

## THE WILD BOY

“Every morning in Africa, When the Sun rises, a deer awakens, Knowing, it has to outrun the fastest Lion, OR, be hunted to death . . . Every morning in Africa, When the Sun rises, A Lion awakens, Knowing, it has to outrun the slowest deer, OR be starved to death . . . It does not matter whether you are a deer or lion, When the Sun rises, Better be running at your best.”

Author unknown.

###

The skinny, white boy ran as fast as his legs would carry him. He didn't feel the thorny vines and sharp palmetto trees slashing his bare skin. His head thrown back in strain, a dirty croaker sack slung over his shoulder, his legs flew through the bramble. The huge black man was steady after him. No doubt about it.

“Hey, kid! Stop!” the black man yelled, then muttered, “Damn your hide,” and kept right on after the boy.

Gasping for air, the boy slid to a stop at a stack of cardboard boxes, nestled into a bank alongside a wide, white sand creek. He tried grabbing for a small suitcase. His hand slipped, there was a crashing sound. The black man's hand clamped down on his arm — the arm holding the burlap sack — and the rattler.

“I got a rattler in there!” the boy screamed at the black man. This startled the man and he let go of the boy. The kid was on his feet and crossing Orange Creek, the sack and suitcase in tow. Too much to carry. Too much baggage. The boy wasn't fast enough —

“Hold on, there sonny.” The black man had him again. This time he didn’t let go.

The man’s hold on the boy made him stumble in the slippery mud and the boy landed in a heap on the other side of the creek.

The black giant fell down beside him, gasping for breath and not daring to release his captive. He stared hard at the long Bowie knife strapped to the kid’s leg, then tapped his chest with his other fist, his dark, craggy face running sweat. “Gettin’ to old for this sort of play.”

The boy looked down at the black man’s hand where two fingers were missing.

###

Only minutes before, the swamp had been filled with the buzzing of the rattler. The boy, long-haired, dirty, wearing raggedy jeans, had stood motionless, watching the snake — waiting for the right moment. He’d held a section of bamboo in his left hand and he’d reached out slowly and scratched the fallen leaves six feet in front of the snake. His body was rigid, his breathing silent, sweat had run down his nose and dripped from the tip. He’d blinked to clear his eyes of moisture. The rattler coiled tight, his rattles buzzing the snake struck at the leaves. The snake’s mistake.

The rattlesnake stretched full length. The boy’s right arm had shot out, his hand gripping the snake behind its broad, diamond shaped head. A rattler can not strike if it is not coiled. The boy had watched the flicking of the reptile’s tongue. “You’re a goodin’,” he’d murmured and grinned wide. The boy’s smile had disappeared as the snake’s long tail writhed in midair and coiled around his forearm. He dropped the bamboo and scooped up a burlap sack. Shaking it open, he released the four foot reptile inside. The rattling stopped. “That’s right, ol snake. You go to sleep now. You’ll have another time to show your stuff, all right.” He didn’t know why, but in the darkness of the bag, every rattler he’d caught had quieted.

He'd set off at a fast pace toward Orange Creek and the cardboard boxes he'd called home for over a month. He'd almost made it too, when he'd heard, "Hey, kid!" Swinging his head around he'd seen the biggest black man he'd ever seen come lumbering after him. Saw when the man had cleared a tangled growth of vines and had come a runnin' for him — fast!

###

"What are you doin' camped down here on my land, boy?" The man glared down at him, his black eyes shining.

The boy's hazel eyes narrowed. He stared boldly into the dark ones. No use in lyin'.  
"Catchin' rattlers, what's it look like?"

"I sho can see that! Don't be gettin' assy with me!" He swung a thick hand toward the boxes, "You're not only stealin' my snakes, you're livin' on my land. How long you been here?"

The boy shrugged, trying to subdue the panic he felt, trying to slow his instinct to run.  
"Don't rightly know. Maybe a month."

Just how long you plan on stayin'?"

The boy frowned as if considering the question. He winced as he looked up at the giant. His chin jutted out. "Forever."

The man began shaking his head. "Naw, naw, naw. Ain't no boy gonna be livin' down here in 'dis place like 'dis . . . forever. Where's your mama, boy?"

"Don't have no mama," he said, which wasn't a lie. The boy couldn't stand a liar. He didn't plan on ever bein' one. "Name's Ronald Leonardo Bauer. Leo for short."

"Leonardo! With a name like that your parents must have had some plans for you, boy! Where's your daddy, Leo?"

The boy's eyes slid from the big man. "Not anywhere around here. Ain't none of your business. What's your name?"

"I am Elihu Maker," the big fellow said.

The sound of the man's name was as big as him, it echoed through the swamp and bounced back twice as big, making Elihu Maker seem larger than the giant he already was. The boy shrugged trying real hard not to look impressed.

Elihu reached out and grabbed Leo beneath his arm and stood him up in one fell swoop. "You be sure you keep 'dat snake in 'dat sack of yours. You hear, boy?"

Leo intended to do just that. This was a five dollar snake if he'd ever seen one.

"We got to decide what to do with you, Mr. Leo."

"You turn me over to the law, I'll run away again."

Elihu Maker looked down at the kid. He sure enough believed that. Walking now, he said, "Uh, huh."

A tidy, wood-frame cottage came into view, the silver of the tin roof glinting in the bright sunny space where it sat. A clear pond rippled next to it. A small garden with large tomato plants, some tomatoes ripe on the vine. There were other green things that Leo couldn't identify. Leo licked his lips.

The big guy noticed. "Got a big pot of fresh vegetable soup on the stove. Corn bread, too. I'll dish you out some and we can talk. First, I'll get you a length of rope so's you can tie that snake secure in the sack and put it yonder, 'neath 'dat big 'ol magnolia tree." Elihu nodded.

The boy said nothing, but led the way, took the rope handed to him and did as he'd been told. The kid was thinking about the soup and cornbread.

Elihu had taken the boy doing as he'd been told as a good sign.

Inside a small, clean kitchen, Elihu filled a big bowl with steaming soup and cut a quarter square of cornbread out of a tin pan, put it on a plate and sat it next to the soup bowl. He retrieved a glass and filled it with cold milk from the refrigerator. When he returned with the milk, he pulled out a pack of butter and gave it and a butter knife to the boy

“Eat up.” He needn’t have said it. The boy had already begun eating the soup and bread like he hadn’t eaten in the month he’d claimed to be on Elihu’s property. Elihu stepped back to the kitchen counter and filled a large cup with coffee and sat down across from the kid and stared silently at him as he sipped.

When the boy looked up and took a breath, soup was dripping from his chin. Elihu slid a cloth napkin toward him. The boy picked it up and dabbed his face. “You sellin’ my snakes?”

Leo laid down the spoon. “Ain’t your snakes. They belong to God.”

“They on my land,” Elihu said. The boy frowned.

“Who you sellin’ them snakes to?”

The boy said, “That snake zoo up in Ocala.”

Elihu nodded. “Dats seventeen mile. You walk up there?”

“This is Florida, 1954. I hitched. Everyone does.”

“Figured as much. That shyster, Pete Walker owns ’dat zoo. He pay you all right?”

The kid nodded. “Yeah.”

“You watch him. He has a bad rep and a mean streak. “Cheat his own mama, if he could. Only she’s dead.” Elihu jerked his head toward the swamp. “How you been livin’ out there? What you been eatin’, all this time?”

“Armadillo, coon and what fish I could catch with my hands. I got matches and some salt. Armadillo is tasty once you figure out how to get through the shell. Got me a good knife

here.” Leo’s hand tapped his thigh. “Was my grandpa’s. He left it to me. Was my inheritance. Eating coon’s okay, if they’re young and fresh. I got me a fire pit and a piece of fencin’ to cook on. Made a pretty good fire pit.” Leo picked up the spoon and began eating again. He scraped the bowl clean.

Elihu’s body rumbled in what could have been taken for a sign of mirth. He’d never seen a kid eat like this. He guessed that coon wasn’t all that good. “You want more?”

The boy shook his head and slid the bowl back. “Wouldn’t mind more of that corn bread. Say — I be wonderin’ what happened to your fingers.”

Elihu pushed his chair back, the legs scraping the hardwood floor. “It’s a long story,” he said and took up the empty bread plate beside the bowl, walked to the counter and sliced off another quarter of the bread. He brought it back. Elihu’s dark eyes scanned the boy’s back and arms as he sat the plate down. “You gonna die from malaria, you keep livin’ out there without no protection like your doin’. Skeeters will kill you, give them ’nuf time.”

“Naw.” The kid shrugged. “Got me some flower weed. The vine that goes up on the limbs of trees this time of year, the one the hummingbirds go after. My grandpa told me if you grind up the stems and the leaves into juice and dab it on, it makes the itch go away. Works too. It’s an old Indian trick. My grandpa was part Seminole.”

“That be Jasmine. Ain’t never heard ’dat story before.” Elihu rubbed his wide, calloused hand across his stubbly chin. “Look . . . I need me a little help ’round here.” The boy’s eyes flashed up at Elihu’s. The big man raised a hand. He didn’t want any misunderstanding. He wasn’t used to kids. Didn’t have any and didn’t want trouble from one now. The boy was a teenager and he knew how some of them acted from being around his sister’s brood. Still — he could not abide the boy living out there like an animal. “I can’t pay much, you understand. Bout

fifty cent a day and you get to live on my land. I got some used lumber from an old chicken coup I tore down. You and me could build a little shack down yonder where your boxes are. Put a door on it and some windows with screenin', before your dead." Elihu's eyes hadn't blinked or wavered from the boys. Elihu tilted his head. "What you think? You willin' to do some labor for me?"

"What kind of labor you got in mind? I got me a business to run."

"Well, I can sho see 'dat. Wouldn't want to interfere in your business. I need a new chicken house. Was goin' into the lumber mill to buy the lumber this week, matter-of-fact. You could help me. Need someone to weed that garden out yonder, too," Elihu said with a nod.

"What do you say?"

"Why you doin' this for me? You ain't no pervert or nothin', are you?"

The black face turned blacker with his scowl. "Hell, no, boy. Don't ever be thinkin' somethin' like 'dat 'bout me." Elihu studied the boy's face. He had the feeling no one could lie for long with this kid and get anywhere. He wouldn't. "I see you got a head for business. Maybe I got my future in mind. You got your future in mind, too. Maybe we can help each other."

"Just so you don't go gettin' your hopes up none. I don't want you to think I'll be stayin' if I'm wantin' to go. I ain't makin' no promises to no one. Why, I just might up and want to see the rest of this here world."

Elihu drew back. "Why I'd never think a thing like you wantin' ta stay here, like you said, *forever*."

"Yeah, well, I was in a pinch down there when you had me. You think I could take my snakes to the zoo when we go to town for the lumber?"

"Why, sure. You can put them in the back of the truck."

Leo nodded and took another bite of bread, and asked. “You ain’t gonna turn me in?”

“Naw. I reckon they’s been squatters on land since they’s been land. We’ll forget about it as long as you keep your plan for your future. Course, in ’de fall you’ll be goin’ to school like ’de other chillum ’round here. There ain’t never been a stupid business man that I know of.”

“Wait a minute — My grandma already tried that an —”

“Dats what I thought. Who’s your grandma, Leo Bauer?”

The boy looked down at his now empty plate. “Old lady Murphy.”

“She know where you been?”

“She don’t care where I been. She never wanted me anyhow.”

“We can talk about all this later. We’ll see how things progress.”

“You’re not gonna tell her?”

Elihu knew of Mrs. Murphy. She was a strange woman. Of all the rotten luck the kid had to get her as a grandma. Elihu shook his head and looked toward the ceiling. “Oh, I’ll most probably have to tell her. She may be okay with this arrangement. We’ll see.”

“I don’t want to see her. And you might as well know, she ain’t gonna like me workin’ for no black man.”

“That so? Who your workin’ for is your bidness. You’ll find that out as you get on in years, I expect. We know how folks talk, though. So you might just as well decide what you want to do now, ’cause I ain’t got no time for trouble ’round here.”

“I didn’t say I cared what anyone thought. I been doin’ what I want for a real long time. I’m just sayin’ what my grandma’s like.”

“Could have saved your breath. I know how some of these white folks think. And like I said, I don’t have time for worryin’ ’bout them. I have to tend my life and leave the rest to ’de

Lawd. Now, you don't have to see your grandma now, but, just so we stay on the up-and-up here, if she doesn't go for this arrangement, you'll probably have to go back."

The kid sniffed and pushed back in his chair. "I won't go," he said.

Elihu believed him. "She could send you off somewhere. You're not eighteen."

"She can't catch me. I'll go further into the swamp. No one will ever find me. Not you, not anyone." Leo jumped up. The kitchen chair fell over and smacked the floor.

Elihu smiled. He couldn't help himself. "Settle down. Let's play this by ear."

"I won't live at that woman's house," Leo shouted.

"I heard you, Mr. Leo. I'm old, I'm not deaf."

"Okay, then." Leo reached over and grabbed the glass of milk, tipped it back and drank the entire thing without coming up for air. "Now you can tell me the story about your fingers."

###

Leo felt good. Felt better than he'd felt for weeks, ever since he'd decided to run away. He was fed and had a place of his own with a door and two windows with screening, just like Elihu had promised. Elihu had even given him some clothes that had belonged to his sister's kids. Plus, he'd had a bath in the clear pond beside Elihu's cabin. His spirits were soaring. And so when they drove into Ocala and his new friend Elihu dropped him and his snakes off at the reptile zoo, he wasn't exactly thinking straight.

He had two four footers, one in each gunny sack and one sack in each hand. When he saw the crowd of people gathered around the owner, tall, red-haired Pete Walker, Leo had carefully fished out, one snake and then the other and discarded the sacks. With one writhing snake in each hand Leo Bauer pushed through the crowd of now screaming people saying, "It's all right,

it's okay, I got 'em — see.” and walked right up to Pete Walker grinning ear-to-ear. “Got two beauts here! That'll be ten bucks!”

Pete Walker's face went crimson. He reached out and snatched Leo by the back of his shirt collar and dragged him toward a rough, planked building. He opened the door and pushed Leo inside a large, dark room. Leo's heart was hammering fast. His fists still clamped around the squirming snakes, he looked around just as the heavy door clunked shut behind him.

Pete Walker turned and hit Leo hard on the shoulder, sent him flying, hanging on to those snakes for dear life. Leo hit hard against the wall, where he bounced and slid down and sat, legs splayed in front of him. “Now you done it! Leo shouted and jumped. “They's madder 'n hell! Snakes hissing and coiling, Leo lunged, the open-mouthed, angry vipers flung toward Pete Walker. Pete reared back, a shocked wide-eyed look on his sweat-slicked face.

“You questioned my authority, boy!” Pete shouted. “Don't you ever come in here grandstanding, trying to take attention from me — trying to take over my show!” he stammered. He backed further from Leo. “Get those things away!”

The door cracked open, and Elihu poked his dark head through, his white teeth flashed. “I was told I could find the two of you in here. The big man stepped into the room, leaving the door open wide. “I see I'm none too soon.” He asked Leo. “You get your money for them two snakes yet?”

“Naw.” Leo shook his head.

“Give the boy his money, Pete,” Elihu said.

“I know you, don't I?” Pete's eyes narrowed as he tried to remember just how he knew the black man.

“We knowed of each other. Now, pay the boy.”

Pete pulled out his billfold and produced a ten dollar bill. "Here," he said and shoved the money at Elihu. "You give it to him, soon as he's caged those rattlers."

"Listen up, Pete. I got but one thing to say to you and I won't be sayin' it again. Don't you ever lay a hand on this here boy. And if he brings you snakes, you pay him what you promised." With that Elihu gave Leo a gentle shove toward the open door. Elihu said to Leo. "Where's your croaker sacks?"

"Out by the entrance."

"You got some sacks, Pete?"

"Gotta box." The man had come through the door behind them. He pointed to a large wood box with a hinged lid. "Drop them in there."

"Don't mind if we do." Elihu smiled.

Walking toward the truck, Elihu said to Leo, "What set ol Pete off?"

"I carried them two snakes in my hands and he was talkin' to a bunch of folks. He didn't like me stealin' the show, I reckon."

Elihu rumbled. "I reckon." He patted Leo's shoulder. "We on to a better bidness anyway. Make more money than you ever seen. Got something to show you."

Approaching the truck Leo saw a big flat boat hooked to the hitch on Elihu's truck. It was stacked with lumber for the chicken coop. Standing in front of the boat, Leo said, "What are we gonna do with her?"

Elihu laughed out loud. "That barge is gonna float out in that Ocklawaha and we gonna find us some cypress trees, boy."

"Where?"

“Under the water, that’s where. They was cut by some profiteers and left because the Government finally got around to putting a ban on logging cypress within so many feet of the river. Those big trees are hidin’ just under that coffee colored water. Can’t see ’em without feelin’ for ’em. ’Dat’s where our partnership begins.”

They scooted inside the small pickup and Leo stared over at his newfound friend.

“Partnership?” he asked.

Elihu started the truck and began driving, checking for traffic at the stop sign, they set off toward highway 315, and home. He gave a quick glance at Leo and said, “A Partnership: The one where I drive the boat and you feel for them logs. The one where I wench up ’dat big ol tree and we takes it to the lumber yard and they give us two hundred green dollars for every one of ’em.”

Leo’s eyes widened. “Why that’s a lot of money.”

Elihu held up his hand. “Could be worth a couple of fingers.” He grinned a white grin.

Leo frowned. “That’s why you have that air tank and that mask and all. You were looking for those logs and you found a gator instead.”

“You got it. Figured right then I needed a partner.”

Leo snorted. “I’m quicker than any gator. Besides, I got my good knife.”

Elihu chuckled. “Yes, you do. You bein’ quicker puzzles me with regard to Walker though. You should have been faster than ol’ Pete.”

Leo looked out the side window. “I knew I was in the wrong. I’m not a good liar, not even to myself.” He shook his head. “I just felt good when I got there. I was too full of myself. I wanted folks to see how good I was.” Leo cut his eyes toward Elihu. “You know what I mean?”

“Sure do and that feelin’ can get you trouble.”

“My daddy used to tell me that all the time, then mom died and he was too sad and too busy to care anymore.”

Elihu didn't say a word.

##

Elihu Maker and Leo Bauer worked the Ocklawaha River for two years. The men at the lumber company over in Salt Springs got to know the old black man and his protégé, Leo Bauer. Leo saved his money and until that day things were going pretty good.

###

It was hotter than blazes for the end of May and Leo should have known better. It was spring, and everything multiplied in spring, even Reptilians — alligators. And they should have been more careful, because they were way too close to the banks where the live oaks hung over the water creating invitingly cozy quarters for any beast.

Elihu was holding the barge back and following along on the calm river. The diesel motor was chug, chug, chugging and belching fumes. Leo with the air tank on, was kicking along the bottom of the river, heading downstream with the a steady southerly current, groping with his now long fingers, feeling, letting them slide over slick moss and algae, searching out the right sign: the large, circular trunk of a downed cypress. Instead — the explosion of debris, the cloud of mud, the terrifying swirl and the alarming bite from a gator!

Leo fought for release, squirming and rolling with the gator, he tried to reach for the Bowie knife strapped to his leg. The gator wouldn't let go. Pain did not register. *Get on his back, get on his back. If you get on his back, he can't get to you,* Leo screamed to himself.

Air blew to the surface of the river and with that an alarming reality hit Elihu. He couldn't cut the engine, and chance drifting out of reach of the boy. Thinking quickly, he

grabbed for the anchor and heaved it overboard. It caught and seemed to hold. He then cut the engine and went for the spare set of goggles, the gaff he used to pull big fish from the water and their one life preserver.

As the gator rolled, Leo, knife in hand slashed at the beast's underside. He must have hit some part of the animal's vitals. There was a break and release. At last, Leo fought his way on top of the gator. Knife still in hand he stuck it into the animal's head. In seconds both he and the gator were drifting — drifting. Leo couldn't breathe. The lines from the oxygen tank floated beside him, his anchor rope broken during the struggle. Wrapping his good arm around the gator's neck, he kicked for the surface and found he was only feet from shore.

"Boy!" Eliuh was in the water and swimming toward him. "You okay?"

Leo didn't have the strength to both swim and answer. He swam. His feet touching the bottom, he hauled on the monster who had attacked him. Falling on his knees, he shrugged from the burden of the oxygen tank and flung it toward the beach. Elihu was beside him. "Let go of that gator, boy! Let's get you to shore, you're bleeding like a stuck pig."

"Bring him. Bring him," Leo's last words, as he fell face forward into the water.

Elihu carried the boy onto the sand and examined his arm. It wasn't bad, as gator bites went. But the wound would require stitches. He took off his shirt and wrapped it around the boy's arm as a temporary bandage, then fetched the air tank and put it beneath the kid's head. Elihu felt of the boy's heart and was comforted by a steady beat. The kid had evidently been overwhelmed. He could see why as he looked down at the gator. "Had you a bad day, you did runnin' into the Wild Boy, an all," Elihu harrumphed. "Gone to gator heaven and no doubt this here kid will make him some boots outta ya."

Leo coughed and opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the Moss Bluff Fish camp across the river. The camp was a peaceful sight. He lay there listening to the birds and the insects whirling around without speaking for an entire minute. When he sat up, he ran a hand over his face and looked at Elihu. “Thanks, ya hear? I think you saved my lily white ass.”

Elihu laughed. “No prob. You kilt this gator an you just a kid. You gonna be some sort of a legend round these parts, you keep doin’ things ain’t natural.”

Leo ignored the remark. He was still starin’ at the fish camp across the river. “How come you suppose I never paid attention to that fish camp?”

Elihu shrugged. “Just a bunch of fellows from somewhere’s else settin’ about to plunder our fish habitat.”

“Don’t you think they’d want to come cross the river with their cars and boats instead of driving all the way round to the bridge at Welaka? Think of that, Elihu. It would save twenty miles of drivin’ and more than that in time.”

Elihu looked at the boy and shrugged. “Why — I reckon,” he said, but he knew this kid. Knew that the boy was formulating some sort of plan, just by the question he’d asked.

“Who owns that land yonder,” Leo pointed with his chin over his shoulder.

“Oh, some feller I know. He’s bout my age. It’s no account land. Sand and —”

“You reckon he’d sell a few acres?”

“Don’t rightly know. You could ask ’em. Right now, we got to get your hide to the doc. You don’t want that bite infected.”

“Okay,” Leo said and stood up on shaky legs. “Let’s go.” And then using one of Elihu’s favorite terms, said, “I got business to tend.”

Elihu was shaking his head. He stood and looked down at the dead gator. “What you want to do with ‘em.”

“Bring ‘em. I got plans for him, too.”

###

Twenty-seven stitches, a tetanus shot and more iodine than he’d seen in a lifetime did not slow Leo Bauer down one bit. He bought four acres on the Ocklawaha that week. He purchased a ferry boat from a fellow up river who’d retired. He painted over the name Magnolia and named his boat The Manatee, after the gentle giants that swam beneath the river every winter. Then he set about building him a two room house right where the ferry landing was.

Leo was pounding nails. The roof and walls up on his new house when Elihu came to see him. He had stopped pounding when Elihu’s old truck came rattling down the sandy lane.

The first thing the old man asked was, “I reckon you won’t have time for loggin’ any more? How much you reckon ‘dat ferry boat would carry?”

“Two cars or trucks or three or four jeeps.” The logging question was a question that Leo knew was coming, and it had right off. He said, “Do you remember when we first started, we used to find one, maybe two logs a day? We look now a week sometimes. We bout logged that old river out, Elihu.”

Elihu sighed. “You always told me you’d go off, one day.” The old man looked around. “You didn’t go off too far.”

Leo smiled. “Naw. I sort of like it around here.”

“You’re right about the loggin’ bein’ over. I reckon I didn’t want’ to face up to it. You think I could help you put a cable across the river, so’s that ferry of yours doesn’t stray? You know that’s why that feller up river when on and retired. He never put him a cable across. I don’t

know how many folks had to swim back to their cars. 'Dat was a big laugh around these parts for years. Buildin' a cable across is a tough job for one man."

Leo squinted across the Ocklawaha and nodded. "It would be hard. I could use some help." He leaned back against the side of the building and crossed his long legs. He was wearing cut off jeans, as usual. His legs were tan from the warm sun and he was barefoot, his toes coated with white sand and rubbing back against one another as he thought. His gaze lingered on the land across the gently flowing river. "You ever give any thought, Elihu, to just how many folks drive over there to the Ocala National Forest?"

Elihu pursed his lips. "Yeah. They's a lot of huntin' goes on over there, I reckon. Not to mention the fishermen."

"That's right." Leo inhaled. "Maybe thousands," he said.

"Thousands?" Elihu repeated, the word making a whooshing sound. "You could be onto something here. Maybe, whenever you got to go to town, I could come and tend to the ferry," he waved a thick hand, "take folks across, an such."

Leo nodded. "That would be a big help, too, Elihu. I'd pay you, of course."

Elihu chuckled. "Oh, I don't need the money. I got military retirement and I got social security. That's bout all I need. All 'dat money we made pullin' those logs, I put up in the Ocala First National. Account has your name on it, too. In case I bite the dust."

Leo blinked. He turned his head and stared at the old man. "Why would you do that for me?"

"As young as you were, you were the best partner a man ever had," he said.

Leo's eyes welled up with water. He turned his head and swiped at them. "Thank you, Elihu. I guess I hadn't thought about us being partners for a while. I figured we were more like family."

Elihu looked down at his dusty boots and up again at Leo. He flashed that white grin.

Leo said, "What do you think of this idea? You know how the guys in Orange Springs are always tryin' to see who can jump out into the river the furthest every summer? They're always tryin' to find trees that jut out over the water."

Elihu laughed. "Why sure. My friend Kootsey, he jumps further than any of those white boys up in Orange Springs! He has the record since forty-nine!"

Leo waved his arm toward the sandy beach. "I figure on buildin' a forty foot tower along the bank here. Let 'em hold their contest whenever they have a mind to. It'd bring folks down here to the ferry. It takes time for word to spread about what services are available, you know?"

Elihu's eyes tightened, he said, "I had you pegged right from the start. When the sun rises, you are ready to run. A real entrepreneur is what you are. Let's us get busy, then. We got us some work to do."

THE END