

Every Day's A Parade  
by Bill Judge  
(under construction)

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After pulling off to the side of the road, Case Cavanaugh peered down on Laura O'Connell's ranch using a detached duplex crosshair reticle Leupold 4.5–14×50 Mark 4 scope that would be mounted on a fifty caliber Barrett M107 sniper rifle. He steadied his hands on the roof of his car as he stood outside the driver side door. He trolled the back of Laura's oversized garage, what she called her hangar, and the back of her house. He studied her white F150 Ford truck as it was parked next to the hangar, on the opposite side from the horse corral. She could have been in the hangar but was not. He had checked thoroughly for any sign of activity through the windows and the open door between the hangar and corral. No sound and nothing stirred.

The smaller storage sheds and chicken coop were way off to the right. The chickens were outside the coop and surrounded by a sturdy wire fence that stood six feet tall and formed the protection against roving coyotes. Long poles extended from the coop to the fencing and a lighter gauge fence lay on top to protect the chickens from a sudden swoop by eagles, hawks or owls. Since the coop was open, and he saw no movement, he figured Laura was not in that building. He switched to the late model black Ford Explorer that was parked on her dirt and gravel drive and was perpendicular to the F150, but nudged just in front so no one could jump in the truck and launch forward.

Exhaling with a silent whistle, he realized that he had arrived too late. Based on the presence of the Explorer, they were already at her place, probably inside. He would have heard Laura scream if they held her in the hangar. He had no idea how many were there. He did know that if he had driven onto her property, they would have heard his tires crunch on the gravel, and would have killed her instantly. He had no doubt about that. And then they would have been prepared to kill him.

He also wasn't sure she was still alive so he kept his distance. Almost two miles distant to be more precise. He needed to get closer to at least twelve hundred yards. Dressed in sandy cammies and a floppy desert hat, he outfitted his rifle with the scope and added a full magazine. He added two magazines to the oversized pockets in his sand colored jacket. He patted his holster and pistol strapped on one side and his assault knife on the other. Leaving his rental car behind, he carried the thirty pound rifle and attached mount and carefully stepped down the hill off the road and then climbed up another, though at a lesser height. He descended and re-ascended four more times. Each time, the subsequent hill was a little lower than the last. He stayed very low to the ground and kept her back door in sight. Cavanaugh realized the horse corral was going to be in play at some point as he closed the distance between himself and the back door. Rosie, Laura's horse, was next to the hangar with her head in a grain bucket. Her lack of concern also told him that Laura was in the house. He stayed wide to the right. The corral fence would provide some visual cover for him, such that, if someone did step out of the back door, they would have to look through the fence or just over it, to see him. He didn't intend to be seen. Thirty five hundred meters closed to thirty to twenty five to twenty to fifteen hundred to a thousand. If he had to shoot from that distance, it was no longer a trick shot but a sure shot. The land between him and the house was as flat as a griddle and the afternoon sun made it just as hot. West Texas summers were brutal. Dusty, wide open and with no water to boil, the land took it out on the living. The few scorpions that he saw were perfectly adapted to the arid landscape. They required almost no water and they kept themselves hidden underneath the only guaranteed cover in the rough terrain, the rock crops. Lying behind a small rise in the almost flat ground, he set his rifle up on the little mound and pulled back the bolt. The cartridge in the magazine slid into its locked position, ready to fire. All he had to do was wait.

Prone, with his legs spread slightly apart, feet angled, right hand and index finger on the trigger, left hand under the stock, and a light grey colored handkerchief stuck out of the sleeve of his right hand, Cavanaugh ignored the heat and the dust that whipped up with an easy blowing breeze. He tested the swivel mount by sighting different targets in the yard – a corral post, a mirror on the F150, the center of a hubcap on the Explorer, the handle on Laura's screen door near the center at the back of her white washed wooden house. He didn't know for sure if anyone would come out of the back. But chances were better than ninety ten since the SUV was there.

Sweat formed and dripped down his temples, the bridge of his nose, and beaded on his eyebrows. Gnats, flies, and locusts buzzed his hands, ears, and neck off and on as the minutes ticked. He lightly licked his upper lip and tasted the all too familiar salt. He had learned to ignore the small distractions during his missions with the Rangers. He watched Rosie swish her tail and flick her ears in the corner of the corral nearest the hangar.

Given the unpleasant grit, he thought once more about his plan to just lie in the burning sand and wait. He could have tried to cross the terrain and get behind the hangar but had ruled it out. It was broad daylight, the land was flat for over a thousand yards between the base of the hills and the hangar and it was too far to crawl without spending hours barely creeping. Besides, scientific studies showed that males could detect movement much easier than distinguishing between very similar colors. His cammies provided the cover he needed in the sand.

Also, deduction and probability influenced his decision to attack as a sniper. He was sure there were no more than three men who came in the Explorer and most probably just two. Although he was on their hit list, he knew the Picardes family knew he left the ranch with the FBI. So exactly how many men were needed to kill a woman alone on a very isolated ranch? One, if Picardes had absolute faith in the one. If the one failed, they wouldn't likely get another easy chance. Two, if Picardes was rational. Two men could be counted on to kill a single woman stranded in the middle of nowhere. Two men would also counter balance each other. Act as a break on stupidity and rashness. But, three was the better number if rage ruled Picardes. And that was the unknown factor. Was Picardes rational after his son was killed? Was he patient, was he careful? No doubt, revenge was a reason to kill Laura and then him, but not the only reason. Projecting strength was another reason to kill them. If Picardes didn't avenge his son, then he could be viewed as weak. And a bleeding shark was food for other hungrier sharks. So he could have sent three.

While he waited for the back door to open, he thought about the sequence of killing. Why would they kill Laura and then him? Wasn't it just as likely that they were looking for him too? But, where would they look? No one knew where he lived. No one, not even the FBI, Army Intelligence, or the CIA knew all of his places. They knew the ones that he let them think they knew but he still had other hideaways.

Picardes could send other men to the places that were known only by the government and that made Cavanaugh smile – known only by the government. Once the government knew, it was safe to say, any one could know. Government employees were not immune to bribes or blackmail or big mouths.

He laid the center of the reticle crosshair scope on the gap between the screen door and the outside door jamb. About head high if Laura came out and chest high if a normal size man stepped out. He fidgeted ever so gently with the scope. He didn't want to miss if he took the shot. Though, he admitted to himself, it would be hard to miss a man from just over a thousand yards using the gear he had. What he really worried about was getting the second man before they got her.

One of the beads of sweat trickled over his brow and into his left eye, while his right eye was trained on the crack. He felt the slight tickle of another drop above his right eye. He had to wipe at it. If he let the perspiration burn his eyes, he might miss.

Keeping his right hand positioned for the trigger, he used his left hand and pulled the handkerchief out. A quick swab across his eyes, across his brow and across his forehead was all he needed. Less than three seconds, most likely two. Three quick, complete movements, like a clock. One swipe, two swipes. The

back door pushed out. Three. And Laura stepped forward. He carried the hankie in his left hand as he steadied the stock.

He took in as much as he could while positioning his hands. Laura was dressed in a white ribbed tank top t-shirt and flannel bottoms. Looked like her bed clothes. No shoes. Her hair was messy and sweaty and she had fresh blood that dripped and pooled at the corner of her mouth. He dropped his right finger and scoped her face. She had been beaten, not badly, but man handled for sure. He looked at her mouth again. He had kissed those lips, not a long deep kiss but a good kiss, and a filthy bastard beat her. Perhaps they wanted to know if she knew where he was. His eye squinted. He really didn't care why they did it. They did it and they'd pay for it. For the first time in all of his kill shots, his heart pumped with a sickening slush, like thick, gummy motor oil. He felt so sorry for her. He should have made it sooner though he couldn't think how. He should have anticipated they would come but he wouldn't have known when. He told himself to quit thinking and he took a breath.

The door pushed open wider and a man followed her. Again, his eyes swallowed everything he could see. A dark, curly haired, black eyed, unshaven, tanned man. Sunglasses. Wearing a dark blue sport coat that was soiled under the arms. He was about five eleven, medium build, no fat. And he wore a black t-shirt with some kind of red design that was obscured by the coat and Laura. Loose blue jeans, enough room to carry a couple of guns.

The man pushed out through the door and shoved Laura so hard she fell face first into the dirt without being able to block herself. She spit out a mouthful of bloody mud. Fully exposed, the dark man took a step towards her. That's it, you bastard, Cavanaugh thought. He sighted the scope smack in the center of his chest and eased the trigger.

Kerrrr-ploww-wow-wow-wah!! The man fell backward into the door which slammed against the house and he tumbled, or somehow stumbled, away from the door. The gunshot rang out, and echoed, over the plains. A large semi-circular poof of dust rose up around Cavanaugh. At the same time Laura sprang up, her face lit with fear, and she dashed towards the hangar. Good girl, he thought.

The back door swung open again. Another rough looking man in a baseball cap, flowing black shirt, blue jeans and leather loafers, rushed through the door. He raised what looked to Cavanaugh to be a Smith and Wesson 29, and aimed at the hangar. Laura. Cavanaugh had to rush the second shot. He had been caught off-guard because he had watched her and not the door. And because the man had run into the yard. Cavanaugh reset the bolt, swung the rifle to the left by less than an inch and lowered it by even less than that. His finger slowly choked the rifle trigger like a boa wrapped around pig. He wouldn't hold back. Another boom spread across the desert but this time he missed the center of the man and blew off the arm that held the gun. The man cried out in shock and agony while blood spurted from the stump. Cavanaugh pulled the bolt and shot again, putting the man out of his misery.

Cavanaugh lay in the dust and watched the house. That was two. He wondered if there was a third. He couldn't tell but he did notice that Laura had not come out of the hangar, which might have meant she knew there was a third man.

Five more minutes passed and nothing happened. Rosie had either let herself into the stable or Laura had let her in. Another five minutes and Cavanaugh decided to make a dash to the hangar.

He had run no further than a couple of hundred yards when a third man burst through the back door and shot wildly at him which was crazy. A pistol shot from five hundred yards, on the run? Cavanaugh ignored him and kept running towards Laura. It took a while for the man to quit shooting. Then he also ran for the oversized garage. Cavanaugh reached the back door just as the man passed through the wide open overhead door. The man shot at Cavanaugh and then shot at a tool locker against the wall.

Cavanaugh guessed that was where Laura had hidden herself. The man ducked behind a work bench that was set out on the floor. Cavanaugh took a shot, knowing he wouldn't hit the man but the shot would keep the man down. He slammed into the work bench and knocked the man over. Scurrying around the bench, Cavanaugh lifted his pistol into position. The man lifted his arm over the bench and

shot again, way over Cavanaugh's shoulder, missing everything but the broad hangar wall. Cavanaugh stepped to the left and emptied three shots into the man and watched the dead body bounced with each shot.

Cavanaugh hustled to the tool shed and yanked open the door. Laura stared into his face, shocked, tears running down her cheeks.

"Laura," he said.

Fear must have gripped her. She gritted her teeth and swung at him with all of her might hitting in the shoulder. "Where the hell were you?" she yelled.

"Laura?"

"Why didn't you come?"

"Laura."

She smacked his chest with both of her hands wide open. "They kept asking. I kept hoping." She pounded with the base of her palms against his chest muscles. She sobbed, draped her hands over his broad shoulders and then settled her head against him. "Where were you?"

"Laura, it's okay," he whispered. "I'm here."

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"Are there any more?" Cavanaugh asked. He felt her shiver so he wrapped his arms around her.

"No," she answered with her head against his heart. "What did they want?"

"You tell me."

"They kept asking where you were. "

"Before that."

"Before what?" She furrowed her brow and stepped away a quarter step. They were still close enough to breathe each other's breath.

"What did they say before they asked about me?"

"What do you mean? Like, quit screaming, you whore?"

Cavanaugh's face dropped and he leaned back against the workbench. "I didn't mean that. Before that. Start from the beginning. I'm trying to piece some things together."

"The beginning, with the men?"

"Yes."

"I guess I was in the bathroom and just finished a shower after my morning chores – chickens, Rosie, laundry, brushing my hair out, planning my next set of chores."

Cavanaugh took a deep breath through his nose and blew it out the same way.

"Right. I'll get to the point," she said. "Anyway, I heard some men in the hall. They didn't even try to be quiet. Lots of cussing under their breath. I was just dressed in a towel."

One of her hands turned and opened with her thumb out with a 'what do you do when you're caught naked' movement. "I don't know if you get the picture."

"I do," he said, knowing she knew he did.

She continued, "I pulled my night clothes off the hooks on the door and put them on." She stopped and started again. "I thought about locking the door but I knew that wouldn't hold anybody back. And maybe they wouldn't check or, at least, maybe they wouldn't find me."

"So you knew you were in danger?"

She laughed. "I'm standing there naked and there are strange men I don't know in my house. Of course I thought I was in danger."

He shrugged. "And then?"

"And then, I guess they checked my room because I heard them say, 'The bitch isn't here'. That was me. And then they checked the other bedroom and I guess the bitch wasn't there either."

Cavanaugh snorted.

She glanced at him with a sly smile and said, "I stood in the corner behind the door, hoping they would skip the bathroom. One of them did open the door and he looked in, but he didn't step in."

"Brilliant. He would have been a great detective."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," she said, and then she poked him. "No, that isn't what I thought. I thought, thank God, maybe I'll be safe. Maybe they'll leave." She pressed her lips together. "I guess a couple of them checked my front room because I heard, 'where'd she go?' And then, just my luck, the other guy pushed the bathroom door wide open until it hit me. And that's when he found me."

"What then?"

"He shoved me into the hall and I banged my head against the wall and started screaming."

"And that's when they called you a whore."

"No, that's when he," she nodded towards the body on the floor, "smacked me in the mouth."

Cavanaugh reached up to touch her chin and she let him, but then she turned away. "No worry, Rosie bumps me harder than that."

He dropped his hand.

"They tied me to a kitchen chair and stuffed a rag in my mouth. And slapped me around a little. And asked me where you were."

"With a rag in your mouth," he stated.

"Yeah, I guess they wanted to scare me, at first. Loosen me up. Which they didn't have to do by the way, I was loose enough. But they yelled at me, pulled a long ass knife out and waved it under my eyes, and then sliced the dull side across my throat."

"Long ass knife. With the rag in your mouth."

"Maybe they got tired of me screaming and thought a knife would help my memory. Maybe they figured they didn't want to hear me lie and just wanted to hear the truth."

He nodded. "What time was that?"

"I don't know, why? Maybe noon, maybe one."

"I'm just thinking," he said. "So they worked on you for at least another hour."

"Well, not really."

"What do you mean?"

"They didn't work all that hard. One of them got frustrated – Tom Selleck over there." She pointed to the first man, with the sunglasses, that Cavanaugh had shot first. "He smacked me against the side of my head and I guess he knocked me out."

"You guess?"

"Yeah, I guess," she said with a tense crack in her voice. "I don't know how conscious you are when you are knocked out but I wasn't taking notes." She settled back in a normal tone. "I woke up and they were throwing water on my face. I gave them quite a show."

"What do you mean?"

"My wet shirt. No bra."

"Oh. It's not wet now."

"You're a great detective, you know." She bumped him. "It's also hot enough to fry an egg. I dried out."

He nodded. "Did they say why they were here? Did they mention Picardes or Roger?"

"Yeah, they did. They said Picardes wouldn't be happy with just the girl. They kept asking about you."

"I wonder why they thought I would be here. Your local papers didn't mention me though they did write about you." He thought for a moment. "Anything else?"

"They wanted the damn phone."

"What damn phone?"

"Mine I guess."

"Why would they want your phone?"

"I don't know."

"Did you give it to them?"

"No. I told them it was out in the hangar."

"So that's why you were outside?"

"Yes."

"You were going to give it to him?"

"Why not? I was going to take my time trying to find it and try to figure a way out but I would have given it to him."

"Anything else?"

"No. Except they wanted you pretty bad. Picardes wants you. They said they would kill me unless I told them where you were. That's when he shoved me into the yard."

"They would have killed you as soon as you told them."

She nodded her head in agreement. "But I didn't know. Although you said you'd be back."

"You told them that?"

"Yeah, I wanted to buy a few breaths."

"But you didn't know when I'd be back."

"No, I didn't. And whose fault is that?"

"Oh, hold on, don't blame me. I didn't know myself. They had things for me to do."

"Who?"

"The government."

"Pretty vague. The government. Just like your promise to come back."

"But I did."

She slapped at him with a lazy swing. "Now you did."

He caught her hand and pulled her closer. "I came as soon as I heard."

"How could you know I would need you now?" She paused and her face crinkled when her thoughts caught up with her ears. "Heard what?"

"Heard that Picardes put a contract on us."

"He did? When? Why didn't you call?"

"You never gave me your number."

"And the CIA can't find my number?"

"The FBI."

"What?"

"I worked for the FBI."

"You know what I mean."

"And what would I have said?"

"Somebody wants to kill you. Me. And given me a chance."

"And you would have done what?"

"I don't know. Run, maybe."

"Where? And who would you have run from? You wouldn't know them. You wouldn't know what they would look like. You know them now because you saw them. But you wouldn't know them if I called you and you ran. They could be anybody. They would always be after you. You couldn't run far enough or fast enough or be gone long enough and that's why I had to come."

"Because you knew what they looked like."

"No, because I knew they would come."

"How long have you known?"

"Known what?"

"That they wanted to kill me. Us. How many days have you known?"

"Days? I just found out this morning."

"When?"

"About six this morning."

"Oh."

"Pacific time," he added for emphasis.

"Oh."

He could see her do the math.

Her eyes blinked and with her one hand still holding his, she reached up with her other, pulled him close and hugged him again. "What took you so long?"

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Cavanaugh lifted Laura's buried face from his chest with a light touch and kissed her once, gently, then he pressed his lips hard against hers. A little electric twinge shot up through his core. He squeezed her and she ran her hands up his shoulders and pulled him to her and they kissed again. Dropping his hands to her lower back, he pushed her in closer and they both sighed and kissed again.

Rosie neighed and broke their passion. "Hmmm," Laura said as she stepped back and smoothed her hair. While Cavanaugh held on to her hand, she asked, "What do we do now?"

"Now that the only chaperone with a tail and mane interrupted us?" He pulled a little on her arm.

"Not now," she said. "We've got dead bodies to worry about. What do we do?"

"You think I'm in the dead body business?"

"Aren't you?" She asked as the side of her mouth curled into a hint of a smile. "Isn't that what you do?"

"Only on week days," he replied. He dropped her hand. "I'm not sure what to do. When I need a body bag, I'm either already with the cops or on a black ops assignment. In the first case, they handle it. In the second case, I can't answer."

"But you do know about dead bodies?"

"Of course, I do," he couldn't help a little snicker. "I watch Bones and House reruns like everybody else."

"Grey's Anatomy, goofball, is much better," she said and swung way too easily at him to hit him. "So, back to my question. What do we do?"

"Well, we need to do something with the bodies."

"Thank you, General Reality." She gave a fake salute.

"Aww," he started to say something and stopped. "Give me a second." He scratched the back of his neck.

"We could alert the local police. We should alert them." He shifted his weight. "And call the FBI since this is related to the Picardes case. Or, it sure looks that way." He leaned against the work bench. "But if we do that, we'll be here the rest of the day, answering questions. Maybe taken downtown, wherever that is, and questioned."

"Jim and the local boys won't take us downtown. There isn't a downtown out here. They'll call in the county or state. And we'll have to go there."

"That'll take time. Time we don't have."

"At least today and tomorrow."

"Maybe the FBI can take over the case and spare us some of that."

"Assuming they can tie the bodies to Picardes. They won't have any proof, other than my word."

"Assuming it's Picardes," he agreed.

"Is there an echo in here, Rosie?" She looked over at the stable.

"We can't stay here."

She turned to him.

He resumed, "Picardes will send more people and they'll be smarter and better armed than these guys. They'll be more prepared, too."

"We can't run either, can we? I mean, I've got Rosie here. And the house. And the damn chickens to worry about."

"We'll take Rosie, you can shut up the house and we'll let the chickens loose."

"We can't do that. That would be just plain murder."

"Murder? We're not going to kill anybody. At least not yet."

"No. I mean the chickens let loose for all of the coyotes and the hawks. They'll be dead before the day is done. And if not then, by day break."

"We can't take the chickens with us."

She laughed. "No, not even the Jed Clampetts took their chickens to Beverly Hills."

"What'll we do?"

"Now you're asking me? I'll take care of the chickens. You take care of the dead bodies."

"The dead bodies are done. We'll leave them."

"Leave them?"

"Yeah, leave them. We'll call them in after we've left. But we can't leave until we get rid of the chickens. Or so the story goes." He blew a breath through his mouth. "I've never been held down by chickens. Sniper fire, yes. Chickens, no."

"Whoa there, Nellie. I'll call the Russell kids and give them the chickens. All they need to do is come and get them."

"The Russell kids?"

"Yeah, a family that lives about ten miles that way," Laura pointed south.

"It's a plan. We'll hitch your horse trailer to your truck. We head to Odessa, drop off my rental. Head north until we get there."

"Get there? Where?"

"I don't know."

"Let me get this straight. This is called a plan? We go north?"

"Better that we don't discuss it."

"Are you some kind of caveman? Better we don't discuss it? Why? If we don't know, they won't know?"

"Something like that. If we don't know, how could they know?"

"Well, maybe it would be better if you and I knew but we just didn't tell them. That would be a better plan."

"Are you always like this?"

"You mean sensible?"

"Oh, forget it, we'll talk about it on the way."

"Now, that's a plan. Not a good one, but a plan."

Cavanaugh hitched Laura's one horse trailer to the back of her truck. He loaded his rifle and field gear behind the driver seat while Laura led Rosie out of the stable.

"Here, hold her while I pack my bags. Won't take a minute."

"Right. I'll believe it when I see it," he said as he tied off Rosie and walked to the chickens. Shooshing them and waving his arms, he managed to get them all into the coop and he closed up. He turned and saw Laura standing next to the truck with a smug smile.

"I told you. As Gretchen says, I ain't no high class broad."

"I'm impressed."

"You should be." She held a lined leather half hip jacket. "I'm guessing, if we're heading north, we'll go through some mountains."

"I reckon."

"I packed my boots, too."

"We're not going to the Himalayas, Hillary."

"I would know that wouldn't I, if we talked about the plan."

"You don't let up, do you?"

"Not hardly."

“You drive. Drop me off at my truck – up there.” He pointed up north, behind the hangar. “I’ve got the rest of my stuff there. I’ll pack in the back, here,” he slapped the back of the pickup, “and drive up to Odessa. We can leave the rental, get some money, and get out of Dodge.”

“That almost sounded like a plan,” she said, as she climbed up into her truck, switched on the ignition, buckled up and closed the door. “Get in, slowpoke.”

He climbed in without a comeback. It would be a long ride.

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With the tires crunching on the gravel and rock, Laura pulled out onto the county road. Both the driver and passenger looked one way and then the other, automatically, in unison.

“No need to do that, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Keep check on my driving. I’ve been driving all by myself for a lot of years.” She turned the wheel and gassed it on to the tarred surface. “Besides, there won’t be another car or truck on this road all day.” Cavanaugh chuckled, “If you say so. I heard that there’s a beauty queen out here somewhere. She might get a lot of traffic.”

She swatted him with the back of her hand. “How far to your truck,” she asked.

“Just around the bend, up there, beyond the rocks.” He pointed to a jutting of rock from the hills on the right.

With the Tundra on the shoulder, she pulled up behind and left the motor running.

“I’ll just get my things. Throw them in the back and we can get going.” He hopped out and closed the door to her truck. He carried his sniper rifle on his back and grabbed the rest of his gear from the back seat.

Running her fingers through her hair, she watched him from his back as he set the rifle down, pulled gear from his truck bed and turned back to her truck to toss them in. He cleared out the bags and then packed the Barrett M107 into its case. Lots of bending and stooping, she noticed.

He stowed the gun case in the back of her truck and then walked to the passenger side of his pickup. Fully expecting him to pull open the door and get whatever else remained, she watched with sudden interest as he stopped and then squatted and stared into the dirt. He flicked something with his finger and then seemed to pick up a couple of items and put them in his shirt pocket. Walking around to the front of his truck, he took a deep breath. She saw his chest heave and his hands settle on his hips as his head tilted to one side. He bent down and she lost sight of him as he ducked below the windshield level. A few seconds later, he stood back up, slipped something into his back pocket, dusted himself off and crossed the road, all the while looking at the pavement with a quick, cautionary glance up as if checking for non-existent traffic. He stopped on the other side and looked out over to her place, far in the distance. His grim face broke into a little smile. Her own forehead crimped as she obviously wondered what he was doing.

He clambered down the first hill and picked up a can. Climbing back, he shook it up and down and a gooey black liquid dripped out.

She got out of the truck as he headed back to her.

“What’s that all about?” She asked.

“Somebody’s been here.”

“How do you know?”

“Here’s my oil filter.” He held up the canister.

“I’m not following,” she said.

He walked around his truck and pointed at the ground. She followed.

“Hey, stay back there,” he shoed her away from the front and then pointed to the dirt. “Here are the footprints. Size elevens. Dress shoes. Maybe Oxfords. Maybe wingtips. Definitely not trail boots.” He

reached into his shirt pocket and showed her a cigarette butt and a little opened foil packet. "Smoked a cigarette while chewing on Nicorette. Hyper dude." He turned, squatted and pointed to his right. "Here's where he crawled under the truck to get my filter."

"You can't remove an oil filter by hand." She paused. "Unless they were put on by hand, but a rental place would have their own shop do it the right way."

"Oh, the filter was on tight. They took it off with this." He pulled a tool from his back pocket. "My own pair of channel locks."

Her eyes squinted in disbelief.

"I brought a small set of tools with me. The rest are in a little case in the back of your truck."

"Resourceful bugger. But why would they go to all this trouble?"

"Somebody didn't want me to leave. So much so that they climbed under my truck and unscrewed my oil filter."

"Why not just cut your gas line or puncture your tires?"

"I think they thought of that. But this had more of a touch. A little pizzazz and a message."

"What was?"

"This oil filter."

"Are you always like this? It's like pulling teeth from a grasshopper."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not telling me anything unless I ask the right questions. Why is an oil filter 'more of a touch.'"

Her voice raised a quarter pitch.

"They, or he, or she, used it to shoot at me." He stopped and held it up.

"See what I mean." She laughed as she said, "You can't shoot an oil filter at somebody."

"Oh but you can. You can use it when you shoot. It's a homemade silencer. Just screw it onto your gun and fire away." He made the motions as if fitting the filter onto a gun and then he pointed at the hole at the cap. "The bullet," he said, "or rather, bullets are then shot through the canister and come out here."

"They, or he, or she, shot at you from up here? We didn't hear it."

"No, we didn't and I won't say it's because there was a silencer so we wouldn't hear it, even though that's really why." A smug little smile crossed his face.

Her eyes blazed.

"See? I didn't say that and you still got mad." He chuckled. "No, I didn't say it because that wasn't what I really wanted to say. Whoever it was, left me a message and they thought they left me in a bind. I'm pretty sure they expected me to hop back in the truck and drive off and overheat. And I'd be left stranded somewhere. And an easy target to ambush."

"They thought that much?"

"Maybe."

"Who would think like that? Not those bozos who came to my house."

"Ah, that's the real question, isn't it?" He looked back at her place. "No, you're right. Not those clowns. And the person who shot at me really didn't expect to hit me, though they thought they'd try. A 22 can go a long way. But not that far. Not with any accuracy."

"A 22? A rifle?"

"Probably. Look at the diameter of the hole." He held the top of the can up for her to see. "The first one would be slowed by penetrating the metal. The others would be slowed or pushed off course as they followed." He leaned back on the truck.

"So they shot for fun?"

"Maybe. Unless they didn't know what they were doing. But I think they did."

"Why all this set up? If they wanted to stop you, why didn't they just puncture your tires?"

"Your ranch gave me a defensive position?"

"So you don't know."

"No."

"So you don't know who was here?"

"No."

"So what do you know?"

"I know somebody was here."

"Okay. You're almost as good as Sherlock Holmes."

"I also know we can't stay here."

"You're like the evening news."

"And I know we've got to get out of here."

"At least you're driving in a straight line. So where to?" She asked.

He didn't answer.

"We leave your truck?"

"We have to. I can call it in."

She bobbed her head in a quick assent and said, "Okay." She climbed up in the driver seat of her truck.

Taking an obvious hint, he climbed up on the passenger side.

She waited for him to buckle up before asking, "Where to, bub?"

"Nice. You drive so I have to tell you where we're going?"

"Do you like that?" She had a smile on her face.

"I should expect it."

"You really should." She shifted into first, "Now, where to?"

"We'll need funds."

"Fiduciary?"

A slight smile crossed his face. "Pecuniary," he said.

"Picayune pecuniary?"

"No, more like, prestigious."

She laughed at the word play. "I guess that means we can't stop at an ATM."

"No."

"How about the Bank of America? Okay with you?"

"Sure."

After cruising for about an hour, she drove up 385, past Interstate 20, where 385 turned into South Grant, then North Grant, and then right on Eighth St.

Cavanaugh kept tabs on the flow of traffic, checking for a tail.

"You seem to know your way around."

"We're still in Texas."

"It's a big state to memorize."

"Only if you're not from Texas."

Cavanaugh snickered.

"You like that, huh?"

"Yeah, I never thought of it that way." He shifted in his seat. "It might be smart to close out your account."

"Why? Will we be gone that long?"

"Maybe. But I'm thinking more along the lines of someone keeping tabs on you by tracing your transactions."

"The mob can do that?"

"Anybody can do that."

She pulled into the bank's lot and stopped along a side walk, taking up over five parking spots because of the trailer. Although Cavanaugh opened his door to get out, she never moved.

"What are you doing?" He asked.

"Thinking."

"Thinking? About what?"

"How much I should take out. How somebody could track my banking."

"There's not much to think about. Anybody can track anything. And by anybody, I don't mean everybody. Rather, anybody with the will to do it will find someone who can do it. The mob would have the will."

"Well, that makes sense."

"Of course it does. Computers make lots of things easier."

"I guess so."

"And as far as how much, why don't you just close your account? If we come back this way, you can re-open it."

"It's not as easy as you think."

"Why not? You've closed an account before, right?"

"That's not the problem."

"It's not? Well, then, what's the problem?"

"I don't really want to say."

"Okay. I can respect that. Just get enough money out so you don't need to withdraw again."

"How much?"

He laughed. "I have no idea. How about a fifty thousand?" He closed his door and walked over to hers and opened it. "Let's go."

They both stood in line for a cashier. He went first and after exchanging paper, the female clerk counted out several hundreds and twenties. Laura politely turned away.

Cavanaugh finished and then stood aside while Laura slipped a withdrawal slip to the clerk. The cashier's face contorted as she looked at the slip again. "I can't do this. We'll need a manager."

"I'll wait," Laura said.

"We can't do it here. Too many prying eyes. We'll go to Mr. Toomey's office. Over there." The clerk pointed across the lobby.

"Oh, I know him," Laura brightened.

"What's the matter?" Cavanaugh asked as he moved in close to the window.

"I'm not sure."

"We can't give out that amount of cash." The clerk answered.

"How much did you ask for?" He asked Laura.

"Fifty thousand, like you said."

Cavanaugh gulped. "I was just kidding."

"I wish you would make up your mind," she said as they followed the clerk to the manager's office.

--20--

After knocking on Mr. Toomey's office and briefly meeting with him, the clerk let herself out and held the door open. "Mr. Toomey can see you now."

"Miss O'Connell, so very good to see you again. Please come in." Toomey walked to the door and extended his hand.

"Good afternoon Mr. Toomey," Laura said as she took his hand. "My friend, Mr. Cavanaugh," she added as a way of introduction.

Toomey nodded and also shook hands with him. "How may I help you? Please sit." He gestured towards the chairs in front of his desk.

"I wanted to withdraw some money today but it isn't as easy as I thought."

"I agree. I agree. And I'm sorry. Fifty thousand at a branch like ours is significant and could cause a little disruption in our reserves. Normally we would require advanced notice for anything above ten thousand, but since it is you, Miss O'Connell, we'll accommodate you in any way we can."

Cavanaugh openly stared at Laura with his eyes widened. She noticed as her cheeks flushed and she nervously glanced back at him. She returned to Toomey. "It may be that I may not quite need fifty thousand," she replied and then raised her eyebrows at Cavanaugh. "Though I can't say how much, can I?"

"I was only joking," Cavanaugh replied.

"Well, how much do I need?"

"Ten thousand?"

"You don't know?" Her voice had a squeak.

"How would I know?"

"You're the man with all the answers. No. Wait. No, you're not." She said with sarcasm dripping like maple syrup. "Like this one. How long will we be gone?"

"I don't know. Weeks, maybe."

"Weeks." Laura sniffed. "Where?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Mr. Toomey watched the banter bounce back and forth before interrupting, "Miss O'Connell, can you follow me? I'll need you to sign some papers." He stood and helped Laura out of her chair. Exiting the room, he took her to a kiosk in the middle of the branch. "Are you okay, Miss O'Connell? Are you in any danger?"

Laura sniggled, "Funny you should ask, but no. Not from Mr. Cavanaugh."

"Well, that's another thing, Miss O'Connell. He's not Mr. Cavanaugh. He's a Mr. Robert Lasch. At least according to the account he drew on with Miss Baxter, there." He nodded towards the cashier.

"He's a puzzle, that's for sure."

Toomey gave Laura an odd look. "Are you sure you're safe?"

She looked back at the room where Cavanaugh waited, "Never safer."

"Well, okay, then. Let's finish up. I just wanted to be sure you were not held here under duress."

Laura nodded and said, "That's very kind of you."

"How much will you need?"

"I think ten thousand will do."

"Normally I wouldn't say this to anyone but since it's you, Miss O'Connell." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "You realize that I'll need to report the withdrawal."

"You will? You mean it can be tracked."

"Yes, the government requires us to report any withdrawals of ten thousand or more."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Can you make it nine thousand nine hundred?"

"I could, I could. But someone at the main branch may notice and report it anyway."

"Well, what do you suggest?"

"Would ninety two hundred be enough?"

"I guess so." She chuckled, "I still don't know for sure."

"Please tell me you will use it to buy a car." She could hear the plea in his voice. "Just in case I'm asked."

"Yes, that's exactly what I'll need. I'll need a car."

"Thank you, Miss O'Connell. If you could fill out this withdrawal form. Thank you." He passed a slip of paper.

She wrote on the form and handed it back to him.

"Thank you, again." He walked the form over to the cashier, said something to her, and then returned to Laura. "Miss Baxter will bring the cash to my office." He stepped aside, "If you please." He motioned to his office.

Cavanaugh stood up as they entered. "Any problems?"

Toomey left his door open.

"No," Laura replied.

"Not at all," Toomey said. "Here comes Miss Baxter now."

The cashier handed him an envelope. "Ninety hundreds and ten twenties."

"Very good," Toomey took the envelope from her and handed it to Laura. "You can count it here." He pointed to his desk.

Laura ignored the offer, flipped through the wad of bills and said, "Looks like it's all here."

"You should count it," Toomey glanced back and forth between her and the envelope. "Really, you should."

"Oh, Mr. Toomey, don't worry, it's okay." Laura slid the envelope into the back pocket of her jeans. "Can we go now, Bobby?" She asked Cavanaugh.

Cavanaugh blinked and wrinkled his brow but didn't reply. He moved to the door, allowing her to go first.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Toomey," she said and they exited the office and the bank.

"Bobby?" Cavanaugh said as they walked to the truck.

"Robert Lasch to be exact."

"Oh, they told you."

"Of course."

"Of course," he said. "Why wouldn't they tell Miss O'Connell who seems to run the bank?" He crossed over to the passenger side.

Laura climbed up into the driver's seat. "You're missing the point."

"Oh, I'm exactly at the point."

"No, you're not, Mr. Lasch."

"No, I'm not, Mr. Lasch." He imitated her. "But you've got that right. I'm not Mr. Lasch. I'm Cavanaugh."

"So you say."

"So the FBI says too."

"Pfft, FBI. What do they know?" She started the truck. "Where to, Bobby?"

"Oh, it's gonna be like that, Miss Millionaire."

"It is."

"But you didn't object to your name."

"There are two things a lady doesn't talk about," she sniffed, affectedly.

"Apparently."

"So? Wherrrrre?" She drew the word out long and slow and cocked her head.

"Okay, okay. How about Albuquerque?"

"Through El Paso or Amarillo?"

"What's the difference, Miss Texas Millionaire?" He smiled at himself. "Kind of rhymes."

"Cute," she replied. "We'll go a little further south before turning up to El Paso. But we'll backtrack east about a hundred and ten or twenty miles before heading north if we go through Amarillo."

"What do you recommend?"

"It's a prettier drive to El Paso."

"El Paso, it is. Then Albuquerque."

She pulled out of the lot, headed back down Grant to Interstate 20, and headed west. Interstate 20 merged into Interstate 10. They passed through Van Horn and approached El Paso as the sun was setting just over the horizon.

Cavanaugh kept looking back through his side mirror.

--21--

"So what's in Albuquerque?" Laura asked as she headed west on the highway.

"Nothing. A place to stop for the night."

"So that's the big plan?"

"We have to stop somewhere."

"Assuming we're going somewhere."

"Yep, assuming."

"There's a reason you're not telling me."

Cavanaugh didn't answer. He looked at the mirror in his window and then straight ahead before replying, "Only because I don't know."

"What don't you know? Let's start with that."

"Hard to describe a negative."

"Alright, sweet cheeks. Let's do something easy. Who is Picardes?"

"I told you before. He's the head of a crime family in New Orleans."

"Okay. What's that mean?" She checked the traffic as they passed through Las Cruces. She noticed how he glanced at his mirror, too. "Going to be hard to spot a tail in the dark. All you can see are headlights."

"Yeah, I know."

"So does this crime family man have a family?"

"Yes, he has, or had, two sons and a daughter."

"Wife?"

"Dead."

"How old is he? How old was she?"

"He's sixty three. She was fifty."

"She was a little young to die. What happened?"

"I think divorced happened. She finally figured out who her husband was. And then he killed her."

"How do you know?"

"I don't but there was no love lost. He got tired of her. He wanted something younger. So he divorced her. She set up in a new town. Ten days later she mixes her drinks with some cocaine, runs her car off a bridge and drowns."

"It does sound suspicious."

"She wasn't known to be a drunk or a druggie. Maybe a glass of wine here or there. But she ends up in the river with a BAC of one six and coke in her system."

"A back?"

"That means blood alcohol content. She was two times over the limit and already high. Most women couldn't stand after mixing the two yet we're supposed to believe she got in her car and drove five miles until just before the bridge and she hits the water. With an hour or two missing somewhere."

"Where was she before she drove?"

"Supposedly home. One of the neighbors saw her drive off."

"And what's the missing hour or two?"

"The neighbor saw her drive off around seven. It was close to dark. After pulling the car from the river, the dash clock said eight fifty one."

"Assuming the clock was set."

"Yes."

"So how does a person get to be twice the limit in less than two hours?"

"Absinthe can do it. If you drink it fast. Or, more likely, moonshine."

"Moonshine?"

"Oh yeah, people still make it. Haven't you had homemade wine before?"

"Yes."

"Not much different. You pick your poison."

"But she wasn't the type to drink like that if all she normally had was a glass of wine."

"Bingo. Somebody forced her to drink it. And I don't think she had a drug habit. Somebody probably drove the car to the edge, jumped out and let the cops try to piece it all together."

"Is that a theory or is that the truth?"

"It's the working hypothesis."

"Hypothesis, huh? So the cops are scientists?"

"You'd be surprised at the tools they bring to a crime scene."

"I guess I've seen enough TV," she said. "What about the kids? What do they think?"

"Who knows? One's the crime king's heir, the other is a serial killer and the other loves to party."

"How old are they? Let's start with the dead guy."

"Roger was twenty eight."

"Married? Kids?"

"Roger?" He replied skeptically. "No, thank God."

She drove on. "What about the other son?"

"The heir apparent? Rene is thirty two. Married. Wife's name is Chenaux. They have a three year old son. I'd have to think to remember his name."

"Never mind. Is their marriage solid?"

"Seems so."

"The daughter?" She prompted.

"Brigitte, the baby of the family in more ways than one. Twenty four years old. The party girl with lots and lots of playmates."

"I get the idea."

"I'm not sure you do. A party girl in Nah Lens is a lot different than a Saturday night beer at the rodeo."

"Maybe. But all it takes is imagination."

"A little more than that."

"Any drugs?"

"Brigitte? Oh yeah."

"The other son?"

"No. I don't think so. Maybe some weed. I don't know. I didn't investigate the other kids very much. I was after Roger."

"Okay, makes sense," she said. "So what does a crime family do?"

"Ever watch The Godfather?"

"Of course, but that's so old. Tommy guns. Beer kegs. Like The Prohibition. That's finished."

He looked over at her and laughed, "Sure it is. When did good times ever end? Women, drugs, and tax evasion."

"I understand women."

Another chuckle.

"You laugh but I've been around. I know what I know."

"Downtown Odessa?"

She smiled at that. "Okay, maybe it's not a hot spot. But I've watched The Sopranos."

"Breaking Bad?"

"Of course."

"The Wire?"

"I can't watch TV all day. I do run a ranch."

"Right, b."

"Huh?"

"Just playing."

Laura saw a road sign and said, "Coming up on Albuquerque."

"Sounds good. I'm getting tired," he yawned.

"Long day." She pointed up ahead at another sign, "Holiday Inn, pool, sauna, breakfast."

"Nah. Let's find something else."

"Hilton?" She called out.

"No."

"Wyndham?"

"Something else."

"Like what?"

"Like that, over there."

"The Desert Palm?"

"Just the thing."

"You're kidding."

"Trust me."

"Well, there's no shortage of parking."

"See? Things are looking up."

She pulled into the motor court and parked near the last apartment. Cavanaugh got out and stretched.

She followed but headed towards the trailer.

"I'm going to check in," he said.

"Okay," she nodded. "I need to check on Rosie. Two rooms," she added.

"One room. Two beds. It's safer."

"Yeah, right." Laura squinted as another car pulled into the court and the headlights flashed across her face. The driver was a young man. She guessed mid twenties. His passenger was a blonde, about the same age.

Laura opened the trailer door as the two got out of their car. The boy had on a loose cotton shirt and shorts. The girl pulled her hair in a ponytail. She wore a tight t-shirt and shorts cropped high. The boy draped an arm around the girl's waist and squeezed her butt. She saw Cavanaugh give the girl a quick look before entering the lobby.

Men never change. One room. Two beds. She brushed down Rosie.

--22--

Cavanaugh eyed the couple as they entered the motel lobby. He had just finished booking the last two rooms on the strip, near Laura's truck and trailer.

"Maybe we should club downtown." The girl said as he passed the couple and she stole a quick look at Cavanaugh.

"There's a rodeo." The guy replied.

"Club," she insisted.

"Okay, but let's get our room first."

Cavanaugh didn't give them a second glance. He unlocked the door to the nearest room that he rented and flipped on the lights and left. Walking over to the last room, he swiped the plastic key, unlocked the door and turned on the light. He propped the door open with the room's little wastebasket and went back to the trailer. Laura was walking Rosie around the lot behind the motel.

"I got the room. The last one, right here."

"Two beds?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "And one shower." He smiled inwardly.

"With a lock on the door, I hope."

“Only if you set it.”

“In your dreams,” she said as she led Rosie back to the trailer and locked her in. Rosie’s water and feed bucket were full.

“Which we should get to, soon.”

“Any plans for tomorrow?”

“Let’s see what the night brings.”

Grabbing one of his bags, he offered to take Laura’s but she shook him off. “I can handle it.”

“Okay.”

She pushed through the door, took in the room and dropped her travel bag on the bed, furthest from the door. “I’ll shower first.”

“Fine with me.”

She set her toiletry bag on the bathroom sink, unpacked it and locked the door. A few minutes later, Cavanaugh could hear the shower running. He rummaged through his bag, grabbed a pistol and a hunting knife and slipped out the front door.

Passing the couple’s Jeep, he walked past three lighted rooms, down to the lobby and peeked in. The desk clerk was still there but the couple had already completed their business. Perfect, he thought.

He strolled down the length of the rooms, careful to keep an eye on the lit room, which was the third from the end, and stepped behind their Jeep. He crouched, pulled out his knife and stabbed the tire walls in the passenger side tires. Satisfied, he strode back to their room, locked the door and sat in one of the chairs. The water was still running. Holding his bag on his lap, he packed his pistol and knife on the top of his clothes. He set the bag down and ambled across the room.

He rapped on the bathroom door, “Save some hot water for me.”

He heard a muffled, “Don’t worry. I’ll be out in a minute.”

He sat down and pulled the curtains just far enough that he could see the front of their truck and the deflated side of the Jeep. He wrote ‘Rocky Mtn Ave Loveland CO’ on a pad of paper next to the phone.

A moment later, Laura stepped out of the shower dressed for bed in a t-shirt and gym shorts. She had a towel wrapped around her head. Still seated, Cavanaugh noticed her long legs as she sat on the edge of her bed and rubbed her arms with a skin cream.

“Your turn,” she said.

“Maybe I will.”

“Maybe you will?” She said. “Don’t gross me out.”

“You’re probably right,” he said as he picked up his bag. Calling from the bathroom, he added, “Don’t get comfortable.”

She heard the shower turn on.

He locked the door.

Laura laughed at that. And then wondered what he meant. She didn’t have long to wonder. The shower stopped and a couple of minutes later, he appeared in fresh clothes – a black t-shirt, blue jeans with his shoes on.

“Come on, get dressed. We’re leaving.”

“We’re leaving. Why?”

“I think we’re being followed.”

“Where? How did you figure that out?”

“That cute couple? So much in love?”

“They’re kids, out for a good time.”

“Right. Let’s go.”

“Alright then.”

“This time, I’m driving.”

“So you don’t have to tell me where we’re going.”

"No. So you can sleep on the way."

"Which is?"

"I've got a place in the hills near Redfish Lake in Idaho. We can stay there until the heat's off."

"The heat? What heat?"

"You'll see."

They each picked up their own bags but Cavanaugh opened the door very quietly and lifted a finger to his lips.

Laura looked at him funny but eased through the door. He left the key cards on the night stand by the door and gently closed the door behind him.

After packing their gear behind the seats, getting settled and turning on the engine, Cavanaugh whispered, "Now let's have some fun." He put the truck in gear and maneuvered around the Jeep. He let the back end of the trailer bump the Jeep. The Jeep's car alarm blared and he pulled out onto the street, crossing back to look at the motel.

"Why did you do that?"

"Watch. Third room."

Laura looked around him, through the driver side window. A door flew open on the third room from the end and the guy ran out, fully dressed, with a pistol in his hand. His girlfriend followed. She, too, carried a pistol.

"See what I mean?"

The man lifted his pistol at their truck but Cavanaugh punched the gas. A passing tractor trailer, going the opposite way, shielded them.

"What in the world," Laura exclaimed as she shrank from the window. "It's like he suspected us."

"He doesn't just suspect us. He knows it was us. Or, rather, he doesn't care that it was us that set off the alarm. He's not even thinking about that. He only cares that we are getting away." He chuckled. "I only set off the alarm so you could see them come running out."

"They were following us?"

"Of course."

"How could you know?"

"I can't say, I *knew* but I was pretty sure."

"How?"

"A young couple, out for some fun, and they stay at the only motel without a pool or a sauna?" He looked over at her, "We couldn't even get a drink at that dump if we wanted."

"So you knew it was a dump."

"Of course," he said as he blinked.

"Well, that makes me feel a better. For a while there, I didn't think you knew the difference."

He laughed. "I have lived in rougher places."

"They're just going to get in their Jeep and follow us."

"Not for a while."

"Why not?"

"I slashed their tires."

"You did what?"

"Well, I didn't want them to follow us."

"But you didn't *know* that they would follow us."

"I strongly suspected."

"So, based on a suspicion, you slashed somebody's tires."

"I was pretty sure."

"You're lucky you're not in jail."

"Been there too, but I've gotten out."

"Only because you worked for them."

--23--

"Idaho is a long way. They could catch up," Laura said.

"If they knew where we were going."

"We're pretty obvious. Pulling a horse trailer. And we'll be slow."

"I'm guessing that's the last we'll see of them. Especially if they go through our room."

"Why? And how would they get in? And that brings up another thing but I'll wait until you answer." She waited.

"How would they get into our room? Just pay the manager a few bucks to let them check the room for something that their 'friends' left behind. It's not hard." He cleared his throat. "If they do that, they'll find an address I wrote down on a pad by the phone."

"An address? Your address? Please say no."

He laughed, "You know I wouldn't. I gave them the address of the FBI in Loveland, Colorado. Or at least the street name for the FBI office. They'll figure it out once they get there."

"Loveland. Lovely." She giggled.

Cavanaugh admired her for a second, she sounded so musical. "It's the least I could do for our 'friends'."

"The very least." She turned towards him and leaned against the seat and door frame. "Now, about my other question. Why did you tell me we only had the one room when I saw you leave two keys?"

"You saw that? You must have eyes in the back of your head."

"Yes. It's a freak of nature. All women do. Prepares us for kids and men." She raised her eyebrows then dropped them. "So, why?"

"I didn't say that we only had the one room."

"You led me to believe that."

"I did? I only let you go in first even though it was my room."

"How would I know that I had an option?"

"Good point. No. You're right. I shouldn't play you." He dropped the truck into a lower gear to grind up a hill. "I didn't want them to get the room right next to us. It made it easier to get away."

"Because they could listen to us by using a glass against the wall?" She yawned.

"Something more modern than that, but, yes." He looked over at her. "You should get some sleep."

She yawned again and said, "Maybe I will." She rummaged through her bag in the back and pulled out a sweater. Rolling it up, she placed it behind her head and nestled in the corner of the seat and passenger door.

Cavanaugh kept the pace nice and easy. The midnight ride turned into a sunrise drive which turned into a mid morning jaunt.

Laura slept through Las Vegas and Salt Lake City. She readjusted herself when 84 turned into 93 just outside of Twin Falls. She finally woke up with a stretch and a question. "Are we anywhere near a bathroom?"

"Shoshone is just ahead. We can stop for a break and for breakfast."

"Oooohhh," Laura stretched out her arms and hands as far as they would go inside the truck cab.

"Sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you. I should have taken a turn driving."

"That's alright. I'm used to night duty."

He did yawn. He tried to hide it but she saw him.

"You can take over after breakfast. Which is," he said, as he pulled into a diner, "right about now."

He parked behind the restaurant and walked with Laura around to the front doors.

A waitress sat them in a booth by the front windows and took their orders for coffee, eggs, bacon, hash browns and toast. Laura excused herself.

Cavanaugh sipped at his coffee and idly watched the little bit of traffic passing by the diner. He kept thinking about the couple in Albuquerque.

Laura came up behind him and sat down.

“Any signs of our ‘friends’?”

“No,” he laughed. “Funny you should ask. Like I said, they are probably in Colorado, driving by the FBI office.”

“What’s bothering you?”

“Well,” he adjusted his coffee cup. “I just don’t see them as New Orleans’ mobsters.”

“No,” she said. “You’re right about that.” She sipped her coffee and then asked, “Where are we going?”

“Redfish Lake. Just follow 75 north, there,” he pointed to the highway in the front of the diner. “We’ll pass highway 20 and go through Ketchum, just stay on 75. We’ll stop in Obsidian for a few things.”

After breakfast, they walked back to the trailer. Laura backed Rosie out and led her around. She filled the water and feed. Rosie nibbled at a tuft of grass on the edge of the parking lot.

“Probably need to restock my feed supply,” Laura said.

“Let’s do that in Ketchum. Just wake me up. Better yet, let’s do that here. Then I can sleep a little longer.”

They stopped at a feed and grain store and then headed up 75. Cavanaugh loaded the extra bags of barley and oats into the bed of the pickup while Laura filled Rosie’s buckets. Surprisingly, he even bought a couple of bags of his own. Laura meant to ask him why but got distracted.

They both climbed back in and Laura released the brake and put the truck into first.

“Wake me when you see Obsidian, okay?”

“Sure,” she replied.

He yawned, long and loud. “Pulling the trailer up the grade, it will take you about two, two and half hours. Wake me if you have any trouble.”

She brushed him off, “Go to sleep, I got this.”

“Ha,” Cavanaugh leaned back in the passenger seat and fell right asleep.

The terrain became more wooded as small pine trees, alders, snowberry and dogwood lined the road and the taller Douglas firs grew further back. The area was much different, much more rugged in its rock formations than the hills of west Texas. As they headed further north, Laura noticed a difference in the air itself – it was cleaner, fresher, cooler and thinner. Where west Texas air was hot and dusty, like being downwind of a sandblaster during a summer broil, the Idaho air in July was almost like November. She saw very little traffic until she drew near the Ketchum and Sun Valley area. She knew July wasn’t the best month for skiing.

She pulled into a gas station on the far side of Ketchum and filled up. Handing her credit card to the cashier, she added a bottle of water, a box of raisins and a foil bag of dried apples. The USA Today paper that sat on the counter made no mention of “bodies found in an abandoned ranch in west Texas.” That wasn’t an everyday occurrence in her square of the world. A little disappointed in the apparent lack of national interest, she said, “I wonder if this is how Bonnie and Clyde felt when they first started out.” As the teenage boy swiped the card and waited for the receipt, he didn’t even look up to ask what she said.

He handed her the receipt.

“No signature?” She asked.

“Nah, nothing under fifty.”

“Have a good one.”

“Yep.” The boy adjusted his ball cap and looked back down at his phone.

Cavanaugh was still sleeping when she eased back onto the highway and continued north. Just over an hour later she saw a sign.

Nudging at his shoulder, she said, “Time to wake up. We’re here.”

"Obsidian? Already?" He checked his watch. "We didn't make much time. Almost three hours."

She laughed, "I'm a tourist up here, remember?"

"Yeah, I guess so." He looked ahead. "There's a little mom and pop on the right about a half a mile. You can't miss it."

"I've heard that before."

"I'm not kidding. See?" He pointed to a small group of buildings. "Pull in, okay? We won't be long." He started unbuckling and had a hand on the door.

"Do you want me to slow down and drop you off on the run?"

Cavanaugh smiled, "I guess I'm a little anxious to see if there's any news."

"Of the bodies we left behind?"

"No. That wouldn't make it here. Just news. Local news."

"Can I join you?"

"Sure. Just park right here. You won't bother anybody."

He led her to a low lying, green tin roofed log structure. Rough hewn steps led up to a screen door that was flanked by a sign for cigarettes and another for Olympia beer. Holding the door open for her, he followed her in.

A large, grey haired Native American woman stood up from behind the counter, looked at Laura, looked at Cavanaugh, back to Laura and called out, "JJ! You weren't gone long."

"No, Mama, it didn't take as long as I thought. How are you doing?"

"Fine, fine."

"Running Wolf?"

"In the back, taking a nap. Same as always."

"True. It is afternoon," he said. "We could set a clock to him."

She sighed, "Predictable. But he's mine." She brushed her hands on the front of her billowing gingham blue and white skirt. "What's on your mind?"

"I'll take the usual, if you have it this week."

Mama nodded but asked, "Where's your manners?"

"Huh?"

She nodded towards Laura.

"Oh, that's right, I'm sorry."

"Mama, this is Laura." He said simply and watched as the two shook hands.

"Pretty girl."

"It's not what you think, Mama."

"You think it never is, but Mama knows," she said as she winked at Laura.

"Oh you and your prophecies."

"You know what I said when you left."

"Yeah, goodbye."

"Oh, go ahead and joke, but you know what I said."

"Yes, I do, and I did."

"Hmmm," she smiled up at him from the counter.

"Do you have the containers?" He asked.

"This week and last. You just missed a shipment before you left."

"That's right," he said as he followed Mama to the storeroom and returned with three large canisters.

Mama followed with another and a bundle of mail. She set her things on the counter and picked up an empty cardboard box.

"You should just get a bigger shipment instead of paying Earl to drive it up."

"I should but, then, what would Earl do?"

She nodded and packed the canisters and mail into the box.

He paid her for the goods and then asked, "Any news?"

"No, it's been a quiet week. Like most weeks."

"Hercules behaving?"

"Depends on what you mean by behaving," she said with a chuckle. "No telling with him."

"No complaints?"

"Nah," she dismissed him.

"Any hunters?"

"No."

Picking up the box, he said, "Thank you, Mama. Tell Wolf I might not be able to play chess this week."

"He already knows."

Cavanaugh looked at her with a question hanging.

"I told him when you left that you wouldn't be playing for a while."

"Sure, Mama, sure. Bye," he said as he leaned his shoulder into the screen door.

"Nice to meet you, Mama," Laura said.

"You too."

He loaded the box in back and headed for the driver's side. "It might be better if I drive the rest of the way."

"Okay," she said as she handed him the keys.

After they were both in and Cavanaugh had started up the truck, she asked, "JJ?"

He snickered, "You don't miss much. Yeah, JJ." He pulled out on the main road and headed north.

"Mama knows my name but she didn't know if you knew my name."

"What?"

"Just a game we play. She knows who I am. Who my father was. Who my mother was. She knows how people are with famous people. She was just protecting me."

"I don't know much about your father. And nothing about your mother."

"Long story," he said as he drew out the words.

"That you'd rather tell at a different time," Laura completed his thought.

"Yes, exactly."

"Hmmm."

Several miles later, he slowed down and turned on the right blinker.

Laura couldn't see a road, not really. The only tell tale sign that she noticed was that the drop off on the side of the road had been filled in for about six or eight feet. And that was where Cavanaugh turned.

Into thick brush that parted on either side as the nose of the truck burrowed itself like a gopher into the undergrowth. A car passing by at anything near the speed limit would never notice the drive.

She watched through her mirror, after the trailer passed through, how the foliage collapsed back. She was sure there was some breakage but she was just as sure that it wouldn't be noticed.

They bounced along a rocky drive that curved between the pine and brush and ran upward. In fact, the drive circled a small hill and Cavanaugh followed it in second gear before stopping at a dug out cabin.

She noticed how the cabin couldn't be seen from where they had come. It looked like the crest of the hill. A chimney pipe was hidden by a large rock and a clump of trees.

"Here she is. Home sweet home." With a sweep of his arm, he pointed towards the home.

From a quick glance, she saw a plain satin varnished wooden door, a long row of windows, a chair under a low extended roof and a leading trail of flat stones that walked right up to the door. Overall, the place looked like a mountain man's hovel.

"What do you think?"

"Nice," she lied. She was used to hard living but she was also used to modern things like plumbing and indoor toilets.

"I hope so. This is where we'll be staying." He said it with a smile.

"How long?"

"I don't know, but we can talk about it. Come on, let's unload our stuff."

Laura blew a breath out before getting Rosie out. She opened up the dried apples and fed them to her.

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After propping open the door, Cavanaugh set his bags and sniper gear in the corner of the one room cabin and walked back outside. "Do you want me to get your things?" He asked Laura.

"I'll be there in a minute." Laura called out over her shoulder and then leaned in to Rosie. "Don't worry, baby, we won't be here long." She stroked Rosie's forehead. Rosie clomped on hoof on the stony ground just to the left of the cabin.

"If we get your stuff inside, I can back the trailer over there," Cavanaugh pointed to a flat area beyond a stand of trees behind her and Rosie.

"Okay, let's do this," she said and strode over to the truck. She grabbed a couple of bags and he lifted the box from Mama's and also took one of her bags.

Stepping inside, her heart sunk. One room. No sink, no water. Old curtains hung to the sides of the window. There was a couch on the back wall and two wooden chairs and a table on the left wall. A Coleman lantern sat unlit on the table. Pantry cabinets hung above the table and chairs. An entire set of shelves formed the right side wall.

She let out a long sigh and set her personal bag on the table, in front of the lantern.

"How long are we going to be here?" She asked.

"I know what you're thinking."

"You think you know what I'm thinking but I don't think you thought long or hard enough," she said with a quick huff as her nostrils flared.

"It's not what you think." Cavanaugh smiled.

"How can you smile at this?" She asked as waved her hand over the room. "I have no plans to sleep in here with you for one night, much less stay here for weeks."

"We've got sleeping bags." It was almost as if he wanted to tease her.

"So what? We've got no water, no sink, no toilet, the air is stagnant, the floor is," she looked at the floor expecting to see dust but didn't, so she changed her words. "The floor is flagstone or granite or something."

"No, you got it right. It's granite."

"Yeah, just like your skull." She dared him to respond.

"No, I know, let me show you. This room is for show."

Her brows furrowed, "For show? Who would want to see this?"

"No, this is just in case someone stumbles into the place while I'm gone."

"What do you mean?"

He moved to the shelves on the right wall and did something. She heard a click and then he pushed in the set of shelves. It opened into another, hidden, room.

"What?" She said with her mouth open.

"Let me show you. Come on," he said as he took her hand and led her into a real living room with an area rug over hardwood and paneled walls. "That's a sofa bed. That's where I'll sleep." A newer, nicer sofa sat against the same back wall as the first room. He flicked a light switch and she saw a long mahogany bookcase filled with books. A globe and globe stand stood in front of it. There were two matching recliners with a small table in between. A lamp stand hung over it. Its bulb had turned on with the overhead crystal light fixture. A painting of a small waterfall and pool surrounded by forest hung over the sofa.

"Is that real?" She asked.

"The painting?"

“Yes.”

“Yes, it’s a real painting. Done by my mother.”

Laura noticed the artist’s signature, Kimani, stroked in a warm caramel color in the brush that formed the lower right quadrant. “Why, that’s beautiful. It belongs in a museum.”

“I know. It does. There are some small museums in California and New York that have my mother’s paintings.”

“You were going to tell me about your mother.”

“You’re right, I was. But first let’s go through the rooms.”

Laura noticed another door in the back of the room next to the sofa and another on the right wall. He opened the door next to the couch and reached in and flipped a switch. “This is your room. Well, it was my room but now it’s yours. I will need to move a few things but we can do that later.” A full size bed was covered in a paisley patterned quilt that was pulled up over a set of pillows. Two smaller pillows were arranged on top. There were two dressers – one long and another was a tall highboy.

“The long dresser is empty. You can put your things in there. My stuff is in the other one. And in the closet, which we will need to share.” He opened it up and pushed a couple of coats to the side. There were plenty of unused hangers.

“Come on,” he directed her to the other door and opened it. Switching on the light, she saw a small kitchen with a breakfast table, a sink, cabinets, a set of pantry shelves that held some canned goods, and even a top and bottom washer and dryer. A small refrigerator was placed under a counter top.

“How is this possible?”

“That’s not all. Remember you wanted a bathroom.” He walked over to a door next to the washer and dryer. Turning on the lights, she saw all that she needed – a shower, toilet, sink. A set of shelves held a hair dryer, soap, shampoo, deodorants, towels and washcloths.

“This is all built into the hill?”

“Yes.”

“You did this?”

“No. Not me. My father did. This was his little hideaway from the movies and Hollywood life.”

“It’s wonderful. I’m sorry about what I said,” she offered with a downturned face.

He snickered. “Well, to tell you the truth, I would have been a little mad if I were you, too.” He walked to another door tucked in a corner. “Here’s another way out but we keep this locked. Unless we need it. There’s a little cave behind here that is hidden by the brush outside. I’ve never had a need to use it. But it’s there.”

“Do people know you live here?”

“I guess some do. Like Mama and Running Wolf. They know I live up here. I don’t know how much they know about the place. They haven’t been up here with me, but they might have been when dad was alive.”

“And you were going to tell me about your dad.”

“Yes, I was but we’ve got more to do,” he said. “And more to show.”

“More?”

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After they unpacked their bags and rearranged some of the furniture, which included moving the highboy near the sofa bed, Cavanaugh backed the horse trailer next to the stand of trees. He placed a cinder block under the tongue of the trailer and then unhooked the trailer from the truck.

“There, we’re set.” He walked over to Rosie, slung a bag of feed onto her back and gently pulled on her reins. “Come on, girl. I want to show you your new home.” He raised his eyes at Laura and said, “We have a stable closer to the pond.”

“Pond?”

“Well, you’ll see. And maybe we’ll see Red.”

"Red?"

"My horse."

"You have a horse? You never mentioned that."

"It's hard to explain and easy for me to forget. For convenience sake, I don't really 'have' the horse. I let her roam free because I'm gone too often to keep her penned. So she really takes care of herself but usually she'll stay near the stable and the pond." He led Rosie and Laura down a very thin trail until they came upon a two horse stable bordered by a short stretch of corral fencing on either side.

"We can store her feed down here but we'll have to lock it up. Too many other animals like horse feed."

"Will Rosie be safe down here?"

"Oh, sure. Red's been with me for seven years with no problems."

"No problems with bobcats or mountain lions."

"No." He cleared his throat. "Well, to tell you the truth, we did have a cat threaten Red but Hercules took care of running her off."

"Hercules. Is that a dog or something?"

He chuckled, "You'll probably meet him sometime this evening. I'm sure he's heard the truck. He knows I'm home. He'll be stopping by."

"So, a friend?"

"Oh yeah, definitely a friend."

They filled the feed bucket and then Cavanaugh picked up a water bucket. Walking to the side of the stable, behind the corral, he filled the bucket from a water faucet.

"I hate to ask so many questions but how do you have running water here and at the cabin?"

"Good question and something you would know about, with your ranch in the middle of nowhere. Like you, we run it from a well and a pump. Down by the pond. There's a switch up in the kitchen that I turned on earlier. We're set."

"You keep saying 'we' as in 'we run it', who do you mean by we?"

"I do? I didn't notice. I guess I say 'we' because I didn't build this place. My dad did and then we used to run it. So probably thinking of my dad but also Red and Hercules and sometimes Rocky."

"Rocky?"

"A moose that comes down to the pond once in a while. I call him Rocky instead of Bullwinkle. He's one of the guys that would eat the horse feed if he could. But nice enough fellow."

"So you're a Doctor Doolittle."

He laughed, "No more than you are. You know what it's like sharing nature with nature. Unusual things and friendships happen, I guess. I've heard you talking to Rosie. She's more than a horse to you."

"Yes, she is. You're right." She leaned against the corral. "So any other creature friends?"

"You mean like a talking raccoon or flying squirrel?"

"Yeah."

"No, not really. Let's go down by the pond. I want to check the pump house and generator anyway."

"Should we take Rosie?" Laura asked.

"If you want. She might like to explore a little."

As Laura took the reins, he walked off behind the stable and then stopped. "Oh wait. Here comes Red."

A large red draft horse, with a white face, ambled through the brush and then nuzzled up to Cavanaugh.

"How are you doing, girl? As you can see, I'm back. I brought a friend." He stroked her red mane and forehead and motioned for Laura to get closer. "This is Rosie." He put a hand on Rosie's neck. "She'll be staying with us. For the time being."

Laura watched the gentle touches that Cavanaugh gave to both horses. "She's enormous."

"And this is Laura," he said as he nodded towards Laura. "Between you and me, Red, I think she just called you fat."

"I did not," Laura giggled.

She pulled her foil bag of dry apples from her pocket and gave a piece to Red and to Rosie. "What is she? Eighteen, nineteen hands?"

"Very good eye. Eighteen and a quarter."

"Where did you get her?" Laura reached up and ran her fingers across Red's back.

"From an old movie hand who worked with my father. He couldn't care for her any longer." He patted the horse. "Old Red here used to pull the chuck wagons in the westerns."

"She's a magnificent horse." Laura admired her proud, straight bearing. "Do you ride her?"

"Not much, but we do get out once in a while."

"She seems very content."

"She's very sweet," Cavanaugh admitted and then he tossed the mane between her ears. "Well, now that they are acquainted, we can let them go. They'll either follow us or they won't."

"Raising a horse is as easy as that?"

"Mostly. I do groom her and watch her health, but other than that, she takes care of herself. Come on."

He and Laura strolled down an unseen path, Cavanaugh in front, Laura just a step behind. The horses stayed up near the stable.

"So what's down here?" Laura asked over his shoulder.

"The pond. It's a little more than a pond."

"Always the mystery."

"Shhh," he admonished. "Listen."

A woodpecker knocked somewhere nearby. A wood warbler tweeted and another answered. And then she heard running water.

"It's a creek. How far?"

"Not much now." He marched fifty yards farther into the undergrowth and then parted the brush. "Here you go. You go first."

"Oh my gosh, it's fantastic!" Laura exclaimed. A silvery waterfall cascaded over rocks that descended like steps from a mountain and poured into a blue water bed that swelled to forty feet across. Ricegrass, red columbine and milkweed lined the water's edge. Further down, the water flowed over another set of rocks and ran off down into the woods. "This is what your mother painted," she said with breathlessness.

"Yes," Cavanaugh smiled. "My dad said she sat down right here where we are."

Laura could see a wisp of sadness mist his eyes. "Did you know her?" It never occurred to her until then that he might not have known his mother.

"I'm sure I did but I don't remember much. I was only two when she died."

"What happened?"

"Cancer. Breast cancer."

"How sad." Laura reached out and took his hand. She felt him tighten the grip just enough to know he appreciated the gesture.

"Thank you."

"You said her name was Kimani. That sounds Native American."

"Shoshone." He held on to her hand.

"What's it mean?"

"You mean like, what does Laura mean?"

"Whatever do you mean?" She wrinkled her nose and smiled. "You know Laura doesn't mean anything."

"Why do their names need to mean anything?"

"Oh you're right. But they often do." She felt embarrassed but then brightened.

He let go of her hand to swipe under his eye. "Butterfly. Kimani means butterfly in Shoshone."

"That's a lovely name," she said as a goldfinch flew across the water and settled on a reed. "That means you're Shoshone."

Yes, partly Shoshone, partly Irish.”

“You should be very proud,” she said and then she noticed his eyes brighten.

“Yes, thank you. Come on, I want to check the pump and generator.” He took her hand and led her around the pond.

“Do you ever swim in it?”

“I have but it’s ice cold, even in the summer.” He stopped and turned around. “While we’re on this end, I should show you something.” He stopped before the waterfall. “If you dive under here, there’s a little cave behind the falls. I’d show you but we’d have to get undressed.”

Her cheeks flushed. “That’s alright, I believe you.”

“You sure?” He chuckled.

“Quite,” she ended with firmness.

“All right, let’s go check on the equipment.”

After they walked the length of the pond, he pushed into the brush, holding it back so she could get in and then stopped at two little concrete block houses with grey metal doors. He lifted the latch on the door of the closest one and a hornet buzzed out. “Darn those things!” He swatted at the air while Laura just watched, amused. “I should have expected it but they always surprise me.”

“Don’t they?” She agreed.

He checked the electrical connections for tightness and corrosion and then locked the latch. “All good. Let’s see the generator.” He stepped to the next and checked the connections. “Good here. Let’s look at the water wheels.”

“Water wheels?”

“Something my dad set up. I need to replace them once in a while.” He pressed back towards the water where it ran over the rocks at the end of the pond. “Sometimes they get jammed with a stick or a rock.” He stepped into the water and Laura watched as he dipped his hands down and swipe at what looked like a hamster wheel with fan blades. “See? Isn’t this cool? The water runs through the blades and, as they turn, they generate a charge that’s gathered at the generator up there which gets stored in a set of batteries behind the cabin. Living off the grid. Except for the internet.”

“You have internet access out here?”

“Yes, satellite.”

“Ah, yes.”

“We better head back up before the sun sets,” he said as he looked up. The woods prevented him from seeing the sun but the day was definitely growing long.

They climbed back up the incline as Cavanaugh occasionally reached back with a hand to help Laura.

“We’ll come back, right?”

“Every day if you want. We can even swim.”

“I didn’t bring a suit. I didn’t know we’d go swimming.”

“Did you bring shorts and t-shirts?”

“Of course.”

“Well, there you go.”

They passed the stable where the two horses chewed at the grasses that lined the trail.

“Hello girls,” Cavanaugh called, but he didn’t stop. They swished their tails in recognition. He continued to the cabin. He stopped suddenly, “Wait.” He held a hand out to grab Laura. “Do you hear him?”

She did. Something very large drove through the brush ahead. She edged closer to Cavanaugh. “What is it?”

“It could be Rocky,” he said.

She sighed a breath of relief as the bush just ahead wriggled with movement. But then she drew another breath in with a shake that made the air seem cold. Something very dark, something very big burst

through brush and suddenly roared, sending a white hot electric shock of fear through Laura – a gigantic eight foot grizzly bear! It's mouth wide open and its paws extended in the air.

"Oh my God," she yelled.

"It's Hercules," Cavanaugh whispered and he gathered Laura next to him with one arm.

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"Hush, shhhh," Cavanaugh put a finger to his mouth. "Hercules," he said as he turned to the grizzly. "Why? Will he eat us?" She said over Cavanaugh's shoulder while his arm was wrapped around her waist.

"Nooo," he laughed.

Laura looked at him like he was crazy. "How can you laugh?"

Hercules put a paw up to his mouth and then shook his head from side to side.

Cavanaugh did the same thing again, putting a finger to his mouth and shaking his head.

"What are you doing?"

"Just saying hi," he answered. "And talking about you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Hercules is very smart. He just looks scary."

"He *is* scary," she hissed.

"Hercules, big boy," Cavanaugh let go of Laura and stepped forward into Hercules.

Hercules wrapped his front paws around him.

Swaying side to side, Laura felt like fainting. She backed up against a tree for support.

Cavanaugh scratched the big bear's belly.

Hercules grumbled and let his paws drape over Cavanaugh.

"Got you a treat, big boy. Up at the cabin. Ready for a treat?"

Hercules backed up, turned around and ambled up the hill.

"That's it," Cavanaugh called out.

"He actually understands you?"

"Sure, some things," he replied. "Hi and treat for sure." He took her hand. "He also knows this," he said as he put his finger to his mouth. "His trainers did that when they wanted to quiet him. He was a circus bear and then a movie star. Very intelligent and sensitive."

"Sensitive? Something that stands eight feet tall?"

"He can't help his height."

"But he's built to kill."

Cavanaugh followed Hercules' pace and pulled a little on Laura in order to keep up. "Well, he will get impatient if we don't stay with him. He'll want his treat." He grabbed her shoulders with both hands and pulled her close. "One way or another."

She pushed him away, with a quick laugh. "What's he eat when he can't get a Ranger?"

He smiled, "Mainly fish and plants – nuts, berries, honey. Though he'll go after a squirrel, too."

"What about horses?"

"No, I told you before, Hercules has watched over Red."

"For dinner," Laura said definitively. It may have come out more as a huff and puff as they ascended the hill.

"He's in a hurry."

"What for?"

"His treat."

"Like an arm or leg," she half-joked.

"Don't worry. He's adapted."

"To what?"

"He's been around people most of his life."

"He has?"

"Yeah. He was a movie star at one time."

"He was?"

"Remember *A Way Out West*?"

"The kids' movie?"

"Yeah, he was the bear."

Laura smiled, "He was a big baby."

"That's him."

"You'd never know it, looking at him."

"No you wouldn't. And he can do tricks."

"Like what?"

"Play ball. He was a circus bear for a while. Until he was scouted."

"Get out of here," Laura pushed at him, keeping pace, "bears have movie scouts."

"There's a little bit of something of everything in Hollywood."

"I'll bet," she acknowledged. "Let's play ball when we get back."

"Maybe. He'll want his treat first."

"Well, I want to see him sometime."

"Okay," Cavanaugh said and looked ahead. "Here we are." He pushed through a hedge and dragged Laura with him.

Hercules posed on all fours with his butt resting on a tree stump.

Laura fumbled in her pockets and pulled out her cell. "I need a picture."

"Whoa," Cavanaugh exclaimed, "just a pic and then turn that off. We may as well shoot off a rocket."

"I've got no service."

"Doesn't matter, your phone will still send a signal and something might pick it up."

"Out here? Who would be looking for us in the middle of nowhere?"

"The technology exists. And we do know of one group." He paused, "And maybe another."

"You mean Picardes. And who?"

Hercules growled.

"Hold on, boy," Cavanaugh said to him as he opened the cabin door. Turning to Laura, he added, "I don't know. But first, the treat."

She followed him into the cabin.

Hercules wandered up to the door and waited.

"Where did we put the box from Mama's?"

"I think it's in the kitchen," Laura answered.

"Okay, I'll be right back," he said and he returned with two big plain label cans.

"What are those?"

Turning them so she could see the labels, and said "Peanut butter." He twisted it back and forth, "And honey."

"Industrial size."

"Just the right size for him," Cavanaugh said, as he pulled off a plastic lid and then peeled back a foil cover on the top of the peanut butter canister. He did the same for the honey and handed it to Laura.

"Come on. He love this and get to know you." He held the door open, "No, you first and give it to him."

Hercules had sat back on the stump and waited for Laura to approach. He sat up and sat down, up and down, and grumbled in his throat.

"Don't worry. He's behaving."

Laura handed him the peanut butter and Hercules took it in both paws. He stuck his long tongue into the top and licked as much up as he could. Just like a dog, he kept moving his mouth open and shut and side

to side. Then he took another lick and did the same. After one more lick, he stood to the side and set the can on the stump and turned back to Laura.

"He wants the honey," Cavanaugh said softly as he handed it to her. "Go ahead."

Once again, Hercules took the can from her and took a big lick. He didn't have as much trouble as before.

"I'll get some chairs and we can sit outside." Cavanaugh returned with the two wooden chairs from the front room. "Tonight's TV."

They both sat and watched Hercules for a while and listened to the grunts and the birds and buzzing of evening insects. Laura swatted at a mosquito.

"Yeah, they're coming out. We should go in."

"No, it's okay. We have mosquitoes in Texas, too, you know. Bigger than this."

"Oh, I'm sure."

"If four or five of them get on you, they can fly away with you."

"Here come the Texas pies."

She smiled, "When our Red Cross needs blood, instead of setting up a blood bank, they just squeeze a couple of mosquitoes."

He chuckled, "Come on, Odessa, let's go in. We'll fix our own dinner. Good night, Hercules," he waved and picked up his chair.

--27--

"What do we have? We didn't pick up anything."

"My mistake. I was so anxious to get up here, that I didn't think about it. Let me look," Cavanaugh said.

"I know I have some canned goods and Mama packed some fry bread in the box, over there." He pointed to the cardboard box with the remaining canisters and mail. "Can you get it?"

Laura bent over the box and picked up the bread. Mama had also packed a stick of butter. Bitten by curiosity, Laura turned over a few pieces of the mail. All were addressed to someone else. After placing the bread on the table, she said, "Looks like you got something from the county government."

He whipped around and said, "That's rude and invasive."

"Rude and invasive? JJ Gates? Is that your name? Or is it Casey Cavanaugh?"

"It's Cav," he stuttered, and repeated, "it's Cav," and took a breath. "It's a little complicated, I guess."

"Uncomplicate me. Is it rude and invasive to convince a woman to travel halfway across the country with you, isolate her from everybody and she doesn't even know your real name?" Laura took a step closer to the knife drawer, until she was easily within reach.

He turned around to face her, with a can in his hand.

She took one more half step and placed her hand on the counter just above the knives.

"I'm both. I'm Cavanaugh, born that way," he said, "and I'm JJ. JJ Gates was a stage name for me in one of my dad's movies so I kept it. For privacy's sake."

She squinted at him, "You were in a movie? Which movie?"

"*Red Rock Rust*," he said. "The one where a widowed cowboy and his son hold off a land baron and his gang from stealing his neighbor's ranch."

"I might have seen that when I was kid."

"Yeah, me too. Except I was that kid."

"The neighbor was a widow. If I remember right, she could shoot too."

He nodded, "Rebecca Eisen. Pretty lady but I didn't notice back then." He turned his back and dug into the fridge. "All they ever called my dad during the movie was Gates, and me, JJ. So I just took the two names." He pulled out a small jar of honey. "People still remember him, and me, as the Cavanaughs. But people don't remember JJ Gates."

Laura relaxed but let her fingers touch the draw knob.

"Hmmm," he snuck a peek at her and Laura's heart slipped. "While you're there, you can get a knife out to cut the bread. And the butter knives, forks and spoons."

'He's not worried at all', Laura thought as she dropped her hand on the knob and opened the drawer.

"What if I were?" She asked.

"What if you were what?"

"Oh never mind, you're clueless."

He shrugged, completely ignorant of her thoughts and she felt her heart skip with the thought that there was something endearing about his ignorance.

"How about beef stew, green beans, fry bread and honey?"

"Okay with me."

"We'll run down to Ketchum tomorrow and stock up." He opened up the cans and heated the contents.

Pulling plates from an overhead cabinet, he set the table and watched the stove while she sliced the bread. He made a pitcher of instant tea. He handed her a glassful. "It will take a couple of more hours for the ice trays to freeze in the freezer.

"This is just fine." The water was naturally cold from the mountain well.

After setting out the bowls of food, sitting down and filling their plates, Laura asked, "What do you do out here all alone?"

"You mean, why do I come out here?"

"Yes."

"I guess I'm a loner. I like nature. Peace and quiet. A chance to think. A chance to read."

"But you're an action hero. The way you took those guys down on my farm. And Roger." Her eyes brightened, "You saved my life."

He cleared their plates and piled them next to the sink. She filled the sink with soapy water and washed. He dried.

"I only do those things because people need someone like me to do them. I'm good at it and they need me but it's not really me."

"So you're not really Arnold."

"Not really JJ Gates, either," he said with a laugh. "I just like to get away. Get close to nature. Discover myself away from the guns and knives and fights."

"You mean there's more to life than death."

He paused while drying one of the plates and looked at her, "That's profound."

She blushed.

"No, it really is. There is more to life than death, though death can really be a fulfillment of life."

"Now you're the one who's deep."

"Consider Picardes. A violent, profane man who died a violent death."

"Karma. What goes around, comes around?"

"In his case, yes."

"Well, what about a kid who dies in the hospital from a rare disease?"

"You're going to make it tough on me."

"I'll try to," she managed a smile.

"Maybe we're all connected in some way to a child like that."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe their suffering expands the meaning of life. A suffering child should force us to appreciate life and try to give back in love."

"They taught you that in Ranger school?"

It was his turn to smile, "That's a different kind of suffering."

They put away all the dishes, pots, utensils. He led her into the living room. "Here's where I spend my evenings, listening to music, reading." He waved his hand towards the book case.

She walked over to it and ran a finger along the books. "Lots of classics. Dickens, Shakespeare, Famous Poems, Robert Frost."

"He's my favorite. Love his poems that juxtapose nature and the meaning in life."

"You mean, the meaning of life?"

"No, Frost understood that was a subject too big for him. The line, 'and miles to go before I sleep' means exactly that. He has a lot more life to live and understand before he leaves."

"I'm not much of a poetry fan though I remember that poem." She continued gazing at the books. "A History of the Shoshone. A History of the Utah, Ute, Paiute, Shoshone and Navajo."

"I want to reconnect with my mother's way of life."

"Totally different than Shakespeare."

"Very different but often just another way of looking at the same things."

"Oh, the egghead section. Advanced mathematics. Quantum physics. Astronomy. Lots of history books." She turned to look at him, "Have you read all of these?"

"I've read parts of all of them."

"Do you understand them?"

"The parts I read," he said with a snort. "I quit reading the parts I didn't, hoping one day I would."

"Veterinary. Horses. Bears. No surprise here on why you have those."

"No, you never know when you'll need the knowledge and some of it applies to humans."

She nodded.

"Ah, here we go, an art section. Grandma Moses, Andrew Wyeth, Late Twentieth Century Women Artists."

"My mother is mentioned in there."

"Really?"

"Yes, just a few sentences and one of her paintings."

Laura selected the book, "May I?"

"Of course, sit on the sofa by the light. I'll put on some music."

"Nothing too loud."

"No, how about some Mozart concertos?"

"You're a high brow?" She teased him.

He shook his head. "No, not really. But it's good music to read by."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'll get a book from a section you missed. Detectives. Maybe Spenser. He's a detective who quotes literature."

"I know who Spenser is. By Robert Parker, who really was an English Lit professor."

He picked out one of his books and grabbed a pillow. "Here put this behind you." He handed it to her and sat on the opposite side of the sofa.

"That's very kind of you."

They both opened their books, about a half hour later, Laura put her feet up on his legs. "Do you mind?"

"No, go right ahead."

She flipped through the book and stopped on certain pages and contemplated. She looked over at Cavanaugh and wondered how a man with so much muscle could be interested in so many subjects.

Another hour passed, "Your mother was quite good."

"I still have some of her art supplies here, if you would like to draw. We should pick up some paints in Ketchum tomorrow. Can't really use her paints. The pastels have dried and the oil tubes are too old."

"That sounds nice," Laura said, with her eyes closed.

"Getting tired?" He asked.

"Yes."

"We can go to sleep." He stood up and helped her up.

"I think so." She crossed the floor with Cavanaugh behind her. As she opened the door to her room, she leaned with one shoulder against the jamb and asked, "Why haven't you made a pass at me this whole time?"

His eyes widened. "I guess I was thinking that you have been through too much, especially with those men."

"Maybe you think too much," she said. "Good night." She closed the door.

--28--

Laura woke up the next morning, in the dark. Without opening her eyes, she clutched a smooth, warm blanket up to her chin. Stretching one curled leg straight forward and then the other, she pointed her toes like a ballerina and relaxed her feet. Rolling onto her back, she stretched one arm and then the other and brought her left hand back to block a yawn, a long yawn. She opened her eyes and saw almost nothing. A thin edge of light shone from the bottom of her bedroom door. Then she remembered where she was. Cavanaugh's place.

A man she barely knew who rescued her from a raving Voodoo lunatic only to ride off with a group of FBI and then returned months later, to rescue her again from a group of nameless mob hit men who were two seconds from blowing her head off. Who was he? Then she remembered the talk about JJ. Was it really true? The cop in Texas said he was Casey Cavanaugh, the son of Cap Cavanaugh, who she did know from the movies.

He said he needed an alias for the privacy but how many people are still looking for the grown son of a movie star who died years ago? Did he need the privacy because he was a Cavanaugh? Even if there were still fans, his dad was not exactly equal to a Kennedy cult. More like Chuck Norris and who knows if Chuck even had kids?

No, she thought as she held the blanket to her chin, he wanted privacy or needed privacy for some other reason. The FBI knew him. They had to know him. They didn't cuff him. They believed what he said though all the evidence, and her witness statement, backed him up. At least it looked like they believed him. They did drive off and he didn't come back for months.

Besides being a movie actor's kid, she remembered that he had said he was a Ranger. She wished she had asked him more about that. A Ranger was Army, right? He said like the Green Beret. Special Forces. Was that like Seal Team Six? She didn't know. She didn't know what a Seal Team was except for a bunch of fighting, often against many more men. And sometimes hand to hand. Like Picardes. And he did that on a dislocated ankle. And somehow he knew how to set his own ankle. That was impressive. And scary. But the animals did react to him as if he was some kind of bear whisperer. Who could get a giant grizzly to play with him? Who has a horse that never needs care? Who has their own lake and waterfall and a secret cabin within a cabin? Her eyes were open. She slipped her feet onto the floor and felt for the lamp that she knew was next to her. Turning it on, she got dressed.

She cracked open the door and looked around the room. Cavanaugh's blanket was folded and draped over an arm of the sofa. A pillow was plopped on top of the blanket. She could smell the coffee in the kitchen but she turned to the bathroom first.

Returning from freshening up, she followed the rich nutty fragrance to the kitchen and poured a cup. Cavanaugh had left the remaining fry bread on the table with the jar of honey and stick of butter. She helped herself and realized the mystery man was breaking down her barriers without even being present. Who was he? What was he? And now, where was he?

She carried her coffee and honey bread to the bookcase and found a tall but fairly thin paperback about the Rangers. She flipped through the pictures until she finished her bread. She had read the Ranger creed, "as a Ranger my country expects me to move further, faster, and fight harder than any other soldier." It was enough. They were fighting machine bad asses in all the better senses of the word. But it didn't answer the alias question.

She put the book back, refilled her coffee and stepped outside without making a sound. The door had been open to the world. The sun had not yet shone through the thick overhead leaves. It may not have crested the surrounding hills and mountains. She couldn't tell. A soft cool early morning breeze tickled her neck. She blew on her coffee and turned her head where the stable would be, somewhere down the hill. That's when she saw Cavanaugh, chinning himself on a long iron bar set between two trees. With his back to her and shirtless, she could see the ripple of his upper back and shoulder muscles as they contracted and expanded with each up and down. She watched him do twenty two reps and wondered how many he had done before she noticed. She sat down on a chair outside the door. He dropped down on the flat ground and lay on his back. He hooked his feet on the trunk of one of the trees and started a set of sit ups. After a hundred, he stayed in the sitting position and caught his breath. Then he turned over into a prone position and did seventy five pushups, the last twenty with one hand – ten with the right hand, ten with the left.

He rolled over again and sat with his torso heaving and sweating. Standing up, he began a slow dance, at least that's what she thought at first. Then she realized it was some sort of martial arts maneuver with very precise hand and leg movements. Working around like a clock, he eventually faced her and then smiled while the sweat rolled into his eyes and the twinkling of the light glistened off his body. She lifted her cup to drink and realized that, somehow, she had already drained it.

"Hey, do you feel like a drive to Ketchum?" He called up to her as he continued his dance.

"Sure."

"I'll be done in a minute."

"No hurry," she said, "I'll just watch you as I finish my coffee."

--29--

Laura and Cavanaugh turned onto 75 with Cavanaugh pointing out the little landmarks that he could recognize without really thinking, especially the triple trunk Douglas fir next to the highway marker, "See that?" He asked. "That's when you turn. Look for the gravel filled trench and just barrel in." He turned to his side and pointed out some more features. "The little pyramid of stones is about a hundred feet ahead of the triple trunk, there," he said. "And of course, the caution sign riddled with bullet holes."

"Are any of those yours?"

"No, probably just joy riding kids."

How far away is this from Obsidian?"

"About five miles."

"Maybe we should get a more exact reading."

He looked over at her. "Good idea," he said. "I might need you to drive back. I'm going to see if I can get a lift to Odessa and pick up my plane."

"And you want me to drive back here? By myself?"

"Maybe."

"Well, then, we'll need a practice run. Pull over here and let me drive. I want to see if I can find it."

They switched seats and she ran back and forth. Up and back down the highway until she was sure she could find the turn off.

Laura stayed in the driver seat and passed the little store that Mama ran in Obsidian. She checked the odometer and took note.

"How far to Ketchum?"

"About fifty miles."

"Do they have an airport in Ketchum? Or Sun Valley?"

"No, it's down in Hailey."

"How far is that from Ketchum?"

"About ten or eleven miles."

"Do you want me to drive you there?"

"Maybe, but let's get the groceries first. And a couple of cell phones."

"I thought you didn't want me to use mine."

"Not the one with your name as the owner. We'll pick up a couple of pre-paid phones."

"You're quite the privacy nut."

"In my business, you have to be."

"What is your business?"

"Odd jobs."

"Wasn't that a Bond character? Odd Job?"

"One of the Sean Connery movies?"

"Yeah."

"Pretty good memory. He was the Japanese muscle for Goldfinger. 1964. Directed by Guy Hamilton."

"You are a movie buff."

He chuckled, "More like a movie brat. My dad liked the Bond movies. I've watched them a couple of times."

"Did your dad drag you around from movie to movie?"

"After my mom died, he hired some nannies to get me through the younger school years but then he'd have me join him in the summer." He took a deep breath and blew it out. "It was okay."

"You don't sound like it was okay."

He glanced at her. "It was boring. At first. Movies seem glamorous from the outside." He scratched at his chest. "My dad must have known I was bored because he hired tutors during the summer. To keep me busy."

"He had you studying during the summer?"

"Some things. Like Spanish and Math. But mainly, physical tutors, like martial arts and swimming."

"Ahhhh," she said.

"Ah, what?"

"I can see the connection."

"What connection?"

"Why you joined the Rangers."

"Yeah, I guess. After watching my dad play movie heroes, I wanted something more real."

"That's a big jump."

"That's what they say when you step out of an airplane down in Benning with nothing between you and the earth but twelve hundred fifty feet and a parachute."

"What? Do they just hand you a parachute and tell you to jump?"

"No." He told her about Tower Week, Ground Week where they practice jumping from platforms and landing, and then Jump Week, where they finally jump from a C130, out of Fryar Field. "Hey, we're coming up to Ketchum. Look for Fourth Street and turn left. There's an Atkinson's on the left."

Forty minutes later, they packed the groceries in the back of the truck, checked out their cell phones and exchanged their numbers. Laura climbed into the driver seat. But Cavanaugh, remained outside with the door closed, tapped in a number and leaned against the side of the truck. She couldn't hear the conversation.

He opened the door. "Okay, I do need a lift to Hailey. A friend of mine will fly me back to Odessa. I'll get my plane and my truck and come right back. You'll be alright up in the cabin." He didn't ask it. He didn't assert it. He just said it.

Laura pursed her lips.

"I won't be back tonight. I'll layover in Odessa and fly tomorrow."

"Okay."

"You'll be alright in the cabin?" He asked it.

"Yeah, sure. I'm fine by myself." She headed for the exit. "Which way?"

"Let's get you some paints and supplies, first. There's an art store nearby."

They loaded some new canvas, drawing pads, paints, pencils and brushes into the back.

"Now to Hailey."

"South on 75?"

"Yes."

"About ten miles."

"We'll go to Friedman's, about a mile south of the town."

"Okay."

"You'll see the signs for Friedman's Memorial Airport. Just drop me off and head back."

Ten minutes later, she stopped at a row of hangars. He grabbed a duffel bag from the truck bed. He walked back up to her window.

"This is good," he said. "If you can, stop by Mama's and pick up my mail, if any. Tell her where I went."

He leaned against her side of the truck. "You brought your rifle, your pistols?"

"Yes."

"You'll be alright."

"As long as there's a grizzly in the back yard, yes," she said, wryly.

"Yeah, Hercules," he smiled. "Don't discount him."

"I haven't."

"Good girl." He leaned into her window. She thought he was going to kiss her. He squeezed her hand.

"Say hi to Mama."

"I will."

He stood in the same spot until she drove. He picked up his bag and walked to the third hangar.

Laura pulled out onto 75 and headed north again. She slowed through Ketchum and picked up speed towards Obsidian until she turned in for Mama's little all in one shop. She stepped through the door. Mama looked up from behind the counter with a puzzled look and then she brightened.

"Laura?"

"Yes."

"Where's JJ?"

"I know about his name, Mama." She coughed a little. "He wanted me to tell you that he's flying down to Odessa to get his plane. He'll be back tomorrow."

Mama looked closely at her and said, "Good." Mama waited a moment. "You know, somebody came looking for him just this morning."

"JJ?"

"No, Cavanaugh."

"What did you say?"

"I said, not around here. There used to be some Cavanaughs in the Ketchum, Sun Valley area."

"Were there?"

"Yeah, when his dad was alive." Her eyes lit up. "I didn't lie to him." She paused. "Strange little man."

"He was?"

"Yeah, I could smell cop on him just standing back here."

"He was a cop?"

"No, not really. I don't think so. I think more like the FBI or CIA. One of those guys."

"He's taken jobs with them before. Or so he's told me."

"Yes, he's still a soldier in his head. Protecting his country."

"But what spooked you about this guy? What did he look like?"

"Black hair, balding on top. Skinny. Hairy hands. White shirt, tie, dark blue slacks. He wanted a pack of cigarettes. I didn't have his brand so he bought what I had. He didn't like that. He also wanted Nicorette."

I didn't have that. He hissed at me. He hissed at me," Mama repeated. "I didn't like it." Her eyes narrowed. "Running Wolf came in. Somehow he knows when I need him. I told the man he could probably get nicotine gum down in Ketchum. He paid for his cigarettes and left. Didn't say another word. Wolf walked over to the door and watched him turn for Ketchum. Be careful with that one, Mama, he said. He's no good. I said yes."

"You never saw him before?"

"No. But I felt his kind before. He's got a dead spirit."

--30--

"You be careful up there," Mama said to Laura, as Laura pushed open the door and walked to her truck. While the news of a man asking for Cavanaugh was not good, she wasn't particularly frightened by a man in a white shirt and tie. An office worker. She let her mind wander.

Maybe the IRS. She assumed Cav had a lot of money but maybe he had tax problems too. It happened to plenty of Hollywood types and families. Royalty checks that had no withholding taxes. They forget to add them up. Year after year comes and goes and all the while, the IRS is adding them up and then, at some point, an office worker mails a letter that says Casey Cavanaugh owes thousands or hundreds of thousands of dollars in back taxes and penalties. But the letter goes to the wrong address, as does the next letter and the one after that. Until, finally, the office worker makes a visit. That's when he becomes scary.

Thinking, she almost missed her marker. She slammed the brakes, let up, pumped them again and slowed enough to make the right turn. She took her time as she slowly crawled up the hill to the cabin.

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Cavanaugh walked into the third hangar and crossed the floor to the offices on the opposite wall. He caught a glimpse of his friend through a window and knocked on the door before opening it.

"Jake."

"Cav, how are you doing?"

"Fine. Good to see you."

"What's so important that you're willing to pay me five just to fly you to Odessa?"

"Part of it is to be quiet."

"Anything illegal?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. Not really. Hooah."

"Hooah," Cav repeated and scanned the hangar area. "When can we leave?"

"I filed my plans, maybe we can leave within the hour, let me check with the controller."

Forty minutes later, they were cleared and up in the air. Cav turned off his cell phone and stuffed it in his duffel bag and rearranged the bag behind him.

"Long time, man," Jake said, as they chewed the miles southward. "Anything happening?"

"Long time," Cav said as he glanced over at Jake. "No, nothing I can't handle. I know where to call for reinforcements."

"That bad?"

"Might be."

"You know we're here."

"I know." Cav blew out some tension with his lips set in a whistle. "There was a dust up in Texas. The Bureau hired me to track down Roger Picardes. You know him? New Orleans?"

"I heard of the Picardes family, vaguely, but you know I don't have the ties that you have."

"You got it right. He's the son of a mob king based on the Gulf. A psycho serial killer."

"Okay. Did you get him? Or is he still out there?"

"He's dead. Probably in one of those above ground crypts, 'down on the bayou'," Cav half sang, half said the clip from the Creedence Clearwater song.

Jake nodded at him. "Good." He checked the clouds and the ground. "Anything else?"

"Well, there's a girl involved."

"Ahhh, now we're getting to it. There's always a girl involved."

"A nice girl."

Jake jerked his head towards him. "You be careful, soldier."

Cav laughed. "Oh, it's not what you think."

"It's not, huh? Then why are you telling me?"

"Okay, but that's not why I'm telling you."

"It's not?"

"Earlier this week, I got a message that the Picardes family put out a hit on me. And her."

"Why? Assuming you killed him and you didn't leave your killing to your girl. "

"It was me."

"Then why her?"

"I think she was bait. To get me out in the open."

"So you're out in the open."

"Yeah, but I already took care of that business. Which is why my plane is in Odessa."

"Oh yeah? How many?"

"Three."

"Good job."

"Hmmm. You know, two things about that message." Cav rubbed under his nose. "One, I don't know who sent it. And, two, I think somebody else is out to get me."

"Somebody inside? Or outside?"

"I don't know. It feels like inside. Somewhere inside. For one thing, they knew how to send me a message."

"Whoa, true, so you can't just ask the Bureau."

"No, I can't ask the Bureau, I can't ask Bennie. You know he'd ask around and, in asking, he'd be passing a tip that I suspect it's inside."

"Assuming it's not Bennie."

"It's not Bennie. Can you see Bennie having the balls to set me up?"

"Well, he's Shiv's brother."

"Which is why we trust him. But that doesn't mean he's Shiv." Cav drummed his knee with his fingers.

"He's also smart enough not to mess with us. No, there's something else going on."

"So, you're not just going to pick up your plane."

"No. I need to find out who else is on my ass, except for the Picardes."

"You sure know how to break friends and influence enemies."

Cav snickered. "We're tight, then?"

"Hooah. You want me to hang around for you in Odessa?"

"No, I need you back in Hailey, in case Laura needs some backup."

"Laura?"

"Yeah, the girl. She's up in the cabin."

"You want me to check on her."

"No, I don't want to scare her off with my ugly friends."

Jake laughed. "Remember Tokyo."

Cav bent his head and said, wearily, "Yeah, I remember Tokyo." He paused and then said, "Just check with Mama."

"Got you."

-----

Laura set up an art A frame stand down by the pond. She liked to sit so she made a second trip to get a chair. She laid a sketch pad on the frame and picked up a pencil. She quickly captured the outline of the lake, and then worked back up the waterfall to catch the spray from the flow of water over the rocks. She added depth and churn where the fall hit the pond, where, supposedly, a cave existed. She lifted her pencil strokes and brought forth the rushes and weeds and brush over across the little lake. She stroked out the grasses that grew from her feet to the water. She thought of Botticelli's Birth of Venus, the Aphrodite, and imagined herself standing out on the lake waters. She thought about the cave. She could strip down and take a look. She had on a t-shirt, bra, shorts. She added the trees and mountains beyond the far edge of the pond, and how the pond poured over the other set of rocks on the opposite end. The sun had descended in the sky and, with a few quick lines, the sunlight flashed through the branches in her drawing and sparkled on the water. She stood up and pulled off her t-shirt. She kicked off her shoes, pulled off her socks and took a step into the water.

Wow! It was cold! She drew three hard breaths.

Cavanaugh said there was a cave. That means he had jumped in to look. If he could do it, she could. She walked closer to the other end and stepped back into the water. Now!

--31--

Cavanaugh spent the rest of the flight thinking about Picardes, the three hit men and the FBI agents that questioned him after the killing of Picardes. Was there a connection between the FBI and Picardes? He remembered he had spent the better part of a day being questioned about the Picardes incident. He had given the set of safety deposit keys to a Special Agent Rowley who had dropped them into a desk drawer, along with Roger Picardes wallet and identification. At the time, the agent hadn't expressed any interest in the keys. Maybe because it was next to impossible to find the bank, or multiple banks, that issued the keys. Maybe because the agent knew he was only going to hold them for someone else. Was it possible that the keys and wallet, along with the ID, were still in the agent's drawer? Did they file a report? He didn't sign anything. Not even his testimony, which he didn't really think about at the time because he was so tired. But, now, in retrospect, was highly unusual. He needed to find out. Just before sunset, Jake touched down in Odessa's Schlemeyer airport and taxied to a stop outside the fuel depot.

"You don't need me?" He asked Cav.

"No. I'm fine. Check in with Mama. If you get the chance."

"Will do. You take care, bud."

"Check. You do the same." Cav unloaded his bag, climbed out of the plane, slung the bag over his shoulder, and walked to the hangar that kept his plane. He didn't see Jake take a call that sent him on to Colorado. Jake wouldn't see Mama for a couple of days.

After negotiating for a longer tie down for his plane, Cav called a cab and rode to a car rental agency in downtown Odessa. Picking out a Ford F150, he drove to the FBI regional office in Midland. Well after hours, he parked a block away from the office, pulled out his sniper scope and concentrated on a side door. He surveyed the perimeter for cameras and concluded that, if there was a camera, it was almost surely inside facing the door. The lock itself was very similar to a hotel Onity keycard operation. He could get the parts he needed from a Radioshack. He checked his phone and found a store with hours from 10 to 9, which meant he had to stay the night. Which meant another day when the evidence could be shipped off but there was nothing Cav could do but wait. He wouldn't have enough time to bust down the door, find the evidence and escape without being caught. And, even if he did, the agent would find out pretty quickly why the office had been burglarized. Cav needed some time before it was discovered

which items were missing. He was tired. He checked into an acceptable motel, paying with cash and he checked his phone messages before falling asleep.

Laura had not called.

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Laura jumped head first into the water as soon as she waded above her knee. Oh my gosh, the water was so cold it hurt. But she was determined to see what Cavanaugh saw. She swam towards the water fall. The water was so pure and clear, she turned her head and could see the wavy lines of brush and trees as they hung over the opposite edge. She saw the wall of rock and stretched her arm out to touch it. She went up for a breath of air and then plunged right back in, into the wall of rock. She felt an opening, her body fit into it. She wondered if this was the cave that he mentioned – basically just an indentation in the rock. It was dark when she faced the wall but still light and clear behind her. With a little push she floated up and broke the water line. It was dark in front of her, above her but light underneath. There was a cave.

She wished she had brought a flash light. She paddled further forward and reached out. There was a ledge. She lifted herself onto the ledge, sat with her feet in the water and then felt above her. She couldn't feel a ceiling. She slowly stood up. The water below gave the faintest of light such that she could sense rock right above her and she raised her hand. The rock formed a ceiling only an inch above her head. Cavanaugh would have been bent over and cramped. She stuck her hand out in front of her and couldn't feel an end. She felt from one side to the next and found a wall to her left. Using her foot, she felt the smoothness and flatness of the rock floor. She kicked something and knocked it over. She kneeled down, felt for it with her hands and picked up a plastic cylinder. It had a metal arm or handle or crank. She turned the crank, heard a motorized sound and then realized it was a flash light that used a hand generator for a battery. Cavanaugh did think of everything. She wound it up and turned it on. The ledge was wide and deep enough for two. In fact, two people could lay down on the floor with ease. It appeared that the back end of the cave had an opening. She wondered if some animal could live back there. She shined the light into it but it didn't pierce the end of the cave. The light just faded into darkness.

She flashed the light along the walls and floor of the cave to her right. Cavanaugh had stored a plastic step stool and a plastic tool box which she thought was odd. She walked over to it and lifted the lid. She sat on the stool. The tool box held a compass, string, hammers, chisels, rock hammers, candles, and glasses among other things, like a pocket knife. She put on the glasses and realized they were readers. About two hundred percent. She wondered what he used them for. She shivered and realized she had better go back and warm up. She could save the mystery for another day.

--32--

Mama woke up early and nudged her husband. "Somebody's down by the store."

Wolf didn't complain, he didn't doubt, he just rolled to his edge of the bed and grunted. "Thief?" He asked but knew better as his feet hit the floor. "Bad medicine," he said, as he felt what Mama had felt, and grunted again, "Very bad medicine."

Mama got up and lit a candle as Wolf dressed. "What will you do?"

He held out a hand for quiet, stood up in just his pants and listened. His long grey hair fell over his shoulders and eyes. His bare feet felt the coolness of the bedroom tile and then, as he repositioned, his toes felt the fur of a bearskin rug in the center of the floor. His eyes were closed.

His wife first knelt on the rug and then sat back on her bent legs. She knew he was feeling the night air, letting his spirit attune itself before venturing outside and listening with the kind of listening that understood that every material object had a signature wave that emanated back and forth, up and down, across and played like the strings of an instrument, like the songs of the wind that whistled

through the trees, across the rocks, down the canyons, and tickled the flowers – dark and foreboding, light and refreshing, low and mournful, high and happy.

She rested her hands on her thighs. Though she wore a light gown, she could feel a cool mist on her hands, and face, her breasts and back.

“Whatever was there, is not there, but still there,” Wolf said.

His wife nodded. Though cryptic, she understood him.

Wolf prayed out loud with his eyes closed, “I know whose voice I hear in the wind, whose breath gives life to all the world. Hear me. I need your strength and wisdom.” He started a fire in a black pot bellied stove in the corner of their bedroom. He pulled down small jars of dried roots and herbs, grass, pine needles and leaves. A sharp, pungent aroma wafted through the room.

He began a prayer from the Navajo,

“Now I walk in beauty,  
beauty is before me,  
beauty is behind me,  
above and below me.”

Mama repeated it.

He walked over and knelt beside her. He took her hand and they repeated it together. They knelt until the first light of dawn and then arose, each helping the other up.

“We should go and clear the evil that has been left by our home,” Wolf said.

They both finished dressing. Mama blew out the candle and then they left their cabin to check on the store.

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After a shower and a continental breakfast, Cavanaugh pulled a computer pad from his bag, left his motel and drove to the nearest library. Using the library’s wifi, he searched the web using DuckDuckGo. A search engine that promised anonymous searches. Did it really, he thought, knowing he would never know for sure. But he definitely would not use Google, Bing or Yahoo. Those search engines monitored all web searches and fetches and pages and results. The big engines combined that data with the IP and whatever user data they could sniff. With each search, and hit and treasure trove of data, he would have felt guilty had he used Google. He looked up at the sweet, silver haired librarian between the reference desk. He searched again, and while he waited a few brief seconds, he noticed the thirty something year old women at the materials checkout. He skimmed through the results and copied the main points into a bulleted list.

When his deed became known inside the FBI, if it became known, though he had his doubts, Cavanaugh knew it would be a matter of time before they traced the searches to the innocent little Odessa library and began harassing the ladies. That’s why he used DuckDuckGo instead of Google. It didn’t store IP data or user identity. With his conscience soothed, he added to the bulleted list of electronic supplies. He created code scripts that would retrieve the sitecode, ident, flags, expiration, authorization and key codes that he would need. He closed his pad.

After about three hours of research, he left the library guilt free and found a RadioShack near a Walmart in downtown Odessa. He bought an Arduino microcontroller, a couple of other microcontroller brands, a keyboard, a 5 pack of 5.6k carbon film pull-up resistors to bridge three point three volt resistors to the data lines and a DC barrel plug to physically mate with the lock.

After stopping at a burger doodle for a quarter pounder, fries and water, he drove to a park and connected the electronic parts together. He bit into the burger and alternated with the fries. Sipping his water, he loaded the scripts into the microcontrollers. He packed up the equipment and used the park restroom. Hands washed and dried, he sat on a park bench and watched the kids, with their moms, play on the jungle gyms and swing on the swings. He relaxed as the ducks swam in the pond and the dogs on leashes sniffed at the trees. At this point, he only needed the night.

-----

Laura woke up the next morning refreshed. Which was strange because she had read a travel book the previous night which contained a section on Ketchum. Skimming through the 'sights to see' in the area, she stopped to read an article about their most famous resident. She didn't realize Ernest Hemingway had lived just outside Ketchum in a two story wooden cabin with a walkout.

The back wall of his winter home had three levels of large double windows that would have allowed very little privacy. But the cabin itself was already secluded and reigned down from on high into the valley behind the home. Undoubtedly, there were nights when Hemingway would have gotten drunk and railed at the stars and the moon. His old Underwood typewriter would have clicked its keys and told dark, spare stories to a white page of paper. After a night of drinking, the letters would have looked much like the black rocks that would poke through a blanket of snow. He would write and drink, write and drink. And in the morning, he would have stumbled into a shower and come out naked to the world. Naked in body with his naked soul on the few pages of linen paper laying on his desk. A middle aged man who swung at the world with a red cape, a matador's cap, a tailored shirt and gilded pants. He dared the world to charge. And when the world didn't charge any longer, he killed himself.

She picked up a pencil and a little notebook and sketched a bull while she sat at the kitchen table with her coffee. She remembered the day before, the trees and brush down by the stream and pond. The cold dip. She wondered if she had the nerve to skinny dip when no one was around. And she wondered when Cavanaugh would return.

She stuck a pencil behind each ear and picked up her coffee and pad. Slipping through the trees, she looked for Rosie in the stable but the horses had found somewhere else to stay. She shrugged her shoulders and continued on down to the lake. Her A frame art tripod was still there. The scene that she had sketched was still there. The water gurgled as it flowed over the rocks, on both ends. But not a single bird sung. Not a single bird flew overhead. She felt alone.

-----

Mama waited inside the little store's door while Wolf had walked down to the deserted highway and started back up the drive. His head bobbed from side to side. Mama turned away from the door and straightened the counters, getting ready for the day. A short while later, she heard her husband's voice. "Mama, mama," he called, near the stone steps the led up to the store. She stuck her head out the door. "Bring the eagle feathers, the wolf pelt and the dried peyote."

Mama nodded and gathered the items. Opening the door, and reaching him, she handed him the feathers.

Her husband waved them over a bloodied area that held other odds and ends. That held something very strange. She shivered and her forearms got goose pimps. The aura around Wolf suddenly felt very cold and evil. He asked for the piece of wolf pelt and he stretched both the feathers in one hand and the pelt in another out over the bloody patch. His lips moved like the keys of a piano playing the same verse, as he mumbled the same chant over and over. A chant of protection.

She recognized what bothered her, besides the blood. There were feet from a bird. Just bird feet, chopped away from the body. She bent a little lower, while listening to her husband chant a prayer to ward off enemies. She guessed they were chicken feet.

He gathered some twigs and leaves. He dropped them on the chicken feet and built a little fire. He pinched some peyote powder between his finger and thumb and sprinkled it on the fire. He did it again and again. Both he and Mama leaned in and took deep breaths, hoping the peyote would cause one of them to dream. She would close the store for the day. They needed to know what evil lay outside their door and why.

--33--

Near noon the next day, Jake circled around Friedman's Memorial Airport. He wanted to land into the wind. With the all clear, he approached the field, hit the flaps and let up on the throttle, aiming for the

striped line in the middle of the strip. Continuing to decrease the rpm's, his right hand gripped the handle on the stick while pulling back on the control wheel to ease the nose of the plane up. Yawning, he kept his eye on the angle with the ground forming the vertex. He dropped past V stall, essentially half gliding, half flying, waiting for the ground effect where the wind will rush between the bottom of the plane and the ground. Mushing through the effect, the plane stalled and touched the ground at the same time. He released the stick and used the rudder and brakes to taxi off the field and towards his hangar. He had remained awake almost twenty four hours in order to make the trip to Odessa and back. While he wanted to go see Mama, he needed to sleep first. If only for a few hours. Surely Cav would understand.

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Towards early evening, Cavanaugh left the park and drove to a street facing the back door of the FBI building. He slouched down in the front seat, adjusting his sunglasses. He tugged on his Texas Rangers baseball cap and appeared to be napping. Just another guy waiting. Maintaining the slightest squint, his eyes were glued on the back door. He watched as a couple of agents slid their cards through the back door lock and went in. Another hour later, sometime after six, they came back out. He waited until nightfall and then waited some more. No one else came out but there was still one car in the lot. Great, always the one eager beaver that gums up the works, he thought. He pulled his pad from his duffel bag and hacked into the state's licensing bureau. He tapped in the license plate of the car. It was registered to a Philip K Browne. Special Agent Browne wasn't kidding when he gave me his name, Cavanaugh thought. Agent Browne and Agent Smith had interrogated him after he had killed Roger Picardes. He had handed the necklace, with the safety deposit keys attached, to Browne. Cavanaugh briefly considered breaking into the office, knocking Browne out and stealing the keys. But, if Browne was acting in concert with either another agency or even with the mob itself, that act would alert everyone. Also, if he had just shelved the keys and forgot about them, Cav would never know. He needed to wait. Thirty minutes later, Browne exited the building and headed to his car. Cav gathered his gear into his lap. Then Browne returned to the building, unlocked the door using his card, and came back out five minutes later carrying a Thermos. Watching the car's red and white reverse lights flare up, he waited again. Browne backed up and then moved forward. Browne's headlights shone into Cavanaugh's truck but Cav was sitting low enough to be unnoticeable. Browne turned right. Cavanaugh waited another fifteen minutes before exiting his truck with his bag. He slipped on a pair of latex gloves. The beak of his cap rested on the sunglasses covering his eyes. If the back of the building had a camera, it wouldn't see the truck and it couldn't make out his face.

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"Mama, bring me a jar of the pond water," Wolf asked his wife as he waved the eagle feathers through the smoke and guided it to his nose.

"JJ's?"

"Yes. The healing water."

He added a few more sticks to the fire. The fire grew larger. He added some more.

Mama returned and handed him the jar. He took another pinch of peyote and threw it on. He and his wife leaned in again. Using the feathers, he brushed the fragrance up to Mama. Chanting another prayer, he dipped his fingers into the water and sprinkled a few drops into the fire. Steam hissed as he and Mama dropped to their knees to get closer. He splashed the fire again and the peyote steam gathered on his upper lip and he took a deep breath. He looked over at Mama, who had on a floppy hat. Sweat, or peyote water, beaded on her forehead and rolled down her cheeks like tears.

Overhead, a hawk flew high above the trees.

"Come, Mama, it's time," he said, as he held his wife's hand and helped her up. His spirit entered the bird. Still in a trance, they retired to their cabin and sat on the floor in their bedroom, next to the stove, and closed their eyes.

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Laura sat in the chair in front of the easel. She was puzzled by the lack of noise. No rustling of the leaves, no twitter of the birds. No bees, flies, gnats. It troubled her. Thinking back to Hemingway and his suicide, she realized that his place might be just five or ten miles away. She wondered what possessed him. He was so talented and, seemingly, practical. Straight forward. A tough guy in a world of tough guys. She remembered a quote of his that reflected her own thoughts on art. "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." She turned to a blank page of her art pad and plucked a pencil from behind her ear. Again she drew the sliver, splattering, pattering water as it spilled into the pond. Turning her pencil so that it was almost flush with the pad, she completed the little ringlets in the water as it floated into the banks. She drew the trees and brush again. The rocks and grass. The airy clouds. Hours later, she bent over into her toolbox of brushes and pencils and picked out a red one. She added berries to a tree that hung out over the water. The tree began to bleed. A drop hit the water with the tiniest of splashes and diffused. The silence around her engulfed her. She was lost in the lake on her pad.

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Cavanaugh hooked the microcontroller to the door lock by plugging the DC adapter into the bottom of the lock. He sent a READ command, knowing it would be accepted without a password. It returned the sitecode and the last keycode that unlocked the door. Special Agent Browne's keycode. Using the data pieces, the next script sent a command to unlock it. The entire set of transactions lasted as long as a blink of the eye. He put on a pair of latex gloves and opened the door. There was no camera. He walked down the hall and found a door with Browne's name on it. It was unlocked. He entered and searched the agent's desk. Opening an unsealed manila envelope, he pulled out the necklace. It bothered him that he was right about the necklace. That the keys hadn't been checked. That there were still safety deposit boxes out there, somewhere. Why? If Browne wasn't going to check them out, then why did he keep them? Did someone tell him to keep them separate from the evidence. He flipped through Picardes wallet with quick, deft fingers and removed the ID. Why wasn't that in the evidence lockers? Was Picardes death even recorded yet? Why not? Underneath the wallet, there was a yellow sticky note with a name and number. He wrote down both. Hooking some paper clips together, he replaced the necklace with the clips and patted it. If Browne didn't actually open the envelope, it would seem as if the keys were still in it. He returned the wallet and envelope to their previous positions. He rifled through some files in the right side drawer but didn't see a reference to Picardes, Laura or Cavanaugh. Sliding the drawer closed, he snuck down the hall into the file room and searched for each of their names in the cabinets. Picardes had a folder. Cavanaugh had a folder and Laura had a folder. He took pictures of each sheet in each and then walking out the back, he let the door close and lock. Browne would still be registered as the last to enter the building.

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Wolf flew over the trees looking for whoever might have left evil symbols near their door but the man remained hidden. He flew down to Ketchum and back again. He flew side to side over their property in Obsidian. He flew halfway to JJ's cabin and back. There was no one. Mama joined a small mule deer herd that grazed the grasses near the road. One of the deer had heard a man approach the cabin in the dead of night. The deer looked at the man and in the instant before they ran, she saw a dark skinned man painted up with a skeleton face and wearing a black coat, white shirt and black top hat. He carried a chicken. The rest of the herd bolted into a ravine but her mule deer remained to watch from the trees across the highway. He approached the store, walking a few feet up the drive. The chicken struggled. He snapped its neck. He walked a few more steps. He cut off the chicken's head and drained the blood on the drive. Her deer's ears were perfect because she couldn't understand what he mumbled as the blood splashed to the ground. It wasn't English or Shoshone, Ute or Navajo. Something else. Maybe French but she didn't know any words. Then the man cut off the chicken's feet and laid them in the blood. He pulled two small black feathers from a coat pocket and

placed them on the feet. A mist or smoke rose from the little pile as the tufts of the feathers were consumed into the smoke. Her deer couldn't stand it any longer and she bolted for the herd. Mama woke up in the cabin, sitting on the floor, next to her husband. She didn't know where the man had gone but she knew what he did. He didn't find what he wanted but he went ahead and had placed on a curse on them. She didn't know why.

----

Laura stared into the pool of water and blood. She thought of drowning and death. Of bleeding and death. She remembered how cold the water had been the day before. Almost cold enough to steal her breath but, by going through the experience, she was able to discover a hidden treasure, the cave. Maybe death was a journey, she thought. Maybe life was a trial, sort of an empty purgatory with bits of Dante's Inferno. She almost drew an angel into the sketch but instead drew a dark feather on the water's edge. She didn't realize she wasn't alone until she heard a twig snap directly behind her.

--34--

Laura's heart jumped. She was no longer in the drawing. Or outside the drawing. The drawing didn't matter at all. There had been no noise. Not a sound. No birds, bees, flies, breeze. She jerked her head out of her dream at the crack of the twig and saw a maniacal skeleton snarling man running towards her with a curved blade in his hand. The contrasts couldn't be greater. As day from night, ice from steam, lava and snow. It was like a full mirror had dropped and shattered. She leaped up from her chair and crashed into her easel. She stumbled around it in a bizarre dance. She hadn't brought a gun. She had felt safe in the woods that Dr. Doolittle called home. Where was Cavanaugh? Her life rushed through her mind with a thousand different thoughts and questions. She had nowhere to go. She fainted for the woods and the monster took a step that way. He was dressed in opera clothes which was so damn strange. She couldn't get a grip. It would be comical if her life was not one second from death. She ran the other way, towards the waterfall that hid the cave.

Maybe if she could reach the cave.

She thought she'd run into the water and then jump and dive. Maybe the crazy man couldn't swim. She took a step towards the woods as did he again but then she ran along the edge and turned. She'd splash through the water and then jump. The man didn't say anything but grunted like an animal insane. She remembered the way Picardes had been. This man was the same. Like some kind of dark magic possessed him. Voodoo, Cavanaugh had said. Still running, her right foot splashed into the water, she swung her left foot forward and she tripped on a large unseen rock. She fell face first into the water. Too shallow to swim. He was on her in second. He dropped to his knees and raised his knife.

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Mama was the first to awake. She turned to Wolf. His eyes were closed but his lips were moving. She hoped he was praying. Based on what she had seen, they needed protection. Then she remembered the little ceremony that Wolf had performed with the fire, peyote and water. He wanted the peyote to summon the revealing dreams and then the healing water to block the dark magic from the skeleton man. With some amazement, she realized that Wolf had already known what she was just shown. The skeleton man had come to curse them but feeling Wolf's power he could not enter their home to kill them.

She arose and fixed some tea and sandwiches. When she returned to their room, Wolf was already awake.

"He's some kind of voodoo witch," Mama said, as she placed the lunch tray on a low table. "You should eat."

Wolf nodded. "Thank you." He bit into a sandwich and said, "By way of the hawk, I could not find him. I looked everywhere. From here to Ketchum and then from here halfway to JJs."

"And evil man, with great magic. He could be anywhere," she answered.

“But he came here. He must have had a purpose. And I don’t think he was looking for us or he would have brought a greater magic than he carried. We were lucky.”

“I don’t know about luck. You are gifted, Wolf.”

“The man is very powerful. We need to figure out where he went and why he was here. The answer to those two questions might be the same. Could it be that he was looking for the man with the tie?”

Mama shook her head, “No, I don’t think so but I do think there is some kind of relationship.”

“Who else has been here? JJ and his lady friend?”

“Some of our friends too.”

“I think he was looking for JJ or the lady.”

“Or both.”

“The man with the tie asked for JJ?”

“Hmmm, hmmm,” Mama murmured.

“I think I should go up to his cabin and warn him.”

“That’s a long walk for an old man.”

Wolf smiled. “Tomorrow. Tonight we sleep.”

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Cavanaugh avoided driving in front of the FBI office by turning right. He needed to go through the documents that he had photographed and he needed a quiet place to work. He would not return to Idaho that night and maybe not the next day. He wanted to call Laura but it was too late.

Even though it was near midnight, he knew he could call Jake – any hour of any day. They had spent years together in the Rangers, on all day and all night missions, all over the world. A midnight call would almost be expected.

He booked a room in a different motel across town from the FBI. Not that it mattered. Odessa was small enough that the FBI was just minutes from him, if they figured out that he broke into their office and if they figured out how to find him. He would take his chances with that.

After settling in his room, he transferred the pictures from his phone to his pad where he could enlarge them to a more standard size. The information in his file was pretty much what he expected. His education, his training, his military experiences, his mother and father and their accomplishments. His suspected political views which, in reality, were none. He had one view of politics – follow the money. That usually led to the motivations.

He scanned through Picardes files. He wanted to find something that would give him a clue as to which banks Picardes used. He did find a banking slip. He wrote the name down. He also found inside information on the Picardes family. Not surprisingly, the crime family was not a happy family. Internal squabbles between Roger, his brother and their father had practically pushed Roger out into the streets. Too bad. Maybe that’s why the FBI had moved so slowly on the body. Nobody wanted it.

Then he turned to Laura. One page into her files and he had to stop and whistle. Laura was rich. Very rich. As one of the great great grandchildren of a Texas wildcatter, she was at least eight digits rich. No wonder she couldn’t close out her account. He laughed at how stupid he must have seemed to her. And yet, money never entered their conversation, except for the day at her bank when he wanted her to close out. He grinned again. She had more than one bank. She had more than five banks and a couple of investment firms. And she lived on a ranch, raising chickens, taking care of a horse and painting pictures. His heart warmed.

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Laura was sure she was dead. She wrestled as he grabbed her hair and neck and pushed her face in the water. With one of his knees pinning the back of her leg, she couldn’t move. She swallowed water as she jerked her head to the side. She caught just a breath and he pushed her in again. She expected the knife to plunge into her back and puncture her lung or liver. She anticipated the sharp pain. She could almost feel the blade tip slide into her. At any second.

But he didn't. Instead he tried to hold her under the water and then he pulled back. He tried to get her chin up. She realized, he wanted to slice her throat. Like a chicken. She fought but couldn't break free. She heard her splashing. She heard him splashing and then she heard something else splashing. And roaring.

Hercules lumbered into the water on all fours. He rose up on his hind legs and knocked the skeleton man off her back with one big swipe. He tried to get up but Hercules swung a paw across his head that knocked him halfway up the bank, such that his face was partly in the water. He looked dead. Hercules ambled over and sniffed him. He pushed him but the man didn't move. Hercules turned to look at her. She expected him to continue the fight with her but he didn't. He tilted his head, straightened up and walked away into the woods. Leaving the dead body to her.

--35--

Cavanaugh went back to his own file and continued reading. It detailed his tracking of Picardes, from New Orleans to Biloxi to Nashville to Memphis to Chicago to St Louis to Kansas City to Austin to Odessa. It never made sense to him. Oh, the music aspect was obvious. New Orleans jazz, Biloxi Mississippi blues, Nashville country, Memphis country and blues, Chicago blues, St Louis blues, Kansas City blues, Austin country. Picardes liked to party and he liked southern music. And southern women. Maybe Cavanaugh missed a city. Maybe Picardes went from Austin to Dallas and then planned to go on through Odessa on his way to, and this was another hole, where. Phoenix? Las Vegas? Phoenix was never known as a music city. Sure they had music but anybody can find a juke. And Las Vegas was pure show – gambling and glitz. Maybe the next stop wasn't about music. Maybe the next stop was Juarez. Ciudad Juarez. That wasn't a music town either. But it was a good town for drugs and cash. Maybe Odessa was just on the way to some business and Laura happened to be one distraction too long.

The hit men didn't go to Laura's to kill her, but to find and kill him. Maybe they weren't going to kill him just because he killed Roger. Maybe they were going to kill him because of what they thought he knew about Roger. But what did he know? Just where he went and when. And, in their minds, possibly, who he met and where he was going and what kind of business would get done.

Cavanaugh didn't know how he could possibly confirm the theory, except for the safety deposit boxes. Maybe they held a clue. Maybe they would send more men to kill him and he just happened to leave Laura alone in his house. Cavanaugh kicked the bed.

He couldn't fly out of Odessa and into Hailey in the middle of the night. It was too late to coordinate anything with the part time airport personnel. They wouldn't get in until maybe eight. That meant he couldn't possibly get back home until six or later in the evening. He had already been gone too long. He would have to call Jake.

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Still standing in the water, dripping, suddenly aware that she was frozen from her thighs down and cold from her hips up, Laura glanced over at the dead man and sloshed forward until she reached the bank. She looked for Hercules but didn't see him.

She stood on the bank and shivered. She couldn't possibly bury the body. She had no shovel either with her or in her truck. Cavanaugh may have kept a shovel somewhere, maybe in the stalls, maybe there was a tool shed somewhere, but she could spend the rest of the evening just looking for it. She was tired, wet, completely exhausted from the sudden fright and the fight for her life. And the shock of seeing Hercules break the man with two swipes. At the time of the fight, for a split second she didn't know if Hercules would come for her, but she was grateful for him.

And thinking of the stalls, she wondered where Rosie had wandered off. Would the howls keep her away? Was she afraid of the strange man? Or the big grizzly? Or both. Laura was alone. After one of the biggest moments in her life, she cried. Alone. She sat in the wooden chair, bent over and sobbed. Her life seemed to be one big downward spiral ever since she met Roger Fountainebleau. Or Picardes. Or

whatever his name was. She had slipped into using the name Roger had given her. And Roger was a Cajun killer. Until Cavanaugh, or JJ, or whoever Dr Doolittle called himself, killed him. She sobbed, at first, gently and then uncontrollably and then gently and then the sob broke. She gave a rueful little smile. She thought of Rex Harrison as Dr Doolittle, then Eddie Murphy and then Cavanaugh. Her Cavanaugh. Her Army Ranger, movie actor, Little House on the Prairie Cavanaugh. Where was a hero when you needed one, she thought. Somewhere in Texas, or on his way back. What a story she had to tell.

She gathered her drawings, pads and pencils. She left the chair and the easel. She could only carry so much and the sun was setting. Climbing the hill, she passed the stables. They were empty. She began to worry but she knew she couldn't look for them in the dark.

She made it to the edge of the ground in front of the cabin and looked up. Hercules was sitting off to the side with his back to the cabin wall. He watched her approach. She could hear him breathing. It almost sounded like growling. She saw his powerful chest rise and fall. She slowed. She was afraid of him, there was no doubt. Her quickening heart and a new shot of adrenalin told her that. But she couldn't sleep outside. Oh, maybe in the cab of the truck, with the doors locked tight. But what good would the thin sheet metal in a door do when an eight foot grizzly wanted in? Or glass? Nothing. Scared to death again, she took another step. Her heart pounded. She sweated in all the wrong places. Her legs felt like lead and then. Hercules reared his head. Oh God, here it comes. He's going to kill me, she thought. His chin lifted and then his whole head thrust from side to side with a spasm. And a sneeze.

She laughed. Hercules didn't want to eat her. He just needed to sneeze.

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Cavanaugh went back to Picardes file and stared at the transaction slip. Cite Soleil Community and Financial Services. The transaction was just a two thousand dollar withdrawal but it seemed odd. He searched for banks in New Orleans. Bigger banks had to be there and they were. As rich as the Picardes family was, why not use Wells Fargo or Chase or Hancock? They would have branches everywhere. And then it dawned on him. They, or really Roger, didn't want the exposure of a big bank. He would not want audits and examiners and federal agents poring over every detail. He would want something small and personal, like a service. A financial service.

But something else tugged at him. The name of the financial service company was Cite Soleil. A French name. New Orleans voodoo came from Haitian voodoo which came from West Africa. He had heard the name before and he thought about Haiti. He searched for cities in Haiti and found Cite Soleil. They had a devastating earthquake in 2010. That's what he remembered.

Passing through Fort Benning for another round of airborne training, there had been relief drive posters at the churches for the victims of Haiti, and particularly for Cite Soleil. He didn't know why that city had been named.

He began to read the articles. Cite Soleil was one of the most impoverished cities and areas in the Americas. People lived in cardboard shacks, shacks made of tin, shacks made from wooden pallets and a tin roof. Crime was rampant. At the time, gangs had been flourished and controlled individual sections of a living hell but reportedly, their influence had diminished. Mortality was extremely high. Murder, drugs, and prostitution still flared in Cite Soleil.

Why would you name a bank after one of the poorest areas in the world? He needed to get to New Orleans. But first, he needed to call Jake.

-----

Checking the caller id, Jake answered his cell, "Yep." It was early morning, before light. He rolled over onto his back and positioned the phone between his ear and pillow.

"Did you check on Mama?"

"No, I couldn't. I had a run."

"Today, okay?"

"I have another flight booked but I can get there this afternoon. Maybe evening. Okay?"

"It will have to do."

"Okay. Where are you?"

"I'll be in myself as soon as I can."

"Okay," Jake said and paused. "What's going on?"

"Not now."

"Okay."

-----

Wolf woke up with the sun and tenderly shook Mama. "How did you sleep," he asked through a yawn.

"Not long enough," she said, and lifted the covers closer to her head and tucked them under her chin.

"Are you going to sleep all day?"

"Hmmm."

"Well, I'm going to get up."

"Okay."

She opened one eye just enough to see him cross the room for the kitchen. She listened to him bang around. She flinched with every pot and spoon and fork clunking against each other. "Where do we keep the filters?"

"Above the pot."

"Where?"

"In the cabinet."

"Okay." It was quiet for a moment. "Where do we keep the coffee?"

"In the cabinet."

"Where?"

"Above the pot."

Her feet hit the floor. She knew the next question. How much water. And then it would be. How many scoops. That man. He could mix the most complicated potions and medicines but he couldn't make a pot of coffee. She wrapped a robe around her and padded to the kitchen.

--36--

Although amused by Hercules, Laura was still uncomfortable with him. He was eight feet tall while she was close to five. He was half a ton. She was just a tenth of his weight. The height and the weight difference bothered her but it was more than that. She didn't know what to say to him. She wanted to but didn't dare get close to him. The only interaction she had seen was the little play acting between Cavanaugh and the bear. Hercules might not react the same way. But, on the other hand, it appeared that he had been waiting for her. She wondered if it was even possible for the bear to think about and anticipate her moves. Like Rosie did, who she missed.

Just like men, she thought, when in doubt, feed them. She ducked inside the cabin and came back out with the tub of honey. She set it down in front of Hercules. He bent over and stuck his nose in it. Pulling his head out, he licked his lips, nose and snout and then dug into it again. The goo covered his nose and his furry mouth and his tongue slid all around his face. He even seemed to smile.

"Good night Hercules," Laura called from the door. Pushing it closed she walked back to the bedroom, laid across the bed and fell asleep.

-----

Cavanaugh held up the necklace with the keys and wondered where. Where would Picardes rent a safety deposit box? And why? Cavanaugh thought of Picardes as a town hopping serial killer who traveled from New Orleans to Nashville to Chicago to New York to Miami. He never seemed to settle down. Except for New Orleans, which was the home of jazz, gumbo, rum, absinthe, voodoo, drugs and Bourbon Street sex clubs.

He twirled the keys under the motel lamp light and watched the brass twinkle as it turned. How could he figure out the bank? What would the FBI have done?

He searched the internet and read up on safety deposit boxes. Maybe the FBI agent wasn't in some sort of conspiracy. Maybe he was just trying to figure out what to do with a set of keys that could be used in only one box and that one box could be anywhere in the country. The odds of finding the box were enormous. He would need help. He had to call HQ.

He turned out the light and meant to sleep for a couple of more hours.

-----

"Here, let me get it. You go sit down over there," Mama said to Wolf.

"Thank you," he said as he watched her pull a spoon out and measure the coffee. She filled the pot with water and poured it into the coffee maker.

They had been married for over fifty years. They met as teens on the reservation and they married before he was sent to Vietnam. When they shipped him home with shrapnel in his gut and back, she nursed him. The Marine doctors had removed all of the pieces except one little irregular shaped shard. It was somehow buried in his spinal. Surgery in the 60's was too crude to safely extract it so they decided to leave it in. She stayed with him through the long, hard recovery. There were times when he still walked with a limp, especially when he was tired or working too long. He sighed.

"What's the matter?" She asked.

"I need to go up and see her."

"You can't walk that far."

"I know but I've got to try. She is in danger. I know it."

"She's a strong woman, Wolf."

"That curse was stronger. She won't be able to withstand him."

"I think you would be surprised."

"I still have to see."

"You should wait for a sign."

"Didn't we both sense the evil magic?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that 'sign' enough?"

"No. We don't know where he went," she said.

"But we know only one person who could be hurt by him and she's alone."

"If you go, I'll be alone."

"He won't be back. We prayed for a hedge of protection."

Mama watched him sip his coffee. His hand trembled. "It's too far for you at your age."

"My age. I can still hunt and fish and track all day."

"It's not during the day that I worry about."

"I'll be fine, Mama," he said as he reached across and took her hand.

"We're not kids anymore."

"Maybe we are," he said and gave her a seductive smile. "I could prove that."

She stood up and laughed and bent over to kiss his cheek.

He grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap.

She giggled.

"We're still kids at heart." He kissed her neck. And then her lips.

She sighed. "Wolf," she whispered.

He didn't answer but kissed her again and hugged her and buried his head on her chest.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "Come on," she said as she took his hand.

-----

Waking early, Laura finished her coffee and peeked outside. Hercules still had his back against the cabin. He had been sleeping but he heard Laura and was just stirring. The pre dawn light permeated through the trees and he dropped to all fours and ambled into the woods, going wherever eight foot bears go. He turned his head around and looked back at her one more time before disappearing. She knew it was no accident that he had stayed outside her cabin during the night. She was grateful for his protection and, possibly, his friendship. She lifted her hand to him and smiled. But she was interested in Rosie and Red. She hadn't seen either of the horses for a couple of days. She packed a lunch, a couple of apples, some water and a box of bullets. She slung her bag across her shoulder and picked up her rifle. She could hear the early morning birds twittering in the trees. A soft breeze blew across the front of the cabin like a whisper from a child. Hard to imagine, she thought, there was a dead body down by the waterfall. She still didn't know what she would do with it. She walked towards the stable. She didn't want to bury the body. She didn't even want to report it. He tried to kill her why should it be her responsibility to care for the carcass. If she were back home, she could drive into the middle of nowhere and dump the body and let the carrion picking animals take care of him. The horses still weren't in the stable. She continued on to the pond and wondered how long a body could lay before decomposing. Maybe, she thought, she could haul it up to the cabin if Red were around and then take it to the sheriff in Ketchum or Sun Valley. But what could she tell the sheriff? A blood curdling voodoo man tried to kill her on Cavanaugh's land. Or was it JJ's. She really wanted Cavanaugh. She could see the ripple of the water from just inside the trees. She stepped from the brush. She dreaded even looking over at the body but she had to. The body was gone.

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Cavanaugh's eyes snapped opened and he shook his head. 'The body was gone.' He closed his eyes again. He heard the words in his head, in a dream that had no visuals and he didn't know what it meant. The body was gone. He had slept a lot longer than he wanted and it disoriented him. He opened his eyes again. The sun was bright outside his motel room. Way too bright. Way past ten. Way past time. He rubbed his eyes and tried to make sense of what he had heard. He thought of his days as a Ranger when there were plenty of bodies. Real war was real hell. One second your buddy was right there next to you, smiling at you, and then, the body was gone. But not gone, just splattered into thousands of pieces. Blood was everywhere. Cavanaugh wiped at his face with the grisly memory of an RPG blowing up one of his foxhole partners. He spit out imaginary blood and bone fragments. And wiped his mouth with his arm. No, no, no. That wasn't the message. A one on one man hunt through the Zagros mountains along the Iraqi – Iranian border was also dangerous. One moment you strain for a grip on a mountain side and the next, you're gone. No. He washed his face in the motel room's bath, bending down to splash water on his face, lifting up to look in the mirror. After five or six splashes, he used the towel to dry. He was sure he hadn't been dreaming. The words came to him without any visual context. If it wasn't a dream, then what was it? A message? A telepathic message? He didn't believe in mental tricks. And he couldn't waste any more time speculating on it though it seemed important. He had to call HQ. HQ was another Special Ops vet that Cavanaugh had worked with on a couple of missions and they became friends. But HQ worked for the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency. The DIA was very similar to the NSA except the DIA was military intelligence, espionage and, sometimes, operations. Cavanaugh picked up his phone, all ready to punch a number to a dead drop message box. It was a dead drop from Cavanaugh's end. They never directly talked to each other for secrecy's sake. Cavanaugh

would call the number and leave a message. HQ would pick up the message and reply. Sometimes within an hour, sometimes longer. Then Cavanaugh would call the box every hour. He didn't know how HQ had rigged the system but his best guess was that HQ had set up a call forwarding sequence that couldn't be traced by his agency or the NSA. A series of computers tied together using proxies that disguised the end points. Cavanaugh would call and leave a message. HQ would call and retrieve the message by encrypting it and dropping it in a different box and then forwarding a different encrypted message with varying time to live hops. HQ presumably used a different method to then descramble and listen to the encrypted message.

Cavanaugh punched in the numbers on his throw away cell and waited for the rings to stop and then for a beep. He said, "Roger Picardes, bank transactions, two months," and hung up.

He was still bothered by the 'body was gone' thing. Maybe Laura? He tapped her number and waited. And waited. He ended the call. Damn.

He called Jake.

-----

Running Wolf packed a back pack and attached his rifle. Mama walked with him through the store. He kissed her on the lips and then, kissed her gently on the forehead as he laid his hands lightly on her shoulders. "Bye Mama." He opened the door and stepped out.

"Look who's here."

She stepped to the door and said, "Red!"

"Is that not a sign?" He turned his hand outward, toward the big draft horse.

She hesitated. "It's a sign. Maybe a sign of trouble."

"We know there's trouble, Mama. We just don't know what kind. Here, let's get her close to the steps and I'll fit her with a bridle and reins." He ducked into the storeroom and returned. He adjusted the equipment and threw a horse pad across her back. He didn't have a saddle that would fit properly. He kissed his wife again and climbed up, over Red's back. "Goodbye, Mama."

"You look like a warrior, Wolf."

"I am a warrior." He tapped Red with the heel of his moccasin and they turned toward the road.

Mama clenched her hands together under her bosom and grimaced as he crossed the highway and rode up into the trees.

-----

"Jake, where are you?"

"Reno."

Cavanaugh thought a minute. "Four hours away?" He didn't waste words. He knew Jake would understand.

"As soon as I can. Is something wrong?"

"Maybe. I need you to check on her."

"Mama?"

Cavanaugh squinted. "Huh, yeah," he said and continued, "check on Mama but check on Laura, too. She's up at the cabin."

"The girl from Texas."

"Yes."

"The one that it's not what I think."

"Never mind," Cavanaugh said. "I flagged HQ."

"Something's going on."

"Yes, I have the feeling that I'm being followed or there's a bigger game. I just don't know."

"What? Why?"

"I'm guessing it's something to do with Picardes."

"Hmmm, it doesn't really fit."

“No.”

“Okay. Got it. I’ll leave as soon as I get the okay. Should be soon.”

“Thanks.”

-----

Laura ran over to where the body was supposed to have been. Back in Texas, she could hunt. Most of the time, she hunted coyote who tried to snatch her chickens, but she had also hunted mule deer. She was used to tracking in the sand which was much easier than mountain rock chips. She scanned the area and then bent over and looked closely. She noticed a couple of indentations as the rocks seemed to be pushed apart. Maybe a knee that had dug into the ground, maybe an unsteady foot that thrust awkwardly and fought to gain balance. She couldn’t tell. She followed an imaginary line up to some grass and brush. Maybe there a few crushed blades, some branches not quite right. She was much more familiar with a dry, sandy terrain. She heard a click and then another, like a rock hitting another rock. She tensed for a second. Then, she pulled her rifle from her bag and held it in front of her with one hand on the stock and the other palm resting on the trigger guard.

The clicking got closer. She raised her gun. And then she heard a snort and a horse pushed its head through the brush.

“Rosie, baby,” Laura said with relief. “You’re back.”

Rosie lifted her head and dropped it and snorted.

“Where’s Red?”

Almost as if Rosie understood, she turned her head towards the way she came.

“Do we need to find her?”

Rosie stamped one shoe and snorted.

“Okay, let’s go see,” Laura said as she held her bridle. “Can you carry this for me?” Laura lifted her bag up onto Rosie’s back and cinched it. “First, we should go to the stable and get a saddle.” Laura guided her back up the hill. “That’s a good girl.”

-----

Wolf had crossed the highway on Red’s back and they made their way up the low mountain rock. It wasn’t a steep climb, but steady. They weaved in and out of the trees and big sharp granite stone clefts. Wolf wanted to avoid tramping along the highway because of the danger from the cars and trucks and also because he felt exposed to every passerby. He was more at home in his mountains than on civilization’s pavement.

He had packed a rifle because it was a grown up security blanket. The list of predator animals in that part of Idaho was fairly short – black bears, cougars, coyotes, bobcats and a few grizzlies. Only the grizzlies really scared him. The cats were sneaky but cowardly. They wouldn’t attack a grown man. The black bears avoided men unless the man threatened the bear cubs. And the handful of the big grizzlies were much further north.

Of course, there are always exceptions. He knew Hercules. Hercules would stop by the back of the store and trick for treats. Like Halloween but much more frequently. Hercules could be anywhere. He was king of this part of lower Idaho and he liked to walk every uninhabited inch. And, then, when Hercules got lonesome he would go to JJ’s cabin or down to the store and get some attention.

Riding on Red’s back, Wolf turned his eyes to the skies and scanned for hawks, eagles and vultures. Eagles would be a good sign. Hawks would be normal and vultures would be bad. He saw a red-tailed hawk and then a couple of turkey vultures gliding very lazily up ahead. And he saw a few puffs of cloud drifting ever so slowly above the tree tops. The vultures outnumbered the hawk, but Wolf didn’t take it as a particularly bad sign.

Guiding Red through rivened granite, Wolf figured he was about halfway up the trail to the cabin. The crannied gorge rose between five and ten feet above his head and twisted and turned so that he could only see a few feet ahead. Red’s horse shoes clip clopped on the stone as Wolf held the reins loosely.

Red knew where she was going. But, suddenly, a dark shadow floated somewhere on his left and he grabbed tightly on the reins. Red snorted. Wolf couldn't tell if it were a bear or a cougar. He reached for his gun with his right hand but missed as something slammed him hard in the back on his left. He heard a human grunt. As his hand pulled up from the rifle and missed, Wolf continued to grab. He caught on to his knife and pushed back.

Wolf was able to glance backward. It was the black man with the white painted face. He too held a knife. A long, curving ceremonial knife shaped like a black snake with a pointed head. But he was off balance, much more off balanced than Wolf. Red was a big horse and impossible to straddle on his haunches. The man swung his knife from behind Wolf while Wolf pushed. He sliced Wolf's left shoulder as he slid backward on the horse. Almost on cue, Red lifted up and Wolf slashed back with his knife, cutting the man's thigh as he fell off the horse. Wolf tried to turn the horse around but the gulch was just too narrow. The black man got up and hobbled off, back down the canyon, with his free hand clutching his thigh.

Wolf's head swirled. His shoulder ached but he also couldn't move it. A strange tingle radiated down into his left hand. His fingers could no longer grip the reins. The paralysis also crept across his back and into his right arm and hand. His fingers stiffened. He dropped his knife. He was paralyzed from the shoulders to his hips. The weird feeling snaked into his brain and his legs. He couldn't control his movements. He had trouble breathing. Because his legs were numb, he could no longer steady himself on top. He slid off Red's back and plopped on the cold stone. He thought of Mama alone in the store, and the man running towards her. He passed out.

----

After flying four hours earlier that morning, Jake drove as fast as he could to Mama's. He had promised his buddy, Cav. He had his weapons next to him on the front seat of his grey Suburban. His foot alternated between the gas pedal and the brake as he negotiated the curves, sometimes kicking up gravel on the shoulders. The Suburban ate up the highway at eighty miles per hour. He pushed it harder. As he slid into the store's graveled drive, he could see Mama fighting off a black man with her broom right at the front door of the store.

Jake grabbed his rifle and jumped out of his SUV. The crazed black man, with a white painted face, wildly swung a knife at Mama and cut a slit in the skirt of her flowing dress. Mama blocked a return swipe of the knife by swinging down with her heavy handled broom. Jake cocked his rifle. The man heard the click and turned his head to look with both eyes wide opened. Jake aimed and shot him through the right eye and the back of his head exploded outward, away from Mama. The body dropped on the steps like a sack of Idaho potatoes.

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Jake ducked out from behind the Suburban's driver side door, yelled and then ran up to Mama, "Are you alright?"

She hugged him and said, "Thank you! Thank you! I'm so happy to see you. Oh my." She held him out in front of her and looked at his face. "How did you ever?"

"Cavanaugh sent me. He was worried. About something. He didn't say. He just said to check on Mama." He looked at the dead guy. "Seems he was right."

"He has the gift of sight," Mama said. "But I don't think he realizes it, yet."

"Where's Wolf?"

"He went up to see the girl."

"That's my next stop. He wanted me to check on you and then, Laura." He glanced over at the dead guy.

"Any idea who he is?"

"He came here during in the night and put a hex on us."

"He's not a Native."

"No, Wolf thought he was Caribbean. A kind of voodoo priest."

“New Orleans?”

“Maybe.”

“The guy that Cav killed was from New Orleans.”

“What guy? We didn’t hear about that.”

Jake relayed the story that he had heard on the plane trip with Cavanaugh from Hailey to Odessa. He ended with, “And so Picardes was heavily involved in voodoo. Maybe Cav thinks the Picardes are avenging the son’s death.”

“The magic was powerful,” Mama said. She bent down to look at the ceremonial knife. “It’s shaped like a viper.” She stuck a hand into her skirt and pulled a pair of reading glasses from a pocket. “The tip of the blade looks corroded. And there’s blood on the base. But he didn’t cut me.” She fluffed out her skirt. “Just cut my dress a little.”

Jake squatted and took a closer look. “Definitely blood. Not really fresh but maybe an hour or two old.” He reached his hand out to turn it over but then pulled back. He didn’t want to touch it. Because it would be police evidence and also, he had a weird feeling about it. “The tip is definitely covered with something other than blood.” He stood up. “Where did he come from?”

Mama shook her head, “I don’t know but you better get up to that cabin. Wolf’s headed that way. He may need your help.”

“Wolf doesn’t drive.”

“Red took him up the trail.”

“Why was Red here?”

“That’s a good question that needs a good answer.”

“But the body?”

“Don’t worry about the body. My people can take care of it.”

“Are you sure?”

Mama threw her hands up and shushed him away. “Go! My Wolf might need you.”

-----

Cavanaugh drove over to a coffee shop and ordered breakfast and a coffee. He checked the town’s morning paper but didn’t see any mention of a break in at the FBI office. He checked but he didn’t think it likely that the FBI would advertise a robbery of their station house. It would be like a firehouse burning down. The Odessa PD probably wouldn’t stop laughing for a month. He wasn’t worried about prints. He had worn gloves. And a cap down over his eyes. He checked his phone. No calls.

He sat back in his booth, looked out the big glass window in front and thought about the keys. What would a psychotic serial killer like Picardes keep in a safety deposit box. Fingertips? Ear lobes? A tooth from every woman he had killed? He imagined Picardes with a pair of pliers, or scissors, pulling out a tooth from a violated woman’s body, or snipping off their ear lobe. The last little morsel of sausage and dab of ketchup on his plate didn’t look so good any more.

He pulled his phone out of the back pocket of his jeans and dialed the drop box. HQ had a message for him. He could retrieve a file with the bank transactions. Cavanaugh wrote down the IP address and the file name. He listened to the message again and made sure he had the correct information written down because, once he hung up, the message would delete itself. He didn’t know how HQ had set that up but HQ was the intelligence expert.

Cavanaugh ordered another coffee and asked the waitress if they had wifi. They did. He walked out to his truck and retrieved his laptop. He downloaded the file of bank transactions that Picardes had used in the past two months. He remembered to save it. If he tried to retrieve it again, the file would be gone. Another HQ trick.

Picardes had operated like a small business. There were debit card transactions in New Orleans, Chicago, and all the other towns he knew about. But also little towns in Louisiana, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas. It was all in chronological order.

Cavanaugh wondered, if he checked the homicides in those towns, how many would have an unsolved murder in the past two months.

He reached the Odessa section in the statement and saw that, in addition to debit card transactions, Picardes had opened an account in the West Texas Savings and Loan. It was just a couple of blocks away. He wrote down all of the bank information including the account number and Picardes social security number, which was included with the file.

He folded his laptop, paid the bill for breakfast and left a good tip.

Driving over to the bank, he opened an account under the name of JJ Cates. He then rented a safety deposit box for a year. The key seemed to be the same as the ones on the necklace but he couldn't pull them out in front of the bank employee. Besides, he would need identification to match Picardes and he couldn't create that in Odessa. He needed to fly back home and get some help.

-----

Laura led Rosie to the stable and saddled her up just in case she needed to ride. Leading her by the reins, she headed back to the cabin to get her knife, pistol and a box of cartridges. Halfway between the stable and the cabin, she heard a vehicle crunch the rock. She couldn't see all the way to the cabin but that's where she figured the truck was. She let go of Rosie, grabbed her rifle and crept through the trees.

She saw a man get out of a Suburban. He reached back in and pulled out a rifle. Damn, she noticed she had left the door open to the cabin. She didn't expect anyone. He slowly made his way to the door. He put his back against the outside wall of the cabin and poked his head in. He held his rifle in front of him. "Hey," she called out from behind a tree. "You." She had him in her sights.

The man swung his rifle up while he dropped at the same time.

She shot him.

He scrambled to his truck.

"Laura, is that you?"

He knew her name but she didn't know him.

"Who are you?"

"Jake, Cavanaugh's buddy."

"How do I know that?"

"How many people would admit that Cavanaugh is his buddy?"

Well, that was a totally unexpected reply. Not one that a bad guy would say. She hesitated. She knew she shot him and shot him good, she seldom missed a shot she had set up for, but he was still able to joke?

"Is Running Wolf up here? Is he with you?"

"No."

"Mama said he was coming this way. Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Look, I'll toss out my rifle and put my hands up, just don't shoot."

"Okay. Come on out. Nice and easy."

He tossed his rifle away from the truck, where she could see it. He had his hands up as he stood up and stepped out in front of the truck. Short brown hair, chiseled face with a block jaw. Dark eyes. He was dressed in paratrooper boots, fatigue pants and a gunny green shirt.

She had shot him in the upper part of his right shoulder. The front of his shirt was bloody.

--39--

"Oh my God, did I hurt you?" Laura shouted, as she lowered her rifle, and ran up to Jake.

"No," he replied and put a hand on his shoulder.

Laura relaxed just for a second.

"Of course it hurts," he grimaced.

She tightened right back up.

He rolled his right shoulder and touched lightly with his hand.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but you pointed your rifle."

"I didn't point my rifle," he said through his teeth. "Geez. Holy moley's bare butt. It hurts." He stood next to his AP4 LR-308 semi automatic rifle. It was built for hunting and competitive shooting. It was a good, all-round tool. It made Laura think of all the latest political talk, though she knew most of that talk was just posturing or ignorance. Guns were just another tool out West. She had a Browning .308 BAR ShortTrac. It had a plain wooden stock. It didn't look like an automatic but it was.

"If I had pointed my rifle, you'd be dead," he said.

Laura didn't reply. She just looked at him, deadpanned. She had been around horses and bulls long enough to know manure from a rock. But, just as quick as she could take a breath, quicker than she could raise her own rifle again, he snatched up his gun and shot Hercules' honey tin far down from the cabin, once, twice, three, four times until it sprang up in the air. But he didn't shoot at it while it was spinning wildly. She understood why.

He dropped his rifle again. "No worries."

Laura's eyes sprung open and then closed. "I'm still sorry."

Jake's face softened. "I know you are." He took a deep breath. "And it's kind of my fault for not calling out but I didn't want to warn anybody in case you were in any kind of trouble. I wanted to check first."

"Me? In trouble? From what?"

"That's why Wolf came up here."

"Running Wolf? The old guy from the store?" She asked. "He's not here," she waved her free hand in a one hundred and eighty degree arc.

"He didn't make it up here yet?"

"No. Not that I know. Why?"

"He came up to warn you about the voodoo man."

"I wish he would have. He scared me half to death. If it wasn't for Hercules."

"Hercules was here while Jake was gone?"

"Yes, he saved me from the voodoo whatever."

"Really? You must rate. Hercules usually hides from strangers."

"We had met already."

"He must like you."

"Shouldn't we look at your wound?"

"How much do you know about first aid for bullet wounds?"

"Do you?"

"A little. We were taught some basics for the field."

Laura thought for a second and then said, "Like, how to set a dislocated ankle?"

Jake tilted his head like a dog and asked, "What?"

She chuckled. "That's something that Cavanaugh did, when we first met."

"He set your ankle?"

"No, his ankle." She raised her gun, "I had the drop on him, then, like I do on you now," she said, but smiled and lowered her Browning again. "I thought Rangers were always prepared."

"That's the Boy Scouts."

"Same thing, but with a gun. And a knife. And grenades. And," she continued but he interrupted.

"So you know we're Ranger buddies. It's almost the same thing as scouts," he shook his head. "Let's go inside the cabin. I know where he keeps his supplies." They moved toward the door. "And you can tell me about Cavanaugh, Hercules and the voodoo guy, whom I shot dead."

He went straight to a pantry in the bathroom and pulled down some boxes of gauze, tape and bandages.

She noticed the proper use of English. "You killed Mr. Voodoo?" She talked to him while he set the different articles around the sink.

"Yes." He struggled with his shirt.

"You want me to help?"

He considered it and said, "No." He wrestled the bottom of the shirt over his head and continued talking. "I shot him just a couple of hours ago, down at Mama's. He was trying to rob her. Or something."

"Dead. You're sure about that?" She asked. She noticed the same sinewy, strong muscles in his back that Cavanaugh had. The same V-shaped build.

"Yeah, right through the eye and blew off the back of his head. Dead dead."

"A couple of hours ago? Hmmm," she mumbled to herself. "Hercules killed him yesterday evening, down by the waterfall. Or so I thought. But somehow he was gone in the morning."

"Well, I don't expect this guy will walk away again."

She remembered Roger Picardes in the hallway of her house, trying like a maniac to get at her. "I hope not."

He finally got his shirt up and over his head. With a grunt, he draped it on the bathroom sink, with the bloody parts in the sink. Poking tenderly at the bullet hole just below his clavicle and inside the shoulder joint with the arm, he sucked a bucket of air. "Hand me the antibiotic ointment there."

She handed it to him.

He tried to squeeze it with one hand to get some gel on the index finger of the same hand.

She almost laughed, despite the obvious pain. "Let me help you." She squeezed some on his fingers.

"Thanks." He gently rubbed it on the wound. "Now the back." He turned around and looked at his back in the mirror. "Same deal."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Try to reach your back. Before I waste it on your fingers. See if you can touch it."

He contorted his body and his face. Reaching just the upper edges of the wound, he relented. "Okay, you do it."

She washed her hands and then applied the cream.

"See if he has an oral antibiotic in there."

"Amoxicillin?"

"That's okay, it's something." He moved his shoulder a little after she had finished. "Let's bandage it up. I'll still need to see the doc."

"I'd recommend it."

He ignored her sarcasm. "Let's use the three by three gauze. Just tape it on the outside edges. We just need to keep the medicine on the wound and the dirt out." He was breathing heavily and bubbling his lips.

"Hurt?"

"Damn uncomfortable."

She nodded once and finished with the gauze and bandages.

He picked up his shirt. He lifted the liner from the small bathroom wastebasket and stuffed the shirt in it. "I'll throw this in the truck and get one of Cav's shirts."

She helped him with the shirt whether he liked it or not.

"Whew, I need some water," he said. "Let's sit in the kitchen." He left the bathroom and she followed. After he got his water and they sat, he said, "Now tell me what happened yesterday."

Laura went through the incident with the crazy man down by the lake and how Hercules had spent the night watching over her by the cabin. How she went back down to the lake, found the man had gone and how she found Rosie.

"Your horse?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know. With all the gunfire, she might be gone again. I left her in the woods."

"That's why I didn't shoot the can up in the air. You never know what's back there."

"I figured. Thank you." She got up and fixed herself a glass. "You want more water?"

"Sure, but we should get going. It doesn't take all day to climb the trail to here."

"We need to get you to the doctor."

He lifted his head up and down in agreement. "But, first, we need to find Wolf."

----

Cavanaugh called ahead to the group holding his plane. "Is it ready to go?"

"Physically?"

"Yeah," Cavanaugh's eyes narrowed as he drove to the airport. "Why, what's wrong?"

"Some government guy put a hold on your Cessna. Told us to call him if you came for your plane."

That rang true to Cavanaugh. Somebody was involved with him for some reason. Maybe it was the feds.

Maybe the FBI. He remembered the shell casings on the road by Laura's ranch. The cigarette butt. The Nicorette wrapper. Seemed like everybody had some kind of interest in the Picardes case.

"So why are you telling me?" Cavanaugh asked.

"I figured you were Airborne. Jumper. I saw the tat on your arm."

"Former jumper. Ranger school. Afghanistan. Iraq."

"Yeah, I figured. I'm a vet. I was Air Force." He paused and drawled, "I didn't know him. He could be squat for all I know." He paused again. "Besides, you pay me. He didn't."

Cavanaugh thought he understood. "I'm about ten, fifteen minutes out. I'll make it worth your while.

Can you have her ready? With the prop running?"

"Sure. You got clearance?"

"No. I'm going to have to eyeball the area and hope like hell nobody flies in or out."

"Hang on," the former vet said.

Cavanaugh heard the background sounds get muffled, as if a hand had cradled the mouthpiece, and then heard, "Jimmy, call control and ask if there are any flights in or out. Tell them we want to test one of the planes on the runaway."

He heard a 'sure'. Cavanaugh waited. He was about ten minutes away. Then the voice came back.

"You still there?"

"Yes."

"You'll be good to go. No flights. We'll have it ready."

"I need to get out in a hurry."

"You got it."

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Cavanaugh decided not to take the truck to the rental agency and drove straight to the hangar. He arranged for the mechanics to return the truck and gave them an extra tip. His plane was already humming right at the hangar entrance.

"You're good to go," the head mechanic said, as he shook hands with Cavanaugh.

"Thanks," Cavanaugh said, "It's kind of an emergency."

The mechanic stuffed the bills into his pocket. "No problem."

Cavanaugh stepped up and entered the cockpit. After he strapped in, he turned the radio on and eased the controls to move forward. He rolled towards the field. Instead of air traffic reports, he heard music from the radio. Distracted, he turned to fidget with the radio but, out of the corner of his eye, he saw a black BMW sedan race along the road outside the airport grounds. Anticipating the worst, he muttered,

“Damn,” and left the music on so he could continue using both hands to taxi out to the airstrip and prepare for takeoff as fast as he could.

The radio blared ‘Run Through The Jungle’ by Creedence Clearwater Revival. It was then that he realized the mechanics must have switched the stations from ground control to FM while tinkering with his plane.

“Better run through the jungle,” Tom Fogerty sang and then a guitar twanged.

The car squealed on two wheels as it hooked a right and bore for the strip.

“Thought I heard a rumblin’.” The drums hit a straight, hard beat.

Cavanaugh couldn’t hear the car but he could see it and knew it meant to stop him. He sped up.

The car sped up, too, and was about a hundred yards from the strip.

“Calling to my name.”

Cav did as much as he could to get to air speed, jamming on the controls.

The black sedan slammed on its brakes as it skidded onto the tarmac.

“Two hundred million guns are loaded.”

Uh-oh. Cavanaugh pulled back on the controls, desperately trying to gain lift.

Two men jumped out.

“Satan cries, ‘Take aim!’”

Cav climbed about eight feet off the ground, up, over and beyond their heads.

The two men pulled out their hardware and jerked towards the sky.

“Satan cries, “Take aim!”

Cav sailed over the top of their car, as their guns were halfway up into position.

“Better run through the jungle.”

The men fired at him. He banked just a little. He couldn’t afford to lose control. A takeoff was probably the most dangerous time to fly an airplane.

“Better run through the jungle.”

He leveled off again, banked the other way, and kept trying to gain lift.

“Better run through the jungle.”

One of the bullets ripped through his left wing. He leveled off.

“Whoa, don’t look back to see.”<sup>1</sup>

He kept climbing, and then, when he knew he was far enough away, against the song’s advice, he turned the plane to look at them. They were staring at him. One of them had a pair of large binoculars.

Cavanaugh could picture two big eyes staring at him through the lenses. Knowing he was too far away to be shot at, he gave him a little three fingered John Wayne salute and straightened out for Idaho.

-----

“We’ve got to go down the trail over there,” Jake pointed with his left hand. His right arm was held in a sling that was also strapped around his body. He hoped to eliminate the natural sway when walking.

“Let me lead.” He strode ahead of her.

Laura carried her pack and the two rifles.

“I guess you’ve known Cavanaugh for a long while,” Laura suggested.

“Yep.”

“How long?”

“Ever since we were kids.”

“Around here?”

“My dad was a pilot for his dad, after the Cavanaughs bought this place.”

“Your dad was a pilot, then.”

He glanced back at her. “Yeah, that’s what I said.” He pushed on.

<sup>1</sup> Run Through The Jungle, Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1970

"Just talking."

"So I noticed."

"He said he was tutored," she continued.

"He was." He had a light pant as he pushed through the brush. His eyes darted side to side. Sweat dripped down the sides of his ears.

"So, when did you see him?"

He ignored her and seemed to concentrate on pushing ahead.

"When you were a kid," she prompted him.

"Huh?" He didn't turn around to look at her.

"If he was tutored, when did you see him when he was a kid?"

"When his dad needed a lift, I guess."

"That's it?"

He grunted.

"How did you become buddies if you only saw him once in a while?"

He hesitated a step and did turn around with a look of 'Oh my God' on his face. But her brown eyes were as wide as a doe's. His shoulders drooped a little as if in resignation. "The way most boys do. We got in a fight."

"You got in a fight with Cavanaugh?" She asked and her voice rose a little.

He shrugged with one shoulder. His only reply was, "Yeah."

"Who won," she asked, with a huff in her voice.

"I don't rightly know."

"Come on. You must know," she scoffed.

"Have you ever seen boys fight?"

"I don't know. Maybe. At the rodeo. Way back in grade school," she answered. "Wasn't much time for fighting."

"Well, boys fight until they're tired, that's all." He skirted a large tree. "Unless one of them is really, really good." He took a deep breath.

"Were you good?"

"Probably not. At least not better than each other."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. We threw some punches, bloodied our lips and wrestled until we both had enough." With a little smile on his face, he added, "I could have whipped him."

"Why didn't you?"

"Didn't want to show off."

"Is that right," she trailed off. She figured Cavanaugh had won.

After a while, she asked, "How far away is this trail?"

He blew out a long breath. "How long until we get there," he mimicked.

She noticed. "I'll shut up."

He didn't say anything but kept walking, sliding through the trees, always with his left shoulder first. He went on for a few minutes and then his breathing became more ragged. "Trying to ignore the pain."

She nodded.

"The trail is only a little bit further."

A few minutes later, they broke through the brush and trees and into a small clearing before the top of a rise of rock.

Laura heard a click and a neigh.

"Rosie! You waited for us." She hurried over to her mare. "Good girl."

-----

Mama had figured someone from the tribe would come by and help her with the body but she had no visitors. There was very little traffic on the road. A few semi-tractor trailers hauled goods up north and some brought logs back down south. She knew she couldn't leave the corpse lying in the drive in front of the store, so she got a canvas from the supply. She made sure it had metal eyelets. She strung rope through the eyes and tied them to the ends of a hardwood axe handle. After spreading the canvas next to the body, she knelt down next to it and shoved him onto the canvas. She laid the handle out at the head and stepped through it so the handle rested on the front of her stomach at hip level. She pushed forward using both her hands and hands and the rope tightened with the weight of the dead man. Heaving like a plow horse, she slowly made her way from the front to the back of the store. She grunted and groaned and took quite a few breaks. She stopped when the body was completely hidden from the highway.

She sat on the steps at the back and rested again. After a while, she got up and walked back over to the corpse.

Untying the rope from the handle, she moved the body to one edge of the canvas and folded the rest over the front of the man.

She busied herself inside the store and waited. Wolf was constantly on her mind.

-----

"Rosie, where have you been?" Laura hugged her neck. Rosie shook her off and started towards a ravine that led downhill.

"She knows the trail," Jake said.

"Would it be better if you rode?" Laura asked.

"I don't think so but maybe we should loosen this up. I might need both hands."

She untied the sling and added her bag and Jake's rifle to the saddle on Rosie's back.

They weaved their way down, following Rosie's lead. Laura occasionally glanced up at the rocks with an intensity sparking in her eyes. A shadow, or something, moved, off to the side.

"Any problems with mountain lions up here?"

"With humans?"

"Yes."

"No."

"Never?" She looked up again.

"No, not with the two of us and a horse. Cats aren't stupid."

"This would be a great place for an ambush."

He laughed. "Cav and I used to play here."

She kept scanning up at the rock and brush. It was difficult to see around Rosie, who led the way.

"I thought I saw something."

"In the rocks?"

"Yeah."

"Could be a hawk, casting its shadow. Could be a cat, but they won't attack."

"Maybe."

"Hold on," Jake called to her. "There is something up ahead."

"What?"

"Looks like. Looks like Red."

With a grunt, he scooted around Rosie and Laura followed him.

"Oh no, not just Red, but Wolf. Looks like he's dead."

While flying between Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and then, during the time past Grand Junction, Colorado, Cavanaugh couldn't figure out who had shot at him or why. It was possible that the Picardes gang had found him but, it was just as possible that the two men were a hit team from one of his other missions. He tried to keep the shooter's face fresh in his mind.

There was the Iranian nuclear physicist hit. A three man team. Clean hit in Arak after the scientist left the heavy water processing center. He thought it was a clean hit but you never know.

And the Istanbul affair – the botched suicide of a vacationing Russian agent who, fortunately, sought refuge in a successful car detonation. Except it wasn't by his team. After preparing an aconite tincture, Cavanaugh had managed to poison the food of a murderous Russian named Sudlenkov but the Russian only had a small bite before being called away. Thirty minutes after that, the Russian entered a car that subsequently exploded. Cavanaugh had been thirty minutes closer to the Grecian border at the time of his death. He always wondered who rigged the Russian's car. Ukrainians? Did they know that he was involved? Did they hope to kill the both of them?

And there was the recent New York City shoot out. The newspapers reported it as just another gang related shooting but it was really an attempted hit on the United States ambassador to the United Nations. Of course, she never knew about it. Her limo and her escorts drove right by the scene but he and his team had already done their work. Although they had no kills, they did prevent the assassination. It was thought to be a Syrian team but could have been an Iranian team that launched from Syria.

He thought back to the shooter. Everything about the guy was dark. Dark hair, swarthy face, big hairy hands – though he only thought of that when he remember the size of the forty five that the guy shot. The big hands made the pistol look like a squirt gun. Black suit, black tie, white shirt, black fedora. Dark sunglasses. Black moustache. He could have been Iranian.

The other man was a squirrel. Small, nervous, grey all around – grey suit, short, buzz cut grey hair, pallid face, tiny mouth. He pulled a gun but did he shoot? He had positioned himself behind the vehicle and the plane. And then he skirted the sides of the BMW when the plane flew over their heads. If he was an agent, he wasn't much of one. The rodent was a coward. More like a shrew than a squirrel.

Trusting his instincts, he was pretty sure the shooter was an agent. Probably not FBI. Possibly CIA. Or a rental just like he himself had been on so many occasions.

Cav held tight and banked through normal disturbance. A flight on a Cessna was like a hellish ride on a bumpy mountain road, with plenty of ups and downs and turns. Nothing to sweat as long as nothing happened. He checked all of his instruments one more time and then settled back.

Foreign agents? From Russia? Turkey? Maybe even ISIS, though the face was not Turkish or Iranian. The shooter reminded him of Saddam Hussein but a lot paler, maybe more like Josef Stalin.

He needed some help from HQ. But he couldn't get a steady internet signal. He had to wait until he landed. He checked his instrument panel. The fuel, oil, rpm's all looked good. He sighed. The bullets went somewhere. He experimented with the allerons, both left and right, the flaps, both left and right, the rudder, left and then right, then straight. Everything was okay. He relaxed back into his seat.

With the heavens sparkling like a robe of diamonds, he stared out into the night. Landing would be a problem too. If the guy had followed him to his plane in Odessa, he probably knew that he kept his plane in Hailey. And he possibly knew that Jake maintained it for him. He decided to land at Magic Valley Regional Airport in Twin Falls and he began to make the arrangements. Magic Valley was just three hours away.

The sun cast a pale haze behind him in the east. Assuming all went well, he'd drop down and then rent a truck to drive up to Obsidian, which was another two hours away. Worried about Mama and Laura, he

received his landing instructions and, working through the airport with his radio, called ahead to reserve a truck for his drive.

A few hours later, he prepared for landing. It was then that he realized he hadn't checked his landing gear and tires. He dropped low and allowed the tires to warm. Using an upgraded wireless monitor, he checked the tire temperature and then the pressure. Satisfied that they were all safe, he landed, rented space at a local hangar, and accepted a ride to the car agency. They had a Ford F-150 waiting for him. He paid for a week's rental with cash.

He stopped at the library and used one of their computers to send a message to HQ. He wasn't sure what to ask for. He described the men as best as he could and guessed at the men's affiliations. HQ, he knew, would answer when he could.

-----

Jake got around Red and knelt over Wolf. "He's not dead," he called back to Laura, who maneuvered around both Rosie and Red. "At least not yet." Wolf was sweating and struggling for breath with short, rapid pants. Jake checked his pulse. It was very weak, just a bare whisper, which made it difficult to pin down the number of beats. He had to guess at close to two hundred. He examined Wolf's shoulder wound which was a cut, but not a gash. But it looked inflamed. Red with blood but the skin and the exposed muscle was grayish white. A brackish substance coated the edges of the cut. "Do you have any gauze in that bag of yours? And water?"

Wolf's eyes fluttered and he tried to speak. "Hate in," was all that Jake could understand. By that time, Laura had squeezed past Red with her bag.

She opened and passed a water bottle to Jake.

He held it up to Wolf's lips and let the water touch. Wolf moved his mouth. Jake pulled back.

"Here, wet the gauze," she held out the bandages and waited until Jake was finished. She dabbed at the edge of the cut and was careful to marshal the dirt and blackness away from the opening of the wound.

"Hate in," Wolf said.

"Haitian," interpreted Laura.

Jake nodded. "Of course." He sucked air. His wound bothered him.

"Mama," Wolf managed to say before he passed out again.

"Mama will know what to do," Jake said. "You run ahead to her and get her prepared. I'll guide Wolf down on Red."

Laura looked sideways at him. "I hate to tell you, big guy, but I'm the new girl here. I have no idea where Mama lives."

Jake blew out a bunch of air. "Can you track?"

"Yes, sir. I'm a West Texas desert tracker."

"Good, because I don't think I can could get down this hill much faster than Red can when she's carrying Wolf so you'll need to go." He bent down and grabbed his knees and sucked in some more air.

"Are you okay?" Laura asked.

"I have to be," he replied. He pointed down the gulley and explained the trail to her.

Laura started down.

"And keep the sun to your north or west. At some point, you'll hear or see the highway. Make your way to that. If you've gone more than two hours without hitting the highway, cut straight due east. You can't miss it."

"Then what?"

"Then go south. Can't miss Mama's."

-----

Full of questions, waiting on HQ to get back to him, worried about Mama and Laura, Cavanaugh pulled into Mama's gravel and dirt drive in the late afternoon. Hearing his vehicle pull up, she stood in the doorway.

"Mama, how are you?"

"Just fine, JJ."

"Wolf?"

"I don't know."

A furrow creased Cav's brow. "What do you mean?"

"He went to see about your Laura and they haven't been back."

"I sent Jake."

"I know. I've seen Jake, bless you. Or I wouldn't be alive."

"What!"

She told him about the voodoo man and showed him the body in the back of the store. "There are unclean spirits here and they will only get worse as the night comes on."

Cav rubbed the back of his neck. "How bad, Mama?"

"Bad."

"How bad, Mama, I need to make plans."

"I don't know for sure. Wolf would know. But I don't think we have strong enough medicine here in our villages."

"That bad?"

"Remember the tales of the Black Jack Marauder that Wolf would tell you kids on your hunting trips?"

Cav remembered. He and Jake and a couple of brave teens from the nearby villages would squeeze together around a fire as Wolf weaved a tale of a blood drinking vampire and his night stalking companions who lived in the hills. But he didn't know that Mama knew about those stories. "Yes, Wolf kept us up most of the night."

"Which is what he wanted. Teach you boys to go without sleep. To be vigilant. To use fear as a weapon."

Cav acknowledged her.

"Well, these spirits are worse. Much worse."

"Then, Mama, you should ride with me up to the cabin and we'll look for Wolf and Laura and Jake."

"And what happens if they show up here and we're gone and there's a dead body out back?"

"We'll write them a note about the dead body."

Mama smiled. "No, we're not going to write them a note about a dead body in back. What if the intelligence men come by? The ones that have been shooting at you."

"How do you know about that?"

"I'm not totally blind."

"I need to find out about them."

"You do."

"But first, we need to find Wolf and Laura and Jake. Jake should have them here already."

"Yes, Wolf is hurt."

"You know that?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"I don't know. On a trail somewhere."

"They might bring him to my cabin."

"They might. I don't know, JJ. I can't see that."

"I'll go to the cabin." He stood at the door of his truck. "I'll start there."

"That's a good plan and I'll stay here and wait for them, or you."

"We'll find them, Mama."

-----

'Can't miss it.' Laura knew that's what everybody said as a way of jinxing you so you would miss your mark. She would show Jake she could track in Idaho as well as in Texas. Dropping straight south and

following the creviced trail, she made up her mind to cross to the east as soon as she could. Her hands kept constant contact with the rough walls of the rock and she just followed it down. Down and down she dropped. Even as she tried to push herself, she was not winded.

She had been in the Glass and Guadalupe Mountains in west Texas and the trail she followed was definitely easier. If Wolf weren't hurt and comatose, and if she hadn't shot Jake, she thought with chagrin, she could pick flowers and forage for food just for fun.

Just then, the trail opened to her left while also dropping to the front of her. She paused and stared down the path that snaked to the left. Without a doubt she could climb down it, she thought to herself. The Guadalupe was sometimes crazy in its inhospitableness with its sheer drops and unstable rock and she had traversed that with no problem. She had even rescued others from that mountain range's treacherous traps. This was like a cakewalk at the Sunday school celebrations. She double checked her pack for water, she had only taken one bottle and left two for Jake, tightened the straps of her pack and rifle and turned left towards the east.

She knew she had to hurry. The mountains hid the sun so she had to guess at its location. She also knew that evening was coming on. She needed to be back with help before dark.

-----

Jake managed to keep Wolf on Red for the first one thousand feet but Wolf was so stiff he slid from one side or the other. Jake had to readjust him and push on him. He tried to hold on and yank him into position. Wolf's body was just too stiff to drape over the back of Red.



All of the upper body activity caused Jake's shoulder to bleed heavily. More heavily than he would have guessed though the front of him was drenched in blood. Even his pants were soaked and the blood pooled in his shoes. He squished when he walked. Drinking deeply from the water bottle, he emptied the first one.

He opened the last bottle and tried to wet Wolf's parched lips but he was too far gone to absorb any of the water. He'd have to take him down to get any water in him. Jake wiped across his own brow, drank again and needed to rest.

He slumped against the canyon wall for a minute. He hoped Laura was making good time though he didn't know what kind of help she could bring. Only Mama was at the store. She was an excellent nurse, he knew, but Wolf's wound was beyond her skill and so was his. He needed to get the slug out and Mama wouldn't be able to do that.

At the moment, he really needed rest more than anything but Wolf needed to get to Mama and his people. He needed a hospital or a medicine man. Jake leaned again against the rock wall. Sweat ran down his face and into his eyes. He fought against the dizziness. He tried to straighten up. His knees buckled. He used the rock to leverage his body upward.

Red led the men down the path for another fifty feet as Jake kept a hand up under Wolf's belt and struggled to keep him on the horse. Rosie watched them from behind. Wolf slid away from Jake and Jake grabbed harder around the belt and tugged. He grimaced in pain and the blood flowed down his chest.

Wolf's weight shifted and he slid towards Jake. Jake braced himself with both legs but his knees gave out. Wolf fell on top of him and they were wedged between Red and the rock wall. Jake tried to push Wolf off with his good shoulder but he didn't have the strength any longer. He took a deep breath. The sky spun above him and grew dark, and darker. And then, everything went black.

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With the sun dropping behind the mountains, Mama walked around back to check on the corpse. The tarp had pulled from the black man's face and she was taken aback by his wide open, opaque left eye and the gruesome gap in his darkened right orbital that opened into his skull. A sickening putrid stench already wafted around the body. Green flies and gnats buzzed around the head. Those that landed on his grotesque right eye instantly dropped dead.

The black man's dead body had certainly deteriorated over the last few hours. She pulled the tarp back over his graying face. Despite his crazed attack on her, she didn't want the crows to pick at his face. She

had heard stories of the disrespected dead revenging their desecrators.



A sudden gust of cold wind blew the cloth away from his face and Mama drew it back again. The wind picked up and the tarp flip flopped like a flag as the face of her attacker was exposed again. Wishing Wolf were home, Mama drew the collar of her shirt close and glanced down at the body. With a grumble, she headed back for the shelter of the store. Wolf was her main worry, not the dead body. Her people would stop by any minute, she told herself, and take care of the body. But that was another worry. Usually someone from the tribe managed to drop into the store during the day, if only to check up on her and Wolf. She hadn't heard from anyone. Laura was up at the cabin. Her Wolf left to go check up on her and then Jake left to check up on them. And even if people were foolish and unreliable, animals were not. She hadn't seen Red or Hercules, for that matter. Entering her store, she thought, Wolf was right. There was an evil aura around the witch of a man that lay dead behind the store. Covering him up with canvas would not lessen the unholy magic that seeped from his pores. Unlike the native tribes of the Great Plains and Mountains, she did not know the name

of his tribe. Her husband seemed to think his magic came from a mixture of Africa, New Orleans, the Caribbean islands and a perverted Catholicism. The wind picked up and rattled her windows. She locked the doors even though she knew the undead were not bound by wooden doors.

-----

Laura followed the new ravine and kept bearing to the east as best as she could. She didn't want to miss Mama's store and thought her best bet would be to find the highway and follow it south. She wished she had paid more attention to the maps in Cavanaugh's cabin. Down in the culvert, she couldn't tell the time of day from the sun. Her phone was in her truck. There were no shadows. Similar to the desert near her home, the temperature dropped as night got nearer. She wasn't in any danger from the cold, not even in the mountains, but she would be uncomfortable from sweating all day and then any drop in the cool night air. She drank from her water bottle. Suddenly a mountain lion screamed somewhere right above her. She dropped the bottle and then fell to her knees to retrieve it. Only a few swallows had been lost but she knew she would regret it.

Swinging her rifle off her shoulder, she held it out in front and pointed upward. She knew she was in too close quarters for a rifle to be much good but she had no weapon other than a knife. She didn't want to fight a mountain lion with only a knife. She needed to get to better ground. Tightening the lid of the water bottle, she slid it into a pouch on the side of her back pack and hustled down the gully. She kept an eye on the rocks above her. Although she didn't want to hurry too fast, she jagged down further and further and then she tripped.

Head first, she tumbled into the side of the crevice and, when her shoulder slammed into the wall, almost caught her balance. However the impact turned her around. She fell backwards off a drop for a few feet and landed with her full weight on her rifle while she turned her ankle.

Pain shot up her right leg. Immediately, she knew she had done something to her foot or ankle. She wasn't sure. She picked up her rifle to sit down and examine her foot but then noticed something even worse. She had broken the wooden stock of her gun and bent the barrel. She sat for a few seconds in the quiet and rubbed at her leg, right above the ankle, hoping she hadn't broken the darn thing. She refrained from turning it in circles; instead, she tightened the laces of her boot.

She was the one who was supposed to hurry ahead and get help. It seemed likely that Jake would beat her down to the store and be able to get Wolf to the tribe's true medicine man or the town's doctor. She didn't know which would be better.

Even though she had grown up in the Southwest Native American territory and knew about many of their customs, the incidents of the past few days had shaken her world. The introduction of voodoo was altogether new to her. It seemed much more powerful than anything she had ever witnessed. She needed a doctor to look at her ankle but Wolf needed something else.

The Kiowa and Apache were not known for the use of black magic and Laura knew that some of the Navajo practiced it and some had drifted into the foothills of west Texas. She had avoided their camps but still felt and heard about their influences, particularly The Skin Walkers which were remarkably like shape changers but marked with a deeper malevolence. Laura shivered more from a sense of foreboding and fear than the cold. She stumbled forward.

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All of the way up to Obsidian, Cavanaugh reviewed the things that he knew and tried to grasp the many things he didn't.

He still didn't know why Special Agent Browne had kept the safety deposit box and Picardes' wallet and hadn't turned them into the evidence lockers. He still didn't know who the men were who fired at him at the airport. He didn't know why he hadn't heard back from Jake.

The tires of his rented F150 squealed when he pulled into the drive of Mama's store. The first thing he noticed was that the beer sign and door lights were not lit even though they should have been open for business and it was late afternoon. The hairs on the back of his head tingled. Pulling his pistol from his

sack and picking up his rifle, he exited the truck and kept it between him and the front door. He crouched low and dashed to the stoop.

He first checked one side of the store and then the other. Sensing no activity, he crept to the door and slowly turned the knob. He burst in and immediately dropped behind a counter of grocery items. He heard nothing. He knew the store almost as well as his own cabin. He reconnoitered the next aisle and then the next which brought him to the checkout and register. Still no one. He slipped into the back room where Mama and Wolf lived. Everything was dark. Nothing moved.

It was empty.

He crouched down further and checked their bedroom. Still nothing.

It too was empty.

He backed up to the door and into the barrel of a rifle. Surprise!

He couldn't do a leg sweep. The person had protected themselves by using the door jamb. He couldn't push back for the same reason or go forward or drop and roll. He didn't straighten up. Most of his defensive and offensive training emphasized a small target. Even though a gun was in his back, he wasn't going to present a larger target. He waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Surely the gun holder was going to say something. He waited. But nothing.

He was positive he had a gun in his back. He knew the layout of the building. He hadn't backed up into a pipe. It had to be a gun.

"What do you want?" He didn't sound like himself. Cavanaugh's voice was gravelly from inactivity and drainage. All of the flying and driving caused his sinuses to act up.

He got nothing but the slightest nudge of the gun in his back.

Clearing his throat, he tried again. "Where are the store owners? Wolf and his wife."

That's when he heard a woman's laugh, the gun back off and his name, all at once, "JJ, you're back!"

He swiveled around. "Mama!"

She hugged him. "I didn't know it was you. I was pretty sure you weren't a criminal but I wasn't sure who you were." She laughed. "You were all scrunched up. It was dark." She chuckled again sounding relieved. "'I'm so glad you're back.'" She kept her arms around him.

"Where is everyone?" He asked.

"Somewhere between here and your place, I hope." She replied.

"What?" Cavanaugh exclaimed.

"A lot has been going on since you've been gone."

"I sent Jake here to watch you and Wolf and check up on Laura."

"You did but we had an intruder."

"What?"

"A voodoo witch."

Cavanaugh nodded.

"Wolf and I thought we had kept him away with our prayers and we did, at least from here." Mama paused to catch her breath.

"You thought?"

"Hold on."

"Okay." He stood his rifle against the wall and a case.

"We did keep him away. He didn't come back to trouble us but, well, Red came here all by herself and we thought that was strange." Before Cavanaugh could speak, Mama held up her hand. "But that was good in a way, we thought. Wolf decided he could ride her to check on Laura."

"And he left you here, alone."

"I've been alone many times."

"You have," Cavanaugh said, without a sound of approval.

"It was only an hour or two after Wolf left that the voodoo shaman, marked out in white paint to look like a skull, came after me out front in the lot."

"What!"

"And right then Jake came driving up and shot him dead. Blew out the back of his head."

Cavanaugh nodded.

"Talk about the protection of the spirits. I've got the body out back." She motioned nonchalantly as if displaying her groceries.

"Waiting on the sheriff?"

"No."

Cavanaugh frowned. "No?"

"No. He is some kind of shape shifter or undead. I think my people need to prepare his body so he can't return from the dead and then burn him or bury him. They will know what to do."

Cavanaugh nodded. "I see. No one has been by?"

"No."

"That's unusual."

"Yes."

"The Jake went after Wolf?"

"Yes."

"And no word from Jake or Wolf?"

"No."

Cavanaugh rubbed at his face and then at the back of his head. He dropped his hands. He came to a decision. "I can't leave you here, Mama."

"You must."

"Why?"

"I'm waiting for my people. They'll come. They always do."

"They usually do," he corrected.

"They'll be here."

"I don't know where our people are – Jake, Wolf, Laura. And Red. Why did Red come down? Was another horse with her? Rosie?"

"I didn't see another horse."

"I have to go up there. Which way did Wolf go? The trail?"

"Yes."

"And Jake? The road? In his truck?"

"Yes."

"I'll go. I'll find them and bring them back, Mama. They'll be alright."

"They'll be alright but something's happened."

"What?"

"I don't know. I can't see. Usually I can see or feel what Wolf sees or feels but I can't see anything. He's not dead. He's not asleep. It's just black to me."

"I'll find out."

"Yes. I'll be fine. You go. You find my Wolf. You find your Laura. You find Jake."

"Laura should be up in the cabin. Wolf went up the trail by horse. Maybe they are delayed up at the cabin for some reason."

"Just go. I'll be fine. I've got my Winchester." She tilted her rifle. "Tell Wolf I am waiting on him."

"I will. I'll be back." Cavanaugh called as he ducked out the front door.

-----

Laura stood up and put weight on her injured foot. Using her rifle as a crutch, she hobbled forward. The trail seemed to split three ways and the sun had dropped behind the mountains. She had no way to tell the direction. She remembered hearing how men, males, had a small deposit of iron in their nose that acted as a tiny compass and give them, at least some of them, a sense of direction. She didn't have that advantage.

Laura stood in front of the three passages and couldn't decide. Just then the mountain lion screamed like a wailing woman above her and to her left and made her jump. She went to the right and continued through the small canyon even though it seemed to rise at times and then fall. She continued for another hour. Every time Laura had a choice between two or more paths, the lion screamed to her left, almost like it was herding her. She knew it but couldn't do anything about it. All she had was the knife. She followed the crevices and climbed up and then down with the lion hunting her. Laura nursed her water. She scaled higher and higher into the mountain area with no idea where she was headed. The cat



followed her.

Laura realized she would have to spend the night on the summit. She would need to find shelter of some sort and somehow make a fire. She didn't bring a lighter but she had a knife and the canyon seemed to be silicate based.

She found a nook where she could sit back with protection overhead and side to side. Gathering dead pine and hardwood branches and pine needles, she piled them out front.

Clicking on the side of a rock with her knife over a bed of needles and dried leaves, she was able to raise smoke and then by blowing on it, she got a tiny flame. She fed the flame into a fire. She built up the little blaze. She gathered heavier branches from the nearby gullies and gashes.

Stripping down a short straight branch, she untied the boot on her good foot. She wrapped the lace around the handle of her knife and the branch and fashioned a crude little spear. She picked it up and

jabbed it out in front. Satisfied, she leaned back into the chink of rock and waited on the night for either help or hell.

--43--

After skidding to a stop next to Jake's truck and grabbing a pistol, Cavanaugh jumped out and ran to his cabin. He pushed open the door and slid in. No one was present in the roughed in room. Everything was quiet. The secret door to the inner rooms stood open and the inside of those rooms seemed undisturbed. He quickly verified that no one was there. In fact, it didn't seem like anyone had left in a hurry.

But he left in a hurry. Worried about Laura and Wolf, he ran to the path that Wolf would have taken up the mountain. Having spent his younger years exploring the peak's terrain, he easily clambered down and, before dark, was able to catch the sound of the horses snorting. He slowed down and pulled out his pistol and popped his head around an outcropping of rock.

Jake and Wolf lay on the path. Wolf was on top of Jake and Laura was nowhere nearby. Cavanaugh sprang out towards them while scanning all around for danger. He heard the birds twitter in the brush and the winds rustle. He scampered up the side of the ravine and poked his head around and saw no one. He dropped back down.

With a hand on Wolf, he called out, "Laura!" Laura didn't answer. He kept the other hand loaded with his pistol. "Laura!" He yelled even louder.

He ran down the crevice and back up again. He bent over and took Wolf's pulse and shook his head. Gently lifting Wolf, he moved him to the side of Jake and discovered all of the blood that soaked the front of his friend. He would have seen it earlier except he had been looking up and not down at Jake and Jake's lower body and legs.

"What happened, Jake?"

Jake groaned but didn't say anything.

"What happened, buddy? Who shot you? Where's Laura?" He asked in rapid fire all while looking everywhere at once.

He tugged on Jake's shirt to get a better look at the evident bullet hole but decided against tearing it open. It was too dark to do any good. He knew it would be best to get help.

He tried to get some water into the both of them. Wolf was hopeless although he was breathing. Jake seemed to take in a little fluid but Cavanaugh didn't want to rush it. He stood up.

"Laura!" He hollered. He cupped his hands to the sides of his mouth. "Where are you?" He dropped his hands and took several deep breaths. "Dang it!" He pushed on Jake's shoulder. "Jake, Jake, can you hear me?"

Jake mumbled as his eyes rolled back. "Huh?"

"Jake, where's Laura?" He asked but still no answer.

Cavanaugh had a choice and neither was good. He could bring the men up to the cabin and load them into the truck and drive them to Mama or bring them directly to Mama on the horses and then ride the horses back up the trail and begin to look for Laura. He decided on the former. He would drive them to Mama and come back to look for her.

But first he broke a branch that pointed back up towards the cabin. He knew Laura had spent time in the wild and would recognize such an obvious sign and what it meant. But only if she came back and if she had a flashlight to see.

He positioned the two men on the horses and guided them back up the trail. Like Jake, he had a difficult time with Wolf but, unlike Jake, he was able to keep Wolf on top of Red with his two good arms. He had to work at it. Wolf was dead weight and stiff. When they reached the cabins, he loaded him into the back of the truck and helped Jake into the front.

Jake was not quite awake but he was not out cold like Wolf. Mumbling, Jake said something that maybe sounded like 'Laura'.

“What about Laura?”

Jake shook his head. “Mmma-wah.”

“Laura?”

“Wah-wah.”

“Water.” Cavanaugh said out loud and he could have kicked himself. “Of course.” He tilted a water bottle for Jake. After he had finished, he asked, “Have you seen Laura?”

Jake bobbed his head up and down. “Gone.”

“I know, Jake. Where?”

“Gone.”

“I know. Where?” Cavanaugh drove down the cabin path to the highway. They bounced around on the rocky land. “Where?”

“Done.”

“Done?”

Jake shook his head. “Done. Done.”

Cavanaugh slowed his truck and looked over at his friend. He pushed him so he would lean against the window. His lips were parched. Stopping, he gave more water to Jake until Jake coughed. “Enough?”

Jake nodded.

“Where did she go?” He knew it made no real difference. It was already dark and had been dark. He fought the sense of panic that had been rising in his chest. Rangers didn’t panic but then again they didn’t bring their girlfriends on their missions. Girlfriend. He let that thought slide right along with the back wheels that spit up the gravel at the end of the trail.

“Down.” Jake spoke up.

Cavanaugh whipped his head over to watch Jake. “Oh, down. I thought you said done. She went down. She’s gone to Mama’s?”

“Yes,” he nodded and then nodded off again as Cavanaugh’s truck jumped onto the highway after he had checked for traffic. He punched the gas even harder and his truck lurched forward. They’d all be at Mama’s soon enough.

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Mama had watched Cavanaugh tear off towards his cabin and she closed the door to the store. She locked it and secured the chain. Checking the load in her rifle once again, she sat on a chair near the door to the storeroom and waited with the gun across her lap for either Cavanaugh or her people. The store creaked with the wind. The afternoon sun dipped behind the mountains above the store, across the road and their shadows crept across the floor.

Crows cawed and she thought of the dead shaman’s body behind the store. She no longer cared if the carrion birds picked the remaining eye right out of his skull or if they fought over his tongue like it was the last worm on earth. She told herself that she might enjoy the noise of their fighting. He was an evil man and evil things happened to evil men. She patted her rifle once just to make sure it was still with her.

Her head nodded and her eyes closed. She breathed easily through her mouth. She jerked her head up, and she was angry for feeling tired.

She was sure that Wolf wouldn’t tire no matter how many years were dropped on his shoulders. But a few moments later her eyes drooped and her chin touched her sternum. The store was completely dark except for the tiny lights on the electrical outlets. They cast no light to see by. Her breathing seemed easy and soft. She told herself that it was alright to close her eyes and think of Wolf. She had no way to talk to him. She would just think of him for a few minutes and then get up and check the store.

Mama dreamt of Wolf lying outdoors on his back in the mountains at night. The stars were faint and the moon was blood red. There was a shadow in the sky that flew like a ripple across the tiny stars and made them darken and twinkle. At first it seemed far away - far, far away in the east and to the south.

The shadow had passed over a large body of water and into a strange city that was colored in blue, orange, red and green electrical lights, very similar to the sign that she had outside the store and outside the stores in Ketchum. The city was much bigger than the little towns she had been in. The shadow left the city and traveled towards her. It zoomed a great distance in almost no time.

As the shadow got closer, she sensed an ageless vileness. No human could match its corruption. Even the legends that scared her as a girl didn't prepare her for the knowledge that its wickedness had festered for almost an eternity. And with each moment, it drew nearer. It wasn't a shadow. It was a spirit and it was soundless and empty like the empty socket of the dead man except the socket exuded slimy sputum that dripped down into the throat. Sulfur filled her nostrils. In her sleep, she gagged with the smell.

The incorporate spirit passed across the moon and it undulated like a reflection in a piece of dark shaly foil. She realized that she was looking in the water. India ink colored, cold spring water lay before her. The corrupt black spirit disturbed the water and Wolf was in the water. She couldn't tell if the spirit had entered the water. His long black and silver hair framed his grayish face. She was unsure if Wolf was still alive. She reached out for him. She couldn't touch him. She reached again and her rifle fell off her lap with a clatter.

Someone knocked on the front door. "Wolf!" A voice barked.

An engine roared. Truck lights blazed through the windows and massive tires crunched hard across the gravel out front.

So deep was her sleep that Mama fell out of her chair and onto her hands and knees. She felt for her rifle as she tried to gain composure. She was confused. Another loud bang made her jerk her head up towards the front door. She whimpered as she finally got a hand on her weapon. She wanted her Wolf back in her arms so badly.

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Laura leaned back against the rock wall with her makeshift spear gripped in her hands and kept her eyes peeled for movement. She was no stranger to the wild although she had always been more prepared. Checking her bag, she had less than half a bottle of water, a box of bullets and some beef jerky. The bullets were useless and she did not dare eat the salty jerky when she only had a few swigs of water left. The pack was even useless as a pillow since she didn't dare sleep. She didn't dare get comfortable so she didn't use it as a seat cushion either. She remained standing and faced out into the darkness that danced along the rocky culvert walls.

She bided her time by feeding the fire and fashioning additional spears from the few somewhat straight branches.

Her ankle throbbed and she shifted her feet. Her mind fixated on the pain. Living alone, she knew the tricks of the brain. The noises at night became a man breaking in, except a man did break in and assault her. Three men did break in and assault her.

She had heard how wild animals feared humans but she had seen the crazed look in Picardes' eyes and had no doubt that animals would obey him. The mountain lion had stalked her. It had forced her off her path. She was sure it was Picardes. She was sure that the voodoo man was somehow linked to Picardes, if he wasn't Picardes himself.

Pushing back those absurd thoughts, she knew she was tired and hungry and thirsty. She knew how the mind played tricks on a person. The rustling of leaves in the wind became footsteps. Footsteps became insane people. Insane people had foolish thoughts. She forced herself back to square one and solid, dependable thoughts.

She wished Cavanaugh would somehow come and wrap her up in his arms.

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"Can't you get in?"

"No."

"Where is she?"

"Mama?"

Mama started to recognize the voices and she stood up. She rubbed her free hand under each eye.

"Yes, I left her here when I left to get Wolf and my friend Jake."

"I don't know. She hasn't answered. I've been knocking and calling out for Wolf."

"Wolf is with me, Tahoma. He is hurt bad."

"We need to find Mama."

She crossed the floor and unlocked the door. She stood in the doorway. "Wolf is with you?"

"Mama!"

"Yes," Cavanaugh spoke up. "He's been cut with a knife. The wound doesn't seem deep but he is unconscious."

"Let's get him inside," Tahoma said.

"Bring your men. I have two that need help," Cavanaugh said.

They moved Wolf and Jake into the store and Mama turned on the lights. Laying Wolf on his bed, Tahoma inspected the cut. Noticing the dark powder around the edges of the wound, he whistled. He licked his finger and ran it across the blackness. Lifting his finger to his tongue, he tasted it. His eyes bulged and he spit it out.

"What is it?" Cavanaugh asked.

"Very bad. We have no kind of medicine here that can overcome any magic like this. The debauched Navajo may have an evil magic like this but I have never run across it. I was not trained for it."

"Can you help him?" Mama pleaded.

"I don't know. I don't know what it is. Where did it come from?"

"Probably from the dead voodoo man," Cavanaugh said. "Mama?"

"The witch man's body is out back," Mama said.

"Is his magic on him?" Tahoma asked.

"I don't know. I don't think so but I don't know," she answered.

Tahoma nodded to the other men in the room and they disappeared through the front doors.

"You are our medicine man, Tahoma," Mama said. "If you can't help him, who can?"

"This type of magic will eat his spirit," Tahoma said to no one in particular as he bent over Wolf. "I don't know if we have time to send for one stronger than me. We need to take him to the healing caves."

Cavanaugh had heard of the caves but had never gone. "And Jake?" He asked.

Tahoma tore the t-shirt open so the wound was exposed. "He would benefit, too. We would waste time taking him to Ketchum for a doctor and Wolf to the caves."

"There's no one out back, Tahoma," one of the men said as they returned. They looked at Mama.

"He was under the tarp. Out back." She asserted.

"We saw the tarp. There is no body."

"What?" Cavanaugh exclaimed. "Are you sure?"

"There's no one, JJ."

Cavanaugh nodded.

"We saw footprints. Bare footprints. Not Wolf's. Not Mama's."

"Let's get them to the caves." Tahoma broke in and said.

"I can't go," Cavanaugh said.

"Why not?" A man asked.

"I need to find Laura."

"Your truck," one of the men started to say but stopped.

"Who's Laura?" Tahoma asked.

"His girl," Mama said.

Tahoma nodded. "His truck won't help us anyway. We will take them on our horses."

Cavanaugh didn't reply to Mama's assertion. He was busy thinking through the implications of the missing voodoo priest's body. Was it possible that the priest had somehow lived even with the back of his head blown off? The other men had said there were footprints. Were there more voodoo priests, followers, slaves, even zombies? What kind of man was Picardes? From all that he had heard, Picardes' father was a mob boss who happened to be based in New Orleans. The mob dealt in things like drugs, gambling, extortion, and assassination. Cavanaugh would never have suspected him of being a voodoo high priest. Even though his son was involved in voodoo, that aspect should have died with him. Leading the way, he stepped down into the lot where he was suddenly attacked by a swooping crow. Unaware, the other men inside followed him into the dark. More crows circled and dove at them as other birds perched on Mama's roof and in the surrounding trees and watched with beady eyed anticipation. A deep darkness seemed to roll down from the mountains and suffocate the area around the store. Silver black clouds blocked out the stars. Then, lightning flared and thunder cracked. The birds fluttered and flustered and began to fight among themselves. Cawing and croaking, they battled for position on the store and trees.

Abruptly, the largest bird plunged like a missile at Cavanaugh. Taken by surprise, he batted at the vicious black bird with his bare hands as it pecked and clawed at him. Cawing, it was joined by the others on the building in a hellish cacophony as they rushed the men. A hard rain with sharp bits of hail pelted him and the others and cut at his face.

The bird's eyes seemed to glow red in the maelstrom as it perched briefly on his shoulder and jabbed at his face. Its eyes swirled like tiny flames. Rolling his shoulder and jerking, Cavanaugh tried to shake the bird but it wouldn't fly off. Instead, it jabbed and slashed and the rain drenched them all. Flowing down from the hills, the water reached their ankles and slowed them all.

The other men also swatted at the birds that insanely dove at them. The men and the birds seemed possessed by the darkness that pervaded the lot. Falling into the mud on their backs or knees, the men fought off the crazed crows and ravens with nothing other than their hands. They were slashed and bitten by the birds and pelted by the jagged ice.

Driven by adrenalin, Cavanaugh jerked his head out of the way of an attack, reached up and grabbed the enormous corvid and snapped its neck even as it ripped the skin off the back of his hand. Just then Mama stepped outside with her rifle and shot off three rounds – BAM – BAM – BAM! In a restless, loud flutter, all of the birds ceased their attack, cawed and flew off into the night and the storm followed just as quickly. The lightning struck higher up in the mountain behind her. The rivers of water faded to nothing.

Blowing out a deep breath, Cavanaugh said, "I've never seen anything like it."

Laboring to his feet, Tahoma agreed, "Very, very strange." He looked up into the trees and towards the hills and mountains that still flickered. "Dark magic."

"Thank you, Mama," a man named Meah said.

"Thank you," Atsa, another tribe member, added. The others murmured their thanks.

Cavanaugh opened the door to his truck and stepped onto the floorboard and, looking out over the top of the truck cab, stared at the mountains behind Mama's cabin. The clouds coruscated from the lightning deep within. Shaking his head, he climbed into his truck, started it up and then pulled out onto the highway.

On the way to the cabin, he wondered about the birds. He had never seen a bird dive at a person, much less launch a relentless attack. Glancing down from the road, he could see where the bird had bitten him. It throbbed and burned. He lifted his hand off the steering wheel and sucked on the wound. It tasted bitter and sickening. Opening the window, he spit out the blood and then sucked on it again as if he had been bitten by a rattlesnake. Sucking and spitting, he hoped he could get the worst of it out of his system.

Turning up the trail and then parking in front of his cabin, he walked inside and dressed the wound with antibiotics. He placed a gauze bandage over it and taped it.

Ready for a fight, he picked out his Diamond Infinite Edge compound bow which allowed him to max up to a seventy five pound draw. It would be more than enough to kill a deer or a man. He selected several Cabela's Stalker Extreme arrows fitted with broadhead tips.

He packed a flashlight with a red lens, a PVS-14 night vision monocular scope, an empty canteen, and a half dozen bottles of water, a first aid kit and dried fruit. Closing the door to the cabin, he clipped the flashlight to his belt, adjusted his pistol, knife, backpack, quiver and bow and set off for the lake where he filled the canteen and dipped the tips of the arrows. He knew it would be best for his hand if he could just rest it in the pool and let it heal but he needed to find Laura. He had to trust that the antibiotics would work.

Clenching and unclenching the fist of the wounded hand, he tried to work out a dull aching pain that ran from the wound to his elbow. His hand was slightly swollen and on fire. He bit his lip, determined to ignore it. He would tend to it when he got back. He then ran to the trail where he had found Jake and Wolf.

Passing Red and Rosie at the head of the crevice, he descended by the light of a hazy half moon that had separated itself from the sudden storm that moved on round the mountain. The two mares followed him. As soon as he reached the spot where he had found Wolf and Jake, he turned on the flashlight and advanced much more slowly with his head down and his eyes straining to read any signs of Laura.

He called out several times, hoping his voice would carry better in the night air. Stopping suddenly, he thought he saw a boot scuff in the sand bed but he couldn't be sure of the size or the date. But he was sure it was human and whoever made it had been descending, not ascending. That gave him hope. He called out Laura's name again but got no answer. Instead, a screeching mountain lion sounded in the distance and was followed by another scream that was closer. With his arm aching, Cavanaugh touched his holster and moved ahead.

He came upon a gorge that branched off to his left. Turning towards it with the flashlight, he considered the possibility that Laura might have taken it. If given instructions, she would have been told to stay with the main trail and just continue down. But he didn't know if she were given instructions. He remembered what Jake had said, simply 'down'. So Jake knew where she went. Did he tell her to go? Why? How could both Jake and Wolf have been shot and cut but Laura had escaped and yet, Jake was able to give her instructions? Did she come down the trail with Rosie after Jake had found Wolf?

Picking up a twig, Cavanaugh crouched and thought. He manipulated the twig through his fingers like a poker chip at a casino table. It didn't make much sense. He switched off the flashlight.

Jake probably would have found her up in the cabin or around the cabin before he found Wolf. His friend's truck was still up there and Rosie was down by the trail with Red. The footprint, if it was a footprint, had been made after the men. Jake had sent her ahead to Mama's and had told her to follow the ravine all of the way down and *she couldn't miss it*. He could hear Jake saying it like he was talking down to some raw recruit. He snapped the twig. Of course, she wouldn't listen.

She would hear something in his voice, whether it was a sneer or a command or a challenge and she'd get something opposite in her head and veer left. Maybe not right away, like the small crevice there, he looked down the rocks to his left, but she'd go off on her own sure enough. Dang it, he knew he didn't know women but he knew that much about her.

He flipped the flashlight back on and turned left. With his good hand on one side of the gulley and the other held up like a wounded paw, he kept his eyes glued to the bottom of the rocks looking for clues. He stopped where Laura had fallen on her rifle. With a frown, he read the indentation of the barrel, the boot heels, the scrambling and then he guessed that she sat down again.

He heard the big cats screaming again. Knowing they were solitary animals, he wondered why there was more than one.

Squatting down to make sure he was reading her actions correctly, his knees ached and SCKERRR-WHACK!!

He was knocked off his feet and thumped against a chasm wall! He slid down and ended up sprawling like a turtle on his back. He lifted his aching right arm but it got tangled in his bow. Reflexively he raised the arm to protect him from a blur in the night. All he heard was a snarl and a scream as the curving thick part of the bow saved him from a bone crunching, arm snapping bite!

A large cougar mistook him for prey as he had been bent over and it had noiselessly sprung on him. The mountain lion swung at his face and, again, he got lucky. He was not quick enough to react but, because he had already been moving his head, the paw missed his eyes. The claws grazed his jaw, tore open his shirt and cut into his shoulder and left arm.

He dropped the scraped arm to his side and gripped his knife with his hand, all while feeling the sting of the cat's attack. On his knees, he swung upward with his right arm and left hand as the cat bit down. The bow kept the hungry fangs from digging into his skull while he plunged the knife deep into the cat's tawny chest. Its talons tore into his back with a quick swipe, swipe, swipe before the rest of its body realized its heart had died.

With its life's fluid leaking all over the front of him, Cavanaugh huffed and pushed the heavy cat to one side and slumped again against the rock, this time not sure if he would be able to get up. He closed his eyes.

Something bumped him in the head and he awoke to another flock of crows flapping their wings above him and in front of him as they swooped through the little canyon in an erratic pattern. Their fiery red eyes were luminescent in the night. They snapped and clawed as they passed over him.

"Caw, caw, caw!"

"Hooyah," Cavanaugh yelled back at them and he pulled his pistol out and shot it in the air. Only a lucky shot would bring one down, and he was sure he had not hit one, but the noise scared them off. He thought of Mama and then thought of Laura. Ashamed of himself for passing out even for a moment, he labored to his feet. Laura was out there and it was up to him to find her.

Breathing heavy, he yanked on the bunches in his clothes until they fit right and then drank some water. With the flashlight off, he scanned the trail ahead with the night vision scope and determined there was a path forward. He turned the light on and tightened up his gear and plunged ahead ignoring the burn in his hand and shoulder and arm.

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Laura fed the fire and starved her fear by ignoring the screams of the cougars that seemed to surround her as she concentrated on the edge of the short bluff of rock before her. She knew how sneaky the big cats were although she had never heard of them using a coordinated attack. She also knew the chances that they would ambush her while she kept a fire in front of her would be slim so she kept it going, a single branch at a time.

She knew she didn't need a big blaze. She didn't want to restock her wood so she husbanded her resources and kept close to her base. After adding a branch, she leaned back and let it burn. An unexpected wind picked up and a strange, ugly blackness seemed to enter her little ravine like a ghost threatening to choke her. The stars in the sky vanished and lightning flashed. Attuned to her sixth sense from living alone for years, she felt an evil presence settle around her. It grated on her like a raw nerve. She jumped up and pushed and kicked the remains of her fire into her hollow to shelter it from the coming storm. The hot ash burnt holes in her socks and blistered the lower parts of her legs but she kept knocking the fire with her boots. Big drops of rain pelted her head as it whistled sideways over the top. Malevolence reigned in the sound as thunder and lightning flashed and cracked.

She transferred as much wood as she could against her side of the canyon as the wind and the rain blew laterally over her. Hail pounded the upper part of the opposite rock wall and rolled harmlessly to the bottom of the gully. She stood straight up to see if there were any branches that she could still rescue.

Feeling a horrid tingle and her hair electrify, Laura dropped straight down and ducked and covered her head. That saved her life.

A bolt of blistering light blasted a pine tree less than fifty feet from her and the trunk crashed over her as if it had been aimed straight at her. Like pitchforks thrown at her very heart, the jagged bright sparks crashed throughout the woods around her and the thunder ripped. She covered her ears and collapsed even further down. She closed her eyes and lessened the sight and sound. And then the storm lessened slightly, and then slightly more, and then she was able to drop her hands and open her eyes.

Sitting in the bit of mud that puddled in the middle of the gulch, she weaved her head through the pine branches. She got to her knees and then navigated her way out from underneath the tree. The roaring of the wind moved on. The lightning pulsed further off and the rumble took longer to reach her. She held onto the branches and watched the fireworks of nature fade. The chill of the night returned and she shivered in her wet hair and damp flannel shirt and shorts.

Too tired to continue standing, she sat again and poked at the embers eking all that she could out of the fuel. She built back up a tiny fire under the tree trunk. She added some pine needles, kindling and a dry branch tip.

Way, way off in the distance, too far away to even be sure, she thought she heard a gunshot, though it could have been the erratic lightning returning. It was too faint to get a direction. She stood up. There were no clouds. There was no lightning. It was a gunshot. But the shot could have echoed several times before it had reached her.

Settling back, Laura knew a gunshot so far away at night meant nothing. Back in her home, there were plenty of times she blasted a twelve gauge to scare off coyotes that came snooping after dark near her chicken coop and barn. She didn't know the lay of the land above Mama's store. She could be near a cabin or several miles from a cabin. Or, worse, there could be drunken hunters out in the woods shooting at shadows in the dark. Or there could be drunken hunters attracted by a fire that was tended by a woman lost in the woods.

It could be lightning. It could be someone scaring off varmints. Or, it could be drunken hunters looking for lost women. She knew the choice of thoughts were hers.

As cold as she was, she let the fire burn down a little bit more and huddled closer as the night deepened. She jabbed the embers with a stick and shook. Even though it was summer, the temperatures in the mountains could get into the lower thirties and she was wet. Given little choice, she untied her knife and stepped out from the tree. She still heard the calls of the wild cats and even worse, an occasional wolf. Hacking at branches higher up on the tree, she built a shelter around the fire, similar to a teepee. She cut away more pine branches that she could lay over her and under her. She kept the knife in her hand. She only had a few more hours to go until dawn.

--45--

After watching Cavanaugh drive off, Tahoma directed the men to carry Wolf and Jake inside. Once placing them on the beds, the men left Tahoma and Mama alone.

Adding to the medicine bag that Tahoma had carried on his horse, he used Wolf's herbs, roots, salves and powders and combined them. He ministered to them using different medicines and herbs. He chanted and placed feathers on them. Finally, one of the mixtures was burned and gave off a dream smoke so strong that Tahoma left the room. Mama, however, drew a chair next to Wolf. The pungent smoke permeated the room.

She felt herself leave her body as she knelt next to Wolf and took hold of his hand. "Wake up, Wolf, I need you."

Wolf smiled but didn't open his eyes. "Later, Mama, I need to rest."

"I understand. I will wait with you for a while," she said. Her fingers played with his fingertips and she remembered the years long ago when they were young. "You left here as a warrior. I was so proud." She looked at him and gripped his hand.

Wolf did not stir.

"What troubles you?" She asked.

Wolf moved his shoulders and his closed eyes squinted.

"What happened?"

"The voodoo priest."

"You saw the voodoo priest?"

"Yes. His knife was poisoned."

"Tahoma is here. He will care for you."

"Tahoma cannot help me. I will die."

Mama threw out her arms and hugged his neck and wailed. "Oh no, no! I'm here, Wolf! You can't die! Hold on to me! I won't let you die!" She burst into tears. She did not care if the whole world saw her crying. Her Wolf was dying. Tears flowed like a flood. The front of her was wet and, yet, she still saw Wolf through her tears though his image was fractured into a thousand pieces like a kaleidoscope. She squeezed his hand. She would not let go of it and she would not let go of a single chance for hope.

Wolf did not say a word.

Hearing a noise, Tahoma peeked into the room. Mama was still sitting in her chair with her eyes close. A tear ran down her cheek. He returned to the front of the store.

"If Tahoma can't help you, is there anyone who can?"

Wolf didn't say anything.

"Who can help you? Is there another medicine man?" She asked and she shook him. "Who is it? Speak, Wolf, speak!" She had let go of his hand and grabbed his shoulders and jarred him.

His lips moved.

She couldn't hear. She bent down.

"Say it again, Wolf. Louder."

"The blood of the princess," he whispered, though he still didn't open his eyes.

"The blood of the princess?" Mama repeated. "The blood of the princess? Who is the princess?" Mama was scared. She knew of no princess other than the ones in England. Surely Wolf was not speaking of them. It was crazy. Totally insane. How could she save Wolf if she had to get the blood of an English princess. There was no way it could be true. She asked again. "What about a medicine man? Who is the princess, Wolf?"

"The blood of the princess," he repeated. "If her blood is still alive."

"If her blood is still alive?" Mama said the same thing as her chin sunk to her chest. She imagined a vial of blood somewhere. Maybe she could get a vial of blood of a princess. Maybe from a medicine man. She would ask Tahoma.

She slumped over and woke up. Realizing that she had been dreaming, she pulled her chair closer to Wolf and held his hand. "Who is the medicine man, Wolf?" She asked but she knew she would not hear an answer. Her dream was over. For now.

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Ignoring the strange lighting and thunder, Cavanaugh followed the trail down and was confident that Laura had decided to intercept the highway sooner than if she had kept to the original ravine. Maybe she had worried that she would miss it after all and she struck out for the road on her own, knowing that the highway was due east. However, he realized, after a while, that he had over strode her trail and had to double back. Somehow he had missed something. She was in the path all along and then she had inexplicably left it but where?

He had been too confident and now he had to backtrack and find a boot mark or some other mark and, like a dummy, he had already scuffed up the trail. He could have kicked himself.

Doubling back would more than double the time. He went even slower as he bent over with his flashlight and tried to find any branches in the trail that he hadn't noticed before. He looked at both sides of the gulley. Finally, he found where she may have scrambled up the side and headed into the mountains. He wondered why.

Grabbing his right side, he felt a sudden sharp pain before he heard the sound of the gun though not by much.

A man called out in a strange language, "Je lui ai tiré dessus!"

Cavanaugh dropped to the ground and scooted behind a rock. He had been so focused on finding Laura that he hadn't listened for any trouble. He knew Wolf had gotten jumped and Jake and gotten shot.

Fumbling to get his night vision goggles on, he knew he had only himself to blame. With the PVS-14 scope in his hand, he crawled on his belly to a better position, one where he could lift his head.

Fitted with the scope, he scanned the area and quickly counted two men. One was almost on top of him, closing within fifty yards. Presumably, he was the man that shot him. The other man was further up the mountain. Cavanaugh fitted an arrow, dialed the adjustable bow down, and pulled back with his aching right arm. Gritting his teeth, the tension broke the barrier where it was hardest to pull back. He knelt and aimed with his mono scope on. The target fell dead with barely a sound. He had been hit through the heart.

Stringing another, he searched for the second man. Too far away for a clean kill shot, Cavanaugh closed the gap. Slowly moving from rock to rock, he'd pause to give the man a chance to also close the yards on him. His arm throbbed and his fingers were numb. The second man also had a rifle with a scope and he used it to try to sight Cavanaugh but it was useless in the dark. For all he knew, Cavanaugh was still down near the gulch and quite possibly dead.

The night sky's belly rumbled low and harsh.

"Amil!" He called. But no one answered.

Cavanaugh let the arrow zing but just at that second the man crouched and the arrow struck him in the shoulder above the heart. The man tried to lift his rifle to fire but the shoulder was useless. The rifle bumped into the arrow and he had to lower the gun. Cavanaugh jumped up and ran to him, drawing out his knife. The man heard him. He pulled out a pistol and fired wildly in the dark. Cavanaugh had no choice but to crouch behind a tree.

While his opponent whimpered while fidgeting with the arrow, Cavanaugh snuck up to higher ground behind him. The black man gamely waved a pistol with his good hand and peered into the darkness. He could see no better than Cavanaugh. Jerking his head back and forth with every little sound, the man hopped nervously from foot to foot.

Cavanaugh scooped up a handful of gravel and pitched it out into the night in front of the wounded man. As the rock scattered across a twenty foot area, the pistol blazed.

Leaping from a rock, Cavanaugh seized his chance. Grabbing the man's shirt, he foot swept the man and dropped him on his back. Lightning flared and the black man's eyes bulged as he fought back, vainly reaching for a long dagger at his side. Cavanaugh yanked the man's head back and slit his throat with one long, deep slice using the knife in his left hand. Before he even dropped, he extracted the arrow from the man's body and wiped it off on the man's own clothes.

He patted the man down, lifted him up and checked for a wallet but he found no identification. He dropped him like a sack of sand. Walking down the terrain to the other man, he searched his pockets and, again, found no ID's. Disgusted, he retrieved the second arrow, cleaned it up and added it back with the others. Lightning flared again in the mountains and echoed with thunder.

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"Are you ready, Mama?" Tahoma ducked his head inside the bedroom.

Mama stirred from her sleep and opened her eyes. She saw Tahoma in the doorway and his words echoed within her. She dropped Wolf's hand. "Yes, it's time. We need to bring them to the cave." Stepping outside, she noticed that Meah, Atsa, and the other men had built litters for Wolf and for Jake. After securing the patients, they had additional horses carry the litters toward the mountain, along a path that was hidden from the highway.

In an open area, Tahoma slowed down and rode beside Mama. He didn't say anything but waited.

"Do you know of a princess, Tahoma?" Mama asked.

"A princess? You aren't asking about the English princesses."

Mama shook her head.

"From our tribe?"

"I don't know."

"Why?"

"Wolf said, 'the blood of a princess.' I don't know what that means."

"What about the blood of a princess?"

"He says he will die without the blood of a princess."

Tahoma frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"What can it mean? We don't have a princess. Besides, the cave has never failed to heal. There must be a mistake."

"There is no mistake."

The path began to narrow. Tahoma gazed up into the mountains and watched the play of the far away lightning in the night clouds. "We will bring him to the cave and see what we will see," he sighed and rode ahead.

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Trembling because of the cold and her damp clothes, Laura added a few more twigs to the small fire. She did not dare raise a larger flame. There could be unwanted eyes in the forest. She thought she heard more gunshots but she couldn't be sure if it were guns or the weather. She hunkered down with her face and body close to the warmth and her knife on her lap. She held her hands close to the fire and flexed her fingers. Sitting cross legged, her bare knees straddled the flames.

Suddenly something plopped on her shoulder and fell between her legs, hitting the inside of her thighs. It writhed and something else fell and hit and rolled between her legs. She jumped up, crashing through the pine branch roof she had made for herself and other things fell through. And then they RATTLED!! They were rattlesnakes! A den of rattlesnakes had somehow, for some reason, slithered right to her. Crashing through the cut limbs and fir and needles, she had dropped her knife next to the little blaze. The kindling caught fire and the steel of her blade danced in red and orange.

The snakes that had dropped in on her wrangled towards her as if she were a magnet. Wriggling back and forth, their tongues flicked and their tails whirled. Laura picked up a burning branch and jabbed at the three foot vermin, searing their scales and causing them to retreat off into the black.

More of the tree caught fire. She knew she couldn't be stuck in the woods at night without her meager weapon. The fire leapt higher and it was just too hot to reach in with her foot. She stripped down a branch and dragged at the knife as she let the fire roast her face and hands. Finally able to kick at it, she knocked her blade several feet away and waited for it to cool. The tree itself caught fire and rose several feet into the air, sending up a shower of sparks. If ever a signal needed to be sent to every crackpot in the woods, she realized that she just sent it. She bent over to pick up her knife and heard a growl behind her.

Cavanaugh's right hand had swollen like a blown up rubber glove and throbbed with each heart beat through his arm and into his neck. The bird, he began to understand, had passed a germ that infected him at an alarming rate. The antibiotic that he had used did not slow the infection. In fact, it may have fed the spread of the germs. He thought of a Petri dish experiment where gelatin, sugar, bread and saliva sat under a super moist, warm heat lamp and the resultant mold grew like a mutant outer space horror movie. There was something diabolical in the birds' attack. They were so intense and wild and insatiable and, curiously, they followed the storm. It was the same storm that seemed to settle in the hills just beyond him.

Looking back downhill, he realized that he had lost the thin rocky trail again due to the fighting and he knew, even if he found it, he would have a hard time picking up any of Laura's tracks. He felt a little woozy, perhaps from the avian infection, perhaps from over activity. But he needed to press on. Switching on his flashlight, he carefully descended and hoped to pick her up again. He kept his eyes on the changing countryside.

The crack of thunder momentarily lifted Cavanaugh's eyes and he saw what looked like a tiny dot of light in the distance. Wishing he had a pair of binoculars and not just the night scope, he focused on the pinpoint. Although it was in the same general direction as he had already been heading, which was 'over there', 'over there' covered miles of territory and there was a huge risk. If he made a mistake, he could delay finding her for hours or days or maybe never. Laura could become just like the two bodies that he left on the mountain behind him. The wilderness was aptly named. It was full of rough, dangerous, life threatening wildness.

Dropping caution like an empty bag, he abandoned the trail and set off for the light, if that's what it was. He practically ran towards it, knowing that Laura was alone in the Idaho badlands. He knew she was tough but she was a West Texas plains girl who was used to the dust and heat and coyotes. Out in the Idaho mountains, there were grizzly bears, brown bears, bobcats, mountain lions, cougars, and a whole host of other dangerous, poisonous animals that she knew nothing about. Even the birds could turn vicious though, until that day, Cavanaugh had never experienced anything like the crazed crows and ravens.

He quickly closed the gap on the light. It was definitely a fire, similar to the one in his right arm.

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Laura waited until her knife cooled and then bent over and picked it up. The lightning, which had stayed away from her, flared above and crackled like faulty wiring along the gulley. She had never seen anything like it. The plains had strange things happen – sudden wind storms and a sun so hot it could melt the white stripe on a roadway. But she had never seen a gulley lit up like Christmas lights. She briefly cast a shadow as the electricity danced around her and then continued on down the gulch. Insects and spiders emerged from the crevices of rock along the sides and dropped right next to her. Lizards and snakes scurried and slithered towards her and away from her. Her hair stood up, not only on the back of her neck but around her temples and forearms. Everything seemed electrified. The mountain hummed and the night clouds pulsed. The tree continued to burn and the smoke drifted through the ravine.

Laura gagged and climbed up the bank. Spiders and bugs hopped on her hands. Shaking them free as she lifted each hand to climb, a spider hit her face and crawled into her hair. Shrieking, she slid back down the short bank and was bit in the calves by things she didn't know. Painful bites that swelled before she could even swat the unknown bugs away.

Everywhere she looked, the night was alive with creepy crawly things. Bugs, spiders, snakes, and lizards. Bats swooped down through the darkness and darted at her head and shoulders. Wild-eyed, Laura ducked and danced and then scrambled up the bank again.

The tree collapsed inward into the gulley and fed upon itself and lit up the area around her. Radiated by another flare of lightning, on a rise beyond the roll of hilly ground, Laura swore she saw the voodoo man again, grinning with his eyes bulging. She was dizzy. Her head swam. He lifted his hand as if he were a conductor in a hellish orchestra. The same man who she thought was killed by Hercules down by the pool. Who she wished was killed by Hercules. He had come for her once before. Had he come again? He appeared to have power over the wind, the thunder and the lightning. The insects, spiders, bats, and snakes crawled at his command. Laura couldn't take refuge in the cleft but she didn't want to expose herself to the deranged hoodoo man on the mountain. And she knew 'exposed' was the right word for her. He had her sex foremost in his brain, as she knew he knew he could overcome her and torture her and do far worse things to her. She gripped her knife tightly in her hand and began to hate.

She felt an awful but powerful black burning in her heart that told her that she had to fight back. She had to run up to the voodoo man and kill him once and for all.

She knew how to do it. With her knife drawn, she'd tread across the distance and dodge between rock and tree and get behind him. Then she'd jump him and slice across his throat with a clean, deep cut. She had killed deer and cut their throats. She skinned them and slaughtered them and packed away the meat. She could do the same to him. Cut his head off. Disembowel him. Hack off his limbs. Her hate was justified. Her hate was strong. It radiated throughout her being and illuminated her mind.

As fast as a flash, she imagined running up to him and plunging the knife into his wicked heart and watching the blood pump and squirt and his eyes roll up into his head.

She clenched her teeth and stared at the hill where she had seen him last. Planting her feet and holding steady with one hand, she peered over the rock and waited for another flash of lightning to prove to herself once and for all that he was still there. She counted one second, two seconds and then something crawled over her hand and up her arm and up her legs. The bugs and spiders flittered everywhere again as the lightning didn't splash across the night but crackled along the ravine like a string of lights. The galvanic energy drove the insects and spiders insane. The snakes hissed and bumped into her boots. Rats scurried for their lives between the snakes. She thought it could get no worse. Then she heard the growls again. Deep, guttural, unnatural growls that made her skin crawl backwards. And they were much closer.

-----

Meah and Atsa reached the wooded area first and stood before the cave and unlatched the litters from the horses. Weaving his way past them and through the brush, Tahoma entered the cave and lit the smokeless torches. He stepped out and waved them forward.

The mouth of the cave was narrow and low and hidden by a wall of rock, trees and greenery. Meah guided his litter with Jake on it into the cave and set him away from the opening. Atsa followed with Wolf. Tahoma had begun additional preparations that emphasized cleansing aromatics. However, the air within the cave already seemed fresher and healthier than the pungent pine outside. Mama tied up her horse and unbundled a blanket and a small bag of her belongings. Entering the cave, she laid the folded blanket by Wolf and knelt on it next to him. Although she had not been to many of the healing ceremonies in the cave, she anticipated a long stay.

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Laura retreated to the gulley and hurried towards the fire with one hand stretched out to the side in case she stumbled. The floor and sides of the gulch still crawled with spiders and bugs but she forced herself to step firmly and she felt a satisfying crunch underneath her boots. Clutching the knife, she tried to peek over the ridge whenever she climbed up on a rock.

The clouds' rumble reverberated through the skies, hills and mountains and pulsated with eerie white, yellow and pink light. As the wind picked up, ash and sparks flew into her face. She saw double of everything. Withdrawing her hand from the side of the rocky wall, she lifted her arm in front of her as if to ward off not only the hot embers but unseen evil spirits that might be out in the blackness.

Disembodied ghosts of some sort or another that searched for the troubled living, that sought out helpless souls to drag with them, down into hell.

Laura was sure the voodoo man had been out there. As if on command, she looked that way again. She looked where he had been with an outstretched arm, as if commanding his army from Hades. The growls were closing in on her but she didn't see him. Things swayed – the night, the fire, the sparks, the insects. She was crazy thirsty. At one time, she knew she had some water but she must have dropped it. She almost cried.

She knelt in front of the burning tree and peered into where she had holed up earlier in the night. She thought she saw her bottle. Using an unburned stick, she poked but she couldn't reach it. Just when it seemed like she would hit it, the stick just missed. She held the thin branch with the ends of her fingers. Ignoring the howls and growls that closed in behind her, she jabbed at the bottle. Thirst gripped her throat. The fire toasted her visage. Sweat from her brow dripped into her face. She swore she had hit the container but the stick seemed to pass right through it.

Her arms and legs were bitten or burned by bugs or floating embers. She couldn't see well enough into the crevice to knock the bottle towards her. Heedless of the fire around her, she stepped into the rounded out shelter of rock, into a bundle of bracken to reach down for her bottle.

Her bottle wouldn't stay still. It moved from side to side and appeared to multiply into two bottles, into three bottles. Just then, as she extended her hand to grab for the bottles, something enormous and ugly and hairy snarled above her and she glanced up just in time to see a face full of yellow slobbering teeth and fiery, orange red eyes. A long black snout dropped mucus into the dirt and chasm as it leaped for her but then inexplicably fell awkwardly towards her with an ear shattering shriek that pierced her heart.

Crying out, she stumbled back. Blood sprayed across her face. The three bottles wriggled and squirmed and she realized they were snakes. The beast slammed into her and knocked her out of the rock wall indentation and out of the fire. Her knife flew from her hand and landed in the hot ash that burned just outside of the fire. Falling backwards, she tripped and the animal landed on top of her. It stank like burnt sulfur and rotting flesh. Lightning flared and the night sky rumbled and she heard another guttural bray above her.

A timber wolf stared down at her and bared its ugly yellow teeth and red gums. Saliva dripped from the corner of its mouth. It crouched and jumped for her and then it also squealed and whimpered and fell on top of her and the other beast. Blood exuded from both and hit her neck. The slick, oily red gore rolled down inside her shirt, onto her chest and under her arms. Reaching up to push them off, she grabbed on to a stick or something protruding from the side of the wolf's head, just below its ear. She wriggled at it and more blood spilled down on her. The other beast was a wolf too.

A snake slithered across the arm that she had used to lift and brace herself and jostled the wolves to push them off. Its dry, scaly skin repulsed her. Its rattle made her insides tense and grip. She almost threw up with fear. Grunting, she heaved against the bodies again and their blood mixed with her sweat and trickled into her mouth. The coppery taste sickened her. Already dizzy and sick to her stomach, she gagged. She spat the blood and hairy fur out of her mouth. Insects crawled up her shorts and into her boots. The heat from the fire was unbearable. Sweat poured down her face, from her temples, from the back of her neck and down her shirt. Everything swam. She passed out.

--47--

Cavanaugh was positive there was a fire up ahead and a little downhill of him. The rumbling of the thunder and the flashes of lightning had returned. A blood red moon also poked between the clouds on the opposite side of the coming storm. The hair on his arms and neck prickled with each pulse of electricity. Slotting an arrow into the string of his bow, he descended towards the light. After hearing

the calls of a pack of timber wolves, he hurried as fast as he could. If Laura were down there among them, she wouldn't stand a chance. Given the right kind of determination, a pack of wolves could take down a moose. Even with a gun, assuming she had one, she couldn't shoot fast enough – especially given the uncertain terrain. He scurried on, keeping his body weight in front. He tried to pick out the obstacles as his feet fell.

Tripping once, he rolled on and over his sore right shoulder and arm. He kept the bow out in front and to the side, and kept his mumbled language under his breath and to the side, also. It hurt. It hurt like the dickens.

Undeterred, he crossed and scissored his legs and bounced back up and forward. The fire was much closer. Several wolves milled along the edge of a ravine where a fire seemed to burn from the middle of it. He pulled back on his bow, about halfway through the seventy pound test. His arm felt every bit of the strain but he didn't let up. He ran another ten yards when he saw a wolf leap towards the burning light.

Something inside of him told him to draw and shoot. He could have just let the crazy wolf jump into the fire and kill itself but animals, particularly large carnivorous mammals, were not suicidal. It was attacking another animal or human. And just as quickly, he knew it was attacking Laura. He drew the string all of the way back until his hand was next to his ear. The compound bow snapped into position. He sighted it, looking for the quickest kill, which was through the ear and into its brain. And he let it fly while the animal was in mid flight with no way to divert its course. He was positive he hit his mark.

Not waiting to confirm his kill, he strung another arrow and pulled back again and aimed for the wolf closest to the edge of the ravine. Whistling through the night air, the missile buried itself deep between the ribs and into the heart of the wolf. It slumped and then rolled over the edge in a lifeless heap. He fingered another arrow and shot again. Because his target jumped back at the last split second in order to avoid the dying wolf, the shaft dug into the neck of a third wolf and severed the trachea and an artery. It madly hopped and dropped into the fire and quickly sizzled with ear piercing screeches and screams. He had never heard anything like that before, not from a wolf. It was like it was possessed. The thrashing throes of the roasting wolf panicked the remaining pack and they plowed into each other before scattering back into the cover of the night.

Cavanaugh could see their eyes peer from deep in the dusk around the trees and rocks. Their guttural communications told him that they hadn't given up. Unbelievably, the dumb beasts were plotting and planning. He didn't know how. It was like they were under a spell. Charmed by some unseen malevolent spirit or being that had the intelligence to guide the wolves.

Sweat rushed from every pore in Cavanaugh's body. His right arm was completely numb but it also ached and throbbed. The poison seeped into his right side and neck. Finding it hard to breathe, he closed the last few hundred yards of distance and slid down the side of the chasm and ran up the passage. He leaned against the walls and panted. The fire was hot. Spiders and snakes and even bats crawled, slithered and flittered around him. He was spooked by their unnatural appearance. The creatures would like the warmth but not the burning heat. They wouldn't risk being burnt alive and yet they still crawled right up to the fire or swooped down from overhead. He used a stick to pick up and fling away a three foot rattlesnake.

He notched one more arrow but wished he could let his arm hang at his side. Warily watching the edge of the ravine, he drew closer to the fire. Its heat warmed his face and legs. He wanted to take a drink of water but he only had a single swallow left in his last bottle. The growls of the wolves drew closer again. He had hoped to find Laura down in the gulley but he didn't see her. If she were down near the fire, she wasn't on his side of the blaze.

Clutching the bow with his almost useless right hand, he pulled up on the rock cleft with his left and found enough footing to get over the top. Something scurried off into the dark to his left. He heard rock and gravel slide back down behind him and then the crackle of the fire. The wind carried some of the

burning embers up into the night and he held his breath hoping each one extinguished itself before falling back to the earth. Even though the clouds pulsed with lightning and they thundered, they brought no rain and the dry forest bed and fallen dead trees would burn for days and maybe miles. He figured Laura was still down in the little canyon. He just hadn't found her yet.

A yellowish white wolf with blood red eyes crept forward out of the black and growled deep in its throat at Cavanaugh. Surprised at the boldness, he stared back at it and around it. The tall pines and hardwood trunks stood like columns in the darkened gloom and hid the remaining pack from Cavanaugh's threat assessment. Irregular rock shapes and boulders appeared to dance as the shadows from the flames and lightning jumped in fits and starts. He didn't know if he had to deal with three wolves or a hundred. The ugly, angry, pale wolf took several slow steps forward.

With each gnarr, spit dripped from the corner of its mouth and its teeth were needle point sharp. Its pupils were tiny black dots set in crimson liquid that fixated on Cavanaugh. As it stepped towards Cavanaugh, more wolves left the shelter of the trees and brush and rocks and advanced on him. They all began to thrum and howl and bay and snap at each in anticipation of a bite of man meat.

Sensing that he had little to no time left, Cavanaugh pulled back on his arrow and - too late! The ring leader pounced on him and he shot wildly behind into the pack. Before tumbling over into the culvert, he heard the almost human scream of a wolf dying somewhere in the trees. His bow fell from his hand and slid down the rock into the channel. He grabbed for the knife at his side. Lightning lit up the hills. Without even a second to process the images, he thought he saw a menacing human figure raise its arms with a skull or rock or something else in its right hand. His brain bounced back immediately to the voodoo priest that Mama had talked about. He hit the gully floor with a thud.

Struggling to breathe, he thrashed on the ground and then reached for his belt and pulled up. He arched his back. He had the breath knocked out of him and he attempted the only first aid he knew for it. He panted and tried to slow his breathing into a deep, rhythmic pattern. He needed to get oxygen into his brain. The fire sucked it all off the floor. He felt like passing out. Sweat dripped into his eyes. Then the wolf sprang on top of him.

He hadn't gotten his knife out yet from the sheath and the wolf bit into his inflamed right shoulder. God only knew what kind of diseases were carried by the dirty beast, which had grown at least half again as big as a normal sized timber wolf. Searing pain brought tears to Cavanaugh's eyes and the monster's foul breath clogged his nose so that he could only breathe through his mouth. As the wolf swiped his head across his face, spittle and his own blood dripped into Cavanaugh's mouth. He choked and gagged. Pushing with his bloody, dead right shoulder, he tried to wrap his legs around the wolf but the greasy fur eluded a lock. His left hand finally gripped his knife and he managed to pull it out of the leather sheath. The animal clamped down on his left hand with its front paw and bit at his right shoulder, tearing into the previous wound. The wolf's teeth hooked around Cavanaugh's clavicle and it shook violently. Cavanaugh instinctively opened his left hand, dropping the knife and slammed his outward palm at the head. Stunned, the wolf opened its jaws and Cavanaugh slid backwards towards the fire. His shoulders and head bumped into something soft.

He wanted to push as hard as he could into the obstacle so he could get some protection from the fire but the wolf was on top of him again. Snarling and snapping, the maniacal fiend bit its own tail and howled and snapped again at Cavanaugh. Somehow he eluded the worst bites but the razor like claws scored along his right hand and arm and drew blood. Despite his own perspiration he glanced into the mean red irises and saw a reflection of hell before realizing it was a reflection of the fire behind him. Holding off the beast with his numb arm, he felt along the crevice floor for his knife with his left hand. He scooted to the side on his back and dragged his hand. For some reason, he couldn't grasp the knife that he knew had to be right next to him. But he did not dare look away from the wolf to look for the steel blade. He just felt for it as best as he could.

As Cavanaugh scrambled, the wolf sat back on its hind legs poised for the kill with its lips curled in a sneer. The bloody drool dripped down the sides of its mouth. It seemed eager to finish him once and for all as if it had a human purpose in killing him. It sprung for him with its mouth wide open. Cavanaugh stuck his left hand out and snatched whatever he could possibly grab. Dirt and sweat stung his eyes and threatened to blind him just as the horrible lupus committed and sailed through the air. But he squinted to see through the smoke and heat and burn. He thrust his makeshift weapon forward as hard as he possibly could at the terrible menace. Like a mythical sword, he stabbed with a flaming golden red branch that was about four feet long and an inch and a half thick. Fire licked half way down its length and burned the opposite end into a sharp, hot, searing point. He jabbed up at the wolf as its arc descended onto him. In a microsecond, the full weight of the monster would crash into him and its teeth would tear his face to shreds.

He braced himself against the winding crevice rock wall that faced away from the fire. He was opposite of where he had fallen back down into the culvert. With a gigantic growl, the wolf opened wide and Cavanaugh's thrust caught it in the back end of the beast's throat. Its weight carried forward and the butt end of the branch jammed into the rock. The wolf's head tilted upward and the pointed spear pierced through the upper inside of its mouth, through the back end of an eye and into its brain. Its huge deadweight, limp body slammed into Cavanaugh and knocked his head back against the rock.

He tried to get back up but the dead animal pinned him against the stone and rock. He slumped. He felt like his blood had quit pumping through his body. He saw stars and he knew it wasn't the night stars nor the embers. They were proteins disengaged and floating behind his eyes.

Floating. Everything swirled. Everything. The smoke. The sparks. The fire. The wolf. The voodoo priest that Mama had told him about. It all seemed so long ago. Wolf. Mama's Wolf, not the dead wolf. He leaned his head back. He wanted to sleep. But what about Laura. What about Laura? He needed to find Laura. He opened his eyes again.

He saw the voodoo priest who had one eye. He thought he could see straight through his skull. And there was Laura. Laura?

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Rolling over onto her side with her eyes closed but facing the nearest rock wall, Laura rubbed at her temples which pulsated. In the far reaches of her mind, she had some sense that the insect and spider bites, the heat of the fire and the lack of water all caused her head to thump. She rocked back and forth in rhythm with the pain. Although she tried to block out the sick feeling and the headache, she couldn't get past it. She was vaguely aware of a scuffle or a fight near her but she didn't have the strength right then to turn towards it.

When she didn't rub the sides of her head and her ears, she rubbed her face and then she went back over the sides of her head. All of the time, she kept her eyes closed and breathed in huffs through her mouth, choking through the smoke.

With her head teetering, she gained some semblance of consciousness. And as she awoke, she realized that it wasn't totally her brain that beat like a drum. Crickets, grasshoppers or cicadas or other kinds of insects thrummed together. Bats still swooped and flitted through the smoke. She turned onto her back again and the fire and sparks still danced. The eerie lightning flickered in the dull gray clouds of night. Still with her eyes shut, she put her hand on her heart and she could feel it beat as quickly as if she had run a marathon and it scared her. She opened her eyes and stared up into the shape of blackness along the top of the ridge of the ravine and yet, around that blackness she could see clouds and even further off to one side, she saw the blood moon. Her heart thumped harder. She remembered her knife and saw it next to the fire. Because the fire had been burning for awhile, the knife was further away from the heat. She touched it with a finger and found that it was cool enough to lift.

Laura grabbed it with one hand and pulled it close. The black shape hovered over the little culvert. Lightning flashed to its left and illuminated the ghastly shape of half a man. The crimson, bloody moon was to its right and showed the other half. Laura tried to envision whether she saw the front or back of the ghost. No light shone through it or on it so she couldn't tell. It silently drifted down and stood on the floor of the gully.

The dark spirit took a step away from her and she understood she had been observing its back. Reaching in front of itself, its arm disappeared and then reappeared and held, at his side, a bright silver and copper shining cutlass. About eighteen inches long, the sharp edges of the blade were silver while the middle section was reddish copper.

The impenetrable ghoul lifted the sword above its head. Everything was eerily silent. The bugs quit humming. The bats no longer swooped. Watching him, Laura instinctively scooted an inch or two back and squeezed her knife. At that instance, a burnt out branch dropped from the husk of the tree behind her and fell into the fire, sending a shower of embers up into the night but also landing on and burning her hand. She cried out. The ugly hellish spirit whooped in an unknown tongue and whipped around with its blade held high. Sparks circled its face. The fire reflected on its blade and also showed its visage. It was the voodoo priest. Laura stared through his vacant eye socket and saw a part of the red moon behind him.

His jaw dropped and she could count the long white teeth in his decaying head. Its single yellow iris and black pupil focused right at her. He swung the long blade towards her and she rolled out of its way. It clanged against the rock. Her head swam. Unsteady. Laura jabbed upward into its belly with her knife and pushed it deep into his body. It visibly sizzled where she had plunged. The spirit screamed as if in pain and withdrew a few steps. Her arm went completely numb but hurt with a bone aching hurt. She extracted the dagger with her hand still gripped around the bladeless handle. The base of her steel blade had melted and smoked. She tried to drop the handle but couldn't release her grip. She swung her arm at him and the handle comically stayed in her hand. She just stared at it. Using her left hand, she unhooked her fingers and the handle dropped to the ground.

She heard a voice yell out, "Laura!" Jerking her head, she looked along the chasm and then saw Cavanaugh tucked away in a fold of rock, his head peeking around it. He struggled to get up.

The voodoo priest chopped at her with his cutlass and she blocked it with a branch. She rolled across the canyon floor until she neared Cavanaugh. Not three feet from him was his knife.

Laura tried to open her right hand but couldn't. She shook it in with an awkward arcing motion but her fingers wouldn't open. The ghostly menace stabbed down at her and she deflected the small sword with her piece of wood but it sliced down her forearm and bicep and nicked just inside a rib on her left side. Inhaling, she pushed Cavanaugh's knife towards him with her right hand and kicked at the voodoo priest with her foot.

He was totally unlike the ghost she had expected. He felt as cold and as hard as ice. She turned her ankle and thought she may have broken it. Her head swirled and she closed her eyes. She couldn't help it. The hoodoo man was sure to kill her anyway.

The pain seared her brain and she saw shooting stars behind her eyelids. The insects began thrumming and drumming again. She tried to swallow but only managed to choke on the smoke. She opened her eyes. The bats swooped down and flicked at her hair with their wings. They felt like spiders.

Cavanaugh picked his knife up. It seemed to glow in the dark as if it had absorbed the light from the fire and magnified it into a righteous anger. He seemed to gain strength from holding the blade. His face glowed and glistened from the sweat even as it smudged from the dirt and grime of the fight. His left forearm muscles rippled as he pulled the knife back to himself.

The ghoul stood above her with his back to Cavanaugh and stared down at her with otherworldly malevolence. He grinned a horrible evil grin and her insides shriveled and sickened. The fire seemed to drip from his teeth and blood from his eyes. His breath stunk and gagged her. Spreading his feet apart,

he lifted his cutlass with two hands, the silver flickered, the red of the blade appeared to ooze as the fire jumped. Up above his head and then back, he withdrew the small sword, his back arched with the effort. He started forward in a flash with his cutlass to kill her and Cavanaugh sprang.

Like a rifle shot, he leaped with his knife straight ahead. Lightning flashed and seemed to sparkle along the edges of Cavanaugh's silver blade, making it appear white hot and semi-liquid. Cavanaugh's knife, head and upper body disappeared behind the blackness of the ghostly voodoo priest and then the priest screamed in an unearthly high pitch. All of the surrounding wolves howled and wailed. Coyotes and cougars screeched. The bats squeaked and dove and some landed in the fire and then flew back up in the air. The ground in the ravine shook. The priest's blade exploded in a shower of sparks and they flew every which way like angry popping flashing specks of iron and copper. Then the voodoo man dissipated into the night like a black mist - seeping upward into a dark sewer in the sky.

Cavanaugh knelt behind the disappearing ghost. He pulled back his hunting knife and wiped it on his thigh. He bent his head down and sucked in a deep breath. Then, looking towards the fire, he asked, "Laura, are you okay?"

She lay back on the ground and stared at him, making sure he, too, didn't disappear. Satisfied that he wouldn't, she said, "You did notice me. I was beginning to wonder."

A pained expression crossed his face.

She hid a smile and nodded, "I'm okay." She rubbed her right arm and added, "What took you so long?"

His eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"I was heading back to Mama's and took a short cut," Laura continued.

"Short cut? Do you have any idea where the heck you are?"

"Of course, I do," she said. "If you'd bother to move a couple of more steps, country boy, I'd be close to you."

Cavanaugh took the hint and scooted on his knees until he was right next to her. He put his left arm behind her shoulders. Raising her up, he bent down and kissed her.

Laura pulled back and her eyes seemed unfocused.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No. No, not at all." She made an odd Bewitchy movement with her mouth. "I just feel funny. My lips hurt. And I'm thirsty as all get out."

"Hmmm, let me look at you." Cavanaugh turned her arms towards the fire. "He cut you pretty good."

"Pretty good, or pretty bad?"

"Not too bad. But you've got several bad bug bites." He dropped her arms and, using his fingers, felt along her legs. "Same thing here. What about under your shirt?" He saw the little hole where the knife had penetrated. He reached up. "We should check."

She knocked his left hand away. "Uh, not so fast, doc."

He looked at her, surprised. "Well, I was just gonna."

"Yeah, you were gonna, alright," she said. "I think we can hold off on that."

"Oh, yeah, right." He gave a nervous laugh. "I guess I was remembering my times in the field."

"Yeah, I guess you were."

He reached into his flat backpack. "I've got a little water left. It's from the pool. Saving it for you."

"Really?"

"I figured you might need it. Besides, there's a good chance it'll take care of those bites."

"What do you mean?"

"The water from the pool, it has healing properties."

"What about you?"

"I don't need any."

"Do you have any bites?"

"No."

"No? What if I checked?"

"You gonna?" He smiled.

"I might."

"You might," he scoffed. "Ha! Big talker." He held out the bottle. "Drink this, it'll do you good."

Laura reached for the bottle. "You sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

She finished it and handed the empty bottle back to him. He stuck it in his pack.

"Now, about that kiss," she said. "I'm not all bluster."

Cavanaugh raised his eyebrows. "Maybe you're not." He kissed her until the tree behind them collapsed into itself and sent another shower of sparks up and out. And then he kissed her again.

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The beginning grey of morning showed between the mountain gaps. The lightning and the clouds had disappeared as soon as Cavanaugh stabbed his knife into the back of the voodoo priest and pierced his heart from behind. The remaining wolves, cougars, insects, bats and spiders were all gone.

"How are you feeling?" He asked.

"Better."

"You look better."

Laura and Cavanaugh had climbed out of the ravine on the opposite side where Laura had first descended the day before.

Able to put weight on her foot, Laura stretched her arms out above her head. "So, if I'm not where I think I am, where am I?" She asked.

Cavanaugh gave her a quick, sideways glance and couldn't hide his grin. "Why, you're next to me."

"Great." She dusted herself off.

"What? You don't think I'm funny?"

"There are plenty of hungry, out of work comedians who don't have to worry about you getting one of their meals."

"I was only playing off of you."

"I know, cowboy, but where are we, really?"

Cavanaugh looked up at the mountains and turned in a full circle. "If I had to guess, I'd say we're about ten miles east and twenty miles north of Mama's."

"And if you weren't guessing?"

He licked his parched lips. "Just about the same."

She took a deep breath. "So I managed to actually go further away from Mama's."

"Definitely further east."

"So we've got a couple of days' hike ahead."

Cavanaugh laughed. "I hope not."

"Why do you laugh? Ten miles plus twenty miles, that's thirty miles. How are we going to do better than two days?"

"Let's just head west. We need to find some water first - then we worry about getting back."

Laura nodded. "You're the boss, boss."

He started off. "Only nominally."

She followed. "What's that?"

"Nothing."

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Cavanaugh shifted and slid down a short bank of rock and then turned to help Laura. "Hang on and then just slide feet first. I got you."

She did as she was told and he grabbed her foot with his left hand. Easing her down, he let go and then took her hand.

“What’s wrong with your right arm?”

“What do you mean?” He tucked his arm behind him and turned to the side to hide it.

“Don’t play me like that. I can see you’ve been favoring it. What’d you do? Hurt it in the fight with the ghost.” She reached around him and took the fingers of his right hand into her hands. “Holy Toledo! That’s not from the voodoo king.”

Cavanaugh drew his hand back. “In a way, it is. At least I think so. Craziest thing, a bird, a crow bit me down at Mama’s and now it’s infected or something.”

They started walking.

“I’d say. Your whole arm is swollen black and blue. Why didn’t you drink the water that you gave me? It’s supposed to heal you” she said. “Wait. You did drink the water. Why didn’t it work for you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t drink enough.”

“You could have drunk mine.”

“I already drank almost a full bottle. I’m thinking it must be something else.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe it’s a different kind of virus. Maybe it’s a curse. Not sure. That thing was crazy.”

“The bird?”

“Yeah. It was like it was fixated on me. It zeroed in on me and dove straight for me. And then it bit me.”

“Why you?”

“I don’t know. But it was like it had a death wish.”

“Your death or its death?”

“Hmmm.” He glanced quickly at her. “Maybe both.”

“That is strange. I never heard of a bird like that.” She took his hand again. Her lips curled up.

“Something else to think about,” she said. “The voodoo priest came all the way up here, high in the mountains.”

“Yeah, he wanted to kill you.”

“He could have done that almost any time. I had a long way to go to get lost,” she said, and she gave him half a smile. “I was out in the open.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think he was trying to draw you in to save me so he could kill you or kill us both.”

“That’s a pretty elaborate plan to be thinking for a man with half his brains blown out,” Cavanaugh chuckled.

“You go ahead and have your fun.” She gave him a little shove. “Just the same, he was a ghost or a zombie or something and he was able to find us. And we never did talk about that.”

“About what?”

“That voodoo guy was a ghost and you didn’t seem the least bit phased by it.”

“What do you mean? I was phased.”

“See? You’re dissembling now.”

“I’m not dissembling or whatever you’re saying.”

“You are, too.”

“No, I’m not. I can tell you this. He bothered me.”

“That’s not what I meant and I think you know it. I wasn’t just bothered. I was scared out of my wits. I would think the same would happen to you.” She had lagged behind him but then she tugged on his left arm and made him look at her. “You’ve seen his kind before. These evil spirits. The dead that walk again. Whatever the heck they are. I’ve never seen such a thing in my life. Not even once. But you have.”

“What the heck are you talking about?”

“See? You’re trying to throw me off. Why?”

"I never saw him before."

"I didn't say you saw *him* before. I'm saying you saw something *like* him before. I can hear it in your voice."

Cavanaugh shrugged his shoulders. "I've heard stories, sure."

"More than stories."

"The Algonquians tell of the Wendigo who is a kind of man eating evil spirit or creature. Sometimes it prowls the world as the spirit or creature and sometimes it possesses a person and turns them into a monster."

"Like the voodoo man."

"Maybe."

"So you've seen that before?"

"No. That's the Algonquian story."

"So you're still playing me." She turned away from him.

"Don't be like that."

Laura ignored him and kept walking. She passed him and moved ahead.

He watched her for a few seconds and then called out, "Do you know where you're going?"

She stopped. "So, not only are you not going to tell me what you saw, you're going to be high and mighty with me, too?"

He laughed. "Okay, okay. I've seen something like him before."

"Where?"

"Not now. We need to find some water."

"Any around here?"

"There's usually a little stream trickling down. We just keep heading west."

"Okay. But."

But, quietly."

"Okay."

-----

A half hour later, they were both bent over a small stream and dipping their hands, drawing the water up to their mouths and drinking.

"Worth the wait," Laura said as she shook her hands dry and then wiped them on her shorts.

"Almost worth it," Cavanaugh corrected her.

"Just trying to be positive, bubba."

"Good," he said as he filled his bottle.

Laura stood up. "I've got a question."

Cavanaugh rolled his eyes.

She ignored him. "Why were you able to kill him with your knife? I stabbed him and my knife just melted in him like a stick of butter."

"I'm guessing its because I dipped it in the pool before I left."

"You think the pool by your cabin has some kind of magic properties?"

"Maybe."

"Come on."

"For living out on the plains, you don't seem to have much respect for native lore."

"We don't have magic pools by my house."

"You'd be surprised what you do have."

"What do you mean?"

"Not much." He rubbed at his arm. "I think it's best if we go to the pool."

"Why there? You drank as much of the water as you could. It didn't seem to help."

"Well, like I said, the water is healing, the whole pool is healing. I'd like to jump in."

"It's ice cold."

"Yep." He led her forward. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Brrrr," she said and shivered.

"You could jump in with me."

"I could."

"Yeah?"

"Hmmm, not quite," she mumbled. "Let's get back to your story about the creature. The Wendigo."

"That again."

"Yep, I want to know when you saw the voodoo man or something like it."

"Up close and personal?" He asked.

"Yeah."

He sighed. "I think I saw a Skinwalker once."

"What's a Skinwalker?"

"To Navajo outsiders, the closest word and meaning would be a shapeshifter. They're a kind of witch who can change into almost any kind of an animal with the intent to cause great harm."

"The Navajos live by me. I never heard of a shapeshifter."

"They don't like to talk about them."

She did a 'so what' with her shoulders. "What's the Navajo word for this 'shapeshifter'?"

"Naaldlooshii."

"Nahl-da-loo-shee?"

"That's close."

She glanced ahead at the trail. "We can walk and talk."

They started up again.

"So how did you get mixed up with a shape shifting witch?"

"I guess I've always been somewhat connected to ancient lore."

"Because of your mother," she said softly.

"Yeah, because of her. Because I had friends around here. Because of my dad."

"What did your dad have to do with it?"

"In this case, quite a lot. He was on a movie set in Arizona and I hung around with one of the local kids who happened to be Navajo."

"And he told you about the shape shifters."

"They call them skinwalkers."

"Right. Skinwalkers."

"Not quite. He was involved in one of their religious ceremonies and asked me to stand with him. I had to ask my dad and I got to spend the next few days in the desert undergoing their right of passage."

"Which involved drugs and dreams."

"Which involved a lot more than that but, yes."

"Why would your dad let you do one of those?"

Cavanaugh stopped. "Because he trusted them. He trusted me. And we did nothing wrong."

Laura went quiet. "Okay," she whispered.

"My friend's name was Ahanu," he continued.

Laura smiled, "He who laughs."

"That's right." Cavanaugh looked over at her. "He still does, by the way. Anyway, we had spent a couple of nights out in the desert, out on a plateau, lying on our backs, staring at the stars, thinking our thoughts, smoking our smoke and feeding our fires, when, for some reason we both heard the call of an owl."

"Probably because of your magic smokes."

"Be as judgmental as you want, but it wasn't like that." Cavanaugh pulled on his nose with his left hand and drew in a deep breath. "So we followed the owl down to a place above a home but below the mountains. It was in the foot hills. It was a white man's home."

"How could you tell?"

He looked over at her. "How can you tell where you live?"

"That's fair. Okay."

"So we're a couple of hundred yards away from the house when the owl flies down and rests on the top of a saguaro branch near the home." He picked out a path that descended gently. "Now it's a white owl on an almost full moon night and we think it's good luck so we don't want to scare it off so we stayed back."

"Is it good luck?"

Cavanaugh looked at her annoyed. "Maybe."

"Go ahead."

"So a little while later a grey coyote slinks underneath a bedroom window. We don't think much of it because coyotes hunt everywhere. Houses. The desert. Towns. Dumps. So we lay back down and don't pay much attention until we hear a scraping noise and we sit up and see a long haired man, dressed in furs next to the same window. He's trying to open the window."

"I'm guessing it's one of those shapeshifters. And that those witches aren't all females."

Cavanaugh shakes his head. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Anybody home?"

"Just wait a minute," he said with another quick look. "The house is dark but Ahanu knows there are people that live there. Parents with a teenager and a couple of younger kids. A teen girl younger than us. He thinks the guy is trying to get into her room."

"Whoa."

Cavanaugh nods. "Now we don't want to get blamed for anything so we jumped up and yelled at the guy to get away from the house."

"Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Get blamed."

"Geez, hold on. We start down the hill and lose sight of the guy for just a second. I mean just the briefest of seconds and when we look up again, we see the coyote run off from the window."

"So nothing happened."

"I'll be hanged. Will you let me finish?"

"Go on."

"We didn't see any point in chasing after a coyote that had a couple hundred yard lead and it was a good thing we didn't because the lights all came on all over the yard. And the teen girl came out with a rifle and started shooting. Not necessarily up in the air."

"You think she would have shot you?"

"Please. Can you just let me tell it?"

"Okay."

"So we snuck back up the hill but I guess we weren't sneaky enough because she sent two bullets our way and stopped to reload. It's the reloading that saved us."

"She was a bad shot."

"She got close enough for me to feel a bullet go by me and I was in the dark."

"So not so bad. What happened to the shapeshifter?"

"We moved further down the hills but we watched the house. The cops and her parents came later. I guess her parents were out for the night."

"So nothing happened."

He let out a breath. "Oh boy."

They approached a wall of rock.

"We told Ahanu's father about it. He said we saw a shapeshifter. They prey on children." He leaned against the rock for a breather. "Later, word came round that intruders were spotted at the ranch. Of course, Ahanu's tribe knew nothing about it. How do you explain a shapeshifter to the police?"

Cavanaugh raised his shoulders.

"But how do you know it was a shapeshifter?" She stood away from him and the wall.

"I know it was a shapeshifter. Why?"

"You didn't see it actually change shapes."

"You're impossible." He shook his head. "No, we didn't see it change shapes but after that episode, I heard enough stories to know what we saw and how close we came to real trouble."

"I guess so."

Suddenly, Cavanaugh reached out and grabbed Laura by the arm and yanked her into him.

"What in the world?"

"Shhh," he put a finger up to his lips. Then they both heard a buzzing sound. He situated her next to him and had her lie down against the rock wall.

"What is it?" She whispered.

"Just wait," he whispered back.

The sound was just above him and Laura tried to turn her body.

"Don't. Not yet," he cautioned.

She stopped fidgeting.

The buzz continued and then took off over them, flying another hundred yards east and further downhill.

"It's a drone," she said. "How in the world did you hear that?"

"I heard enough of them in the real world."

"Whose is it?"

"I don't know. Could be anybody's. Hikers, nature lovers, hunters of one kind or another."

"Hunting us?"

"Maybe."

"Can we get up?"

"Yeah, I think so." He stood up and dusted off as best as he could with one arm. "If they were hunting us and found us, I think the drone would have swung around for a better view. I also think it would have turned back east."

"So, it didn't spot us."

"No, probably not, though they might see us on play back, assuming they are looking for us."

"Oh great, and look at my hair."

"Look at your hair!" Cavanaugh threw his hands up and then moaned about his right arm.

Laura patted his good arm and said, "Calm down. You just never know when you're being played, do you?"

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After more tribe members had gathered in the cave from the mountains and the hill areas, Tahoma led them down, deeper through the cavern to a small lake that shimmered with the glow from crystalline walls which reflected and amplified the cool light from their small lanterns. In previous centuries, they would have burned torches and bees wax candles and some of the smudge and black could still be seen. However, the group used cool white LED lanterns that irradiated the walls and water and gently

bounced back even stronger and brighter. Paradoxically, in a cave, deep underground, there were no shadows as the light lay upon and in everything – every nook, cranny, fold, and angle.

“Set them there,” Tahoma pointed at the water’s edge. Setting his medicine bottles and bag next to him, he donned a beaded vest and necklace and walked between the unconscious men, chanting. The others backed away except for Mama. She just moved to the other side of Wolf and watched and hummed a healing song that she remembered from her youth.

Mama had heard of the lake but she had never been inside the mountain. Wolf was closer to the medicine men than she had been so she had no reason to be asked to go to the lake whenever it had been used for healings.

Tahoma’s voice gradually softened until she could no longer hear him. She watched his lips move and then he stopped. He knelt and laid his arms on his thighs with his palms face out.

He stood up. “Lay them in the water.”

Knowing how cold the spring waters were in the mountains, Mama gasped. She thought of the shock to old Wolf’s system and she was afraid. Tahoma glanced harshly at her and shook his head. He motioned with his hands towards the men and then the lake. Wolf and Jake were picked up and set in the water. Neither man reacted.

Tahoma’s mouth continued to move. Although Mama couldn’t hear any words, she knew he was chanting. His voice slowly gained in volume like smoke rising from a fire until she heard the chant. She knew it and bowed her head so she could join in and she whispered it too though unobserved. She, too, held her hands out in prayer.

While still chanting, Tahoma positioned a candle on the shore, between the two, and crumbled a pinch of powder into the flame from one of the bottles. Mama saw a great cloud float around and over them and a bird as large as an eagle rose from the fire and spread its wings. She watched it circle above her head, circle over Wolf and Jake and then fly off into the mist. Jake stirred ever so slightly as if he wanted to follow but Wolf lay as still as death itself. Mama continued to pray through her fear.

She breathed heavily and smelled honeysuckle and pine, larkspur, anise scented red hyssop, fresh picked blackberries and squash pie pulled from the oven. She adapted her breathing to the slow chanting and felt the calm. The moisture from the lake inside and the rock walls refreshed her skin and further eased her breathing.

Even though the smoke, from one small candle, from one small pinch of powder, filled the entire cavern like a spectre, Mama could still see every person, every detail and more. Incredibly, she understood what every man was thinking. She followed Tahoma’s lead as he chanted but then his spirit rose and he walked forward into the water which somehow changed into a path in a forest where the birds squawked and darted away, the winds swept the needles of the pine, and the deer and wildlife bounded deep into the trees.

Tahoma bent down and forward as he walked. She realized he could no longer see and had to feel his way through the woods. She felt the quickening of his heart and the tightening of his chest. Worry, dread and uncertainty began to grip his throat. A thick black smoke choked him and he tried to cover his face as he coughed but he stumbled forward.

Jumping up and running down the path, Mama grabbed his hand and steadied him.

Tahoma gripped her hand. “Mama,” he cried, “which way?”

“Follow me,” she heard herself say and she led him further and further into the woods. She didn’t look back. She knew what she would see. She’d see herself – a frail, old, fat woman, half kneeling, half sitting on the cavern floor, desperate for a miracle. She wanted to lie down next to Wolf. But the medicine warrior needed her to lead him past his apprehensions of the dark unknown, through the sulfurous smoke that arose from nowhere and now threatened to choke them and battle the unseen evil that seemed to float in and out. An eerie light shimmered through the trees, changing from green to gold, to blue, to a strange black light that spoke of a unknown magic, and then back to green.

She sucked air through her teeth and gripped Tahoma's hand. She led Tahoma forward but she just wanted to bring Wolf home.

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Cavanaugh and Laura jerked and snaked their way through the mountains and hills, always heading west. A cold wind blew in their faces. She pressed in close to him, as close as she could, without causing them to stumble. They passed clear tumbling streams and the mountain deer were caught unaware. Keeping his arm pressed against his side, Cavanaugh was able to balance himself against her and lead them both down. Finally they crossed a gravel drive that wound between the trees above and below them.

"Do you recognize it?" Laura asked.

"You mean by the special kind of rock?" Cavanaugh kicked at the stones with his boot.

She glanced at him with a shot of hope but then said, "Right. By the rock. I ought to put this boot against your backside and see if I can tell who's the biggest jerk on the road right now."

Cavanaugh grinned, "I guess I'm a little snarky."

"Yeah, just a little." She looked up and down the road. "Any ideas? Do we follow it?"

"I think we have to try it or we could end up spending another night in the woods."

She shivered. "I can't." She tucked her hands under her arms. "Do we go up or down?"

"We've got to find some place soon." Cavanaugh gazed towards the high mountains and even higher clouds.

Laura watched him, lifted her right foot and began to take a step upward.

"Let's go down," he said.

"Right." She pirouetted on cue. "Why did I know you would say that?"

"Because I'm ornery?"

"Ornery and opposite."

"Yeah, that too."

"Yes."

They walked on in silence. After a time, Laura asked, "Why did you pick down?"

"No real reason. It just seems like most people build high, maybe to avoid the flow of water, so, by my logic, going down the road should lead down to a highway."

"Maybe." She looked around and was, nevertheless, grateful for the easy walk. "We don't have much of a choice on the Texas plains but we do build on the rise."

"Same difference."

"Reckon so."

Cavanaugh stopped and held up his hand. "Listen."

They paused.

"Hear it?" He waited a second. "Should be easier now," he said.

"Yeah, big rig, might be 18 gears," she said. "Fully loaded, coming downhill."

Cavanaugh stared at her. "Right. Probably a logger. We're near the highway."

"Thank goodness."

"You drive a tractor?"

"Me? No." She chuckled.

"Come on, now. How do you know about an 18 wheeler?"

"Lucky guess."

He chuckled. "Right, lucky guess." He kicked another rock. "Most people don't know there are 10 gears in a truck, much less 18 in a heavy duty one like a logger."

"Texas is a big state – cattle, machinery, construction, refineries. We have trucks, too, you know."

"I guess you do."

"Oil doesn't just flow into a gas pump."

"I don't expect it does. But not many women," Cavanaugh started to say and then stopped. Laura waited for him to finish putting his foot in his mouth but then realized he needed help. "Not many women don't do what?"

Cavanaugh stayed quiet.

"Not many women don't do what, exactly?"

"I don't think of many women being in the refinery business, or construction, or cattle, for that matter."

"Just the cooking and cleaning business, maybe?"

"Uh."

"Is that what you were thinking? Maybe some of the women might run a chicken farm and maybe paint a few pretty pictures, nothing serious of course, but they'd never know nothing about a tractor trailer. Is that it?"

"I didn't mean anything by it. In fact, as I said, I was surprised you knew about trucks and 18 gears."

Cavanaugh shut up quickly.

"Yeah, that's just it. You were surprised. Would you have been surprised if Jake, maybe, knew there were 18 gears in a big rig?"

"No, he's been," he shut up again before he said another word.

"He's been, what? Around planes and trucks?" She clenched her fist and twisted her wrist.

Cavanaugh noticed.

"Well, I've been around planes and trucks, too. My dad and uncles, and some aunts, have piloted and driven before. Oil and cattle. None of it moves itself."

"But you must have people doing that."

"Yeah, we do and they're better than some film stars' sons."

"Ouch."

Laura exhaled. She walked on a little and then turned to him. "Sorry. Even after all you've done, I'm still touchy." She sighed, "I'm sorry. You got me going."

"Sorry."

She glanced at him, "Yeah, you look it."

He gave her a smile as washed out as the creek bed they crossed. "We're here. By the highway." He stumbled.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, but he leaned into her.

She held him up. "Where is it?"

"Just up that embankment." He pointed up ahead. "We'll just take it nice and easy." He draped his arm over her shoulder. "You're as cold as a popsicle."

"I'll bet you're all sweet talk on a date, aren't you?" She put her arm around him.

"We'll get you something warm when we get to my cabin."

"I got something warm."

Cavanaugh either tripped again or pulled her close on purpose - Laura couldn't tell, but he did hold her tight. He didn't say a word. And neither did she.

They reached the highway without incident and waited on the roadside. Flagger down a camper, they hitched a ride to the road leading up to Cavanaugh's cabin. Struggling up his drive, an hour later, they were in the cabin as the sun dipped below the trees.

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After they had showered and dressed, Cavanaugh fixed a dinner of ham and scrambled eggs from a dry mix.

"Is that all you have to wear down to the water?" He motioned to Laura with the spatula in his hand.

She studied his face and wondered how he could still stand, but she replied, "The t-shirt?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing else?"

"The jeans."

"Come on, you know what I mean."

"Nothing clean. I didn't know we'd be here that long." She placed her hands on her hips. "And if you remember, I was the one who wanted to withdraw some money and go shopping but you wanted to get on the road."

"Maybe I got something," Cavanaugh put up a hand and cut her off.

"I doubt it." She eyeballed him. "You're about eighteen inches taller than me and I'm not even going to try to guess how much more you weigh. Besides, you need some rest."

"No, let me look." He dished a plate for her. "Finish that while I go dig around."

"Then you'll rest?"

"Okay."

"That's not an answer."

He waved her off.

Famished, she dug in, expecting just plain eggs, ham, and soda bread but she was pleasantly surprised. Turning her head around to the stovetop, she looked for his spices but she surmised that he must have put them away.

Garlic, paprika, pepper for sure. Maybe a little dried onion and a couple of other things that she couldn't place. She cleaned her plate, literally, and set it on the counter. She had just poured herself a cup of coffee when he returned.

"Here we go," he handed her a box. "You should go and see if it fits."

He watched her close the door to the bedroom and then sat on the sofa. A few minutes later she popped her head out.

"You're kidding."

"No, you'll be fine."

"It's too much."

"It's okay. I want you to wear it." He smiled. "Better you than me."

Laura ran her hand down the skirt and let her fingers brush the soft leather. "Just this once."

"Okay."

A few minutes later the door opened and a Shoshone maiden stepped out. Dressed in moccasins, deerskin leggings and a long soft, white, pleated doeskin skirt, and a fringed brushed, white doeskin beaded top. Laura tugged all around and then took another step.

"Well, how do I look?" Laura tilted her head away, without looking at Cavanaugh. "How about this," she said and she turned to the side.

His mouth opened, the leather emphasized all of the right curves and the fringe undulated as she twirled. He reached up and grabbed her hand to pull her down.

She resisted. "No, not now," she said with a grin, "you need your rest so you can heal."

He pulled her down anyway. She snuggled against him and he kissed her.

"Consider this my morning medicine."

"Silly man." She kissed him back. He wrapped his arms around her and leaned into her so she lay against the armrest. "HmMMM," she murmured.

"HmMMM, yourself."

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"Oh my." After what seemed like several miles, Mama gasped and stopped.

"What's wrong?" Tahoma asked, still unable to see in the alternate world.

"I don't know how we get past them."

"Past what? Describe them to me."

"These creatures, these, these snake things."

"Are they coming toward us?"

"No, they are like plants but they writhe like snakes, like plants with a snake body, and they glow and they line the edge of our path."

"Can we go through them?"

"I can't really tell from here." Mama took a step forward near the snakes. Four of them, two from each side of the path, hissed and snapped at her and she jumped back.

"No," she called back to him. She stepped to the side into the woods. As she stepped deeper into the trees, the snakish plants thinned out but so did the light. She couldn't see further into the woods. The only light came from the effervescence of snakes themselves.

"No, we can't just walk between them but if we go into the forest, I won't be able to see in the dark."

"Bring me up to them again."

"They bite."

Tahoma dug around in his bag. "Well, don't let them."

"How do I do that?"

"Don't get too close." Tahoma smiled.

With that smile, Mama felt a strain leave her muscles.