

"The harms of the past  
meet the Truth and  
Reconciliation of the  
future."

— Mark David Smith, author  
of *The Weird Sisters*



# SCHOOL statue SHOWDOWN

David Starr

# CHOOSING BETWEEN PRIDE AND the truth can feel impossible. Which will AJ choose?

AJ and his former best friend Jackson are locked in a tense confrontation. AJ's family has been in this town since it was founded. His great-grandfather "Hatchet" Harold Sullivan, whom the high school is named after, served as the town's first mayor.

Jackson's dad is the chief of the neighbouring Big River First Nation. So when Big River demands Harold's name and statue be removed from the high school, tensions run high. When the statue is vandalized by protestors, the final straw breaks and AJ and Jackson throw down, getting them both suspended. Determined to get to the bottom of the accusations, AJ, guided by his grandmother, digs through the past on a mission to bring the truth to light. But what he learns gives him a whole new understanding of his family's legacy and the town's troubling past.

DAVID STARR is a high school principal. David has authored multiple books, including *Golden Goal* and *Golden Game*, both of which were named among the Best Books for Kids and Teens by the Canadian Children's Book Centre. David lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

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DAVID STARR

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For Ronald Hatch  
and for the nephews



# MONDAY

Alex Sullivan Junior, or AJ, as everyone in the town of Big River knew him, was in a great mood. School was over for the day, the late-March sun was warm overhead, the snow was almost gone, and baseball was starting in a month. To get ready for the season, AJ, Jackson Thomas, and Steve Pearson were throwing a ball on the school's field, even though some small piles of dirty snow remained.

“Great toss, Jackson,” said AJ. Jackson played first base. He almost never missed a pass and had the strongest arm on the team. AJ was the catcher, and the two of them had combined to get a lot of outs last season.

“Not bad,” Steve added. Steve played left field. He wasn't the greatest baseball player — hockey was his game — but he played because AJ, his oldest friend, did. All three boys were on the local baseball team, the Big River Foresters.

They wore red and blue with a pair of crossed hatchets as the logo. The meaning of the hatchets was obvious, and though nobody was quite certain how red and blue had become Big River colours, Mr. Corbett, the school's Social Studies teacher, said they were chosen because that was what was on the Canadian flag before the Maple Leaf was chosen. But whatever the reason, AJ and the rest of the kids who played sports in town wore them proudly.

"Want to practice again tomorrow after school?" AJ asked later when they were leaving the field.

"Works for me," said Steve.

"I can't," Jackson said. "Dad let me take the truck today, but I have to ride the bus tomorrow. Besides, there's some stuff going on back home."

AJ and Steve lived in town, but Jackson lived on the Big River First Nation, about half an hour north. The bus left not long after classes ended, so Big River kids who had to take the bus couldn't stay for after-school activities unless they got their own ride home.

"Stuff? Are you okay?" asked AJ. He'd known Jackson for years. He seemed a little distant.

"It's all good," Jackson said. "Don't worry about it."

"If you say so," AJ said, though he could tell something was up with Jackson. His friend looked downright uncomfortable.

On his way to the parking lot, AJ patted the shoulder of the statue that stood by the front doors of the school, just as he did every day. The statue was of Harold Sullivan, the school's namesake — and AJ's great-grandfather. It was a life-size wooden copy of the photo that hung on the wall of AJ's

living room. In that picture Harold Sullivan stood proudly, a smile on his face, a logger's hatchet in his hand.

*Harold Sullivan Secondary School.* How many kids could attend a school named after their relative? And then there was the statue. No matter how many times he saw the statue, AJ always found it a little weird just how much he looked like his great-grandfather. It was almost as if AJ was looking at an older, wooden version of himself. On the base of the statue was the dedication to Harold. *In Honour of Harold Sullivan, January 16, 1885–June 25, 1973. Hard Work, Integrity, Family, Community.* Those five words described Harold and had become the family motto. AJ had known those words all his life.

'*Hatchet*' Harold Sullivan was a legend in Big River, after all. The most successful Sullivan in a line going back 150 years, back to the time when the town was nothing more than a fur trading post in the middle of the wilderness. Big River had grown a lot since those early days, thanks in large part to his great-grandfather. Harold was a war hero, serving his country in both the First and the Second World Wars. He was a businessman, a politician, and a benefactor. It was said that Harold built the modern town of Big River almost by himself, carving it out of the wilderness tree by tree with his trademark axe.

AJ was proud to be a Sullivan, especially these days. On the fiftieth anniversary of Harold's death, Alex Sullivan Senior, AJ's dad and the owner of Sullivan Sawmills, the biggest company in town, had announced that the mill would be funding a new twenty-thousand-dollar scholarship in honour of Harold, to be given each year to the student who best

exemplified the characteristics Harold stood for. It was the largest scholarship in the history of the school.

AJ hopped into his pickup, fired up the engine, and drove out of the parking lot toward home. The Ford half-ton wasn't new, not by a longshot, but AJ was proud of it. He'd paid for the truck himself. He'd saved for a year to buy it, working weekend and holiday shifts at the family mill. AJ's dad had offered to loan him the money for the truck, but AJ wanted to buy it himself. The Sullivans were hard-working, independent people, and AJ wasn't about to take a handout, even from his own father.

Big River may have grown up over the years, but it was still a small town. Barely five thousand people called it home, but AJ couldn't imagine living anywhere else. After all, he could get almost everything he needed here. There were stores, a baseball diamond, a hockey rink, a curling club, and even a small movie theatre. If there was something AJ or his family wanted that Big River couldn't provide, then it was only a couple hours' drive south to the city.

The city. Why would anyone want to live down there? Too many people, too much noise, too many lights. The city was fine if they needed to buy equipment for the mill or go and watch a professional hockey game, but that was about it.

*Who on earth would trade this for concrete and traffic jams and tiny apartments?* thought AJ.

Big River might be small, and the winters might be long, but the town had been perfect for the seven generations of Sullivans who had come before him, and it was perfect for AJ as well.

As AJ drove, he looked over to the river that had lent the town its name. The water ran high with the spring melt, churning white and green. On the banks, the cottonwood and birch trees were budding. Overhead the sky was a bright blue, and the cool spring air was fresh and clean.

AJ quickly left the town behind him, travelling north toward home. The pavement would end in another ten kilometres, stopping at Sullivan Sawmills, but the road carried on another thirty kilometres to the Big River First Nation. AJ slowed down and turned onto a long gravel driveway, through an open gate, and toward the Home Ranch.

His family had lived at the Home Ranch for nearly one hundred years, in a large log house on a benched slope overlooking the Big River and its valley. The Home Ranch was only a half section, 130 hectares of land, and not large at all compared to some of the other ranches in the area, but it was beautiful. And it wasn't as if the place was a working ranch anymore. AJ's father was too busy running the mill and the other family businesses to ranch, and a couple of horses and a few dozen head of cattle were enough for his mom, Linda, to look after.

AJ's mom had grown up on a ranch south of town, a massive two sections of land with three hundred head of cattle, and she'd taught her son everything she knew about ranching. Thanks to her, AJ could talk about steers and growing hay and wrangling horses with a knowledge appreciated by the most experienced ranchers in Big River, and because of the mill and his dad, he knew about logging and milling as well.

When AJ pulled up to the house, he was surprised to see his dad's pickup parked next to his mom's SUV. It was only

four-thirty. His dad usually stayed at the mill until five, making sure that everything was good to go for the second shift to start work.

“I’m home. Is everything okay?” asked AJ when he kicked off his boots and walked into the kitchen.

His parents were sitting at their large pine table. His father had his iPad in his hands. He was reading the website of the town’s newspaper, the *Big River Gazette*, and AJ could see that his dad was furious. His father wore his emotions on his sleeve at the best of times.

“No, son, it isn’t,” said his dad. “I don’t suppose you read the paper today?”

“You’re kidding, right?” said AJ. He rarely read the local paper, in print or online. It was little more than ads for businesses, small-town gossip, and local interest stories.

His dad passed AJ the tablet. “You need to read it today. Look at this.”

*“Big River First Nation demand name change of Big River High School.”*

“Is this a joke?” AJ asked after he read the bold letters of the headline.

“No joke. Keep reading. Aloud.”

“Big River First Nations have made public their demand that the Big River School district rename Harold Sullivan High School and remove the statue from the grounds. When asked why, Big River First Nation Chief Robert Thomas claimed that the ‘recent announcement by the Sullivan family to name their new scholarship after Harold Sullivan shows that the community in general and the Sullivan family in particular, do not understand Sullivan’s racist past. In an

age of reconciliation, it's well past time this town recognized the role that Harold Sullivan played in the injustice directed against our ancestors.”

“What is he talking about?” AJ asked. “Racist? Injustice? What do they have against Great-Grandpa Harold?”

“Keep reading,” his dad said. “It's not just Harold they're attacking.”

AJ continued. “Sullivan discriminated against First Nations people. He profited from stolen reservation land and was actively involved in sending Big River First Nation children to the Sturgeon Lake Residential School, many of whom did not return to their local reserve. Big River First Nation feels that now is the time for our people to take this stand. After all, Sullivan, along with other so-called town fathers like Robert Pearson, was a driving force in sending our children to residential school. As mayor, he drafted racist and exclusionary policies against our people. Not only that, but he was also personally responsible for the destruction of the Freedom Camp, one of the darkest chapters in the history of Big River First Nation. Fifty years after Sullivan's passing, these are the things that need to be remembered and acknowledged and we will do so by presenting this petition to the chair of the school board at next Monday's School Board Meeting.”

“It's garbage,” AJ's dad said. “My grandfather may have died when I was a baby, but I grew up knowing everything about him, and I can tell you one hundred percent that this is not true. Harold built this town, and he was a good man, a family man. Can you believe the nerve of these people? Two weeks before we commemorate the life of the most important figure in this town's history, and Robert pulls this crap?”

“I know, Alex,” began AJ’s mom in a soothing voice. “I think the name of the school and the statue should stay, and I disagree with what Robert said about the family. It’s not right to disrupt the celebration and appear ungrateful about the scholarship, but Harold was known to hold certain views. Don’t forget that people from the Big River First Nation weren’t exactly welcome in town and that their kids weren’t even allowed to attend the school until after Harold died.”

“Everyone held certain views back then,” AJ’s dad snapped. “That was how things were in his time. I’m not denying that, but it was the government that made those kids go to residential school, not my grandfather. Robert is practically saying Harold killed those kids himself and now it’s our fault! Harold stood for hard work, integrity, family, and community. All of us Sullivans do, and there’s no way I’m going to let Robert trash our name.”

“What was the Freedom Camp?” AJ asked. He’d heard the family motto a thousand times but had never heard of Freedom Camp.

“When Harold was first elected mayor not long after the war ended, he had some houses that a few Native war veterans built on the outskirts of town burned down,” his mom explained. “They called it Freedom Camp. I haven’t heard that name since I was a little girl. I’d almost forgotten about it.”

“Freedom Camp,” scoffed his dad. “What a joke. They were a handful of squatter houses built on town land without permits. They were a fire hazard, and Harold was only upholding the law. That was his job. He was the mayor and

was elected to do just that. Besides, it's ancient history now and has nothing to do with us."

"Jackson's dad, of all people," said AJ, getting as worked up as his father. AJ felt as if his friend and his family had just slapped him across the face. Right after they'd spent an hour playing catch together.

Stuff going on back home, Jackson had said. *This sort of stuff*, AJ guessed. Jackson had to have known all about the petition but hadn't said a thing. No wonder he seemed nervous.

Then his dad's phone rang. "Hey, Buck," he said. AJ knew who was calling. Buck Pearson, Steve's dad, was one of his dad's oldest friends. Buck Pearson was a big fourth-generation logging contractor in town — and Robert Pearson's grandson. The Pearsons had been in Big River almost as long as the Sullivans. "Yeah, I'm reading it right now. Unbelievable, right? You bet we're gonna be doing something about this." They talked for a few more seconds, then AJ's father hung up.

"Robert Thomas seems to have forgotten that his logging company gets most of his business from me," he said. "Though not for long. He's not going to make one more dollar from the Sullivans, and I'll make certain that nobody else hires him either. That's the price he's going to pay for disrespecting our family. This is just the beginning, son, you mark my words. If Robert Thomas wants a fight, he's going to get one."