloud had settled over the two of them already. Jamie had no other basis for his knowledge of Indians than playing stickball with the Choctaw. Why should the problem of heritage confuse people's view of the game-? With the game itself so immediate and direct, why cloud the issue with questions of identity?

#

Jamie didn't fully realize the tournament was going to be played at night. Under the lights, everything seemed changed. alien. Fear and anticipation knotted in his belly. Neal caught his eye from far away and smiled. Jamie knew then what he would do. He would play and play well. When the teams met on the field, he lined up with the eighty-odd people on the Coehomma team, and they met the Black Water team on the football field near the high school, and he hit his sticks against those of the other team. A couple of the Choctaws on the other team stared at him and made faces, but Jamie felt the power of the whole Coehomma community behind him.

When the referee threw the ball up midfield, Jamie watched it arc and fall. He watched it from the sidelines. Never had he been forced to sit on the sidelines while the ball was in play. It hurt him worse than the most painful tackle anyone had ever dealt him. His blood pounded in his temples as he watched the other players on the team running and throwing and tackling. He wanted to be there so badly, but the

coach had benched Jamie, Neal, and Ray at the beginning of the game. And, of course, the Choctaw players who were benched shared their frustration.

So Jamie watched. He thought about what he would do on any given play, watching the coach to see when he would be subbed in. Jamie grew increasingly frustrated and bored as the first quarter passed. Stuck with thinking about the game instead of playing it, he felt deeply the difference between himself and Laurie. Maybe she was fulfilled just talking about something, but he certainly wasn't. By the third quarter, Jamie felt certain that he wouldn't get to play at all. The score was close, Coehomma was a little ahead.

It was a slight hand motion from the coach, but it was enough. Jamie ran onto the field to take the place of the shooter who had been tackled pretty hard a minute before. He felt like he was flying as he set himself up in front of the goal, waiting for the ball to get within reach.

Immediately to the left of Jamie, two players who had been picking at each other for the whole game went down in a whirlwind of limbs and sticks. They rolled over each other a couple of times before the Black Water player maneuvered himself to the Coehomma player's back. Riding him like a horse, the Black Water man got a stick around the other's neck and pushed one knee into his back. Jamie became suddenly aware that one yank from the Black Water's stick would snap the man's neck. For a split second, Jamie's attention was away from the ball and he realized that this game was for real. The cycle of death and rebirth was a metaphor, but in the ballgame, it could come close to physical reality. Jamie thought he was going to faint. But the referee whistled and broke up the fight. The two players got up and ran for the sidelines as their replacements sprinted onto the field.

There was nothing he could have done for his teammate had the Black Water yanked his sticks. Jamie felt lightheaded, but the tiny ball flew across his field of vision and he was once again a part of the game.

The Black Water player directly to Jamie's left snagged the ball from another player who had been tackled. Jamie threw his sticks to the ground and launched himself at his opponent, aiming just above the knee. Jamie caught him on the way down, twisting to be sure that he couldn't throw the ball before he hit the ground. They rolled once, but the Black Water's sticks were together tightly and he was about to recover to throw. Jamie lifted the other man's torso from the ground and threw him over in a flip. Legs flying, the player's sticks finally parted and the ball fell from them. Pulling himself into a crouch, Jamie waited to be sure it was Coehomma who got the ball. A Black Water's sticks touched the ball and Jamie threw him down, too. Coehomma's shooter had the ball, and Jamie leapt up to retrieve his sticks and back up the throw.

The shooter missed the goal by nearly four feet, but Jamie followed the ball's trajectory and was there before the overshot ball could fall into the Black Water defense. He snagged the ball easily and shot. Just as a Black Water built like a beer truck plowed into him, knocking him to the ground, Jamie heard a shout go up from the crowd signaling his score. He allowed himself that one second of pain and joy on the ground before rolling to his feet and grabbing his sticks. Someone bumped into him as he set himself up to shoot again if the ball came his way. He looked through sweat-filled eyes at the Black Water player who was mouthing insults at him. Breathless, Jamie threw his head back and laughed. Through the pain pounding through every part of his body was the exquisite tingle of power for which he seemed to be only the vessel.

The rest of that quarter flew like the field beneath Jamie's feet. When the quarter was over, Jamie drank water and looked for Neal, who had also been sent into the game. Seeing him, Jamie waved him over. Neal was covered in sweat, and gratefully shared Jamie's water.

"You got to play, too," Jamie said. Neal nodded, still catching his breath. "Good shot. Jamie," Neal said between mouthfuls of water.

"Yeah, it was," Jamie said, smiling. "Did Ray get in, too?" Neal shook his head.

"Not yet, maybe next quarter," Neil said. They walked over and sat next to Ray, who stared straight ahead, ignoring them. The game resumed.

Jamie tried to remember how he felt while he was playing. He spent the fourth quarter back on the sidelines, watching. He wanted to hold on to the memory of that play, but there were no thoughts to remember, only actions. The immediacy of the game was lost as soon as you were off the field. The coach gestured Neal in. Ray was on his feet in a second.

"Hey!" he yelled at the coach. "What about me?" He moved toward the huge Choctaw, chest thrust out in belligerence.

The man continued watching the field. In a deep voice he said softly, "What *about* you?"

"Why didn't you put me in?" Ray stood inches away from the coach, challenging him.

Jamie watched a circle of Coehomma players begin to form around the two of them. Jamie rushed up.

"Ray! Stop it! He's the coach. He makes the calls!"

The man, who had not even glanced at Ray during his challenge, now looked at Jamie. He nodded, unsmiling, and returned his full attention to the game in progress. Jamie tried to pull Ray away by force, but Ray shook him off. Then the Cherokee boy noticed the circle of thirty-some Choctaw; all looking at him with disgust. He made a circle, meeting all the menacing eyes, and slumped in defeat. He scowled at Jamie and stomped off to the far end of the benches. As he crossed the circle of players, Jamie saw the Choctaw shove him away with their shoulders. Some of them looked at him suspiciously, but they dispersed. One of the players Jamie vaguely recognized clapped him approvingly on the shoulder without meeting his eyes.

As the tension eased and he returned his focus to the game, Jamie decided that watching was a poor imitation of playing. His muscles hurt, but he was aching to get back on the field. Seeing the ebb and flow of players from the outside, watching the ball flit back and forth across the field made Jamie twitch in response to the plays. He felt like someone had cut off his arms.

The game ended before Jamie got another chance to play. The final seconds passed with Coehomma ahead by one point. The buzzer sounded for the end of the game, and the packed stands erupted into shouts of victory. Once again the teams formed long, snaking lines crossing each other. This time it was hand shaking, slapping, and congratulations that the two sides exchanged.

Jamie looked over to where Neal was standing. The older man was sweating profusely, chest heaving, and looking at the ground.

"We won!" Jamie said.

"Yeah," Neal said, wiping the sweat from his face with his tee-shirt.

"What is it?" Jamie looked in confusion at the sticks in front of Neal.

"Ray's sticks," Neal said flatly. They had each been broken in two.

"Who would...?" Jamie began, but Neal shook his head. A thought dawned on Jamie. Ray had broken his own sticks, renouncing his place on the team and in the game. Jamie whistled softly.

"I always thought that he would come around eventually," Neal said "He could have been such a good player." Jamie looked at the sticks splintered on the ground.

"I don't think so," Jamie said after a moment.

"What do you mean by that?" Neal asked, crossing his arms.

"Everyone has their own way of doing things. You and I are ballplayer and everything else we do is a reflection of that. For Ray the game was a reflection of something else, maybe something he needs to figure out for himself." Jamie shrugged, "When you got called in, he threw a fit and started yelling at the coach." Jamie shrugged again, indicating his helplessness against such obstinate self-absorption.

"He never let himself really be a part of the team," Neal said. "And you," he looked at Jamie, "even when you and Ray were fistfighting on the field, you held yourself to the rules of the game until he pushed you over the line."

Jamie was surprised. From what Laurie and Scot had said, he felt that he was equally to blame for the violation of the game. The fact that Neal had recognized the reasons behind his breaking one of the most important rules of the game comforted him.

"Thanks," Jamie said. The two faced each other with new understanding between them. Laurie walked up and threw an arm around each of them, squeezing hard.

"Congratulations!" she said. "Who says white boys can't play Indian stickball? Good game, Neal! Good game, little brother!"

"Don't call me that," he said.

Several Choctaw approached them. "Where's that Cherokee hoy?" one of them asked.

"Gone," Jamie said. Laurie looked at him curiously. The Choctaw kept shooting glances at Laurie, and she gave each of them one last hug before she went back to the stands to her waiting female friends.

“Good,” the man said. “We're going over to Harlan Bell's place. And we don't want you getting into any more fights.”

“Does he have a telephone?” Jamie asked, “There's someone I need to call.” He thought of his mother, then realized that Laurie had been right - that he did have friends outside of his family. People cared about him; men welcomed him into their world.

Jamie grinned and ducked his head. “I'll call her tomorrow,” he said.