

Poe Tater Salad

Spud

Clee Smith

Chapter 1

The Fool's Wisdom

The morning light struck the limestone outcropping behind Spud's trailer with the kind of harsh Oklahoma clarity that revealed every crack, every weathered edge, every secret the ancient stone might be trying to hide.

Spud shuffled through his yard in mismatched house slippers, one blue and one brown, muttering what sounded like nonsense to anyone who might be listening. "Nvhi ulihelisdi," he whispered, bending to collect a bent bottle cap from beneath a rusted truck tire. The Cherokee words felt heavy on his tongue, weighted with meanings that had no English equivalent. *Water remembers.* His grandmother's voice echoed in his mind, though she'd been dead four years now, leaving him to carry on alone.

He straightened slowly, his seventy-year-old back protesting the movement, and added the bottle cap to the collection in his frayed jacket pocket. To anyone watching from the road, he was just old Spud Salad, the crazy man who lived on the scrubland east of town, picking up trash like some kind of

human magpie. They didn't know that each piece of metal, each fragment of glass, each oddly shaped stone served a purpose in the delicate network of sensors he'd built over the decades.

The bottle cap had been positioned precisely seventeen feet from the northeastern boundary marker, where the limestone formations created a natural electromagnetic anomaly. Its displacement by three inches told him the underground water table had shifted again during the night. Not good. Not good at all.

"Unadotlvhi usdi," he murmured, testing the word shapes against his teeth. *Little spirits.* The kind that lived in the spaces between things, in the cracks where different worlds touched. They'd been restless lately, disturbing his carefully placed monitoring devices, rearranging his yard in ways that spoke of deeper agitation beneath the surface.

A red pickup truck slowed on the county road, its driver craning his neck to stare. Spud deliberately stumbled, catching himself against a tilted fence post with exaggerated confusion. He let his mouth hang open slightly, his eyes unfocused, while his mind catalogued the truck's license plate, the dent in its front bumper, the way the driver's lips moved as he spoke to someone on a cell phone.

Information. Always information. His grandmother had taught him that survival depended on knowing what others thought they knew, and what they didn't realize they were revealing.

The truck moved on, and Spud allowed his posture to straighten slightly. He pulled a battered notebook from his back pocket, its pages water-stained and held together with

duct tape. To anyone who might glimpse it, the notebook contained the random scribbles of a confused old man. In reality, it held forty years of meteorological data, electromagnetic readings, and behavioral observations of the wildlife that served as early warning systems for the spiritual disturbances that periodically threatened the region.

This morning's readings weren't promising. The barn owls hadn't returned to their usual roosts. The creek that ran behind his property had changed its song, the rhythm of water over stone altered by something deeper than seasonal rainfall. And the limestone formations themselves seemed to be humming, a frequency just below human hearing that made his teeth ache.

He moved toward the cluster of juniper trees that concealed his most sensitive equipment, stepping carefully around the apparently random arrangement of car parts and discarded appliances that actually formed a precise geometric pattern. Each rusted bumper, each broken washing machine, each stack of old tires had been positioned to create a kind of technological medicine wheel, gathering and focusing the electromagnetic energies that pulsed through the limestone substrate.

The modified weather station hidden in the junipers showed what he'd expected: barometric pressure dropping in a pattern that defied the national weather service's predictions. Temperature fluctuations that made no meteorological sense. Wind patterns that seemed to be spiraling around his property like water circling a drain.

"Amadohi usdi," he whispered, his voice carrying a note of

genuine concern. *Little mysteries.* The kind that grew larger if you didn't pay attention to them early enough.

From Dell's Diner on Main Street, three miles away, he could hear the morning gossip floating on the unusually still air. His hearing had always been sharp, but lately it seemed to be picking up sounds that shouldn't travel so far. Voices discussing him, as they often did.

"...saw him out there again this morning, talking to himself..."

"...ought to call social services, man his age living alone like that..."

"...harmless enough, I suppose, but that property's an eyesore..."

The third voice carried an edge of anticipation that made Spud's skin prickle. Someone was thinking about his land in ways that went beyond idle curiosity about the local eccentric. Someone was making plans.

He pulled out his cell phone, a device that most people assumed he didn't know how to use properly. In fact, he'd upgraded it regularly, installing applications that monitored seismic activity, tracked weather patterns, and connected him to networks of Cherokee speakers across the region. The phone showed seventeen missed calls from numbers he didn't recognize, all with area codes from Dallas and Oklahoma City.

His fingers, stained with soil and motor oil, moved across the screen with practiced efficiency. The GPS showed three vehicles with out-of-state plates that had entered Clearwater before dawn. One had parked at the motel on Highway 177. The other two were conducting a slow circuit of the roads

surrounding his property, their occupants photographing fence lines and surveying boundaries with expensive equipment.

The development company. It had to be. His contact at the Cherokee Nation had warned him this day would come, when the economic pressures on rural communities would finally outweigh their reluctance to disturb ground that had been sacred for longer than recorded history.

A crack of thunder split the morning silence, though the sky showed only scattered clouds. Spud's head snapped up, his eyes scanning the horizon. There, above the limestone formations that marked the convergence of three underground streams, a darkness was gathering that had nothing to do with normal weather patterns.

"Nvhi gadohiyuhi," he breathed, the Cherokee words carrying both reverence and warning. *Water that speaks.* The underground confluence was responding to whatever disturbance had set the surface world in motion.

His phone buzzed. A text from Jenny Barnes, the teenager who'd been nosing around his property lately with her camera. Her grandmother Rose had been one of the few who'd understood his true purpose, though she'd died before she could properly prepare her granddaughter for the inheritance that awaited her.

Weird storms on the weather radar. They're all circling around your area. Everything okay?

Spud stared at the message, his thumb hovering over the keyboard. How much should he tell her? How much was she ready to hear? Her grandmother had possessed the sight, the

ability to perceive the spiritual dimensions of the physical world, but that gift often skipped generations. Sometimes it emerged gradually, through dreams and intuitions that the modern world taught people to dismiss as imagination.

Storm season, he typed back. *Stay inside when the wind picks up.*

It wasn't a lie, exactly. It was storm season, though the storms building over his property had nothing to do with the familiar patterns of Oklahoma weather. These were spiritual storms, the kind that erupted when the boundaries between worlds became thin. The kind that required ceremonies his grandmother had taught him but that he'd never expected to perform alone.

Another vehicle turned onto the county road, this one a silver sedan with rental plates. Through his binoculars, Spud watched a well-dressed man step out, his expensive shoes immediately picking up red dust from the unpaved shoulder. The man surveyed the landscape with the calculating gaze of someone who saw profit rather than place, his fingers already moving over a tablet as he documented angles and distances.

Douglas Keene. It had to be. The developer his sources had warned him about, the one who specialized in convincing struggling rural communities to accept projects that promised prosperity but delivered only disruption. Keene's reputation preceded him like a weather front, leaving behind transformed landscapes and displaced communities.

Spud shuffled toward his trailer, maintaining the appearance of aimless wandering while positioning himself to observe Keene's survey. The developer spent nearly an hour

photographing the property boundaries, the access roads, the proximity to utilities. His expression remained professionally neutral, but his body language suggested satisfaction. He'd found what he was looking for.

The radio in Spud's trailer crackled to life, tuned to the sheriff's frequency. "Unit 12, this is dispatch. Got a complaint about trespassing on the old Patterson farm. Caller says some old man's been walking around the property lines, leaving junk behind."

Sheriff Collins' voice came through the static, tired and patient. "Copy that, dispatch. I'll head out there and have a talk with him."

Spud grimaced. The Patterson farm bordered his property on the north, where the limestone formations were most active. He'd been monitoring the boundary markers there for thirty years, watching for the subtle signs that indicated when the spiritual barriers required reinforcement. To the new owners, his presence probably looked like trespassing. To him, it was essential maintenance.

He gathered his morning's collection of apparently random objects and headed for the trailer, his movements deliberately unsteady. By the time Collins arrived, he needed to be in full character: the confused old man who meant no harm but couldn't quite grasp the complex concepts of property rights and social boundaries.

The radio crackled again. "All units, be advised we've got storm cells developing over the eastern sections of the county. Rotation possible. I'll update with watches and warnings as needed."

Spud glanced at the sky, where the unnatural darkness above the limestone formations had begun to spread. The weather service wouldn't understand what they were seeing. Their instruments could measure wind speed and barometric pressure, but they couldn't detect the spiritual turbulence that generated storms from the inside out.

His phone buzzed with another text, this one from a number he didn't recognize: *Mr. Salad, this is Douglas Keene with Meridian Development. I'd like to discuss a business opportunity that could benefit both of us. Would you be available for a conversation this afternoon?*

Spud stared at the message, his mind racing through possibilities. The man worked fast, he'd give him that. Most developers waited weeks or months before making direct contact with property owners. Keene's immediate approach suggested either confidence or desperation.

A third vehicle appeared on the county road, this one a compact car with Cherokee Nation plates. It slowed as it passed his property, and Spud caught a glimpse of a Cherokee woman with graying hair, her head tilted as if listening to something beyond the range of normal hearing.

The woman pulled over and stepped out of her car, her movements deliberate and controlled. She stood beside the road for several minutes, her eyes closed, her breathing deep and regular. When she opened her eyes, they focused directly on Spud's trailer, as if she could see through the walls to where he stood watching.

Sasa Wingedpony. The linguistics professor who'd been documenting Cherokee speakers throughout the region. Her

reputation in academic circles was matched by her standing in traditional Cherokee communities, a rare combination that made her both valuable and dangerous. If she'd come to Clearwater, it meant she'd heard something that had attracted her attention.

Spud's morning ritual of muttering Cherokee while collecting seemingly random objects had served multiple purposes over the years. It maintained his cover as the harmless local eccentric while allowing him to perform the quiet ceremonies that kept the spiritual boundaries stable. But it also created the possibility that someone with the right training might recognize the ceremonial language embedded in his apparent rambling.

The woman got back in her car and drove slowly toward town, but not before taking one more long look at his property. Her expression suggested she'd heard something that she recognized, something that had made this particular stop worth her academic attention.

Spud's phone rang, showing Collins' number. "Mr. Salad, this is Sheriff Collins. I need to come by and talk to you about some complaints I've been getting. Would this afternoon work for you?"

"Complaints?" Spud allowed confusion to color his voice, though his mind was already organizing the conversation that would follow. "I ain't done nothing wrong, Sheriff. Just been cleaning up around my place."

"I'm sure it's nothing serious," Collins replied, his tone professionally reassuring. "Just need to clear up a few things about property boundaries. You know how neighbors can be."

"Oh, well, sure. I reckon I can spare some time for you. You been good to me over the years." Spud injected a note of grateful deference into his voice, the tone of an old man who appreciated the sheriff's patience with his harmless eccentricities.

"I'll be by around 2:00 pm, if that works."

"I'll be here. Ain't got nowhere else to go." Spud ended the call and immediately dialed another number, this one connecting him to a secure line that bypassed normal cellular networks.

"Grandmother's house," a voice answered in Cherokee.

"The stones are singing," Spud replied in the same language, using the code phrase that identified him to the network of traditional practitioners who maintained communication across the region.

"We've been expecting your call," the voice continued in English, switching to the language of practical planning. "The weather stations are showing unusual patterns centered on your location. Are you prepared for what's coming?"

Spud looked out at the darkening sky, where the first drops of rain were beginning to fall despite the weather service's prediction of clear skies. "I'm prepared for the ceremonies. I'm not prepared for the interference."

"The development company?"

"They're here. Started surveying this morning. And there's a linguistics professor who might have heard more than she should have."

A pause. "Dr. Wingedpony?"

"You know her?"

"By reputation. She's done good work preserving ceremonial language, but she's never been involved with active practice. She might be an ally rather than a threat."

"Or she might be someone who thinks traditional knowledge belongs in universities rather than on traditional grounds."

"That's for you to determine. But remember, you can't maintain the boundaries alone much longer. The times are changing, and so must the guardianship."

The connection ended, leaving Spud alone with the sound of rain that had begun to fall in patterns that defied meteorological logic. Each drop seemed to strike the limestone formations with unusual force, creating resonances that traveled through the ground and up through the soles of his feet.

He stepped onto his trailer's small porch, allowing the rain to soak through his thin shirt. The water carried information, whispers of change that had been building for decades and were finally reaching a critical mass. The developers were only the surface manifestation of deeper currents that threatened to sweep away everything his grandmother had entrusted to his care.

But change could also bring opportunity. The young woman with the camera, the linguistics professor with her trained ear, even the sheriff with his family's long history of service to the community – they all represented possibilities for the kind of help he'd never imagined he might need.

The rain intensified, and with it came the sound of voices speaking Cherokee words that had been absent from this landscape for too long. Not the voices of the living, but the voices of the land itself, remembering languages that had once blessed its waters and honored its stones.

Spud closed his eyes and let the ancient words flow through him, joining his voice to the chorus that rose from the limestone formations. To anyone who might be listening, he was just a crazy old man talking to himself in the rain.

But the land knew better, and the land was finally ready to speak back.

Chapter 2

Papers Served

Douglas Keene's midnight-blue BMW X7 attracted stares the moment it rolled past the faded "Welcome to Clearwater" sign, its pristine paint job and chrome accents catching Oklahoma sunlight like a beacon announcing the arrival of money in a place that had forgotten what prosperity looked like.

He navigated the potholed streets with the careful precision of someone driving a vehicle worth more than most local annual salaries, his manicured hands gripping the leather steering wheel as he took mental inventory of the town's obvious decline. Empty storefronts outnumbered occupied ones on Main Street. The few businesses that remained wore the weary appearance of enterprises hanging on through stubbornness rather than profitability.

"Perfect," Keene murmured, his voice carrying the satisfied tone of a predator recognizing easy prey. His tablet, mounted on the dashboard, displayed satellite imagery of the target property alongside demographic data that painted Clearwater as exactly the kind of struggling rural community that would

embrace development without asking too many inconvenient questions.

The GPS guided him east from Main Street onto increasingly rough roads, the BMW's suspension absorbing impacts that would have rattled a lesser vehicle. Through the tinted windows, he studied the landscape with the calculating gaze of someone who saw potential profit margins rather than family histories embedded in every weathered fence post and rusted mailbox.

When he finally reached Spud's property, Keene pulled onto the shoulder and stepped out, his Italian leather shoes immediately sinking into red Oklahoma dirt that clung to the soles like accusation. The contrast between his appearance and his surroundings could not have been more pronounced. His charcoal-gray suit, tailored to accommodate his expanding waistline, cost more than most Clearwater residents spent on clothing in a year. The Rolex on his wrist caught sunlight as he lifted his hand to shield his eyes, scanning the five acres of apparently worthless scrubland that would soon anchor Meridian Development's latest triumph.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered, taking in the collection of rusted vehicles, discarded appliances, and weathered outbuildings that dotted the property like metallic tumbleweeds. "This place looks like a tornado hit a junkyard."

The trailer itself appeared to be held together by duct tape, prayer, and decades of accumulated grime. Paint peeled from its aluminum siding in long strips that fluttered in the constant Oklahoma wind. A small porch sagged under the weight of what looked like random collections of mechanical

parts, broken furniture, and containers whose original purposes had been lost to rust and neglect.

Keene pulled his tablet from the BMW and began documenting the scene, his fingers moving efficiently across the screen as he catalogued evidence of the property's decrepit condition. Each photograph would support Meridian's argument that the current owner clearly lacked the resources to maintain or improve the land. The images would play well with city council members and county commissioners who understood that economic development sometimes required difficult decisions about the greater good.

"Probably doing the old man a favor," Keene told himself, stepping carefully around a puddle that reflected his approaching figure in fractured segments. "Place like this, he's got to be drowning in property taxes and maintenance costs."

Movement near the trailer caught his attention. An elderly man emerged from behind what looked like a defunct washing machine, his movements unsteady and his clothes bearing the accumulated stains of someone who had given up on appearances. The man appeared to be talking to himself, his lips moving in a constant murmur that Keene immediately dismissed as the rambling of someone whose mental faculties had deteriorated with age.

"Mr. Salad?" Keene called out, consulting his tablet to confirm the property owner's name. "Mr. Poe Salad?"

Spud looked up with the confused expression of someone struggling to process unexpected stimuli. His rheumy eyes seemed to take several seconds to focus on the well-dressed stranger standing in his yard, and when recognition failed to

dawn, he shuffled closer with the careful gait of someone navigating unfamiliar territory even on his own land.

"Who's that now?" Spud asked, his voice carrying the tremulous quality of advanced age mixed with genuine bewilderment. "You ain't from around here, are you, son?"

Keene suppressed his irritation at being called 'son' by someone who was clearly dependent on social services and community charity for basic survival. He pulled the legal documents from his briefcase, arranging his features into the expression of professional sympathy he'd perfected over years of similar encounters.

"Mr. Salad, my name is Douglas Keene, and I represent Meridian Development Corporation," he began, speaking slowly and clearly as if addressing someone with hearing difficulties. "I have some important papers to deliver to you, regarding your property here."

Spud's face scrunched into deeper confusion, his eyes darting between Keene's expensive suit and the legal envelope in his hand. "Papers? What kind of papers? I ain't done nothing wrong, have I?"

"No, sir, nothing wrong at all," Keene assured him, extending the envelope with the patience of someone accustomed to dealing with simple-minded elderly people. "These are actually good news for you. My company is interested in purchasing your land, and we're prepared to make you a very generous offer."

As Spud accepted the envelope with trembling hands, Keene continued his practiced speech, his tone carrying the condescending kindness of someone explaining complex

concepts to a child. "You see, Mr. Salad, Meridian Development specializes in transforming underutilized properties into community assets. We're planning to build a beautiful shopping center right here, which would bring jobs and economic opportunity to Clearwater."

Spud fumbled with the envelope's seal, his arthritis-gnarled fingers apparently struggling with the adhesive. "Shopping center? Right here? But this is my home, Mr. Keene. Been living here most of my life."

"I understand that this property has sentimental value," Keene replied, his voice carrying the practiced patience of someone who had delivered similar news hundreds of times before. "But you have to consider the practical realities of your situation. The maintenance costs alone must be overwhelming for someone on a fixed income."

While Spud continued struggling with the envelope, Keene gestured toward the collection of rusted vehicles and discarded appliances that littered the property. "Look around, Mr. Salad. This place requires constant upkeep that frankly seems beyond your current capabilities. Our offer would give you the financial security to relocate somewhere more appropriate for your needs."

Spud finally managed to extract the legal documents, but his eyes seemed to have trouble focusing on the dense text. He held the papers at various distances from his face, squinting and muttering under his breath in what sounded like frustrated attempts to make sense of the legal language.

"I don't understand all these big words," Spud confessed, his voice carrying genuine distress. "What's this here about

'eminent domain' and 'just compensation'? Sounds mighty fancy for an old fool like me."

Keene moved closer, positioning himself to point out specific sections of the document while maintaining his patient, educational tone. "These are standard legal terms, Mr. Salad. Nothing to worry about. Basically, the county has determined that your property would serve the public interest better as commercial development. The compensation package we're offering is actually quite generous, well above current market value for land in this condition."

"But I don't want to sell," Spud protested, his voice rising with what appeared to be mounting panic. "This is my home. My grandmother's buried out back. You can't just make me leave, can you?"

Keene's expression shifted to one of gentle but firm correction, the look of an adult explaining harsh realities to someone who lacked the mental capacity to grasp their situation. "Mr. Salad, I'm afraid it's not quite that simple. You see, when property falls into disrepair and becomes what the law calls a 'public nuisance,' local authorities have the power to intervene for the greater good of the community."

He pointed to specific clauses in the document, his manicured finger moving across legal text that seemed to swim before Spud's apparently failing vision. "This notice gives you thirty days to accept our offer voluntarily. If you choose not to sell, the county will begin condemnation proceedings, which honestly would be much more complicated and stressful for someone in your situation."

Spud's hands began to shake more violently as he stared at the papers, his breathing becoming irregular in a way that suggested overwhelming anxiety. "Thirty days? But where would I go? I don't have nowhere else. This land, it's special, Mr. Keene. You don't understand what you're asking."

"I do understand, and I sympathize," Keene assured him, his tone carrying the professional compassion of someone who had learned to mimic empathy without actually experiencing it. "That's why we've included contact information for several excellent senior living facilities in the area. Places where you'd have professional care, regular meals, and social interaction with people your own age."

As Spud continued to study the documents with apparent incomprehension, Keene expanded on the benefits of his company's generous offer. "The compensation package includes not just the purchase price, but also relocation assistance and a one-time settlement bonus that would cover your moving expenses and help you get established in more suitable accommodations."

"But the land," Spud stammered, his voice breaking with what seemed like overwhelming confusion. "You don't know about the land. There's things here, important things. My grandmother, she told me to take care of it. Made me promise."

Keene's patience began to wear thin, though he maintained his professional demeanor. These conversations always included emotional appeals and sentimental attachments that had to be handled delicately. "Mr. Salad, I understand that this property has personal meaning for you. But we have to be realistic about your situation. The truth is, you're not taking

very good care of this land. Look around - it's become an eyesore that's affecting property values throughout the area."

He gestured broadly at the collection of rusted vehicles and discarded appliances, his expression suggesting genuine puzzlement at how anyone could become emotionally attached to such obvious neglect. "Our development would transform this site into something the entire community could be proud of. A modern shopping center with national retail chains, restaurants, and services that would provide jobs for local residents."

Spud's Cherokee mutterings intensified as he continued staring at the legal documents, his voice rising and falling in rhythms that sounded almost musical to Keene's untrained ear. The old man seemed to be working himself into a state of increasing agitation, his breathing becoming more labored as the reality of his situation apparently began to sink in.

"I know this is overwhelming," Keene continued, his tone shifting to one of practical encouragement. "But you don't have to make any decisions right now. Take some time to think about it. Talk to family members or friends who might help you understand the legal language."

"Don't have no family," Spud mumbled, his eyes still fixed on the papers. "Just me and the land. Just me and what my grandmother left behind."

Keene pulled a business card from his wallet, extending it toward Spud with the gesture of someone offering a lifeline to a drowning person. "Here's my direct contact information. If you have any questions about the offer or need help understanding

any part of the documentation, please don't hesitate to call. We also have social workers on staff who specialize in helping elderly property owners through transitions like this."

Spud accepted the business card with the same trembling hands that held the legal documents, his attention seemingly divided between the printed text and some internal conversation that played out in Cherokee phrases Keene couldn't begin to interpret.

"The important thing to remember," Keene concluded, checking his Rolex and calculating how much time this encounter had consumed, "is that we're here to help you make the best decision for your future. No one wants to see you struggling to maintain a property that's clearly beyond your current capabilities."

As he moved toward his BMW, Keene allowed himself a moment of satisfaction at how smoothly the initial contact had proceeded. The old man was clearly overwhelmed by the legal complexities and lacked the mental acuity to mount any serious resistance to the development plans. With proper handling and perhaps some additional assistance from social services, the acquisition should proceed without significant complications.

"Remember, Mr. Salad," he called back as he opened the vehicle's door, "thirty days to consider our offer. After that, things become much more complicated and stressful. We really do want to make this as easy as possible for you."

Spud didn't respond, his attention completely absorbed by the documents in his hands and whatever internal dialogue

continued to play out in the Cherokee language that marked him as one of Clearwater's more colorful local characters.

Keene settled into the BMW's leather interior and started the engine, already mentally composing the report he would file with Meridian's legal department. Subject appeared to be suffering from mild dementia or other age-related cognitive decline. No evidence of family support or legal representation. Property maintenance clearly beyond subject's capabilities. Anticipated minimal resistance to acquisition proceedings.

As the BMW pulled away from the property, leaving a small cloud of red dust in its wake, Keene felt the satisfaction of someone who had successfully completed the first phase of a routine business transaction. In his experience, elderly property owners who lacked family support and legal sophistication rarely caused significant delays in development schedules.

Behind him, Spud remained motionless in his yard, the legal documents clutched in hands that no longer trembled with confusion but with something far more dangerous. His Cherokee phrases had shifted from apparent rambling to precise ceremonial language, words that carried weight and intention in ways that Douglas Keene's expensive education had never prepared him to recognize.

The land itself seemed to hold its breath, waiting for whatever response would emerge from this confrontation between paper law and deeper obligations that had governed this place since long before Clearwater existed, since before Oklahoma became a state, since before anyone imagined that sacred ground could be bought and sold like any other

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commodity in the endless American pursuit of profit and progress.

About the Author

Clee Smith writes stories.



