

The Casino Gargoyle

Larry Shelton was the only Indian on the Karuk police force who had no relatives on tribal council. Five minutes after he was sworn in, a bow-legged councilman named Sam Linkey shook his hand and pulled him aside.

"Some said you was too young and green. I had to remind them, we got tribal preference." Sam shrugged with his palms up. "Only got four cops. I'm pleased one of them is you." It took two or three days before Larry realized that Sam was one of the few council members who had no relatives on the police force.

Sam notified Larry whenever one of the Linkeys had a problem. Sometimes it was loud neighbors or a fence that tilted over the property line. Other times it was a traffic ticket he thought shouldn't have been handed out or a juvenile delinquency charge that unfairly targeted one of his grandkids. Larry began to understand why the family was referred to as the stinkey Linkeys.

"You're doing good work," Sam would say. "Keep it up and you'll be running the place before long." When Larry stood before Council to give the police report and had to read off the list of vehicle citations and domestic disturbances, Sam would lean forward in his seat and tap his fingertips together as if he couldn't bear to miss a word.

One night Larry sat down to watch Cold Case Files and eat a bowl of cereal when the phone rang.

"We got our first player tournament coming up this weekend." Sam spoke with more energy than usual. "My niece was out the casino and goes to her car and finds coffee poured on her windshield." Larry could picture the girl: round face, loud voice. He'd pulled her over once and she'd said, "I'll have Uncle Sam give you a call." Then

she'd driven off with a wave. If coffee on the windshield was the worst she endured, she didn't have enemies to worry about.

"She said you could see the same thing everywhere. Trash cans was tipped over and plants ripped out of the dirt. You know what that landscaping costs? She said Reggie Boyce had the air let out his tires. Said other cars as well. That casino manager won't return a call. When they was hiring I said, 'Let's interview our own people.' Chairman said, 'We hired a company. Let them do it.' What about tribal preference? Now we got this Kent Cameron fellow, hires his own security people. We have no say. There's trouble and we don't know what they're doing about it."

"We've been advised tribal police don't patrol the casino," Larry said. The Chief's exact words had been, "They don't want us at the casino. None of you go near the casino. I don't care what for."

Sam said, "I'm telling you, you are. Tomorrow night I want you out there and I want you to find out what's going on. And whatever you do, don't talk to the casino manager."

"I'm on a day shift tom—"

"Well, sneak out after work. No one will notice."

The next evening, after a day of quiet agonizing, Larry stayed in uniform and kept the shiny patrol car and headed to the Lucky Acorn Casino.

The casino sat in the bottom of a shallow bowl with the parking lot flared up around it. Larry parked at the rim and opened the window a crack. It was a chilly evening. A thin crust of snow coated the planters but the parking and walkways were clear. The night smelled of asphalt and exhaust. He could hear the distant sound of highway traffic and see the giant message sign that towered over the building. A bouncing acorn announced the player tournament then spun around until it morphed into a motorcycle that disappeared in a burst of light.

"Customer loyalty," Sam said, when he talked about the casino. "We don't have the population some of them other tribes get. We need regulars."

Larry opened his thermos and poured a shallow cup of coffee. He was about to bite into a cold hamburger when he heard yelling. A small group had gathered in one

area of the parking lot. Two more cars pulled up and another half dozen people joined the crowd. He started the engine and moved the patrol car next to them.

"Cops," someone hissed. Most of them looked barely legal for gaming. A couple of girls hid beers behind their backs. "Only one," a tall guy said. "My dad's got socks that look older than him." Someone snickered. The guy was blond and built like a linebacker.

Larry kept his voice steady, "See some IDs?"

"Are we doing something wrong, officer?" The blond guy approached, faintly aggressive.

"Might be." Larry observed empty cups and greasy wrappers tossed around the cars. He pointed with his chin, "What's this?"

"That was here when we got here," the guy said. "You gonna make us pick it up?"

One of the girls squealed, "There it is."

Larry followed the line of her arm to the top of the building. The sky was partly clouded, dark blue with clouds peeking behind a three-quarter moon. All he saw was a giant barn of a building splashed in neon lights.

"That's enough," Larry said, using the voice he used to break up parties at tribal housing. "Party's over."

The blond still had his eye on the roof. "There! What is that?"

Larry looked again and saw something that could have been a man except that it appeared shaggy and hunched-over. It crept along the corner of the building. The hair stood up on the back of his neck. He blinked and it was gone. He was digging around the patrol car for his binoculars when the golf cart zoomed up with a shrill electric buzz.

First, a heavy-set guy in a security uniform stepped out and frowned at Larry. Then a man who could only be Kent Cameron leapt from the passenger seat and pulled his hands from his pockets like a magician and fanned out drink coupons. "Inside, folks. Inside. That's where the fun is."

The casino manager was tall and cadaverous with a thin mustache and perfect white polished hands that made Larry think of a mannequin. He eyed Larry unhappily.

"What *was* that?" one of the girls said, but already the blond guy was sliding the coupon from her hand and steering her toward the casino entrance.

"What are you doing here?" Kent wore a shiny burgundy suit that looked like it was stolen from a lounge singer.

"Council member asked me to look into some complaints of vandalism. He's worried about the player tournament." Larry glanced back at the roof. A gray shadow moved out of sight.

"We're *all* worried about the player tournament. And we take care of all complaints," Kent said. He exchanged a look with the security guard.

"So you keep a patrol out here?" Larry dragged his eyes away from the roof.

"You've over stepped your bounds, officer," Kent said. "I do not report to you."

"Let's agree we both don't want to upset the Council." Larry offered a hand to the security guard. "I'm Officer Shelton."

"Winters," and after a moment he added, "Sir." Kent looked like he wanted to smack him in the head.

"Winters," Larry said, "These kids causing the trouble?"

"Those are guests," Kent said.

"Security cams?"

"Nothing shows up on tape," Winters said. Larry sensed that Winters didn't care much for Kent either.

"You're turning this into a much bigger problem than it is," Kent said.

"You log the complaints?" Larry asked.

"Of course," he said, and shrugged uncomfortably, "but not really. These kinds of things are best resolved informally. You know, buffet tickets. Lucky Acorn Player Club points. See?"

"Could I get on the roof?" Larry asked.

"Why would I let you on the roof?" Kent said.

"Do you intend to give the impression there's something to hide? I can make a few calls if that would be necessary."

"Of course. *Everyone* knows someone on Council." Kent climbed back in the golf cart. "Go," he said to Winters, and pointed to the front entrance.

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The journey to the roof was a complicated one filled with locked stairways and Kent's exasperated sighs along with return trips to his office to retrieve additional keys.

Once they got on the roof, they walked to the front of the building for the full view.

"It was lovely right after the snow fell," Kent said. "I saw a bear out by the dumpster one morning."

"Sure. I saw Raven in my kitchen one time but we don't talk about that." Larry approached the corner where he'd seen the strange movement.

"Look at that," Kent said. "It's gone."

Larry followed Kent to another corner. A rough hewn stony lump was bolted to the corner and extended out over the edge. A thin layer of snow covered the top.

"What is that?"

Kent clutched his heart as if offended. "Bear." Off of Larry's blank look he recited, "Oh! Coyote, Bear, Salmon and Frog. Past, present and future guard."

"Guard and frog don't rhyme." Larry had his notepad out but wasn't sure what to write.

"Who says it's supposed to rhyme?" Kent swept the snow off with his hands. "It's a saying printed on the adhesive tab we use around rolled up paper napkins for the breakfast and lunch buffets."

"What about dinner?"

"Dinner is cloth."

"What does that have to do with the statues?"

"They're gargoyles." Kent made an arc with his hand. "Water spout. One of your members, a well-known artist, made them."

Larry failed to think of a single well-known artist who was a tribal member.

"What's his name?"

"Jack Linkey."

"Great," Larry muttered. "What about the others?"

"Bear faces north, guided by the north star." Kent waved his arms as he walked. "Salmon to the west to ocean waters. Frog to the south for warm summer songs. And Coyote to the secret east."

"Who told you all this?"

Kent turned this over in his head for a long moment. "I thought it was tribal lore."

"Lore, oh. Right," Larry wondered if Jack Stinkey had made up all this crap, too. "And how do they work?"

"Not very well. See how these gutters feed into these chutes? The chutes feed the gargoyles and huge geysers—" Here Kent used his hands to motion as if the water was bursting from his hips. "Gush into the parking lot. We have to block off the spots underneath so our guests don't wash away getting out of their cars. Naturally, they complain about those prime spots blocked off during poor weather."

Kent studied the empty corner. "Coyote is gone. I suppose someone should look into that." A phone beeped in his pocket. "You'll have to excuse me. I'll return." He disappeared down the stairs.

Larry checked the missing corner for signs of forced removal but found no chipped concrete or rusty bolts. The roof and walls here unmarred as if nothing had been there at all. He heard footsteps and figured Kent sent Winters to find him so he was surprised when he heard, "Who can resist the smell of hope and money!"

A scrawny, gray-haired man in black jeans and a long-sleeved shiny-black shirt set his booted foot on the ledge and pounded his fists against his chest.

"You?" Larry said, uncertain.

"Indeed," the man said, standing before him with a small bow.

"I didn't even think—"

"In these times, they rarely do."

"This is a nice spot," Larry said. He wished they had a standard operating procedure for this.

"This spot bores me. I think I might like something to eat, Nephew." He offered an innocent smile. "I've heard so much about the buffet."

"That's not a good idea, Uncle," Larry said, a tad sick at the thought of the trouble he'd be in. "What if I brought you something?"

The man *tsked* with an expression that made Larry nervous. "I just want to look around. Just a peek."

"Like I said," Larry said, firmly, "I can bring you something."

Winters came out of the roof access door with a heavy step. "I need to lock up." Then spotting the man he said, "No guests allowed up here. Sir, you'll have to come in."

"Don't mind if I do," the man said, and he darted from the roof and disappeared through the door.

"Dammit." Larry hurried to follow after him.

The man waited near the buffet. Larry brought Kent to meet him. "This is a special friend of the Tribe," he said. "Can we take care of him?"

"Of course," Kent said, but his tone suggested that he only enjoyed handing out freebies when it was his idea.

After the man was seated Kent walked Larry to the lobby. Several men in blue work coveralls assembled a round platform.

"Not so close to the gift shop," Kent said and pointed a finger six inches to the right. To Larry he said, "Have you seen the prize? Harley-Davidson. We're moving it out here." He pressed a few drink coupons in Larry's hand. "Thank you, for your help."

"Not done yet. I need to keep an eye on the guest. Make sure he gets back to his, uh, back home."

Kent exhaled forcefully but smiled. "Why don't you wait in the security office? Makes folks nervous to have police hanging around."

"Sure." He followed Kent to a narrow room that smelled like burned popcorn and coffee and sat in a folding chair. He wondered how he should report this.

Winters stuck his head in the door and pointed at the phone. "Stinkey . . . uh, Sam Linkey, sir."

Linkey's voice shouted from the receiver, "Is that who I think it is, the VIP Indian eating at the buffet?"

"Yes, sir," Larry said. "He's bored. Wanted a snack and—"

"Who's the bonehead who invited him in?"

"Sorry?"

"Now, we're never gonna get rid of him. Manager's throwing a fit. I told you not to involve him."

"Not sure it could be avoided," Larry said.

"You better figure out something or we're going to have Council on both our butts. You're not even supposed to be out there."

"Situation is under control," Larry said.

"It better be," Linkey said.

Larry tracked down the man in the Gold Pan Bar talking up a dark-haired server wearing bright red lipstick. He saw Larry and offered a toothy smile, "Hey Nephew, can you pay my bill?"

"Sure, you ready to go back?" Larry found only two worn singles in his wallet. He handed over his debit card and tried to remember if the balance would cover it. As he led the man out of the bar, the server caught his attention by waving the card over her head. She shook her head with her red lips pressed together. He held up one finger and then walked the man to the door to the stairs.

The lever wouldn't move under his hand.

"I like this place," the man said.

"It is nice," Larry said. He scanned the room for Winters.

"Before I return, I might play some games." The man smiled.

"I guess," Larry said. "I need to find someone to let us back on the roof."

"I might need some money."

"Of course, Uncle," Larry said, through clenched teeth.

He found Kent at the bar talking to the server. She gave him a pointed look. Kent's smile tightened.

"You're taking care of that, Officer?"

Larry held up a credit card and the woman plucked it from his fingers with a doubtful look and carried it to the register.

"How do I get my friend some playing money?" Larry asked.

"He's already played it. All new visitors are invited to join the Lucky Acorn Players Club and upon filling out the Acorn Form, receive numerous benefits including \$100 of play, discount coupons for sundries at the gift shop, and acorn points for lower room rates."

"Can you get me an application?" Larry still wasn't sure if he'd lost control of the situation.

"Certain tribal employees including police are not permitted—"

"Work with me, sir."

Kent pulled out the form. Larry looked it over with a pang of fear in his gut like the time a half dozen dogs circled him with barred teeth down at Sanderson Ranch. "Bad dog, down!" He'd shouted and it worked. He thought it a lot to hope for that he'd be as lucky this time. He filled out the form using false information and a loose scrawl.

Kent opened his mouth to protest but Larry silenced him with a shake of the head. Kent slid a card across the counter.

"Thank you," Larry said. He found the man and handed him the card. "Play this. Then we're back upstairs. No messing around." Larry watched him return to the bar and collect a pretty young woman who followed him to a machine and stood behind him and watched him play.

Larry did a quick lap of the casino to find Winters. He needed to get the damn stairs open. Winters stood next to Kent on the main game floor. A team of workmen prepared to move the prized motorcycle from its display over the gaming machines. The chrome bits sparkled under the lights. The workers had moved a couple machines aside and were preparing a ramp to bring the bike down to the floor.

Winters said something but it was drown out by a chorus of yowls that rose up from a bank of machines near the bar.

"Uncle Wall's balls," Kent said. "Now what?"

A dozen people crowded around one machine. The man sat on the stool, a sly grin on his face. He pressed a round lighted button and the machine beeped and clicked and then *DING!* Everyone yelled again.

Larry followed Kent as he parted the crowd to get closer. "Unbelievable," he said, disgusted.

Larry saw the number 5,000 on the display. "Dollars?" he asked.

"Quarters. Twelve hundred fifty dollars."

"How much free play did we give him?" Larry said. For second he thought of the winnings as partly his.

"We gave him a hundred bucks."

"That ever happen before?"

"Of course not," Kent hissed. "You need to get him out of here."

"Working on it," Larry said.

"Something is not right about him," Kent said.

Larry moved closer. The man nodded over his shoulder. "Hey, Nephew. Fun game." The woman ran a hand through his shaggy gray hair.

"Hey, Old Timer. You about ready?"

"I think I'd like to try the tournament," the man said. He pressed the round button and won another hundred credits.

"You said you just wanted a peek," Larry said. Out of the corner of his eye, Kent snapped his fingers and Winters brought two more security guys over.

Larry shook his head violently at them. "No," he mouthed. They ignored him.

One of them made a small gesture to indicate that Larry should move aside.

"Not a good idea," he said. "Uncle, we should go."

The man pressed the button and the machine spun again.

Thirty-six hundred credits.

The lady friend kissed him on the cheek. The crowd cheered. He hit the cash-out button and barely touched his fingers to the ticket before he was knocked aside by a balding man wearing a veteran's cap who pushed his wide ass onto the stool to the protest of a similarly built woman trying to do the same thing.

Larry ignored the cries of protest and followed Winters as he escorted the man to the security office.

"We have to ask you to leave the casino, sir," Winters said. "Sorry." He put the man in a chair and sat on the table in front of him.

"Leave?" the man said, amused.

"Something in your play is not right," Kent said.

The man frowned.

Larry leaned to Kent and said quietly, "Not the way to handle this."

"I understand *my* job, Officer."

"How do you cheat a machine?" Larry asked.

Kent narrowed his gaze. "No one's using the C-word. We're inviting the guest to leave."

"What if I decline your invitation?" the man asked.

"It's not that kind of invitation."

The lights flickered for a moment and then there was a sound like a roll of coins splitting against a concrete wall. Winters waved two pointed fingers and the security staff hurried back to the gaming floor.

Kent gazed at the ceiling and clasped his hands in urgent prayer. He gave Larry a meaningful look. "I'll be right back."

Larry watched Kent shoot out of the room. "You ready?" he asked.

"Don't you want to see what happens next?"

"What happens next?"

"Sometimes machines have winning streaks no one can explain." The man scratched behind one ear.

"Uh oh," Larry looked out on the casino floor. The machines beeped and lights flashed. People whooped for joy. He looked back at the man.

"They're all winners."

"You understand the casino helps the Tribe?" Larry said.

"I understand my duty, Nephew."

"Your duty?" Larry finally lost his temper. His fist smacked down on the table.
"You need to get back on that roof."

"Nephew," the man said, "There are some more dangerous than I."

"Understood," Larry said. "Sorry." He wiped his palms on pants. "You want to be in the tournament tomorrow. Then you'll go?"

"As you wish," the man said. Larry sent him to wait in the bar.

The buzz from the casino quieted down. Kent returned and slumped in a chair, pale and dazed and mopping the sweat at his neck with a tissue. "System glitch like I've never seen. Everyone with money in the system won. The floor shook with the sound of their winning." He stared at the floor as if recalling a great horror. "How are we going to explain this?"

"I am going to need one more thing," Larry said.

Kent nodded as if he hadn't heard.

"I need a bed for him tonight and a spot in the tournament tomorrow."

Kent snapped out of his daze and gave Larry a hard look. "You're mad," he said.
"He hasn't qualified. Your Council set the rules in blood and stone. No special favors for members. No exceptions. You could be publicly flogged for asking."

"I know. It's difficult to explain but I think the Council would go for this."

"Fine," Kent said. "I need a court order, a gold plated resolution from Council and an airtight assurance that my job would not be jeopardized. Then the answer will still be, no."

"I'll see what I can do," Larry said, picking up the phone.

"You want me to what?" Sam Linkey said.

"Let's just take care of him," Larry said.

"No can do. I don't care who he is or what he wants."

"Circumstances are unusual."

"That's why I'm glad we have someone like you on it," Sam said.

"Do we have an elder or medicine woman who specializes in this sort of thing?"

"Look, don't ask me to hold your hand on this. Shouldn't have been invited in."

"But he's in now, and he wants to get in the tournament," Larry said. "He says he'll return afterward."

"Sure he will. No! He'll want one more thing and then one more thing. You can't trust him."

"Should I try tribal court?"

"You mean, George Linkey?" Sam said.

Larry put down the phone.

"I told you," Kent said. "Now, get him out."

The man sat in the bar, watching the Oakland A's. A wager ticket sat in front of him.

Larry looked at the TV and then the ticket. "You can do that, too?"

The man shrugged noncommittally.

"Sorry, Uncle. I can't help you. It's not that I don't want to, but these people. They don't understand."

"Times change," he agreed.

"Not sure what happens now," Larry said. He thought about putting the man in his patrol car. Taking him back to his place. Then he'd be inviting trouble into his own home.

"Perhaps I can persuade someone," the man said. "I have friends in high places."

"I'm sure you do."

The man followed Larry to the lobby. The prize motorcycle sat in front of the circular platform. The workmen adjusted the platform.

"Nice bike," the man said.

"It is," Larry said.

"I'd like to try sitting on it."

"Why not?" Larry flashed his badge when the men tried to stop him. "Come on," he said to them. "What does it hurt? Our people honor our elders."

The man climbed up on the bike. He closed his eyes and his hands tightened on the grips.

"You look good on it," Larry said.

The man patted the machine as if it was a long lost friend. It started quietly, like a bumble bee but the sound grew to something closer to an electric razor. Then with a loud roar, the bike ignited into action. The man drove it in a circle around the lobby. Every guest froze. Kent ran out of his office with his arm in the air and Winters lurched toward the bike in a fury.

The man stopped next to Larry and said, "I might pay Stinkey a visit." Then, with a gut-twisting roar, the motorcycle was out the door and into the parking lot. The bike skidded to one side and Larry bit his knuckle, worried the man might go down but he righted himself and sped through an aisle of cars. The engine revved loudly again and the biker exited the parking lot and rumbled out of sight.

"How could that happen?" Kent screamed.

"Must have stolen the key," Larry said.

Kent pulled his hand out of his pocket and dangled a shiny silver key. "Aren't you going to go after him?"

"Sure," Larry said.

"You're gonna lose him!"

Larry ran out the door. He started the car and flashed his lights and zoomed from the parking lot. Once out of range of the casino, he killed the lights and pulled over. A fresh twenty lay on the seat next to him and he put it in his wallet and headed home.

Later, he heard Stinkey phoned the facility manager and had the other three gargoyles removed and a conventional drainage system installed. The concrete lumps were stuck under a torn tarp behind the casino.

The man hasn't returned. Yet.