

The Measure of Everything



A Novel by Ed Davis

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ISBN: 1-891386-51-4
Library of Congress Number: 2005909268

Photos for cover and title page are by Patricia Perry.

Dedication

For Al Denman, Julia Cady, Dave and Sharen Neuhardt, and all the other earth-minded angels who worked to save Whitehall Farm in the winter of 1999.

August, The New Millenium

The road to Meredith's Pond dips down beneath an old railroad bridge, now bike trail. Billy passes into its shadow and emerges into a new, white world. It even sounds different in the fog, water from yesterday's rain spilling down the dam into Shawnee Springs Creek. Through mist he sees puffs of brighter white on the banks, duckbills buried in feathers.

His heart rises, a fish flashing into light. How can you have hope, so rare is the thing you seek?

You just do, that's all.

The day will be a scorcher, but not yet. Approaching slowly, he swims through cool air beading on his bare arms and face. You never look before it's time. Even thinking can make it fly. You circle toward it, let go of need. Become clean, open, empty.

And there it stands in the spillway: unlikely, awesome, almost invisible. Stunning in flight, the great blue god, grounded and fishing, looks small and compact. As always, it takes his breath, leaves his heart beating fast.

Motionless, his heron searches the water, fragile and fierce. It knows he's here. So softly and gradually Billy doesn't notice at first, the August air fills with wintry flakes, and memory and presence collide at the edge of all that happened eons ago, only yesterday . . .

Chapter One

Putnam County, West Virginia
Sunday, March 12, 1999

Had Billy known all along where he'd go – or had the road chosen him? Well, Route 35 East (and eventually south) only led one place in his mind. And right now, with Neil Young singing “Heart of Gold” on the Dakota’s stereo and two pieces of paper burning a hole in the pocket of his flannel shirt, he thought West Virginia had never looked so good. Or bad.

He'd had to wait until the Shawnee Springs Credit Union opened this morning to leave. And last night he'd hardly slept in the rest area on Ohio State Route 86, going into the bathroom every hour or so to change the bandage on his hand. (It was hardly bleeding at all now.) So after a two-hour nap behind a K-Mart, he was finally crossing the bridge at Gallipolis, the river blinding white in the afternoon sun. It seared the edges of his memory as well as vision, blanking out all that lay behind him. That was the thing about the road: made you look ahead, not behind.

Welcome to Wild, Wonderful West Virginia.

The land here in Putnam County struck him, as it always did, as awesome in its raw beauty. Farming country. He admired the old leaning barns, the silos, muddy cattle standing in greenish-brown puddles of snow-melt. Billy rolled down the window and inhaled. Mud and manure. A thaw seemed in progress here, although winter still had a chokehold back home in southwestern Ohio, though it was only four hours away.

Home. Had Shawnee Springs ever really been home or just a temporary oasis?

The barn ahead on the left bellowed its slogan about Mail Pouch chewing tobacco. He considered the ads folk art compared to the interstate billboards peddling booze, broads and no-tell motels. The silky Kanawha River serpented beside the two-lane. No traffic whatsoever on Sunday morning, everybody at church. And he'd passed several high-steepled country churches looking straight out of a Norman Rockwell painting, their parking lots overflowing. Billy smiled. God's country.

Which took his thoughts right to Grand-dad. After Ma's death, visits had tapered off and finally Billy's dad hadn't wanted to see his father at all. “He doesn't like my occupation, my women or my lifestyle,” Dad had told him the last time Billy begged him to go see Grand-dad. “He can go to hell.”

So they hadn't even gone to Grand-dad's funeral, and Dad had finally stopped going back even for a once-yearly visit to other relatives. Now Billy had to see his father's homeplace.

The glittering river, high from the snow-melt, gleamed as if lit from fires within. Occasional dead deer littered the roadside, but the pavement had straightened out. He reached over, clicked off the stereo. He knew how the others would see his leaving, with only a week till the auction. *Traitor, thief.* The pocket above his heart tingled. Could he really cash that check?

He was pretty sure it was all over with CitFarm now. The headlines, the photos. Irreparable damage. He wouldn't be surprised if someone had even gotten hurt. Schuyler would see it as the perfect chance to obliterate the violent radicals. Couldn't've designed it for better media exposure himself! Thanks a lot, Mark.

Still, he found himself grinning and gaping like a five-year-old at every picturesque barn and farmhouse, his heart rising as he watched a kestrel leap into the air from a fence post ten feet from the truck. Movin' on. They'd never find him, though he was less than two hundred miles away. Maybe it had taken a farm fight to revive the existence of Grand-dad's farm for him. Now he had to see the place, get some perspective, decide his next move. It was a destination, maybe a launching pad. He didn't know yet, or need to know.

For now, he was doing his best not to think about where he'd come from. About Seth. But he couldn't stop the images . . .



Only three weeks ago, he'd watched her walk through the door of the Bean Tree, its jangling bells announcing a newcomer. Outside it was snowy mid-February, but inside the coffee shop, with soft jazz playing in the background, it felt snug. She stepped toward the burners, lifted the hot water carafe and poured, approached the register, paid for a teabag and headed for a table in the rear.

Beside him, Bonnie snorted. Across from her, Ira grinned.

"Come on, Billy, the farm's zoned agricultural and residential with a three-hundred-foot frontage. It ain't gonna happen."

"Zoning can be changed," he replied. "As a matter of fact, our wise township trustees are discussing it as we speak."

He had smiled past Bonnie, right at the stranger (who, he discovered to his delight, was staring right at him). "So I guess you won't sign my petition?"

Bonnie glared for ten seconds, then suddenly rose.

"Bonnie." Ira placed a hand on her arm. But she knocked it away and huffed out the door, leaving an explosion of bells in her wake.

Ira sighed. "Billy, there's been pressure on Ray ever since November to get something done about affordable housing."

Billy shook his head. "She's got a blind spot for her big brother. I think he'll vote with the pro-developers when the time comes."

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm outta here. Got math tests to grade."

"Tonight then, Citizens to Save the Farm: Conference Room Three?"

"I guess. Not that it's gonna do any good."

As soon as Ira was out the door, Billy turned toward the rear. Sure enough, she was looking right at him. He cupped his hands around his mouth:

"So maybe you'll sign my petition, lovely lady?"

Before she could respond, he was on his feet, walking toward her table.

"I'm Billy Acorn."

"Acorn?" she repeated.

"Yeh, when great-granddaddy Achor showed up at Ellis Island . . . well, you know the rest." He shrugged, trying for boyishness. "It's kinda mythic, like Johnny Appleseed."

When she just continued to stare, he spoke again softly. "And you are?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Eliza- . . . Seth Abel," she got out.

He laughed. "Hello, Eliza-seth Abel. You sure have a unique first name."

When she brushed back her blonde hair, he found himself loving the gesture.

"My daddy wanted a boy. And I guess for awhile I wanted to be that boy. Anyhow." She gave a little wave of her fingers. "I decided to quit being Beth and chose Seth. I haven't used Elizabeth or Beth in years."

"How come I don't know you?"

"I just moved back last August."

"No way. I'd've noticed you."

She smiled, not taking the bait. *Damn*. Had she seen him scrutinizing her fingers for a ring.

"I mostly work – the retirement community south of town?"

"Comfort Manor. Great place, I hear."

"And I take care of my son."

"How old is he?"

"Paul's twelve. Sixth grade."

He nodded, storing it for later use. Before she could open her mouth, he spoke again.

"Where'd you move back from?"

"New Mexico . . . Taos."

He nodded. "I crashed there with a friend of mine once, on the way to Frisco. We even saw a rain dance at the Pueblo." He laughed. "And I swear to God, it rained!"

She smiled. After a brief moment, he sobered. "I'll bet you're an artist."

"My husband is . . . was. He's an art dealer now . . . very successful."

"Oh." He affected great sadness. "You're married."

"Separated."

He brightened. "Well, welcome to the Buckeye state, Seth. Shawnee

Springs isn't exactly Ohio, even though it's *in* Ohio. We like to think it's sort of a country all by itself."

She folded her arms. "How about you? Lived in town long?"

"Going on ten years."

"Burke grad?" She had her fingers stuck in her armpits, shivering.

He shook his head. "I came, I crammed, I departed without degree."

"Me, too."

He looked shocked. "When?"

She smiled tightly. "Before you."

"But not much before." Too late he sensed flattery wouldn't work on her.

"So . . . this petition."

"Oh, yeh. May I sit down?" She nodded at the empty chair across from her. After sitting, he laid the document between them on the table.

"Wood Thrush Farm. It's in danger of being sold at auction within a month to developers who will most likely turn it into Crackerbox City – who knows? – maybe even a Wal-Mart. A bunch of us think that Township Trustees should refuse to support re-zoning and purchase Wood Thrush Farm outright, re-selling it to farmers with easements. That's added to the deed, signed and recorded at the courthouse. It means the land can't be used for any other purpose besides the one stipulated. Forever. We want that purpose to be farming."

She was reading the petition, hunkered forward, her lovely hair falling forward around her cheeks. Without looking up, she spoke.

"Is it free?"

Billy smiled broadly. "Not hardly. If a developer would pay \$1500 an acre, and the going rate for farmland in the area is a thou – then the cost of the easement would be the \$500 difference."

"Whoa," she breathed. "Per acre?"

Billy nodded.

"Where is this farm?"

"It surrounds the village on the north, south and east, bordering Route 69 and Springville Road."

"You mean . . ." He watched it dawn slowly. ". . . all those fields I see all the way to Oldham's Dairy . . . ?" He nodded, knowing she was converting words into images of corn, trees, sunsets. "And . . . along Springville road?"

"Yep."

"That's *all* Wood Thrush Farm?"

They listened to the last gasp of steam leave the latest just-brewed pot.

"And it could be sold to developers?" Her voice was growing tinier and tinier. "They could put in . . . shopping centers?"

Billy nodded sadly. The machine made one final shudder before it ceased.

"I'll sign."

"I knew you would."

“What’s this meeting tonight about?” She blushed. “I . . . overheard . . .”

“Strategy. With only a month till the auction, we’ve got to get people off their butts, get organized and . . .”

“You need an event,” she said, “something for the media.” Her voice had firmed up, her gaze direct.

“Aha: you’ve done this before.” He stroked his beard. “You were at Burke in the mid-eighties, right?”

“That’s right.”

He sat forward eagerly. “Did you know Lloyd Kieron?”

“He was my history professor.” Her voice had begun shrinking again.

“And the leader of one of the most successful no-nukes movements in the U.S.” He shook his head. “Dr. Keiron’s gotten weird, some say crazy. Lives in the old Fletcher mansion on the south end of town – his late wife, the chicken heiress, left it to him. Alexandra’s dad owned half the chickens in southeastern Ohio.” He wagged his head. “Since her death, they say he won’t see anybody.”

She shrugged. “Idealists get bitter, too.”

“Not Lloyd Kieron – not the brightest mind against corporate the-way-things-are that Burke has ever seen.”

She’d begun putting on her coat.

“Maybe you’ll come to the flagship meeting of CitFarm – Citizens to Save the Farm – tonight,” Billy said, “village building, Conference Room Three, seven o’clock.”

“Maybe.”

As she turned and headed for the door, Billy called behind her, “Maybe you can tell us what kind of event we need.”

“Something dazzling,” she threw behind her. “Unearthly. With angels, trumpets and a celestial choir.”

“Hey, and there’s a rally tomorrow morning in front of the village building.”

But she was gone.



He came back with a start, yanking the steering wheel hard to avoid a dead skunk. He’d totally spaced out for a few minutes. Now he realized he should be getting to the intersection with Marsden Valley Road. A mile or so back, the two lanes had widened to four, and he’d begun to see blue interstate signs. An interstate out here? Sure enough, as he slowed to forty-five, then thirty-five, he read a sign saying Charleston was just twenty-five miles via I-275. Damn – a fucking beltway over to I-64 at Charleston. And this used to be the boonies.

When he saw he was on a fast-food strip, his heart sputtered. True, it had been fifteen years since he'd come this way, but he was sure this was all farmland before. But he also knew: build an interstate and they will come. And build. And come.

Stores were getting larger: Lowe's, Kroger, K-Mart. He knew it was only a matter of time, and, sure enough, the inevitable loomed into view: A Wal-Mart Super Store. Damned if they hadn't paved paradise while he wasn't looking. Grand-dad's farm was now part of Charleston's 'burbs. Billy slammed his fist against the steering wheel.

Sitting at the light, Billy turned the stereo back on. When Neil began singing "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere," he cranked it, despite the glare from two suits in the BMW beside him. As soon as the light changed, the yuppie driving gunned it and was halfway to the next light before Billy got the Dakota into gear. The sky, luminous blue before, had turned dark. After three more lights and still no Marsden Valley Road, Billy was seriously considering turning around and heading back to Ohio. At the next gas station he turned in. A perky blond kid wearing the red Speedway vest lounged at the counter.

"Help you, man?"

He didn't look old enough to work. Maybe it was his zitless, baby-soft face. But, no, it was probably the circa-1968 hair: parted in the middle, flower-child style, dangling well past his collar.

"Yeh." He leaned heavily on the counter. "You can direct me the way out of hell."

The kid giggled. "Yeh, West Virginia sucks."

Billy straightened. "My grand-dad has a farm someplace around here. This used to be the prettiest farm country in the world." He looked back over his shoulder. "Till they asphalted it."

The kid blushed. "Sorry, dude. Didn't mean to, like, diss your people. But for me this state is such a drag."

"I'm looking for Marsden Valley Road."

"Beck's Dairy?"

"Yeh, that's Grand-dad's neighbor."

"Beck's rules, man! I been trying to, like, get hired out there for years. Man, they even got insurance benefits. You wanna go back two lights and hang a louie at Wally World."

Billy's face must've registered blank.

"Go left at Wal-Mart."

"Thanks," Billy said, heading for the door.

"Hope you brought your clubs," the kid hollered but Billy hardly registered the nonsense syllables.

Chapter Two

Shawnee Springs, Ohio
Saturday, February 18, 1999

As soon as he stepped outside his apartment building, Billy was blinded by piled-up snow, glinting in the mid-morning sunshine. Shading his eyes, he almost went back upstairs. It had snowed several inches on top of last Monday's storm. Nobody'd show – not for this, maybe not for any rally to save an endangered farm. Certainly not the lovely lady he'd met in the Bean yesterday.

He quickly buttoned his dad's old navy-blue pea coat, the one he'd found hanging in the closet when he was packing for college. ("Take it," the old man said, waving in dismissal.) It still smelled faintly of mothballs and Aqua Velva.

Damn, how could he oversleep today of all days? And he had the beginnings of a headache.

The grinning teenager shoveling snow in front of the Trout Tavern must've heard him mumbling to himself. He whirled around, nearly knocking the shovel out of the kid's hands.

"You writing a book?" Billy yelled. "Leave out the chapter on me, okay?"

The kid just grinned wider. "Hangover, Billy?"

"I quit drinking my last birthday."

"Ri-ight."

He walked on. It was beneath his dignity to tell the little prick that the abuse of substances had never been his thing. Acorns had other addictions – to self, mostly. So when his buddy Ira gave up pot, strongly encouraged by the gendarmes, his employer and soon-to-be-ex-wife, Billy did, too. If Ira didn't burn it, Billy couldn't bum it, simple as that.

Maybe he *was* hungover, though. On Seth Abel. Yesterday at the Bean Tree, she'd left in a hurry after signing his petition. But he'd told her about the rally. Fat chance that she'd come.

The clock above Knott's Clock Shoppe read nine-forty-five. Late to his own rally. *Damn*.

When he reached the edge of the Village Center parking lot, Billy couldn't believe his eyes. A crowd was gathering, and, against the yellow-brick building, catching the growing morning light, was spread a huge colorful banner. Stretched between two broomsticks, it was being held up by two Burke students while Channel Twenty-Five's crew videotaped it.

FARMS ARE FOR FARMERS.

Holy Mother. Had Burkers done all this? Mark?

He crunched up to the crowd, looking for the S.O.B., raising his hand to shield his eyes, snow-blinded. He cringed to remember how Mark had saved the day last night in the student union (his fellow CitFarmers had convinced him to go recruit). After Billy had pulled the plug on the juke box and finally gotten their attention, it was Mark who, recognizing him from the cement company protest two years ago, got his fellow students to pay attention to “the guy who’d brought the capitalist pigs to their knees.”

Billy shook his head, trying to see. The blazing sun had turned all outdoors into a spangled sheen of light. His headache was worsening. Mark Zamora conjured memories Billy didn’t want to revisit. He still saw flames in his dreams.

He almost walked into a table with a sign saying:
GIVE TILL IT HURTS.

Behind it, Woody Freeman beamed his million-kilowatt grin in every direction like a mirror ball. So it was he that had put all this together – in less than twelve hours. If it had been left up to Billy, they’d have a handful of Burke students. He doused warm tendrils of shame fingering upward into his chest. Thank God the old man was talking to *Shawnee Springs News* editor Cyrus Harmon and hadn’t seen Billy. He didn’t want to have to congratulate him just yet.

Billy turned, and, lo – there she was, Seth Abel walking toward him, hatless, long, golden hair gleaming, eyes wide with wonder, looking for all the world like an elven queen. His headache vanished.

She strode right up to him. “You’re not pleased with the turnout?”

“Oh, sure, but . . .”

“You were frowning.”

“It’s out of control.”

So lame. But he couldn’t exactly say *It’s not mine*. He studied the crowd with her: a group of townies was setting up a plywood platform to keep a small P.A. system dry; five or six Burke students were tuning guitars, banjos and mandolins; a guy at the contributions table stood raking in cash and checks; Wendy Small and Jim Jonas from Channel Twenty-Five walked around thrusting microphones into the faces of anyone who’d talk to them. The response to his (okay: Woody’s) call to arms had been phenomenal. Best of all, there was no sign of Mark.

“Who’s that?”

He followed her gaze. Woody, also hatless, with a wondrous shock of white hair glowing in the light, was flickering like a squirrel between trees as he moved from one group to another, folks inclining their heads toward him as if he were imparting secrets of the universe.

“He’s sure got charisma,” she said, looking up at Billy with rain-grey eyes.

“He’s Haywood Freeman. Retired Burke prof. He’s the land trust

president. Great organizer – but kinda pushy.”

“Now I remember him.”

“You had him for a class?”

“Nah.” It was beginning to bother Billy that she wouldn’t look at him, just kept staring at the old man. “My advisor never let me sign up for any of his philosophy classes.”

“Dr. Kieron, right?”

She nodded. “So what’s a land trust?”

As he explained, he was thinking how she’d reacted to Dr. Kieron’s name similarly yesterday afternoon in the Bean. He had a sudden inspiration.

“I’ll bet you were at the Pitney protest in the eighties, weren’t you?”

She nodded. Why were her lovely lips so tightly closed?

“So you knew Dr. Kieron well?”

She shrugged. “Kinda.”

“A great, great man.” *Damn.* He sounded too reverent. But he sensed that Seth did not share that reverence. A topic to be probed later. He retracted both hands from beneath his armpits where he’d been trying to warm them.

“Christ in a crock, Seth, I haven’t even said good morning.” And before she could dodge, he hugged her, and though she didn’t return it, she didn’t shrug him off, either. He let the hug linger a bit beyond polite-social length. It felt good, very good, and last night’s dream of her rose unbidden before it was squelched by the sudden appearance of the boy by her side.

“Hey! Mom!”

She turned around. “Paul!”

She’d said her son was a twelve-year-old sixth-grader. Small as a fourth-grader, though, and his skin was as dark as Seth’s was pale.

“Matt invited me to go with him and his dad to ice-skate in Cedarton.”

Shading her eyes, she looked toward the parking lot entrance. Billy followed her gaze to a beige Mercedes with its motor running. A spikey-blond-haired kid peeked out the back window. A man sat at the wheel, a woman beside him, though he could only see the backs of their heads.

“Matt Plummer, right?” Billy said.

Paul looked up.

“I know Matt’s father, Ben. Owns the stained-glass shop.” He winked at Seth. “Always makes a large contribution to the Widows and Orphans fund.”

“Oh, yeh,” she said. “You’re the money man, aren’t you?”

Billy grinned. “I guess you could say that.”

“So, Mom, can I go?”

She was wavering. With the kid gone to Cedarton, maybe he could wrangle an invite to Mom’s abode. A strategic planning session, perhaps.

“Paul, I’d like you to meet my friend, Billy Acorn.”

The kid grinned. “Is he nuts?”

Billy laughed, repeated the immigration story he'd told Seth at the Bean. "We've been nuts ever since."

Paul looked back at his mom. "We'll be home by dinner, okay?"

"Well, all right, but . . ."

The boy was gone, waving behind him, half-falling in the barely-plowed parking lot.

"Plummers are a great family," Billy offered, but she ignored him, frowning.

"But you don't know how to ice-skate," she wailed as if Paul hadn't already gone, "and you're not dressed warmly enough, and I'll bet you didn't eat breakfast, and do you have any money for lunch and . . .?"

Clearly, she kept the boy on a short leash. Billy kept his trap shut, though he longed to touch her forehead and uncrease her brow. For several moments, she stood looking after her son, as if she'd forgotten Billy was there. He waited as long as he could. Then he patted her shoulder. "Good-looking boy."

At last she seemed to remember who he was. "So. What's happening?"

Billy rubbed his hands together furiously. "Freeman got out the vote. He musta stayed up all night. Every townie who's ever showed the slightest sign of activism decided to jump on the hay-wagon, looks like."

"Maybe all they wanted was to be asked."

"Yeh. By the right person."

"Oh, come on – it's still great, even if it isn't your baby."

He lifted a hand to protest, but suddenly the Burke musicians erupted into song, a cacophony of strings and drums coming from the vicinity of the banner. Freeman stood waving his arms, conducting.

Billy touched her arm, whispering conspiratorially. "The developers are inside."

"Who?"

"Today John Schuyler and all his development cronies come and look at the parcel descriptions and hatch their nefarious plots. Maybe after they see and hear us, they'll wonder if Shawnee Springs is such a great place for development after all."

Her eyes lit up and she squeezed his arm. "Brilliant," she whispered.

Before he could pull her into another hug, she was walking toward the side of the building where they'd set up the speakers. "It's starting," she said. "Let's go!"

The crowd was yelling: "We like farms! We like cows! Developers, developers, go home now!"

This part of the game he loved. Stroking a crowd was like eating donuts: fat and calories and a mega-sugar rush. Catching up with Seth, Billy heard a voice beside them.

“Hey, would one of you mind holding the sign a while so I can get a cup of joe?”

A female Burke student with straight, chopped-off, dyed-black hair stood against the wall behind the microphone with her denim jacket open, displaying an amazing dragon tattoo across her upper chest. Seth grabbed the broomstick holding the banner.

“Give ‘em hell, Billy. I’ll be right here.”

He turned to look at the crowd, which had grown to about fifty, a fairly good cross-section of the village: liberal and conservative; young, old; white, black. Not bad. A gaggle of demonstrating Burke students could be dismissed, but villagers coming out on a brass monkey morning – *this* was something.

Woody stood at the mic, working the crowd. Billy waited a few more seconds, then walked up beside him, making sure the old man saw him in his peripheral vision.

“I yield the floor now, my friends, to the voice of youth.”

Billy nudged Woody away in his impatience, feeling a small pang – there would be no crowd at all if it weren’t for his old prof.

“Thanks so much, folks, for coming. Is it cold or what?”

“NO,” somebody roared. “IT’S HOT AS HELL OUT HERE!”

He lowered his eyes, tented his fingers prayerfully, gave the cameraman time to find him in his lens.

“Well, like John Patrick Burke, first president of Burke College said, ‘The measure of a man’s life is what he’s done for others.’ And all of you have come out this morning to preserve farmland for ‘the others’ that will follow us.”

“FOR THE OTHERS,” they roared. He waited till they subsided.

“I grew up over on Sunset Drive,” he began, “right across from the farm. And though Mom and Dad are dead now, they left me their house . . . in this place. I remember summer mornings, hearing roosters crow, the smell of hay wafting across the field. I’ve been all over the world, from the Australian outback to the mountains of Nepal. I loved Tibet and Jerusalem, but . . . when it comes to holy places, I’ll take Wood Thrush Farm any day of the week.”

When they started to yell, he raised his arms for quiet. “It’s about home, everybody. My mom and dad might be gone, but my home isn’t – not yet. Home is right here for me, and, I’ll bet, for lots of you.” He opened his arms now, inclusive. He was trying not to turn around and see the effect on Seth. “Villages and farms might seem to some to be relics of the past. But if we’re to have a future – if this country is gonna survive, it needs to fight for them. It’s the Wal-Martizing of America, people, and it’s our choice whether we’re gonna just roll over and let ‘em asphalt our asses or show ‘em what Ohio, what America needs.” He paused. “America needs Wood Thrush Farm.”

He dropped his arms, and they cheered, the sound lifting across the parking lot to bounce off the stand of small cedars and back to the village building behind him. As the sea of sound ebbed and the tide went back out, he knew what he needed to do next, to keep the cameras rolling.

Billy waited till they settled a bit. "But somebody cares about Wood Thrush Farm staying farmland. I care, and apparently all of you do, too, so I'd like you to hear from someone who, even though she's new to our town, already cares about it as much as we do."

Too late he remembered her at the Bean's back table, frowning, judgmental and silent, while he tried to sell his petition to Bonnie and Ira. But it was too late. They were waiting. He could practically hear Channel Twenty-Five's film being exposed.

"Give a listen to your new fellow villager and Burke alumna . . . Seth Abel."

He stepped backwards and peeled the broomstick out of her hands, avoiding her eyes. She walked, dream-like, toward the mic. He did his best to keep his eyes off her bluejeaned butt. The crowd quieted and she stood there for hours, it seemed. *Come on, Seth.* A baby cried and seemed to awaken her.

"When I went to Burke in the eighties, I got involved in a couple of causes back then. But . . . I got scared."

Her voice sounded high and shaky. And no one wanted to hear about fear; they wanted to hear about kicking ass. But they stayed quiet, even the baby. Stronger now: "I ran from responsibility, but I found out you can't run forever. Sooner or later, you've got to take a stand for what you believe in."

Approving murmurs from the crowd comforted Billy a little. But so far she wasn't exactly Mother Jones. Had he misjudged her?

"I went out *there* – into the world." She pointed vaguely toward Dayton Street. "And I had a child." She paused – what was she saying? By now, Billy felt himself slipping away, could barely make out her words.

"I was glad I had a son, but it's hard raising a boy in a home where your partner's decided money is more important than anything else. So when I chose to come back to Shawnee Springs, I chose a sacred space. I chose a place where I'd been to a college that isn't like any other school anywhere else. A school that educates not just the mind but the soul."

It was instant – it could happen that swiftly, the moment when you had them. As he watched the audience's energy enter her, she stood up straighter, brushed her gorgeous hair back.

"I chose this place where, long ago, the Shawnee came to the healing waters right here on the edge of Glenora Wood and healed themselves. They probably mostly healed the wounds the white man had given them, the same old wounds of greed and aggression that sicken us to death today. Well, we need water and we need grass and we need trees and we sure need farmland and farmers if we're to be complete human beings."

The baby suddenly cried, long and loud. People spontaneously laughed. *Good, good, laughter was useful, laughter was good.*

“HERE, HERE: FARMERS!” someone hollered before the crowd grew quiet.

“I came here from a land of desert and sage and mountains. But you’ve got something that New Mexico lacks. Green. Lots and lots of green: green trees, fields, lawns. The color of growth. Of life. And where better to have green than surrounding our town – a deep green sea around us. To be able to breathe in the sweet scent of green. I want that for my son and for your children, too. For this baby down front here.”

A ripple ran through the crowd. Upturned, expectant faces. Approval.

“Oh, I know – I grew up in rural Kentucky – that not all farm smells are green. Some are brown. Yellow. Black!”

The laughter was hearty, not just polite.

“But let’s have all the colors as long as they’re natural. Let’s have the full palette of corn, cows and pigs for our kids. I want my son – and this baby right here – to grow up seeing, smelling, knowing Wood Thrush Farm. They’ll be better people for it. So I want to do whatever I can do to save this farm. And I hope – ”

Her voice abruptly ceased, as if the tape had broken. And raising his eyes from where they had again drifted to Seth’s ass, he saw her shoulders lift tensely as if she were recoiling from an explosion. *What the hell?* Had someone thrown something? He panned the crowd furiously, but they bent toward her like flowers toward the light, mouths open.

When she turned, he did a double-take. Her cheeks were flaming red, her head bowed as she stumbled backward away from the microphone, nearly tripping over the cord.

“Rot in hell, you son of a bitch,” she muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Billy said, reaching toward her with his free hand.

But she was gone. And though he wanted to follow her, there was nobody to give his end of the damn banner to, so he was stuck holding the short end of the stick, as usual.