

Tree Cutter

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I parked the '56 Apache at a turnout three-quarters down the curving driveway, told my crew to stay put, which they'd have done anyway, and ambled up to a columned porch. The two-story house was colonial style and built within the decade in a pricey subdivision the same age. Only a couple of miles but a world away from the Buckhead of my youth.

Pressing a gold-lighted doorbell, I heard "Big Ben" on the chimes and liked it so much I waited a few seconds and pressed again. No one came to the door, so I turned and studied the front yard. The manicured lawn rose gradually for two hundred feet to the road. Midway, an island of dogwoods, pines and sweet gum trees nestled in pine straw. One of those sweet gums closest to the house didn't look very good.

My pickup over on the left didn't look so good either. Ten years of hard driving had left patches of rust on its faded navy-blue surface. Could have been passed off as camouflage if it'd been a military jeep. There was something I was proud of: On the side door the bold lettering DAVIS TREE SERVICE. That looked good to me. Even my so-called employees, Tommy and James, relaxing in the cab, looked all right from my spot on the porch. And why not? It was a bright mid-morning, and an Atlanta fall was just around the bend.

Still no answer. High on the doorpost was affixed a small rectangular box. A previous client, same neighborhood, had noticed my staring at a similar unit on his doorway. He told me his people put a special prayer into the box cause the Bible, the Old Testament, directed them to do so. Maybe it was to ward off evil. If so, his people's success rate was not high.

In the clean, open garage sat a shiny, new Cadillac, minus the fins that were big a couple of years ago, so I figured somebody must be around. I tried a knock, three sharp raps, and finally heard someone playing with the door handle from the inside. I put on a serious expression for my client, and when the heavy door was pulled back, found myself meeting the dark, shy eyes of a tall, Black maid.

"I'm Jack Davis – Davis Tree Service," I said. "Is Mrs. Kaufman in?"

The pretty maid spoke quietly but managed to make eye contact: "She's around back. Go to the right. There's a gate and a jumpy dog." She pointed out and motioned to the side. As she spoke, I peeked beyond her into the hallway. The floor was lined in dark, shiny flagstone.

Thanking the maid, I exited the porch and followed a path of white brick leading across the lawn. Passing high shrubs, I turned the corner and stopped at a deep mahogany colored fence. With a clang of the gate, I entered the side yard, walked past the warm shooshing from an indoor dryer's exhaust vent and let an easy slope lead me into a grassy backyard bordered by thick woods.

I was admiring a fine pecan tree that protected a wide back porch and was trying to decide where I'd put my lawn chair and ice chest when a medium-sized retriever from across the way decided to become protective of his home turf. I'd been warned about him.

The dog ran straight, barking his charge and from behind came a command: "Tyler! Here!" Undeterred, Tyler had a mission to complete.

I held my ground and waited till the fella was just within striking range, then with a glare and a shout I stomped my work boot into the grass. That stopped him. Tyler swallowed a bark and dropped his tail. Standing across the yard, his owner called again, and this time Tyler obeyed. That way he could retreat without losing face. He trotted back bravely as if to report on how he'd whipped me. But I kept coming.

The woman, Mrs. Kaufman, I assumed, had been sitting with her legs tucked under her near a flower garden. Now she and I were both walking toward each other, though I was moving faster, all the while trying to keep my barrel chest away from a beer belly.

"Mr. Davis?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said warmly to show no hard feelings about the dog's greeting.

"Well, you certainly gave Tyler a shock." She greeted me with a firm handshake. I could see she was eyeing me, so I eyed her right back. We were both about the same age – late forties. My graying beard matched her neck lines. When it comes to age, necks don't lie. She didn't have on much make-up. Didn't need it. She was medium height, a good-

looking girl, once, now an attractive mother and wife. She wore fancy khaki pants and a loose but tailored plaid shirt.

"I believe you're the first person to ever stand his ground against Tyler," she said as she led me back the way I'd come. Her voice was firm with a hint of playfulness.

"Yes, ma'am. Dogs respect me."

Her head angled up and she laughed, but I couldn't tell if it was with me or at me.

With Tyler tagging along, we reached the gate. Mrs. Kaufman told the dog to stay. He didn't want to but he obeyed.

Like she was making an official announcement, she said, "I'll show you our casualty," when we moved into the front yard.

We walked toward the trees, and I motioned for my boys to follow. They hopped out of the truck and eased over. As if we were some sort of a committee, the four of us studied the lifeless tree, only its very crown swaying slightly in the light breeze. Nearby were three others all thick with leaf here in late summer, their spiked balls still green, hanging from the branches like out-of-season Christmas tree ornaments.

"It didn't come back after the ice storm last winter," Mrs. Kaufman was saying. I noticed James gazing over toward the house where I knew he'd gotten a glance at the maid. He already had one girlfriend and didn't need another.

"Looks pretty cut and dried, don't it, James?" I said with more of a drawl than usual. Why was I acting that way? Was it my audience?

"Sure enough," he said, returning his attention to the tree.

"I presume the maple has to come down," said Mrs. Kaufman.

"You presume right, ma'am," I answered. "We can take care of it, except it's not a maple."

"Oh?" Her look hardened as if she were not used to being corrected.

"This is a sweet gum, ma'am. They've got maple-like leaves, but they're in a different family. Closer to sycamores."

"I see." She was eying me again, a bit cooler this time. "Do you mind if I watch?"

My hands opened out in a qualified yes, and before I could warn her, she was volunteering to stay out of our way.

Tommy and James headed back to the truck for the saw, other tools, and plastic hauling bags. The tree was a foot and a half around at its base and thirty feet high. Struck down in its late youth. An easy job, really, if my observer stayed out of the way.

"Have you been in the tree business very long, Mr. Davis?" Mrs. Kaufman asked. She again seemed amused by something.

"A couple of years ma'am," I said, as I examined the tree. "I kind of backed into it, and I've taken a real liking to the work." She was relaxing a bit more so I decided to entertain her. "You see there's an art to cutting down a tree. And a danger, too. The cut has to be true and right, otherwise the tree's limbs won't be the only ones broken."

"Of course," she said, turning from me to regard the tree with what I hoped was a new respect for its strength. I rubbed my beard and waited for the boys. They just weren't in any hurry today. I didn't want to waste time though.

"Our neighbors, the Wolfsons," she continued, "said you did a fine job taking out a diseased oak."

"Yes, ma'am." Both of us went from looking at the tree to looking at each other. "We don't usually advertise," I added, not sure why I said it. She had strange grey eyes, alert and something wise in them. Taking a timeout from meeting her stare, I continued, "We get most of our jobs by word-of-mouth."

"That's why I called you." She turned to face the dead tree and placed her hand on its ridged trunk. "Lee, my husband, wanted to take bids from several Atlanta services. I said, no, you'd do. Don't prove me wrong."

I thanked her for her confidence.

Although it only lasted a second, I didn't enjoy the next bit of quiet between us. "What does your husband do, ma'am?" I found myself asking.

She breathed out the answer like she was exhaling cigarette smoke. "He's a wholesaler in the footwear industry. Also active in some civic organizations."

He sells shoes, I thought. And judging by the house, the yard, the car, does all right at it.

"What did you do before you went into the tree trade?" she countered.

"Let's see, ma'am," I started post-WWII. "I was foreman in a warehouse that stocked industrial cleansers. Before that I did carpentry. For a while I was a co-owner in a shipping firm. We had one truck. It was always breaking down."

Her sandaled foot tapped the cushiony pine straw. "You look the part for what you're doing now."

"Yes, ma'am, that's what everybody says." I paused to turn toward my two approaching boys, throwing out to them, "You fellas enjoy your morning break?"

They knew I wasn't entirely joking.

"What break?" asked Tommy as he brought over the saw. "We had to put some gas in this thing."

"Right," confirmed James. "And we adjusted the chain's tension, just like you always tell us to."

Mrs. Kaufman was enjoying my boys' behavior. Nudging my shoulder with her fingertip she said, "I'll move out of the way. You probably need to confer with your employees."

"Yes, ma'am," I said, feeling James' and Tommy's grins behind me. She stepped back. I knew Tommy was noticing her smooth walk. He didn't have a gal, and he certainly didn't need this one.

"You want to bring that saw over here, Tom?"

"Yes, sir," he answered. "You want to confer with it?"

I ignored his joke. Tom was lean but strong, a good tree climber. And he didn't scare like that dog. James and he said they were the best integrated tree boys in Atlanta. Once you got them working, I suppose they were.

Mrs. Kaufman stood over by her driveway and watched us closely like a reporter. I didn't have time to monitor her except to make sure she was out of the path of the tree's fall.

I was lining up sightings and making quick measurements in my head to figure out the best direction to fell the tree. It stood on the edge of the pine straw which made things easier. James was tying a bandana across his forehead, and Tommy, his eye protectors on, was unhooking the safety latch on the saw. I was also proud of that machine. It was in better condition than my truck. On big jobs I'd normally do the cutting, and once I switched her on, the buzzing was music to my ears. I loved how the cutter teeth ate into the wood. How pine melted into sawdust. Oak sliced like cake.

Like my customers said, I have a talent for tree cutting. One professor whose back yard needed partial clearing for an enlarged patio told me when I was figuring out how to down trees I was using all kinds of advanced mathematics. "You know calculus intuitively," he said. I didn't argue with him, though Tommy kidded me about that line for the next two weeks. "We gonna need some calculus on this job?" he'd ask, and I'd reply only enough to keep his head clear of the saw blade.

It was time. "What about the branches?" asked Tommy, the power tool resting in his hands like a shotgun. I didn't see any reason to do any preliminary cutting. If the tree'd been bigger, we could have lopped off a few of the larger branches on one side, leaving the other side heavier and making it easier to control the fall. No, this would be a basic cut.

I told Tommy where to start off, motioned for James to keep clear, and took one last look at Mrs. Kaufman to make sure she was safe. She stood attentively, her hand shielding her eyes from the sun.

With an okay to Tommy, I moved over near James. Tommy gave the starter cord a quick pull and the motor revved up. He adjusted the choke and the low whine smoothed

out like a long song note. His first cut sliced straight into the wood, two-thirds of the way into the tree. Sawdust spewed out like a miniature dust storm and the saw's pitch went down a note. Tommy eased over to the other side and made a second cut to meet the first. For a moment the tree remained upright, balanced. James joined him and with a guiding push, they let gravity take over, and just like it was supposed to, the tree, its trunk now separated from the base, began to tilt and tilt more, gaining speed and finally toppling right over and slamming into the ground. We all felt the earth shake when it hit.

Looking over at Mrs. Kaufman, who was nodding her approval, I thought, "Your shoe husband can't do that, can he?" but I didn't say any such thing aloud. Besides I didn't know what he could or couldn't do. Maybe he'd been a part of D-Day or in the Pacific while I was trudging up through Italy. Instead, I called, "A clean fall, ma'am."

"Yes, I see. Plus, you missed the house."

I couldn't tell from her tone if she were serious or playing with me. Tommy and James were over the fallen tree now, skinning it like you would a hunted buck. They sliced away at the branches. Then they'd divide up the trunk.

Mrs. Kaufman approached from her driveway.

"We'll cut it up into firewood for you," I said.

"Does that kind of wood burn well?"

"Yes, ma'am. And by winter it'll be perfect for you."

"You didn't take long to cut it down." Did I hear respect in her voice?

"No ma'am. The days of ax felling are long gone."

"I suppose they are." She said the words slowly as if she were thinking of something else.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Kaufman?" I wanted to snap my finger before her eyes.

After a pause, she answered, "I'm fine. Tell you what." She put her finger in the air as if she'd just had a great idea. "You all must be thirsty. While you and the boys finish the job, I'll go make sure we have some lemonade."

Before I could thank her, she was returning to her house, so I went over to see how the cutting was going. Both boys, in their T-shirts, were hot from the work. I helped James carry the ridged logs over to a storage shed near the side of the house. He began to tell me how pretty the maid was, and I told him he could look but couldn't touch.

"The lady of the house ain't bad lookin' either," James added as we laid the newly cut logs in a growing stack. They smelled of fresh sawdust and a lingering hint of aromatic sap.

I paused to count the rings. Twenty-five or so.

"Yeah, the mamma's nice. She likes you, too."

"Boy, these logs can produce awfully big lumps on the top of a head," I said.

"Ah'm jus' workin', boss man," he answered mocking his own Southern accent.

"Well keep your mind on your work till we're done."

After we piled up the wood, Tommy used the saw to level the stump to ground level. Then James and he collected the smaller branches, put them into the trash bags, and raked the yard where the tree had fallen. When they were done nothing remained except that flattened stump like a grave marker to preserve the tree's history.

We put the tools and filled bags in the truck bed, and, as if on cue, Mrs. Kaufman came out from a side entrance, the maid behind her with a tray holding a pitcher and glasses. We were a bit dirty and sweaty from the work, so we brushed ourselves off with our hands and scuffed our shoes on the ground as we advanced toward the house.

Mrs. Kaufman had the maid set the tray on a picnic-style bench and invited us over. My boys were acting shy and even polite, which I didn't know they were capable of. "Thank you, Annie," she said, and I watched James watch the maid retreat to inside the house.

With a broad hand motion, Mrs. Kaufman indicated we should enjoy ourselves with a glass of cold lemonade. Again, I was impressed that the boys sipped and didn't guzzle. "Have as much as you want," she said. "The day is warming up." We obliged her.

The boys were talking sports, baseball, the Braves' unlikely chance of making a comeback before season's end. I acted like I was checking out the front yard's trees. "The rest of them look just fine," I offered. She answered she was glad about that.

"Oh, I have a check for you, Mr. Davis," Mrs. Kaufman began and said she'd be right back. She went into the house, and I didn't know if I should stay where I was or be closer to the entrance door when she returned. The boys were on refill number two or three.

When Mrs. Kaufman did emerge, I decided to meet her halfway.

Holding a checkbook, she began, "If you'll tell me the exact amount. . ." Her voice trailed off. Had I done something wrong?

Scratching my beard even though it didn't itch, I told her the figure. Why was I feeling tense? Usually being around rich people doesn't impress me much. We all end up in the same place.

"There," she said, handing me the check. "Paul Bunyan couldn't have done a better job." Her words were forced, and she reddened immediately. She finished her scene with "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound sarcastic."

I told her that was all right, no harm done, and decided to play this out, "How did you mean to sound, ma'am?"

That did it. She went stern-eyed and gripped the checkbook. I knew I'd overstepped my bounds and wanted to leave. The boys were chatting and sipping their drinks like nothing was happening.

I was starting on an apology as she and I exchanged grimaces. Before I could make much headway, she held up her other hand to indicate I should just listen.

There was neither hardness nor light humor in her voice now, just a cool softness. She told me things about how she'd started college and made it halfway through before meeting the man who became her husband. Then she left school and had a couple of kids and became a housewife and gave some nice dinner parties and volunteered at the kids' schools and served on some kind of board at her Jewish temple. She ended by asking me what I thought of her.

"Honestly?" I asked. She nodded.

"Well, you ended up marrying well. You've got a fine house. Sounds like your husband is a good man."

She nodded again.

She asked me if I was married and if I have kids and what were they like.

"I'm divorced, Mrs. Kaufman. My two teenage boys live with their mother. She's remarried. Chattanooga."

Swishing the last of the lemonade in my glass, jiggling the remaining ice, I asked her about her children.

"They're in college, out-of-state. A son and a daughter."

"A college education's an important thing," I said. "A big opportunity."

"I'm thinking about going back to school," she added, "maybe take some history classes at Agnes Scott."

"Why not?" I said. "Never made it that far myself."

I heard her sigh. A sighing woman makes me uncomfortable. Not knowing what else to say, I told her we had an afternoon job to do across town, and we'd best be heading out.

Now she was staring out at the trees. Over on the left, near a flower garden, her dog lay flat, sunning himself. Contented. I found myself shoulder to shoulder with this woman, not touching her, looking out at the greenery, I offered: "You've done all right, ma'am." And I believed what I said.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," she answered, more resigned than convinced.

I turned toward her. "You have," I said. "But you don't need me to tell you that, even though I just did."

She nodded toward me. "Thanks," she said, a bit stronger, and for a moment I felt like an old friend.

Together, we walked over to the boys.

"This was great, Mrs. Kaufman," said Tommy. "You know it's been a pleasure working for you." I indicated with a shoulder raise and head tilt it was time to go. They put down their glasses and headed to the truck.

"I appreciate your taking out that sick tree," Mrs. Kaufman said, her voice sounding more relaxed.

"You're welcome, ma'am." Her eyes locked into mine. She held up her hand and rubbed the back of it along the length of my beard.

It's hard to embarrass me, but I'm sure my cheeks reddened, what you could see of them.

"I just wanted to know how that felt," she said.

I nodded and stepped away like we'd just finished a dance. Heading directly toward my truck where James and Tommy were poking at each other, I gave her a parting wave. Looking kind of noble, she said good-bye with her eyes and went back inside.

"Let's go boys," I said with a sterner voice than I meant to. "We've got ourselves another job to do." I slid into the truck.

"Right, boss," cracked James.

Starting the Apache, which needed a new muffler, I pulled off the turnout and onto the driveway. Facing toward the street, I paused a moment and took in the front yard. If you hadn't known, you'd never be able to tell there was a tree missing from the peninsula of forest centered in Mrs. Kaufman's lawn.

Heading up the drive, a warm noon sun overhead, I said to my boys, "I may look like a lumberjack, but sometimes I feel like a surgeon." They laughed so hard I thought they were crying. Tommy, I knew, would kid me about it for the next couple of weeks.