



Evening Star Ranch

Prologue: Chapter 1

By Drake Koefoed

Jeff Denton threw the last of the tools into the truck. He noted the time in his book. Meriwether took the passenger seat. “Meri, I am tired of being poor. I’m going to get an education and make a little money.”

“What you gonna study?”

“I guess law. Lawyers make a lot of money, and most of them are jerks. I figure you could make out pretty well without being a jerk. Maybe have a chance to right a few wrongs.”

“I’m not smart enough for that, but I guess you are.”

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Jeff went to Junior College, where you learn a lot more than you do in a four year school for a lot less. Since there is no particular course of study required to get in law school, he took math and science courses. He continued to do construction and landscaping work while in school. When he graduated in math from the Junior college, he fished around for grants and scholarships, and got one for a sort of pre-vet course. He moved to the U.C. Davis campus.

He had to sell a lot of his stuff to be able to fit in an apartment, but continued to do construction and landscaping. He mowed lawns for people who had mowers, and installed sprinkler systems for others. He trimmed lots of trees. He got admitted to the University of Oregon, a law school that could not teach a cat to catch mice.

He was as concerned as all the first year students about the monumental student loans needed to support the 'education' aristocracy. The first year class talked about the threat of debt.

Jeff said, “Carrie, what do you think of the prospect of paying off all this money?”

“I don't know, Jeff, I'm just telling you what everyone else says. If you're broke 7 years from now, you can go bankrupt, and I hope it

will not happen to me.”

“If you don't pass the bar, you work at a fast food place for 7 years and then give it up.”

“That would really suck. But it's the risk you have to take, I guess.”

The risk got made a lot worse when student loans were made non-chargeable in bankruptcy after they graduated.

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By the time Jeff graduated, he had already worked in the placement office, and found that there were no jobs for most of the class.

There are more law students than there are lawyers, so you can imagine how few and pathetic the opening jobs are. Jeff moved to the coast and lived with a friend from law school, Ernie Dane.

“Can I be here for a while Ernie?”

“Long as you like. We got two little offices downstairs, and I don't want to be partners, because I don't want to answer for someone else's mistakes.”

“Fine with me. We answer each others' phones and make no promises. What kind of thing are you going to take in, Ernie?”

“I'm not going to do criminal defense.”

“I'll do that. I learned half what I know from law school in Defense Clinic. I'm not doing Real Estate.”

“No horse cases. Neither of us.”

“Agreed. I want to do Jones Act and maritime cases.”

“Have at it, but a wrongful death is mine.”

“Ernie, what are you going to take, anyway?”

“Consumer law. Medical malpractice. Business law, but you can do it too. We'll see.”

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As it happened, the two man law firm with the indigent defense contract was wiped out by the disbarment of both its principals.

Indigent defense contracts are a particular curse, because they result in firms making lots of money while working rookie lawyers to death. The breach was filled by the presiding (and only) judge who put all the misdemeanors and minor felonies on Jeff. The District Attorney had a prevailing interest in peace and quiet, and a continuation of the salary he received without much in the way of trial skills. Since Jeff was polite, he was given some very good

offers, and for the most part, they were taken. When a client turned an offer down, there was a show of 'my distinguished colleague' and that sort of thing, and Jeff pushed pretty hard on the cops (who always lied) and other prosecution witnesses.

Ernie picked up some great tort cases and made out rather well on some of them. Then came the case that, in a just world, would have proven Jeff's ability. It was an attempted murder of a police officer. The facts were murky. Jeff did what his ethical promises required: To 'zealously represent the client within the law and the disciplinary rules.'

Jeff got a 'not guilty' in that case. His friend, Ken Goodman, a civil lawyer, went for a drink with him.

“It's your job to represent a client, Jeff.”

“I know that.”

“Thing is, You were supposed to let them win.”

“I would be wrong to do that.”

“You would. Let me lay out the itinerary. We go to lunch at the hamburger joint, we stop and get a 12 pack of beer, and we go to a place I want you to see.”

They ran that out, and ended up sitting on some flat rocks overlooking the ocean.

“A 'sneaker' wave came and took 4 people off this rock 12 years ago and they all died.”

“There are no sneaker waves. There are just people don't pay attention to how high the seas are coming.”

“Mother nature has never been called to the stand to give that testimony because she has immunity.”

They went up to the long disused house. “This house is haunted since way long ago, something about a shipwreck. And to top it all off, a mother drowned her two children in the bathtub 2 years ago.

Want to look inside?”

“Sure.”

They walked up the creaking stairs to see the bathtub in question.

The view from the second floor was magnificent. They went downstairs quietly. Ken picked up a burger out of the bag, and looked out over the ocean. “This place should go for 200, but it never will. If you buy it, I can tell you no maid will clean for you, and no deliveryman will come on the property.”

“Here, in the United States, we have haunted houses? Why did you drag me out here to look at this place, Ken?”

“What did you make on your attempted murder case?”

“\$26,000 and a bit.”

“This house is for sale. Are you afraid of ghosts?”

“No. What are they asking?”

“Not. Nobody but me knows they want to. Want to offer them 18?”

“Be a waste of time.”

“If you buy this house, you will have to move your office, because your buddy Ernie will not be able to be seen with you. But there is a place right across from the courthouse. It's not nice, but you can get it cheap.”

“What do they want?”

“\$200 a month. They live in Colorado, and they don't want to meet any ghosts.”

Jeff made both offers, and they were both accepted. Ken did the title transfer, and Jeff did the living down of the name. The court continued to appoint him, and he took all the cases that came. The

judge buttonholed him in the hall, and pulled him into chambers.

“Jeff, may we speak?”

“Certainly.”

“I need to appoint Kilroy. Should I send it out?”

“I am not able to advise the court on that matter.”

“I don't care how much fur flies, Jeff, but this has to be a fair trial.

Defense counsel has to do his best.”

“If I am appointed by the court to defend anyone I will do so zealously, and within the limits of the law and the disciplinary rules.”

“Jeff, if you want out of Kilroy, now is the time to speak.”

“I have no argument against the appointment, and I will do my duty if appointed.”

“I didn't catch you sleeping, Jeff. I have a second chair who has been on two homicides.”

“Introduce me to him.”

“Jennifer Billings is not a him. She has three years experience in the Portland Public Defender office.”

Jeff met Billings in the courthouse cafe. They discussed the case, and were met by the DA, who offered life without.

Jeff and Jennifer discussed it, met with Kilroy, and refused the offer.

Jeff said, "This may never come to be. "

They met with the DA, who thought it should all be swept up. He offered 15-25 on two homicides. Jeff acted unimpressed. He took Jennifer to the jail and discussed the issue with Kilroy. "15-25 is not bad, but if they really wanted to move you out, they would be doing better."

"They could still go for death."

"They could, and they might. And I have to put it to you straight. They might get it. We will do what we can, but it might not be good enough."

Kilroy looked at Billings. "Baby girl, you ready to see me die?"

Jeff held back the impulse to respond. It would take from Jennifer's credibility.

"Mr. Kilroy, it is my job to see that does not happen."

"Do you think you can do it?"

“If you were Sir Edmund Hillary, would you tell me you could do it, or would you say you would try your best?”

“I would ask your best.”

“That you will have.”

They left and went to the office. “Jeff, how do we deal with this?”

“We try to get him off, the state tries to kill him, and if we have done our best, then that is all we promised.”

“But what if it is wrong?”

“That's supposed to come out somehow.”

“But if it does not?”

“Then the State executes an innocent man. It happens all the time.”

“And you don't care?”

“Genocide, murder, by whatever name, we are against it, but we really can't do much.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Research capital cases. Look for a mistake made or not yet. Get ready for long hours in the office.”

“I'd rather work at your house.”

“Get a mirror in front of you, Jennifer. You spend one night at my house, and it will be all over the news, gossips, whatever.”

In the morning, Kim Scott, his investigator, told him he should not have let Jennifer stay the night, and then reported what she had found out.

“The arresting officer has a bad conduct discharge from the Army. I'm pretty sure they have tampered with the evidence. Your guy is a registered son of a bitch, and could certainly have done it. The deceased are some real bad actors, so it might be justifiable.

Everyone is lying. The prosecutor is a politically motivated dirt bag.”

“Business as usual, then.”

Kim said, “Jennifer, have you ever tried a case like this? They are going to scratch your car with keys, spit on you, refuse to serve you at the burger joint, which might be a favor, and spread rumors about you and Jeff, regardless of truth. This case is going to be very ugly.”

Jennifer said, “I'm making money I need, and learning the profession I have chosen. Ugly just comes along with it.”

Kim said, "I know a remodeler who needs a place to stay. His name is Roland Lewis. You could trade him room and board for a little work here, and it might be kind of handy to have him and Juanita around."

"I have eight bedrooms, but not a lot of money to board anyone, and until we go to trial, I won't be able to pay for much in the way of materials."

"Roland won't expect much of a food budget. He's ex Special Forces, used to working in troubled parts of the world. Juanita, his wife, is from El Salvador. They have two big Rottweilers."

"I don't mind dogs. I want to get some cats. Are his dogs cat chasers?"

"Cat lickers is more like it. They're attack trained, but they are not mean until they are told to be."

"Well, let's call him."

Kim did so, and Roland said they would head right over. Kim went over her investigation so far, which had not gotten anything useful but had illuminated a nasty incident about which every witness appeared ready to lie. Jeff loaded the rice cooker and started it. He

took the chicken that was thawing in the sink, and put it in the microwave to speed up the process. He had intended to thaw it and re freeze it in separate bags but with guests coming, it would all go on the grill.

Jennifer asked, “Are we hiring a mercenary, Kim?”

“More or less. It's not on you. Not your house, not your responsibility. If you stay overnight, having Roland around will be a good thing.”

They went over the case some more. Kim thought the cops had some interest in the two guys Kilroy had allegedly killed. “That kind of thug gets blown away all the time without much happening.

They were informers, bag men, something. There are ruffled feathers all over, and there has to be a reason.”

A pickup pulling a very small travel trailer pulled in. The driver came and knocked on the front door. Kim looked out the peephole, and then opened it. “Hi, Roland.”

“Kim, can we let the dogs out to look around and so?”

Jeff said, “Sure.”

They went in while Juanita let the dogs out. She came in a minute later and locked the door behind her. Everyone sat at the table.

Jeff said, "I am thawing some chicken and cooking some rice.

Anyone want a beer?"

They did, so he passed them out.

Roland said, "I find people sit on pins and needles asking about your roses when they want to know what is really going on. So, we need a place to stay. We want the most strategically located places, which I think are in your attic. We want food for ourselves and our dogs. We will work on your house, clean it, stuff like that. And we will drive you to and from the courthouse and everywhere else. We both have carry permits, and we both carry 24/365."

"Let's take a look around."

"Can the dogs come in?"

"They can, but I may want to get some cats soon."

"Someone tries to hurt your cats, the dogs will tear him apart."

He opened the front door, his hand under his shirt in back. He whistled, and the dogs came in. They were enormous Rottweilers.

Jeff took them for a tour of the house.

“You have your work cut out for you, but it's worth fixing.”

“What do you figure I'm going to spend, percentage of building new?”

“Half. It won't be worth what a modern building would be, but I would fix this one, same as you. It has character, and if you wrecked it, you would be paying twice as much.”

“It's haunted and all that.”

“That could be important, or maybe people just think it's stupid.

Think about any spot here. Can you hear the hoof beats of conquistadors maybe American cavalry and the screams of murdered women and children?”

“If I could hear them, I might go crazy.”

“I stayed at a hotel in France once. It had 21 rooms, in which 92 people had died. The earth is stained with the blood of those who had bad luck before us.”

“Well, let's hope our luck is better.”

They went all around the house with the dogs sniffing everywhere.

The attic was for sure the place to be. Roland and Juanita set up there. They came down for dinner, and the mood was light.

In the morning, Roland got a load of sand dumped next to the house. Juanita bought groceries and sandbags, and they made two positions on diagonally opposite corners of the attic.

The lead up to the trial was predictable. The usual death threats and all that. The trial itself went quieter. Neither defense nor prosecution would comment. There was one incident when a vigilante fired several shots into Jeff's house. Nobody was hit inside. Juanita center punched the perpetrator with a .338, and that settled that. The testimony was uneventful in that nobody was telling the truth. Kilroy did not testify, making him an exception to the lying. The jury was smarter than juries usually are, and decided that since they did not believe anything they had heard, they would stick on the presumption of innocence. The vigilante element didn't like that, and they came up to the house, and threatened to cut the chain on the gate and come in. The Sheriff put that to a stop, making a few arrests. He only had one deputy with him, and about 35 people threatening a riot, but his ace up the sleeve was Roland in the attic with a legal M-60 machine gun.

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