

Funny and heartbreaking, American Job is the story of Everett Pick, a common man afflicted by all the ills of modern America. Like Job, he endures everything while remaining committed to the ideals of fairness, justice, and simple love.

American Job

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# **American Job**

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Formerly titled The Relentless Pursuit of Everett Pick.

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For Dan, for Don, and, most of all, for my family.



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**Note 1:**

Small liberties were taken during the writing of this book;  
please return them.

**Note 2:**

The geography of the Black Hills has been  
re-arranged to suit the purposes of the story  
(there's not much point in being a writer  
if you can't change the world).



## Chapter 1 Pick and Shovel

Ev opened his eyes to the return of his perfect girlfriend for the 90's, the Not-So-Virgin Mary Fae Without Mercy. She stood in the dark next to the waterbed with the shovel raised high over her head. He'd seen in combat how such a tool gets the job done effectively but not neatly and efficiently, which is why he was surprised to find Mary Fae had taken it from the garage to kill him. Subtle weapons like piano wire (she loved music) or a Wusthof blade or her favorite, slow-acting poison--corporate gossip--those were more her style. The spade, therefore, was not good news. It could only mean one thing.

She was really pissed this time.

Lightning streaked the ceiling and struck close. A gusty wind shoved a burning insulation smell through the open window, and Ev knew that either the bolt had struck a telephone pole or heaven's wiring was as faulty as his own. Outside, thunder rolled continuously in a Wagnerian chorus of foreboding at the coming permanent diminution of his mental faculties which had already been considerably slowed by a long and lingering conversation with Johnny Walker--red or black--he couldn't remember which color.

*Mary Fae has always been a woman of great taste and great timing, Ev thought with sluggish, alcoholic admiration. Just the opposite of Juliet, whose name he was sure is bound to come up sooner or later.*

As far as he was concerned, his girlfriend couldn't have picked a better night or looked better in the part. In the stroboscopic effect of the storm's electrical energy, she was a vengeful blonde goddess, wearing a sports bra and baggy, loose nylon workout pants--the right clothes for the job.

*Maximum freedom of movement, always important when crushing your lover's melon, he thought.*

Ev was sure that she'd sat down at a table or on an airplane--she was always on a flight to or from a client's training session somewhere--and done a task analysis of his murder, analyzing step by step what needed to be done to carry out the deed, weighing the pros and cons (not of his death--he was positive that had been decided in a split second) before finally deciding upon the perfect course of action. Then, she'd closed her leather appointment book as he'd seen her do a hundred times before, put the whole thing out of her mind, and sat back to enjoy one Dubonnet--no more, no less. As she'd told him repeatedly, unlike him when it came to alcohol, she knew her limits.

Death by task analysis--Everett wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. It was efficient--one of Mary Fae's favorite words--but it lacked a certain romance and ceremony as far as he was concerned. What was murder about, if not passion? But he knew that was just wishful thinking, maybe a perverse last wish. Women do not kill over-50, forcefully retired schoolteachers out of passion--at least Mary Fae wouldn't. Somehow, she'd found out he was going back to Juliet, and she was furious at him because he wasn't being sensible. As far as Mary Fae was concerned, Juliet and sense were not only not on speaking terms, they weren't even within hailing distance. He had upset her sense of order and that order was not to be violated.

Ev watched the spade start its downward arc. Bent on turning his head into a tiddly-wink of flesh and crushed bone and brain, Mary Fae was determined to use all the strength she'd gained through years of weight training, boxing, and aerobics. He knew he should get out of the way, but he couldn't really think of anywhere else he wanted to be.

His body betrayed him.

It rolled off the bed and took his head along with it as Mary Fae grunted and slammed the sharp edge of the spade down onto the vinyl mattress. Ev gasped as his elbow contacted the hard glass of one of the bottles littering the carpet. As water gushed from the mattress onto his head and down his body, he gasped again. His underwear--the only thing he was wearing--now smelled of rank preservative, powdered plastic and mildew, furious at being long-contained under the unwashed mattress pad.

"You bastard!" Mary Fae said in a deadly low tone that was more ominous than the thunder rumbling outside the window. She jerked at the spade, trying to free it from the tangle of ripped vinyl. "Is it true?"

"Yes," he said, beginning to wheeze as the mildew entered his lungs.

"How can you go back to that woman?"

"I'm not going back to Juliet," Ev said. "I'm going back to a job she has for me. I don't have one here, remember?"

"You could have stayed and fought!"

"This is a small town, Mary Fae, and I'm a big target. They'll never forget or forgive. Isn't that obvious?"

His girlfriend tugged at the handle of the spade again. "The obvious is that I left 25 GM participants without a clue in the middle of my sales training seminar and flew through a goddamned thunderstorm to get here!"

"I planned to tell you when you got back. How'd you find out?"

"How do you think I found out, you idiot?"

"Oh."

"Yes, oh! The bitch called me to gloat!"

In spite of himself, Everett admired the sleek, Nautilus-sculpted muscles of Mary Fae's arms as she struggled with the spade. He kept talking, hoping to cool her rage.

"She wasn't gloating over me, and you know it."

"Then what was she gloating over?"

"Over beating you," Ev said.

Mary Fae continued pulling on the handle, panting at her exertions. Lightning flared, and Ev could see her face in harsh profile. In the dark, she was a woman of angles and edges like a Picasso painting. Anger had pressed her lips into a line so thin it looked as if her mouth had disappeared. It was an unnerving image that she dispelled quickly by saying, "You flatter yourself, Ev. Knowing Juliet, it's more likely she wants money from you."

"She hasn't asked for any," he said.

"So far," Mary Fae retorted. "I suppose you didn't have a damned thing to do with this whole mess?"

"I don't think I did," he answered, trying to remember the location of his pants in case he needed to make it out the door. He had no idea where they were, but a sudden flash of lightning showed his car keys on the dining room table.

"That's such predictable crap from you," Mary Fae said. "Nothing's ever your fault."

Everett decided to go on the offensive. "You're the one who decided to live with me after Juliet and I divorced. I didn't ask you in."

"No, you didn't," she said. "But you didn't refuse me either. It was just like you, I can see that now. You didn't say anything and let me read what I wanted into it. You're like a damned cipher, aren't you? You let me write whatever I wanted on the page and, like a fool, I believed it was you talking! You're a low-life bastard."

The words stung Everett hard because he suspected they might be true, but he said, "If I'm all that, Mary Fae, then I don't understand one thing."

"There's not much you do understand," she said acidly.

"Why do you still want me?"

"Because," Mary Fae said, "I'm under the delusion I can make something of you, that's why."

"This is the Nineties, for Christ's sake," Ev said. "Women don't make anything of men."

"No wonder. It's a delusion that a man can be made into anything, especially you! Do you know why I can't make you into anything, Everett Pick?"

Ev opened his mouth, but Mary Fae supplied the answer in a crisp tone he suspected she used when articulating one of the indisputable points of

her seminars. "Because you won't take a stand on anything. You're a pleaser, that's what you are; doing whatever it takes to float along with the tide. You're spineless, that's why I can't do anything with you."

"I took a stand at the school board meeting, didn't I?" he said. "Look what it got me."

"If Principal Ellwood hadn't a stroke in the middle of the meeting, you wouldn't take a stand at all. And you were lucky that it was Lamar who shot you," Mary Fae said. "If it had been Alvin Hardemann instead of his son, the bullet wouldn't have gone into your knee--it would have gone between your eyes and saved everybody a lot of trouble. Lamarr is so hyper he couldn't hold a gun steady enough to hit an elephant. Why the hell didn't you press charges?"

"What was the point in doing that?" Ev asked. "The boy had no idea of what he was doing. He thought he'd please that idiot of a father by shooting me."

There was no way he could explain to Mary Fae that in the second between the impact of the bullet and his going down, he'd seen the split-faced boy's rapturously murderous expression. Lamarr had finally found a way to get the attention he craved.

"Charges wouldn't have taught the boy a thing, you moron," Mary Fae said. "But it damned well would have taught Alvin something."

"But you agree with him about Heller's book! You told me that before."

"It doesn't belong in the school library but what's that got to do with anything?" she asked. "You don't let people run over you like that. If you'd pressed charges, you'd have your job now."

"Don't be ridiculous, Mary Fae," Everett said. "Alvin has half a thumb on everything and everybody in this town. He as good as killed me with his newspaper, anyway. I was front-page stuff. "Everett Pick is what's wrong with America--moral decay. He provoked Lamarr. Lamarr was just defending himself against a pornographer, a suspected child molester.""

"Nobody believes that stuff," Mary Fae said. "You couldn't even molest yourself."

"You told me yourself once that perception is everything," Ev said. "I went down to the post office today and picked up the gossip along with my mail. Several people were happy to inform me charges are pending."

"See what I mean?" Mary Fae said. "You're a damned cipher. Now somebody else is writing on the page."

"Thanks," Ev said, stung by her lack of sympathy. "Your support is much appreciated."

"You don't deserve any damned support," she said. "You bring it all on yourself."

"It doesn't matter whose fault it is," Ev said. "It's all over now."

"Not quite," Mary Fae said in a tone that caught his attention immediately. He saw the spade was free again and raised high. "You want to be a cipher, Everett Pick, I'm going to write you a message you'll never forget!"

Scrambling to his feet as the shovel slammed into the floor next to his bad leg, Ev grabbed the keys off the table and limped out the door into a rain as vengeful as Mary Fae. He could barely see the Honda in the driveway but was not surprised to find he'd left the windows open. The driver's door was stuck shut from a collision with Wendell Tidball's cornpicker--they'd both been very drunk that night-- so Ev ran to the opposite side and slid over the wet seats to the steering wheel. The old Civic started as it always did--with sniggering reluctance. He turned the key again as a brilliant bolt of lightning put Mary Fae into her starring role. She smashed the spade down into the hood just to get the range, then set to work with a vengeance. As dents spread across the Honda like acne, Ev pumped furiously at the accelerator. The windshield opened up violently to the night air and the spade whistled past his ear. He cringed, waiting for Mary Fae's next blow, then the Civic's engine caught. Letting out the clutch, he screeched down the driveway. Mary Fae matched the screech with one of her own and planted the spade into one of his headlights so hard it snapped the handle.

*That light didn't work anyway,* Ev thought in hysterical relief. *I still have one left.*

He checked his fuel gauge. The needle was on full. It would get him out of Minnesota and then on to the Black Hills. With Mary Fae charging down the driveway, Ev braked and threw the Honda into first gear, accelerating hard as she threw the broken spade. He pulled his head as far into his body as it would go, then heard the crash of a window and a thump on the rear seat.

As he sped away, Mary Fae's scream sounded clearly above the thunder.

"I know where you're going, Everett Pick! Just remember that! I know where you're going!"

Ev whooped his relief into the night, surprised he was enjoying the simple privilege of having a head that occupied its usual amount of space atop his shoulders. The storm felt his body up with fingers of cold air like an unwanted lover, but he fought the shivering by pounding on the dash and bouncing up and down in his seat to generate heat. His one headlight flickered in sympathy with the lightning as rain beat against the remaining windshield like Mary Rae's spade.

The engine coughed like an asthmatic horse, and Ev knew he would have to nurse the Honda for over 500 miles. He had no better relationships



with his cars than he did with the women in his life. Hunching over the steering wheel to squint through the rain sheeting in on his face, he held onto the fact that the forecast had said the cold front was racing quickly through the state and would be gone in a matter of hours. The morning sun would warm his aching joints, and, although he didn't have his wallet, he could probably scrounge up enough change from the floor to get coffee from a drive-through. Ev let a smile cross his face for the first time that evening. He was free of Mary Fae and free of Eden Valley.

There was hope.

## Chapter 2

### Hitting the Wall on Drugs

"Where are you?" his ex-wife asked, her helium voice floating out from the public phone. It was a sound that was seductive when they first met, but Ev had grown to detest it during the last years of their marriage. It had been like being married to a party stunt.

Ev sniffled and looked down at his doughy, hairless stomach. The muscles spasmed from too much caffeine, no food and the drive across the prairie. His bad leg ached from working the gas pedal all night. Checking the thermometer on the brick facade of the Common Cents convenience store, he decided it was not a good sign that he was shivering. It read 110 degrees in the shade. The outside phone was squarely in the sun.

"I'm at Wall. I'm sitting in my car in my underwear," he answered. "I'm sunburned, my leg hurts, and I think I have hypothermia. I've been driving for 12 hours on gas I stole from a Superamerica, and I'm strung out on No-Doz. I saw the best minds of my generation lining the road--literally."

Juliet was interested. "Really?"

"I'm trying to tell you I'm so tired I've been hallucinating," he said, putting a nasty edge into his tone. "I'm a danger to myself and the community. I want you to come get me out of this tourist trap. I'll park by the damned dinosaur. Think you can find it?"

Her words drifted out of the phone like tiny balloons and went off to places Ev's hearing couldn't reach.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"I said, 'Why are you in your underwear?'"

A tractor-trailer rig came off the I-90 exit, belching diesel smoke as the driver geared down. Herefords bawled from the trailer. The noise forced Ev to wait to make his reply. The smell of cattle muscled its way into the Honda as if that was the only place it could find to settle.

"Because of you, damn it."

"What did I do?" his ex-wife asked.

"You told Mary Fae, that's what!"

There was a short silence then Juliet said, "Well, she had to know some time, didn't she?"

"Juliet, she tried to kill me!"

Her voice pitched itself up into a no-nonsense squeak. "Don't be silly, Everett Pick."

"With a damned spade!"

"And that's why you're in your underwear," she said. "I see."

"You make it sound like nothing more than an interesting experience to go through," Ev accused.

"The past is gone, the future is not here yet, so what choice do we have but to live in the present?"

"Spare me your bullshit philosophy," Ev said. "I haven't got any clothes or money or credit cards or any other damned thing except this cold! I want you to come and get me!"

"What's wrong with your car?" she asked.

"It's dying, like me, Juliet. It's going to kick the goddamned automotive bucket because it's old and because Mary Fae beat the holy living shit out of it with that spade which you as good as handed her!"

"Oh, all right," his ex-wife said. "But you'll have to wait until this evening. The clouds are coming, and they're strong, as strong as I've ever seen them."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ev asked. "What clouds?"

Juliet had already hung up. Everett swore and slammed the phone on the receiver. Two men, walking into the convenience store, frowned at him. They wore neatly blocked Stetsons, fitted western shirts and jeans, and cowboy boots that had never seen a lick of dirt.

"Get some shit on those boots," he shouted at them before persuading the Honda into life. "Damned tourists."

Ev drove to the side road, past the rusted swings and faded, sprung animals and parked close to the 40-foot concrete brontosaurus that stood sentinel for suckers coming from the east. When he switched the ignition off, the engine coughed itself into an exhausted silence. He knew how it felt. He'd never been more tired in his life, but the caffeine in his veins wouldn't let him get any true rest. Staring at the green-and-white rear end of the concrete dinosaur, Ev fell into a fitful sleep while he waited for his ex-wife to come and get him.

### **Chapter 3**

## **The Rolling Stones**

A cloud of mosquitoes pestered Ev out of a jagged sleep as the sun was setting. The air was so hot and close, he felt sure he could stir it with a stick. Slapping at the insects, he sat up, trying to figure out the odor that was bludgeoning his nose while he rummaged for another No-Doz to bring himself fully awake. He dry-swallowed the stimulant and looked out the front. He immediately regretted it.

The concrete brontosaurus had taken a dump. It covered the front of the Honda and was threatening to push right through the windshield.

Heaving itself up, the dinosaur brought the long neck around until its face was outside the Honda's window. Red eyes fixed on Ev as if he were a tasty bit of bottom-feed vegetation.

"Go away!" Ev flattened himself against the seat and said, "Far away!"

The brontosaurus smiled wickedly, then nudged the car with its massive nose.

"Oh, Jesus!" Ev said as the car shook from the impact. He closed his eyes and rued ever having given up prayer.

When he opened them, the pile of droppings was gone, and the brontosaurus stood in the same place it had always been. Ev wiped sweat from his face that hadn't come from the heat. Then he threw the No-Doz out the window and looked around for a sign of Juliet. When he saw none, he coaxed the reluctant Civic into life and drove back to Wall. The Common Cents' thermometer still read 110. His ex-wife's car was nowhere in sight.

She'd let him down again.

Ev sighed and turned onto 240, then south toward the Badlands. He knew he couldn't risk the freeway because the Highway Patrol was always out in greater numbers close to Rapid, and he was sure they weren't tolerant of half-naked men driving cars with smashed windshields and malfunctioning electrical systems.

As he came down through Dillon Pass, he looked off to the west and saw the clouds that Juliet had been talking about. He swore. A storm was coming off the Black Hills and feeding on the heat energy of the Badlands. A monster with an anvil shape big enough for a Norse god, it sent out lightning at such a pace that the sky seemed to be a defective fluorescent bulb quivering in erratic and crazy green patterns. Ev hated light like that. It was tornado light, and it would be on him long before he got anywhere near the Hills, thanks to Juliet.

*Not that I was sure I can stay on the road in any case,* he thought with growing fear.

His remaining headlight flickered faster than the lightning, and he couldn't see much beyond the front of the car.

*Which might be a blessing,* he thought, *because the delusions have returned.*

Outside the car, saw-toothed siltstone pinnacles jumped up and down like ancient jaws trying to work themselves into action and for a moment he felt like he was driving straight into a giant mouth. Gripping the steering wheel tighter, he reminded himself that erosion had shaped the peaks, not the No-Doz and his tired mind. He drove hard until a sheet of lightning lit up the lunar landscape from horizon to horizon and a huge clap of thunder shook the Honda. He sucked in his breath at what he saw coming across the ancient landscape.

It was not the tornado he feared, but crazed, straight-line winds, chewing up the ground like a frenzied, starving animal.

Braking hard, Ev searched for a ditch and cover, but then a sudden roar caught the Honda broadside. The wind lifted the car violently and rolled it down the road. Ev hung onto the steering wheel as his head slammed into the roof and stared at what he saw in the green atmospheric stew swirling around him. He prayed this time that the No-Doz *was* working on his sleep-deprived mind; otherwise he was in the strongest storm ever recorded. The proof was right outside his shattered window.

The giant stone heads of Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson, and Roosevelt--all of Mount Rushmore--rolled and thundered down the road alongside him.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Lost**

Lorena Sheldon Sarvis sped up out of Blackhawk Ranch and onto the main highway, pushing the Chevy off the gravel road and onto the asphalt without her usual careful checking of both directions. Last year, nine members of a Sioux family had died in their van at the dangerous intersection at the hands of a drunk driver, and nine white crosses flashed by in her vision as she fought the Lumina's wheel. She apologized internally as her car bounced off a fifth wheeler hauled by a Jimmy. A horse's scream of terror matched her own, and Lorena saw the brief flash of terrified wild eyes through the slats of the trailer, then she was by. In the rearview mirror, she saw the driver veer toward the ditch, gain control and pull back into the hill's slow lane. He blinked his lights angrily at her. The flashes lit up her face in the mirror, and even in the flickering shadows, she could see the dark bruises around her eyes.

A wave of shame and revulsion swept over her. Shame that she'd put up with Vernon's abuse, revulsion that her fear had nearly caused the death of one of the animals she loved so dearly. She hoped Vern wouldn't do anything to Rigel or TJ. The Arabians were beautiful horses, as delicate and sleekly muscled as her husband was blunt and coarsely built, like bricks poorly laid. Another thrill of fear ran through her body as she considered the possibility that he might do to them what he'd done to her, then she relaxed a little as she calmed her mind and thought it through. Unless he was pushed too far, Vern wouldn't hurt the Arabians for the simple fact that they were worth too much money. He was always respectful of money.

The thought of money made her search the seat as she drove toward Rapid. Her purse wasn't there. When Vern picked up her riding crop, she'd been too scared to think about anything other than getting out of the house. She had no cash, no credit cards, and nothing on but a nightgown. The sheriff's office was not an option. She'd seen the deputy one too many times, and he'd done nothing, dismissing her as a flighty, young wife. To him, it was a matter to be taken care of within the family.

Lorena briefly wished she could will her mother and father back to life so they would take her in, then dismissed it for what it was--useless, desperate thinking. Her grandmother lived on the east side of Rapid, but Lorena wouldn't even think of disturbing her at night. Gramma was independent as a hawk, even at 95 years, but even she could stand so much shock at her age.

The sudden vibration of the steering wheel made Lorena check the speedometer. She was up to 80. Letting up on the accelerator, she gripped the wheel tightly to keep her hands from shaking as badly as the Chevy.

"Calm yourself," she said to the air, repeating the words as if the mere act of saying them over and over again would accomplish the act. Much to her surprise, it did. She opened a window and let the cool night air rush in as she settled back and tried to relax tense shoulders. Over the Badlands, she could see a powerhouse thunderstorm probing the ground with lightning strikes as if it were looking for exactly the right spot to do the most damage. An answering brief flash to her left caused Lorena to look toward the Hills. Above the mountains near Mt. Rushmore, a single small cloud raced across the stars, spitting lightning as if it were a young child doing its best to imitate and impress its giant parent out over the prairie. Every time it sent out a flash, there was an answer from the ground. Lorena puzzled over the phenomenon for a moment, then realized the location for the answering flash was Moresdon Heights. She'd heard rumors that Juliet Moresdon was building something strange on her property.

She was many years younger than Juliet, but before Vern confined her to the house, they'd met at dances and talked. Juliet was a warm woman and definitely different, in Lorena's opinion. She hesitated for a moment between spending the night in the car and asking a woman she didn't really know that well for shelter. When the headlights lit up the sign for the county road leading directly up to Moresdon Heights, the decision was made for her. As she turned the Lumina onto the gravel, a gust of rain-cooled wind shook the Chevy, and Lorena shivered. It felt as if someone had reached through the window and stroked her skin with a cold, brutal finger. Shivering again, she put the accelerator to the floor.

The wind felt exactly like the hand that had touched her during the latest rape.

## Chapter 5

### The Pole Position

Juliet was disappointed. Disappointed for herself and for old Ray Iron Eagle. The medicine man had tried so hard, and she still didn't understand his power. Sitting nude on the stallion, she watched the Lakota shuffle his arthritic limbs through the pines on his way back to his battered pickup to make the trip back to the Badlands and the Pine Ridge reservation. The medicine bundle tucked protectively under his arm, old Iron Eagle shook his head as he walked toward his vehicle.

*It's in disapproval of my efforts as he'd at first disapproved of my going skyclad,* Juliet supposed.

She lifted her eyes to the sky again. The small cloud she'd created with Ray's help moved away from Mt. Rushmore across the stars and out toward the east, where a huge storm raged over the eroded spires of the Badlands. It was the best she'd been able to accomplish with her present skills. Rubbing the crystal atop her oaken power rod, she tried not to think negative thoughts. Crystals were so sensitive to moods and could store latent negative energy that could rebound on you later. But it was hard not to feel let down. She'd thought the combination of the medicine bundle and the crystal energy would provide access to the natural earth forces. She suspected Iron Eagle's bundle was not the problem. He'd spent her money wisely in tracking down authentic artifacts of power. It was likely the crystal itself. It was too small and simply couldn't store the power needed to create a storm the size of the one pounding the Badlands.

*You did the best you could,* she thought at the crystal. *When your larger sister is finished, she will complete the task, and I will be able to join the Ascended Beings on the Higher Plane.*

For a moment, Juliet listened to the snorting night noises of the buffalo herd five hundred feet below the cliff, waiting until the holy white bull she'd imported from Wisconsin turned his shaggy head upward, then she turned the stallion away from the edge and urged him into a trot back toward the house. She was so pleased with the new horse, a powerful black Dutch Warmblood, that she'd named him "Thor" to mesh his harmony with her efforts to harness Mother Earth's power. The stallion had cost her money she didn't really have, but it was obvious he was so right for her.

Coming up from the canyon edge, they passed Jim DeHuis' construction equipment and went up between the sweat lodge and the pyramid shape of the Soundchamber. She commanded the horse into a walk when they came near the Tipi on the Meadow and the Faery Cabin so



as not to disturb the little ones and the bear, angel, turtle and buffalo altars within the structure. She'd told Everett about the Cabin before he'd left. He'd considered it a waste of time and money, but then her ex-husband was terminally cynical. He believed in nothing so she'd waited until he was gone before she bought it.

*I shouldn't have invited him back, I know, she thought. His negative energy could throw everything off track.*

But she believed in people, believed in...redemption wasn't the right word, although that was close. What she wanted to do, was make Ev the same as her--an executive of healthy change, to heal and lovingly set things straight in the world. With him back, she could make this the time of his greatest service.

Then Juliet clapped a hand to her mouth and looked again out toward the east. She'd forgotten that she was supposed to meet Ev at Wall. She thought briefly about driving out to meet him, but knew it was too late. She'd missed him by several hours: by now, he would be holed up in one of the motels, riding out the storm.

*He always prides himself on being a sensible sort, she thought, and wouldn't take any chances. I'll ride back to the house, call the motels and apologize when I find him. Then, I'll bring him back in the morning.*

When she had the horse bedded down for the night, she heard the noise of a car coming up the road. She thought Everett had made it after all. She went out by the totem pole to greet her ex, but it was a Chevy that came up the driveway, not the Honda Ev had described. A window rolled down, and she was surprised to see young Lorena Sarvis.

"Lorena!" she said. "Welcome. What are you doing here?"

Lorena held her head away as if she were trying to hide something. "I'm sorry to ask," she said in a voice barely above a whisper, "but can I come in for a while?"

"Of course," Juliet answered. "Get yourself out and come into the house. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Lorena said in an unconvincing tone.

When they were inside, Juliet saw Lorena's face in good light. "My God!" she said. Lorena's cheeks were swollen and bruised, and there was a gash above her right eye.

"What happened?" she asked.

Lorena gave her a wan smile. "Vernon," she said.

"That sonuvabitch!"

"Yes," Lorena said. "May I sit down?"

"Oh my God, yes. I'll call a doctor. I'll call the Sheriff."

"No, I'm okay. Don't do that."

"Why not, Lorena, for heaven's sake? Do you want him to get away with this again?"

"No, but he still has my horses. I don't want him to hurt them. I'm sorry to come here. I left my purse at the ranch, and I couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Then I thought of you."

Juliet smiled at her.

"He doesn't know where I went," Lorena said. "You won't have to worry about him coming here."

"To hell with him," Juliet said. "Come into the kitchen so I can get some ice for your poor face."

She pulled Lorena into the kitchen and sat her down close to the sink. Then, she wrapped ice in a towel and pressed it against the girl's cheek while she examined the gash.

"Thank God, it's not deep," she said. "I'll get some antiseptic and a bandage for it."

While she worked, she asked Lorena, "What did he hit you with?"

Lorena shrugged. "Anything he could get his hands on. When he picked up my riding crop, I ran."

Juliet cried as she fastened gauze over the cut with adhesive. "But why? Why would he do this?"

Lorena answered, "When he's at his meetings, I've been sneaking out for rides by myself. He doesn't like me to go out of the house. Tonight, he came home earlier than I expected."

"He's crazy," Juliet said.

Lorena began to cry as well, and Juliet hugged her fiercely until the tears stopped. The girl wasn't even 18 yet.

"You need some rest," Juliet said. "Everything will look better in the morning. Everett will be here tomorrow, you know."

Lorena looked at her in surprise. "You two are getting back together?"

"Not like that," Juliet said with a laugh. "He's going to do some work for me."

"But I thought he had a teaching job in--"

"That's enough for now," Juliet said firmly. "I can tell you all about it tomorrow. Right now, you need sleep. Your eyes are half-closed already."

She guided Lorena to the guest bedroom and found an old nightgown for her. Lorena was a slim, raw-boned girl. She looked lost in the nightgown, Juliet noted wistfully, and momentarily envied her skinniness until she realized that her weight might not have been her choice under Vernon. She guided Lorena into bed, then turned out the light, found the portable phone and carried it out onto the deck. Past the canyon, distant bursts of thunder rumbled back over the Badlands.

She phoned Wall Drug and the motels. None of them knew of Everett, so she phoned Wanda Stensen at the Common Cents in Wall. Wanda and her husband had made an occupation of regularly running businesses into the ground and the Common Cents was their latest. Their first had been the catering of Ev and Juliet's wedding reception. Ted Stensen's idea of good food was sloppy joes, potato chips, and more beer, so the reception had been a drunken affair. It hadn't helped that Wanda put away a few too many and ended up flirting half the night with Everett.

*Our relationship had been cool ever since, but this was no time to dwell on past injuries,* Juliet told herself.

She phoned and asked for Wanda. When the clerk said that Wanda was too busy to come to the phone, Juliet told her to say that it was an emergency.

She heard rustling noises and then Wanda's voice say, "so what's the emergency?"

Juliet heard the tearing of a bag, and then the crunch of what sounded like potato chips. She held her temper and said, "Wanda? Have you seen Ev?"

"I might have," Wanda allowed.

"I can see there's a big storm out there," Juliet said. "Is he okay? Do you know if he's staying with somebody? I phoned the motels, and they said he hadn't checked in."

"I didn't talk to him," Wanda said. "He didn't come in. I only saw him reaching out of his car for the pay phone. He didn't look too good. He was in his underwear."

"Thank you for that information," Juliet said.

"He drove that old beat-up Honda toward the Badlands. What did he do to that car, anyway?"

"Never mind," Juliet said and pushed the off button. A pang of anxiety ran through her body, but she shook it off. Everett was a man who was slow and painstaking in any situation to the point of driving everyone else insane, but he was also a man who kept his head when everyone else was panic-stricken. He might be in the middle of the storm now, but she was sure he'd found a spot that was safe.

Juliet stretched and yawned. She went back into the living room and put the phone on its cradle. It was time for a good night's sleep. In the morning, if he didn't show up, she'd go look for Everett. That would be one way of making up for her forgetfulness.

*I've been so much luckier than Lorena,* Juliet thought as she fell asleep. *Everett never hit me. Not once.*

## Chapter 6

### Prey

Vernon Sarvis pulled his convertible onto Ancient Hunter's Overlook with a satisfied grin. The vintage '59 Caddy had blown by everything on the road, and he'd left more than a few terrified tourists in his wake of his fins.

*In the era of rice burners, there was still something to be said for a big American V8, he thought with satisfaction.*

Grabbing his binoculars, he got out of the car, appreciating the solid thud of the door when he closed it. He stretched his arms high and walked to the edge of the overlook.

The Badlands spread out beneath his feet. Last night's storm had turned the usually dry clay and silt soil into torrents of mud that flowed into the low areas he remembered were called "slumps" by the geologists. Sliding down from the crumbling sandstone pinnacles, the mud would be slippery as soap until it dried. With their jagged, erratic peaks, the formations looked like breached castle walls.

*I like this place and always have, he thought with a smile. It's uncompromising. You take it on its own terms or not at all.*

Scanned the sky with the binoculars, he looked for raptors. They rode the thermals endlessly, and he liked to watch them when he needed a break from his dealership and the troubles with Lorena. A red-tailed hawk rewarded his efforts almost immediately, soaring above him in lazy, effortless circles. Vernon didn't envy the raptor's freedom as most people seemed to do. Freedom, for people, was an illusion. There was only duty and responsibility. What he did envy was the bird's ability to carry out its acts without thinking. Mate, fly, kill prey, preen feathers - the hawks and eagles simply executed nature's mandate. The simplicity of it all, that's what he really envied. The directness. Unlike people. Unlike Lorena.

Sarvis sighed, wondering where she'd gotten to and how long it would take her to come back this time. She was like a yo-yo, always spinning away from him only to be snapped back. The girl never seemed to learn. Patience, he supposed, was the key, but he was starting to run low on that. He had a new business to run, and business wasn't good right now. He didn't need any distractions, especially a wife who couldn't seem to get pregnant. A man had a business; he wanted to hand it on to his sons. She couldn't get that through her head, no matter how much he talked to her about it. Hell, he'd even told her he'd settle for a daughter, not that she'd appreciated that gesture much.

He lowered the binoculars to check his watch. Cars didn't sell themselves, especially in a slow market. He had bills to pay, and it was time to get back to check on salespeople, who couldn't spell responsibility duty, and whose reading was limited to a commission check.

*Damned near as lazy as Indians*, he thought. *It's time to get them the training Detroit recommended. The first thing I'll do when I get back is put in a request.*

A flash of light from one of the slumps caught his eye as he was returning the binoculars to their case. He checked it out with the field glasses and said, "What the hell?"

Like Lorena, some fool had gone out in the storm last night. Vern couldn't imagine how the vehicle had gotten that far off the road. From a half-mile's distance, all he could see was a roof that was dented so badly it looked like somebody had taken a hammer to it.

*It's probably a drunken Indian*, he thought, tickled at the idea of a mud person being stuck in mud, *but I'd better check it out anyway in case it's one of us*. Obscured from the road by skunkbush sumac and prickly pear, the vehicle might not have been spotted. He went back to his Caddy, tossed the binoculars in the backseat, and pulled out onto the highway.

Five minutes later, Vern crossed the road and looked down into the jumbled chaos of the slump. He could only see the car from the rear, but it looked as if the mud had filled up the interior. He hoped that whoever was in the vehicle had gotten out, but there was only one way to find out. Returning to the Caddy, he opened the trunk, happy once again with the enormous amount of space it afforded. He pushed aside his camos and boots and the High Plains Militia literature he'd printed up and checked to see if Lorena had returned his shovel to its correct place after using it in the garden. She hadn't, and Vern cursed.

Checking the Browning and the combat knife, he decided he wouldn't need either. Rattlers were few and wouldn't be active in the heat anyway, and the knife would be worthless if he needed to dig anyone out. He slammed the trunk and set off, swearing at the dust and mud already accumulating on his snakeskin boots. The shine was gone before he was even down into the slump.

## **Chapter 7 In a Slump**

Ev opened his eyes and sucked in his breath.

There was a bright, flashing light at the end of a dark, hot tunnel and the smell of things long dead.

He blinked, and suddenly, the four presidents were right in his face, looking down their huge noses at him.

He screamed and tried to back away, but couldn't move. Then Mt. Rushmore fell away amidst the sliding of cloth on metal and the crunch of boots on gravel. Ev looked out of the dark interior of the Honda into the bright sun, trying to see where the great stone faces had gone.

Another flash blinded him, and he saw the four presidents again.

Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Roosevelt were a silver belt buckle glinting in the sun.

Looking closely at the buckle, he saw it was holding up tan, Western-style pants with a very sharp crease. Underneath the mud and dust, the snakeskin Tony Lamas still had a high polish. The Honda's roof prevented him from seeing the face that belonged to the suit, so he said the only thing he could think of.

"Nice boots."

The man settled into a squat. Everett squinted into the sun, unable to make out details. The shape looked vaguely familiar, something like a bowling ball on legs.

"Pick. Why am I not surprised?"

It was a high-pitched voice, misplaced in such a body, but one that bit off words with military precision. A hot breeze brought the lime smell of an aftershave overdose: it was then that Ev realized who it was.

"Vernon Sarvis?" he asked.

"None other."

"Last time I heard that voice I was under a pile of bodies on the two-yard line."

"That's right," Sarvis said. "We won the game."

"That was some spear you gave me," Everett said.

"Stopped you short of the goal line, didn't it?"

"It was just a game," Everett said. "No need to break my ribs."

Sarvis shrugged. "Whatever it takes, right? Besides, I couldn't have stopped you any other way. You were just too damned big."

Ev felt the pressure increase on his chest. "It's great to talk about the old days, but I think I'm paralyzed, Vern. It's hard to breathe."

"Maybe," Sarvis said, "but I think you're just up to your neck in dinosaur dung."

"What?"

"The Badlands tried to do you in, Pick. It buried you in several million years worth of mud. It slid down through this slump. Probably still is sliding."

Everett looked beyond Sarvis and saw that he was right. All he could see was the sun baking the surface of the mud into a hard, cracked crust that came right up to his chin, but underneath it felt greasy and loose. He felt like a major ingredient in a very bad soufflé.

"Shit," Ev said, desperately wanting to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "It's hot."

Vernon nodded. "One hundred and five in Rapid yesterday, 108 today. Out here, I guess we could add a few degrees."

"I guess," Ev said.

"That must have been some storm, Pick. Blew you right off the road?"

"Like a tumbleweed."

"You're lucky to be alive," Sarvis said, "but if you'd had a good American car like a Cadillac, it probably wouldn't have happened."

"Could be," Everett said, "but teachers can't afford Cadillacs."

Running a hand over a blond military haircut, Sarvis glanced at the roof. "The wind couldn't have done all that. What'd you do to this thing?"

"I made a woman mad."

"What the hell did she use to cause all that damage?"

"A spade."

Sarvis whistled. "Strong woman. I'd like to meet her."

"Look, get me out of here, and I'll get you an engraved invitation. Something's poking me hard in the back, and it hurts."

"Not that easy."

"What do you mean?"

"Use what part of your body you still got above ground, Pick. You're inside that rice burner, and the door's not just going to open itself against all this mud, is it?"

"So, what are you going to do?" Ev asked.

"I don't know. Something. These slumps move around when they get really wet. No telling where you might end up if it decides to do some traveling. I guess I'll go for help and --."

The roar of a motorcycle cut through Sarvis' words. Vern's jaw hung loose at something Ev couldn't see, and his head bobbed up and down as the rider bounced the machine through the jumbled clay and rocks.

"Who is it?" Ev tried to shout over the noise, but Vern remained frozen in place.

A high whining of the engine told Ev the machine was airborne. Then tires thumped on the dry soil, and the motorcycle slid to a stop in billowing cloud of dust. The smell of gasoline burned through the air.

The machine was a Harley; the rider was a large, naked woman. She wore a Minnesota Vikings helmet, purple with white horns painted on the side. As she turned to look back at Ev, her breasts swung like heavy inverted bells. The nipples wore green Mr. Yuk stickers. Clenching the bike's saddle, the dimpled buttocks looked to Ev like two giant golf balls filled with suet. The rider wore high, black leather motorcycle boots. A crooked six-foot oaken staff with a piece of quartz at the top was lashed sideways across the saddle. As she removed the helmet, Vern shut his mouth and turned accusing eyes back on Everett. Ev did his best to shrug.

It was Juliet.



## Chapter 8

### Bushwhacked

His ex-wife acknowledged Sarvis, then got off the Harley and untied the staff. Then she walked over to Vern and whacked him across the backside with it. Sarvis yelped and leaped away from her. Ev strained to see what was going on as the two moved in and out of his line of sight.

"What'd you do that for?" Vern shouted.

"You sonuvabitch," Juliet said. "How's it feel?"

She hit him again and said, "Like it, do you?"

"Jesus, cut it out, will you?" Vern said.

"You *don't* like it, do you?" Juliet caught him in the shins.

"Shit, of course not. You think I'm crazy or something?"

Juliet stopped. "Oh, then Lorena is crazy, right? That young girl really enjoys getting belted?"

"Is that what this is about?" Sarvis asked.

"You figured it out."

"What goes on in my family is none of your business!"

"It is when that business shows up on my doorstep with her face rearranged and crying her eyes out," Juliet said.

"You tell her to get her ass home where it belongs."

"It belongs with me right now, and that's where it's going to stay, Vernon Sarvis."

Ev saw Vern turn red, then sputter, "Look at you! What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me. I'm skyclad, that's all."

"You're buck naked, that's what you are."

"Uh, people?" Everett interrupted. "It's getting harder to breathe, and my back is really starting to hurt. Do you suppose you could get some help?"

"Oh, shut up," Vern said. "Look at your wife, for Christ's sake! She hasn't got any damned clothes on."

"She's my ex, remember?" Everett said. "I don't have any hold over her."

"Well, if you were any kind of man, you would have!" Vernon said to him before turning back to Juliet. "My God, woman, have you no self-respect! You're fat."

"That's right," she said and danced about the staff. Flesh jiggled beneath skin that was already turning pink from the sun. "I love my body no matter what size it is, and you'll simply have to respect that."

"Respect, my ass!" Sarvis said. "It's just...gross, that's what it is."

Juliet poked him at his stomach with the staff. "It sounds to me like *you* have a problem, Vernon Sarvis."

"Get some clothes on, will you?"

"I didn't bring any," she said.

Sarvis took off his suit coat and held it out to her.

"I don't want it," Juliet said.

"Wear it," Vern commanded.

"I don't want it," she repeated.

"I can make you wear it!"

Juliet knocked the coat out of his hands with the staff.

"Sonuvabitch!" Vern shouted. He picked up the coat and brushed it off.

"I offer you my best suit coat, and you throw it in the dirt."

"I told you I didn't want it."

"What if somebody happens by?"

"What if?" she said in a mocking tone.

Ev felt the pressure on his chest increase and shouted, "Stop it, you two! I need some help now! I'm suffocating."

Expressions of annoyance crossing their faces, they looked at him, then at each other.

"He's right," Vern said. "We need somebody who can cut that roof off, so we can dig him out. I'd better go. Who's going to believe a naked fat woman riding a motorcycle?"

"They know me better back in Wall," Juliet said. "And I can get help faster on my Harley."

"Please!" Ev said. "Just do something!"

"Maybe I can help," a new voice said.

Juliet and Vernon swung around, and Ev could see Lonny Gunderson working his way down the slump. A big man like Ev, his belly was just starting to protrude over his gun belt. The sheriff stopped between Juliet and Vernon and peered down into the Honda.

"Everett Pick," he said. "I might have known."

"Lonny," Ev said. "Can you get me out of here before those two argue me to death?"

Gunderson nodded. "I'll radio for the Medivac chopper and see if we can get something to cut through that metal. You're lucky, Ev, I'm a little out of my way today. The Pine Ridge tribal police detained a couple of New AIM members for defacing Rushmore, so I came out to pick them up and take them back to Rapid. Between Moses Brubaker preaching on the radio and them jawing me from the backseat on the sanctity of the sacred Hills, it was time for a break."

"Amen to that," Ev said, squirming as he tried to relieve the sharp pain in his back.

"What did they do to Rushmore?" Vern asked in a sharp voice.

"You haven't been listening to the news, have you?" the sheriff said. "They spilled hundreds of gallons of red paint down from the top. The Four Presidents look as if they're bleeding."

"Bastards!" Ev heard Vern say. "How'd they get all that paint up there without anyone noticing?"

"Beats me," Lonny answered. "Probably had it lifted up by a chopper along with regular maintenance items, then hid it somewhere."

"Where are you going to hide barrels up there?" Vern asked. "There's no place to hide anything."

"I don't know," the sheriff said. "Hall of Records, maybe. Borghlum never finished that part of the monument, you know. It's nothing but a big cave."

"Maybe," Vern responded. "But I didn't think that Indians could be that smart."

"Well, they obviously are," Lonny said.

Ev saw Vern point at Juliet and say, "Not to change the subject, but she's naked, or didn't you notice?"

"Hi, Juliet," Lonny said. "You're getting a helluva burn on that skin, did you know that?"

"It doesn't matter," Juliet said. "I have some herbs that will take care of it."

"Maybe," the sheriff said, "but it's awfully hot today and the sun is pretty direct. You might want to cover up."

"I'll be fine," she said.

"Suit yourself," Lonny said.

"She's naked! Vern said again. "That's indecent exposure! Can't you arrest her?"

"I could," Ev heard the sheriff say. "But it seems like we've got more important things to do here. Let me get on the radio."

Ev caught sight of the sheriff as he heaved his weight up through the rocks. Vernon and Juliet glared at each other, then at Ev when he asked, "Has anyone got anything to drink? I'm awfully thirsty."

"Not a thing," Sarvis said. "I was just making a run out and back today."

Juliet shook her head. "No room for that kind of thing on a motorcycle, Ev."

"Maybe the sheriff has something," Ev suggested.

"I'll check," Juliet said. Ev watched her dimpled buttocks disappear over the slope. Sarvis sat down and shook his head.

"How can she do that?" he asked.

"Don't look to me for any answers," Ev said. "I divorced her, remember?"

"If she were my woman, I wouldn't put with that kind of shit. I'd teach her a lesson or two."

"That's not my style, Vern," Ev said. "Besides, I'm not exactly in a position to teach anybody a lesson right now."

Sarvis flashed a grin at him. "You sure aren't. Things don't change much, do they? Here you are again--at the bottom of the pile."

They sat in silence until the sheriff and Juliet came back down into the slump.

"Help's coming," Lonny said, "but it'll be about an hour."

"All the sheriff had is coffee, but he said you're welcome to it," Juliet said.

"Anything."

His ex-wife unscrewed the cap of the thermos and poured coffee into it. Then, she got down on her knees and pushed the cap through the window and held it for Ev. He sipped awkwardly, feeling the liquid dribble down his chin. Then, he said, "When I get out of here, have the sheriff reserve a cell for me."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I'm going to kill you, that's why!"

"Me!"

"If you'd shown up, I wouldn't be here now, would I?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Everett, but the clouds were so right! And how could I know this would happen?"

"If my hands were free right now, I'd--"

The distant thwap-thwap-thwap of helicopter blades interrupted his threat.

"They're early!" he said. What part of the cloudless sky could be seen, he searched eagerly, then saw the chopper come over a saw-toothed ridge. It circled overhead for several minutes, in and out of Ev's sight, then landed. The blades blasted dirt and pebbles into his face, but he didn't mind. A few facial abrasions were minor compared to finally getting out of the crushing mud. He heard shoes slipping on the rocks and the rattling of equipment and relaxed.

Help was at hand.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Media Exposure**

A moment later Juliet was shouldered aside, and a microphone was poked into his face. Behind it was a stiff, blonde hairdo, red lips, blue eyes and makeup as thick as the mud Ev was in. The woman was dressed in a blue blazer with a big Action 7 insignia on the left breast. Next to her, a cameraman focused a Betacam on the reporter's face.

"This is Mindy Rattigan, reporting live from the Badlands with an exclusive for Action News Seven. Monitoring emergency radio traffic, we discovered a tragedy in the making and are the first on the scene, even before the paramedics. As you can see just beyond me, a man is trapped in mud up to his neck inside his automobile. Apparently, the car was blown off the road last night, and the driver ended up in this mess. Eyewitnesses tell us the man's name is Everett Pick, and that he is originally from the Black Hills area. Emergency crews are on the way, but the situation is this: Everett Pick is buried in mud up to his neck and that mud continues to move down the slump toward him, threatening to crush the breath from his lungs. Let's see if we can get him to tell us how he feels."

The reporter and the camera turned to Everett. The motion of the microphone brought the smell of Obsession to Ev's nose.

She waited, urging his answer with quick nods of the lacquered blonde hair.

Anger surged through Ev. "I have just two words to say," he said.

"Yes?"

"Fuck you."

"Sir!"

"Fuck you and the helicopter you rode in on. Fuck everybody!"

"Mr. Pick, that helicopter might take you back to Rapid!"

"Dead or alive?" Ev asked.

The reporter hurriedly signaled the camera back on her face. "As you can tell, Everett Pick is under stress, possibly suffering from heat stroke after spending hours buried in mud up to his neck. Let's let him conserve his strength and talk to the people who found him. Perhaps they can provide some of the details on how Mr. Pick ended up in this predicament."

Everett lunged upward in the mud, hoping a miracle would free him to first strangle the reporter, then Juliet. The muck held most of him tight, but he felt his right hand move slightly toward the surface. He wriggled it hard while the reporter interviewed the eyewitnesses.

"I'm the one who found her," Ev could hear Vernon say to the reporter. "I was out taking a break from my new dealership--Sarvis Motors-- and cruising in my vintage Caddy when I saw a flash of light that looked like it didn't belong in the Badlands. I decided to check it out and found Pick."

"And you, I understand you're his ex-wife," Mindy said to Juliet. As Ev worked at freeing his arm, he could see the camera man desperately trying to keep the lens above Juliet's neck.

"That's right," she said. "Everett was coming back from Minnesota to work for my project, the Gathering. When he didn't show up last night, I came looking for him."

"Sheriff, how did you happen to answer a call for help all the way out here?" the reporter asked.

"I didn't," Lonny said. "I picked up two prisoners from the Tribal Police today and was on my way back when I discovered all this."

"Lucky for Everett Pick," Mindy said.

"Lucky indeed," Everett muttered as his hand finally broke free. He squirmed and wriggled until the entire arm was free, then he reached behind, groping for the object that was hurting his back. After several minutes of straining, he finally got hold of a smooth, wooden surface with a jagged end. It was the broken spade handle.

"Bless you, Mary Fae," he said, "You bitch."

Ev tugged at the handle until he had a firm grip, then he pulled hard and the spade came free with a muddy, sucking sound. Working the shovel forward until it was in front of his body and the handle was poking out the Honda's window, he began shoveling small bites of mud away from his left side while keeping an eye on the interview.

"The Badlands can kill you, if you're not careful, isn't that right, Sheriff?" he heard the reporter ask.

"That's right," Lonny said. He had his big thumbs hooked in his gun belt, and Ev devoutly wished he were close enough to grab the pistol out of the sheriff's holster. "The cold will get you in the winter; in the summer, it's the heat. No doubt about that. Only a fool comes out here unprepared."

"I understand Mr. Pick had no food or water with him," Mindy Rattigan said.

The sheriff started to answer, but Vern broke in. "Far as we can tell. There wasn't anything on the scene when I got here, and coffee was the only thing we could give Ev."

"None of us had anything, except for that," Juliet added. "Everett just didn't have any luck this time."

"Luck, my ass," Everett said between gasps of air as he pushed the spade deeper into the mud, yelping as the blade rammed into his left arm, then slipped under the elbow. Wiggling the shovel back and forth, he

worked until the arm was out of the muck. After a rest of several moments, he grabbed the spade again and stabbed at the mud pressing against his chest. In a few minutes, he could move his body. He laid the spade down crosswise to the car, put his hands on the handle and pushed himself upward. The mud sucked hard at his legs, but Ev persisted and soon felt his body slide out of his underwear and free of the ground. He crawled out of the Honda and flopped on his back, drawing in great gasps of air. Behind him, he could hear the voices droning for Action 7 News and, in the distance, the sound of another approaching helicopter.

"Too late for Medivac," Ev said to the sky. "The patient is already dead."

He lay on the hard clay, catching his breath, waiting for the chopper to come. Several minutes later, it arrived, painted in the bright red, white and blue colors of SkyHigh 5. It was another network helicopter. The pilot angled overhead while a cameraman hung out the side with his camera trained directly at Ev. Churned up by the blades, dust and grit pelted his skin. Ev waved both arms at them.

"Go away!" he shouted. "For God's sake, just go away!"

The pilot ignored his plea, circling while the cameraman got his footage, then pulled away to find a place to land.

Struggling to his feet, Ev waited for the dizziness to subside, then he picked up the spade and staggered toward Juliet and the others.

Sarvis turned away from the reporter and the camera to stare at him. "Jesus," he said, "he's naked too."

All the others turned toward Ev.

"How about an interview for the victim?" he said.

The reporter's face lit up. "Do you feel up to it?"

"You bet," Ev said. He nodded toward the camera. "Is that thing on?"

"It sure is." Mindy Rattigan turned toward the lens. "Ladies and gentleman, it's a miracle. The victim, Everett Pick, has got out of a deadly situation all by himself. Let's hear what he has to say."

She turned back to Everett. "How does it feel, Everett?"

"How does it feel?" Ev said. "It feels just fine. But this will feel even better."

He raised the shovel high over his head and slammed it down hard. The Betacam smashed to the ground. Ev got a good grip on the spade handle and set to work on the camera while the cameraman danced away, shouting in protest. In a minute, there was nothing but glass, metal and circuit boards scattered over the soil. When it was over, Ev planted the spade in the ground and leaned against it, trying to catch his breath.

Mindy Rattigan and the cameraman glared at him.

"You're in trouble now, Pick," the reporter shouted. "That camera is worth \$60,000."

Ev could barely hear her over the clatter of the second helicopter's blades as it landed just above the slump. Squinting through the blowing dust and grit, he saw another interview team leap out of the chopper. The cameraman knelt immediately and focused on the scene below. Ev raised the spade again and started up the slope toward him.

"Stop!" he heard someone yell behind him, but he ignored the warning and limped forward. A confused chatter of voices rose out of the slump.

"This is a second warning!" the voice said again, and Ev realized it was the sheriff. "Stop right now, Pick!"

He ignored the order and continued until the cameraman suddenly realized that he was the object of Ev's attack. Scrambled frantically to get to his feet, the operator slipped and fell on his back, the camera lying across his chest. Ev reached the top of the slope and raised the spade above his head. Then, a huge sledgehammer of a blow hit his body, and he was sitting on the ground alongside the SkyHigh cameraman. Stunned, Ev looked down at his bad leg.

There was a very large hole in it.

With wide, round eyes, the cameraman stared at the blood, then shook himself and picked up the camera to film the wound.

Ev dropped back on the ground. The smell of gunpowder drifted through the heated Badlands air.

*The shock of the bullet must have been very great, he decided as he closed his eyes. I can't feel a thing.*



## **Chapter 10**

### **Flight**

Ev gasped and sat up out of a nightmare of whirling helicopter blades and deep, unforgiving slumps. For a second, terror gripped him that the mud was still sucking at this body, then he saw with relief that he was in a hospital room. Behind the bed, a high wind moaned outside the window. Sleek metal crutches were propped up beside the closet. Voices buzzed outside the room which smelled of rigorous attempts to keep surfaces infection-free, and a PA system asked for "Mr. Blue" with casual urgency. An IV drip was beside the bed and standing beside the drip was a nurse with hips of considerable authority. She apparently had awakened him by peeling EKG electrodes off his chest. The name badge pinned to her pastel blue uniform said 'Rowena.'

A high-pitched squeal drew Ev's attention away from the nurse. Beyond her, Ev could see another patient in the room, adjusting a hearing aid. A wiry little man with a blond walrus moustache, he sported tattooed arms and a white Tom Mix hat that dwarfed his head, making him look like a bad-attitude mushroom. Ev didn't ask why he still wore a hat plumed with large eagle feathers tucked into the Sioux headband because the dark eyes beneath the brim glittered with a sly and amused paranoia, but mostly because the ink-needled arms were handcuffed to the bed. One of the arms had an IV in it; the other had a large bandage around the bicep.

"Lay back, Mr. Pick," the nurse said, re-tying his hospital gown, then wheeling the portable heart-monitoring machine into the corner. "You're a very lucky man. The bullet missed everything that was important."

Ev laid back and studied her, guessing she was a woman in her. Her brown hair was pulled tightly back in a bun, and it seemed to have drawn a permanent, petulant expression into her face at the same time. Her lips were very thin and lacked lipstick.

"You're in Regional," she informed him as she lifted his wrist to check his pulse. "You underwent surgery yesterday."

"Where's Juliet?" he asked.

"Juliet?"

"My ex-wife."

"Oh, her," the nurse said with an expression of distaste. "She's in the waiting lounge, being interviewed. Naked."

She regarded him with equal distaste. "I saw you on the news yesterday."

Ev nodded. He didn't feel like talking. His leg hurt as much as if Mary Fae had taken the spade to it.

She nodded toward the window. "It's a good thing you aren't out there tonight. It's unreal. The temperature's dropped 70 degrees since that storm went through. An unseasonable Alberta clipper is blowing through. You were naked too."

Rowena was trying to prompt him into an explanation, Ev realized, or perhaps an apology of some sort. He ignored her.

"Do you have insurance, Mr. Pick?" she asked, dropping his wrist.

"No," he said. "Do you have something for the pain?"

"Then something will have to be worked out with the hospital."

"I had insurance," Ev said, hoping that providing the information would somehow placate the nurse and prompt her into bringing a painkiller. "In fact, I had four different health insurance plans in five years, but then I was fired."

"Oh?" Rowena said with a thin eyebrow raised to indicate he should go on.

"It was the law of diminishing health care returns, I think, Rowena," he said. "With each plan, I got less and less coverage. The co-pay on medicines was just terrible. Painkillers, for instance."

Ev looked at the nurse hopefully.

She busied herself with his chart. "What type of work did you do, Mr. Pick? Why were you fired?"

"I was fired because I was a teacher who was shot by one of my students."

The eyebrow arched itself into a skeptical question mark as the other patient snickered. Ev looked at him. The tall-hatted man seemed to find his story outrageously amusing.

"You were fired because one of your students shot you?" the nurse asked.

Ev nodded. "He shot me in this leg."

Rowena's eyes followed his pointing finger. "That's the same leg where you were shot yesterday."

"Right."

"Doctor Jorgensen didn't say anything about an old wound."

Ev looked at her in alarm. "You mean, he missed it? He didn't miss anything else, did he?"

"No, he didn't. He didn't have to. The bullet went right through."

Ev flipped the sheet off to look at his leg. He couldn't tell anything about its condition; his thigh was wrapped with gauze and bandages. He wiggled his toes, and fire shot up the leg and into his brain.

"Nurse, could you get me something for this, please?" he pleaded. Outside the door, the voices rose, and there was thumping on the wall.

"The pain will be worse in physical therapy," Rowena said, "but don't worry, it's all part of the healing process."

"Well, start the process now, will you!" Ev snapped. Something crashed hard just outside his door. "What is going on out there? I thought hospitals were supposed to be quiet!"

"Calm down, Mr. Pick!" Rowena ordered. "It's just the media. They want to interview you. They've been out there since you were brought in."

"Jesus," Ev said. "Do they have to be right outside my room? Can't they wait in the lobby like everyone?"

"They won't take no for an answer, despite our best efforts. Especially that Mindy Rattigan. She says since their helicopter brought you in, you're her exclusive story. The other stations aren't buying that one, of course."

"Of course," Ev said.

"I've been keeping them at bay, Mr. Pick," Rowena said.

The nurse was looking at him with an expression that clearly said she was tired of the job and wanted him to do something about it.

"Okay, Rowena, why don't you get me a painkiller and talk to them at the same time? Tell them to give me an hour so my leg doesn't hurt so much, then I'll see them. How does that sound?"

The nurse was satisfied. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

She opened the door, and a hubbub of voices broke into the room along with hot lights and aggressive camera lenses. Ev saw Mindy Rattigan get her fingers on the door frame, then scream as Rowena closed the door on them. The hand withdrew, and Ev heard cursing that was muffled once the nurse pulled the door shut.

Ev waited for a moment, then sat up gingerly on the side of the bed. His leg felt like someone was beating it like a gong. He was ready to attempt to get on his feet when he heard the crash of a tray on the floor and Rowena's voice shouting at the media.

"Leave me alone, would you, just leave me alone!" she pleaded. "Look at what you made me do. Damn!"

Ev flopped back on the bed as he heard the scrape of the tray being picked up. A moment later, a red-faced and thin-lipped nurse came through the door. She banged the tray down on the table next to the bed. A needle jumped up and skittered across the tray's plastic surface. Rowena caught it before it fell and glared down at Ev as if he'd been causing her to drop everything.

"They made me spill the alcohol and swabs. I'll clean that mess up, and then I'll be back."

Ev watched her broad bottom retreat out of the room, not sure whether she'd made a promise or a threat. He didn't plan to stick around to find out. Pulling the IV drip from his arm, he measured the distance between the bed and the crutches and hoped he could make it. He put one hand on the night stand and stood up. Pain shot through his leg again, and when nausea threatened to put him on the floor, he sat down hard on the bed.

The snicker came from the other bed again. "You want out of here, right?" the man said in a conspiratorial voice.

Ev twisted on the bed to look hard at him.

"Hey," the patient said, throwing his hands up in the air, "I ain't stooling on you, Pickman. I'm the one who's here to help you."

Ev eyed the man skeptically. "How?"

"You want out, but you're in no shape to go anywhere--am I right or am I right?"

"So?"

"I got something here that will help you."

"A painkiller?" Ev asked hopefully.

The patient broke into an hysterically amused giggle and stuffed a pillow over his face until it subsided. Pulled the pillow off, he gave Ev a broad grin. A tooth was missing on the right side of his mouth.

"A mothering big painkiller," the unshaven face said as the words tumbled out with maniacal speed. "It'll get you the kind of get up and go you need to get up and really go." He sniggered and continued, "For a long, long, loooong time! What I got will not only get you free, but you can fuck your brains out for 24 hours and keep coming back for more cum. You'll come, you'll semen, and--oh man, you'll conquer her! The ladies will all be singing titty-ditties about you. Cum see the cum man, that's what they'll all say. The Cummins diesel man, that'll be you--high revs, lots of gears, and never stop, never idle. You'll definitely be the lay of the land, my man."

Appalled at the obscene blather, Ev stared at the man. "What the hell are you talking about? The doctor wouldn't give you anything like that, and they damned well strip-searched you before they brought you in here."

"That they did, Pickman," the patient said with a knowing laugh. "That deputy done a good job on all my orifices. By the time he got through, I was a drug-free zone--almost."

"Almost?" Ev asked.

The man directed his eyes upward.

"Your hat?" Ev said with skepticism. "Any idiot would know to search a hat."

"That's right, and the deputy did. Tried to tear the lining right out of my best one, the bastard."

"So, where did you hide it?"

A sly, satisfied smile appeared underneath the brim. "Nobody searches feathers, man."

Ev looked at the eagle feathers. "I don't see anything."

"Get your large ass over here, and you'll see it. It'll be worth your while, I promise you. You want to get out of here or not? You ain't gonna do it without me, I'll promise you that, too, because you don't look so very hot right at this very moment."

"All right, all right," Ev said and stood up again, this time doing it slowly. Using the bed for support, he worked his way around until he was close to the other patient's bed.

"Just take the feathers out," the man said. "But don't fuck with the band. A big, fat Indian gave that to me and told me it'd bring me luck if I never took it off. And if I ever did take it off, he said he'd thrash my ass worse than Custer because he didn't want to have to deal with the bad luck that would bring. I always pay attention to what he says, and you know why?"

"Why?"

"Because he ain't no rez brave, that's why. He's red through and through. Scalp my pretty hair if he could get hold of it, but he's too fat to do that."

The man grinned, lifted the hat briefly, then settled it back on his head. Ev had a brief glance of thick blonde hair piled atop a bone-white forehead.

"Shut up," he said to keep the man from further rambling. Pulling the feathers from the band, he found a small test tube tied with fishing line to the shafts. He undid the line and said, "I still don't see how he could have missed these."

"The bullet wound was bleeding on him at the time, okay?" the man said. "You interested in ancient history or in getting out of here?"

"But what is it?"

The patient gave Ev an exasperated scowl.

"Now what do you expect would goose your juice--liquid Tylenol?"

"Jesus, just stop playing games and tell me what the fuck it is!" Ev said. "I'm not putting anything in my system until I know what it is."

"Crank, you dimwit, speed. That's what it is, speed, speed up you good."

"Some sort of amphetamine?" Ev asked.

"Hee, hee," the patient said. "The mother of all speed. Put a meth in front of it, and that's what you got. Crank you up, but never crank you down. A friend in need is a friend indeed."

"Why are you giving me this?" Ev asked. "What do you want from me? I can't give you anything."

"Fuck the system, man, fuck 'em for me, that's all I ask," the hat said. "And, somewhere down the line, you'll return the favor. I crank your shaft, you crank mine. It's the law of my land, soon to be yours. Besides, it's good business--my loss leader, that's you, my man. Bring you back for more. All you want at a good price."

Ev examined the test tube nervously. "I don't know. I don't know where this stuff has been. There's AIDs to think about..."

The man surged up from the bed, his face contorted beneath the brim. Only the handcuffs stopped him as he spat out his words. "I ain't no fudgepacker, and you say anything like that again, I'll blow you fifty new assholes with a Street Sweeper! My crank's cleaner than my dead mother's kitchen! Now, stop fucking around. That wide-body nurse brought in a clean needle, didn't she? You're one safe motherfucker. Ain't any AIDs gonna get you."

The commotion in the hall decided Ev. Rowena was shouting again at the media people. Removing the cork from the test tube and the plastic tip from the needle, he drew the drug from its container as the man showed him how. Then, he made a fist until a vein bulged and plunged the drug into his system.

"How long?" he asked the man as he withdrew the needle.

"Faster than a speeding bullet, Pickman. "You're going to be able to fly out of this room when it hits. Just sit back down and practice that old virtue, patience, and you'll be home free."

Ev took his advice and sat down. After several minutes of desperately running methods of escape through his mind, he suddenly felt good.

Very good.

He felt better than he'd ever felt in his life.

*And strong!* he thought. *Superman is a wimp compared to how I feel..*

The patient grinned at him and winked. Ev winked back and stood up. He got himself back around his bed and found the crutches. He was ready to charge through the door when he remembered what the man had said--he'd be able to fly.

"Now, that's not a bad idea," he said out loud and marveled at his voice. He now sounded like he had balls that dragged on the floor. He turned toward the window.

He stopped as soon as he had his nose against the glass. Regional was a very modern hospital. The window was sealed.

*What's more,* Ev realized as he looked outside, *I'm on the second floor. It's a long ways down.*

The pounding on the door increased. He could hear "Pick! Pick!" being shouted by the media. A wave of anger swept through him. They were out

to get him again. He hesitated and looked again at the window, then at the other man.

The patient flapped his arms. "Fly, Pickman, fly. You can do it."

"You're goddamned right, I can," Ev said in the clearest decision he'd ever made in his life.

Hobbling to the bed, he pulled it away from the wall and pushed it across the room and up against the door. Then he wheeled the portable EKG out of the corner. Grunting, he picked up the machine and threw it against the window, shattering the pane. A, strong, cold wind blew glass back into the room, bringing with it the scent of pine. Ev poked a crutch at the hole to widen the opening. The abrupt silence in the hall ended, and there was renewed pounding on his door. Ev swung himself back to the bed, cursing the glass as it cut his feet, and pulled the mattress off. He dragged it to the window and stuffed it into the hole. Then, he threw both crutches out and fought to keep his balance.

"Get the wind beneath your wings!" the man urged. "Show them the right stuff."

The door shuddered from a sudden impact. "Pick, Pick!" the media shouted.

Ev took a deep breath and made his decision. Using his good leg, he half-leaped, half-limped onto the mattress. He tried to push himself through the hole, but a jagged edge of glass snagged his hospital gown and ripped his side. Ev cursed, backed up and tore the bloodied gown away from his body, then re-tied it around his neck. *If Superman can have a red cape, then so can I*, he thought. He threw his weight at the mattress again, and this time it worked.

Pickman sailed naked into the night.

## Chapter 11

### Power Walking

Ev didn't remember the landing, but it must have been a good one, he decided. He was still able to limp along with the crutches. And he didn't even need any clothes, even though it was cold. The wind was straight out of the north and making the pines moan almost as loud as he was.

*It doesn't matter, he thought. My motor is running in high gear, giving me lots of heat.*

He'd caught a coyote in an alley eating deep dish pizza out of garbage and chased it halfway across town to share in the piece drooping from its mouth, but it had given him the slip. Momentarily disappointed at his failure, Ev forgot it quickly because he realized he was beginning to understand that the babble the skinny little cowboy had used in the hospital room wasn't babble at all. It made complete sense now.

*The shit in my system has Berlitzed me into one bilingual bastard, Ev thought, feeling the power of the drug muscle its way through his veins.*

Working to catch his breath, he tried to remember where he was. He'd grown up in Rapid, but in the dark, everything looked the same. He jerked as sirens wailed in the distance, swung around and headed up the nearest hill. Minutes later, he stumbled up onto level ground. He paused again to quiet his breathing, then turned and froze.

A T. Rex stared down at him.

For a moment, fear had hold of him, then he dismissed it, lifted a crutch at the dinosaur and said, "You're no thunder lizard. You're a big fucking pussy, that's what you are."

Charging across the grass, he grabbed hold of the beast's belly, and bit hard.

"Oww! Shit!" He backed away, holding his bruised lips.

Somebody had slipped a fake in on him. He'd tried to bite off a mouthful of concrete. He looked past the T. rex and saw other dinosaurs. Ev giggled. Now he knew where he was--in Dinosaur Park, on Skyline Drive high above Rapid amidst cement replicas of the lizards. Hopping back over to the , he whacked its pebbled haunch with one of the crutches. The noise seemed to trigger a spotlight from the parking lot below. Its glare pinned Ev against the dinosaur.

"Jeeesus, do you see that?" a man said as a truck door slammed. The smell of beer gusted past Ev on the fitful wind. "He's got a hard on for that Rex."

A woman's voice giggled.



"Goddamned pervert," the man said. "You can't even park up here no more without some deviant popping out of the bushes. Gimme me the 30-ought-six."

"Now, Daron," the woman said.

"Gimme the goddamned rifle, Renae," Daron ordered. "They gotta learn a lesson, don't they?"

"Don't hurt him," Renae said as a bolt action was worked.

"Shit, I ain't going to kill him. Just a foot or hand or a leg or something like that."

A shot shattered concrete above Ev's head. The noise pissed him off. He grabbed hold of his dick and aimed it toward the light.

"Bang!" he yelled.

When nothing happened, he looked down at his erection and said, "Damn! Blanks." He decided to disappear into the darkness and circle around to where he could grab the rifle and twist it around Daron's goddamned head. Then, behind him, he heard Renae say, "I think he was already hurt. He was on crutches."

"What difference does that make?" Daron answered. "A pervert don't change his stripes just because he's crippled. Don't you listen to the crime reports on the news? That's what they're always saying. You can't change a pervert."

"Well, tell the police, then. Don't go shooting at people. You want to go to jail yourself, you dumb ass?"

"Shit," Daron said and fired another shot. "That was just in the air, buddy," he shouted at Everett. "Next time, it's for real."

"The sheriff," Renae insisted.

"All right, all right," Ev heard Daron mutter. Ev hid behind the T. Rex as the couple drove off. Disappointed, he thought about staying right where he was until the police came, so he could take them all on, but he didn't feel like waiting around for a bunch of wimpy pukes. He had better things to do. Besides, far off, there was the familiar sound of helicopter blades churning through the air. You couldn't fight what you couldn't reach. A prudent man lived to fight another day.

Ev turned to look southwest toward the only place he could think of to go. It was twenty miles over hills and mountains to Juliet's ranch. But that was okay.

He was up for a walk.

## Chapter 12

### Warmblood

The soreness in her face woke Lorena early. She lay in confusion for a moment, looking down at the soft sheets with a rose tulip pattern, then remembered where she was. Juliet had put her in a bedroom that was--uniquely decorated, that was the only phrase Lorena could come up with. There was a clutter of boxes, copiers, and phone equipment on and around the knotty pine dresser. Done in a soft pastel blue, the walls were hung with paintings of unicorns, dragons, and ethereal women dressed in Greek clothing and standing near ruined columns and deep pools. A large dream catcher hung over the dresser mirror.

Looking around the room for her blouse and jeans, Lorena saw them draped over a chair, clean of blood, but sloppily ironed. She dressed quickly and checked her hair in the mirror.

She gasped at the face she saw beneath the rumpled hair. It was many shades of purple and black from the beating that Vernon had given her, but what was really disturbing was that she looked like a woman for whom food had become a foreign country she rarely visited.

*Which was true*, Lorena admitted to herself. *I've had no appetite for a long time now. Vern likes his women thin, and I've done my best to become what he wanted.*

Checking the mirror again, she murmured, "But not like this." She touched her fingers to her gaunt, bruised cheek, then ran her hands down the length of her body, noting that her arms nearly disappeared in the sleeves of a blouse that had somehow become absurdly too large for her. Tears welled up, but she brushed them away quickly and concentrated on doing her hair with the rat-tail comb she found on the dresser. When she was finished, she hurried out of the room. She wasn't sure what she was going to do about Vern, but she knew one thing--she was going to thank Juliet for her help.

"Juliet?" she called after she came out of the hallway. When there was no answer, she searched the house. A large blue leather sofa and two leather Barcaloungers sat on a soft white and deep carpet in the living room. An open dining room led to the redwood deck and a view down into Moresdon Canyon. It held an oak dining table with six chairs around it. A vase of lilac branches sat on the table's lacquered surface. The walls were covered with framed symbols she didn't recognize. She stopped to look at one before going into the kitchen. It had an arrangement of what looked

like ancient runes--21 of them, she counted--and beneath them was the phrase "ONLY visiting this planet. (Jeremiah)."

Lorena had no idea as to what this meant, so she decided not to worry about it and went into the kitchen. Juliet was not there, but a message was written in black marker on a washable slate attached to the refrigerator door. It read:

*You've been sleeping for a long time! Good for you!  
Granola, soy milk in fridge. Horses in the stable. Stallion demands apples!.  
Back soon.*

Lorena grimaced at the thought of granola and soy milk and suddenly realized that her appetite was back.

*I don't want anything that's good for me today, she decided. I want something that's absolutely fattening.*

Opening the refrigerator door, she looked hopefully into its interior. It was filled with grapes, cooked rice, apple juice, soy burger mix, and one egg on the door. She felt her hopes diminish until she opened the meat drawer. There was a pound of bacon. She guessed that Juliet didn't eat things like this, but kept them on hand for guests. She blessed Juliet's thoughtfulness once again and pulled out the bacon and the egg.

Lorena scrambled the egg and microwaved six strips of bacon. Sitting at the dining room table, she ate her breakfast as slowly as she could without it becoming cold. Across the canyon, she could see the roof peak of her house through the pines. She allowed herself a brief moment of pleasure at the fact that she was so close to Vernon and he had absolutely no idea of where she was. She wished she could keep it that way, but it would not happen unless she left the state completely. Vern had too many contacts. He made it a point of knowing everyone from the local mayor to the governor because, he said, it was the only smart way of doing business. If there was someone in a position to do him a favor, Vernon Sarvis knew him. She would have to find another way to deal with him. Chewing on her bacon, she had no idea of what that might be, but realized she had some time to think about it. She was sure Juliet wouldn't tell him where she was and maybe she could ask if she could stay until things were figured out.

After clearing the dishes and washing them up, Lorena went outside. It was a clear day, but the sun hadn't topped the mountains yet and the air was still cold. She shivered as a fitful wind gusted through the top of the pines and blew dust up from the driveway.

A whinny sounded, and Lorena looked across the driveway to the stable, a well-kept pole building with a large corral to one side of it. She smiled at the totem pole that stood in front of the stable doors. Juliet seemed to have a liking for things that were out of the ordinary.

When the horse whinnied again, she remembered the note on the fridge. Returning to the house, she got several apples, then she went out into the stable. As her eyes adjusted to the dark interior, she could see there were at least 10 stalls, but only two were occupied.

The first horse was an Arabian. It was a graceful chestnut mare with a sweet and gentle face. It nuzzled at her hand as she fed it an apple. Her eyes teared briefly as she remembered her own horses left behind with Vern. To drive the thought out of her head, she decided to investigate the horse at the far end of the stable.

*It's a Dutch warmblood, she knew immediately. There's no mistaking the well-defined musculature, almost like a human bodybuilder's, and the arrogant cast to the eye, as if the horse is saying to me, "Of course, I have your total attention--I'm the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in your life."*

Lorena was inclined to agree. Standing at least 17 hands high, the stallion had a lustrous black mane that flowed like any woman's. She looked at the bronze name plate on the stall door. It read "THOR."

"Capital letters, of course, when you're talking about a god," Lorena said. But she felt Juliet had mis-named the horse. The refined warmblood looked more like Apollo or one of the other Greek deities with the muscular, yet delicate and graceful bodies. He definitely didn't look like a coarse and blunt Norse god. But she hadn't ridden him, and she knew as well as anyone you couldn't know a horse's true temperament until you rode it. Her backside had taken enough bruises over the years from misjudgment of an animal's true nature.

Thor snorted suddenly as if adding his own low opinion of her abilities to the one she was forming in her mind. Lorena laughed and reached over the door to pat the warmblood. The dark stallion pulled away as if she wasn't worthy of his attention.

"I forgot the treat, didn't I?" she told the horse.

She offered an apple to Thor. The horse snatched it away before she had a chance to tease him with it.

"My, you are quick, aren't you?" Lorena said. "Okay, I know a challenge when I see one, and I'm already sore, so why not add to my misery?"

Searching the tack room, she was pleased to find an English saddle, along side the Western ones. Like most Hills men, Vern had contempt for the lighter equestrian versions, not seeing any practical use in them, but

Juliet evidently was as little bound by their opinions as she was by anybody else's. Lorena took the saddle and bridle back to the stall. She was not surprised when Thor quietly accepted her tacking up. A horse could choose its moment just as craftily as a human being. She led him out of the stable and tightened the girth. She was about to mount when she remembered she'd forgotten something.

"You would have loved that, wouldn't you?" she said to horse, then fastened the reins to the totem pole and went back to the tack room and looked on the wall where several helmets were hung on pegs. She tried them on until she found one that fit, then went back to the horse and shook a finger at him. "I'm a fool," she said, "but I'm not that big a fool."

She swung up into the saddle and felt the power of the warmblood. It was a horse that could run far and fast--with or without you.

"Today, it's definitely with me," she informed the stallion and urged him into a walk. She would do as she always did with a horse new to her. She'd test his limits gradually until she knew exactly what he could do or couldn't do.

*Of course, she told herself, there are always surprises along the way no matter how well you plan.*

As she adjusted the stirrups, she was startled to find herself hoping there would be one.

## **Chapter 13**

### **Tourist Trap**

Ev limped out of the pines at daybreak, leaned on his crutches, and admitted to himself that he didn't have a clue as to where he was. Not that he cared. What he did care about was his appetite. He felt hungrier than a starved dog and twice as mean. And down the slope was a prime clump of chokecherries. He had no idea if the berries were in season, and he didn't care. Anything would do.

Setting the crutches in motion, he worked his way down the hill. The sun struck him as soon as he hit level ground, but it only brought with it a gust of the cold wind that had blown on him all night. Ev hurried through the grass toward the bush. When he got to it, he yelped with joy. There were berries, and they were ripe. He inhaled deeply, smelling their pungent scent. Another strong smell, one vaguely familiar, lingered in the air, but he dismissed it, grabbed the bush and began chewing berries straight from the branch with noisy smacks of satisfaction.

As soon as Ev swallowed the sour fruit, his stomach rebelled. He ignored it until it cramped his guts and doubled him over. He gasped as successive waves of nausea rolled over him, then threw up into the grass. When the spasming eased, he grunted in relief. A deeper grunt answered his. Ev straightened and looked up.

A black bear towered over him on its hind legs, its arms stretched toward the bush as if to tell Ev he'd been poaching the wrong territory. The rank smell of damp fur rolled over Ev.

Delighted, he got up and raised one of the crutches. "You want some, motherfucker? Come get it! I'll whip your furry black bear ass."

Ev swung the crutch. A giant paw snapped it like a dry Hills twig. As the other paw leaped toward him, Ev realized two things. He wasn't going to win this fight.

And he now knew exactly where he was.

It seemed like only seconds later a shriek opened his eyes.

"Mom, that man's naked," a girl's voice was saying.

"Don't be silly," the mother asked. "What man?"

"Over there!"

The voices seemed to be talking inside Ev's head, simultaneously close and far away. He was on his back, looking up into a cloudless sky. There was an incessant ringing in his ears as if he'd stood too close to a large bell. Then, he remembered the bear. Sitting up, he put his hand to the side

of his head. It came away slick with blood. Fifty feet away, the mother and daughter sat in a Taurus and stared at him.

"He hasn't got an ear," the girl said.

"It's him!" the mother said. "I saw him on the news!"

"What was he on the news for?"

"Never mind," the woman said. "You don't want to know. We have to tell the Bear Country people."

"Damned tourists," Ev said as the car sped away. He rubbed blood off his face as he looked around. A cold wind ruffled the chokecherry branches. The bear had gotten lucky and knocked him about ten feet away from the bush. One crutch was still whole.

*It was a good thing for him I was only annoyed and not really pissed,* he thought.

Dizziness and nausea swirled in his head, but he still felt good. He crawled over to the good crutch. Using it as a support, he pulled himself up into a standing position. He stood for a moment, watching in fascination as blood dripped to the ground. Then, he settled the crutch under his arm and hopped across the meadow toward the Hills. He hoped Juliet was home. The bear had jumped him. Now he was going to jump her bones.

It was only fair.

## Chapter 14

### Posting Trot

Lorena rode away from the house, choosing the clear, flat ground between the stable and the nearest hill to test Thor out. The warmblood was doing some testing of his own already, she realized, snapping his head up and down as if checking her grip on the reins. She kept it firm and steady, communicating to the horse that she was the one in control. When his head stopped bobbing, she asked for a trot, and Thor responded immediately.

"Wow!" Lorena said to herself. She'd never driven a racing car with smooth, instant acceleration, but she imagined this experience was similar to it. The warmblood's even gait floated them through the landscape.

"You are something else," she said, leaning to pat the horse's deeply muscled neck. "Let's see what you can really do."

Giving Thor his head, Lorena had her breath taken away. The stallion galloped across the meadow at a speed she'd never experienced before. A wave of exhilaration swept over her. It was replaced by a thrill of fear when she tried to slow the horse. The warmblood raced toward the hill without responding to her command.

*He's found his moment, she realized, and there's nothing I can do but hang on until he tires.*

Lorena gasped when she saw that he was headed straight for the pines. She thought briefly about jumping off before one of the branches knocked her flying, but the horse was so fast there was no time to make a decision. She closed her eyes and lay close to Thor's neck as the first tree flashed by. When there was no impact, she opened her eyes.

The warmblood charged up a trail.

*It's been here before, Lorena thought with relief, because it's splitting the pines expertly. There's no danger I'll be brushed off unless I panic and do something stupid.*

Relaxing back into the saddle, she centered her thoughts into an image of calmness that would eventually translate itself through her body language to the horse.

Moments later, Thor relaxed with her. His gallop lost its immense power and settled back into the trot Lorena wanted. Still, they surged upward through the cleanly-biting smell of the forest until the warmblood slowed and reached the crest. Lorena patted his neck again and walked him until they were both calm. Then, she brought him to a halt and settled back to enjoy the scenery. Off to the west, Mt. Rushmore was



exceptionally visible on such a cold, clear day. It was almost as if the four presidents were standing next to her rather than miles away. To the east, the sun was finally coming free of the mountains, but a gust of wind from the north reminded her of how chilly it still was. She rubbed her arms to get warm, then froze as she looked down into the meadow below.

"Good God!" she said.

## Chapter 15

### Cabin Boy

When Ev woke, he was on his back with the bloody hospital gown tangled about his neck. He straightened it out, disappointed that he'd needed a nap. He was still feeling good, but not as good as before. The sun shone down directly into his eyes, annoying him. The smell of pine tried to cut through the stench from the leg as he struggled onto his side to see where he was.

Somehow, he'd made it to the top of a small hill with the help of his remaining crutch. Below, standing in the middle of a weedy pasture, an old log cabin stood, looking as if it had been around since Crazy Horse and the others had surgically removed Custer's vainglorious attitude. There were no telephone lines in sight so Ev knew the best he could hope for was some food to carry him farther toward Juliet's. Worked his body up into a sitting position, he reached for the crutch.

It wasn't there.

Ev searched the ground around the trees. The crutch was nowhere to be seen. Then, he looked down at his legs. The flesh was bruised, and there were long scrapes filled with pine needles. It was obvious he'd lost the crutch a long time ago and simply crawled up the hill.

"Well, fuck me," he said philosophically. Turning onto his stomach, he dug his elbows into the ground and wormed his way down the hill toward the cabin.

When he was beyond the last tree and into the pasture, Ev laughed in relief. It was good to be past the rough ground and sharp pine needles into the softness of grass. With a burst of energy, he pulled himself the final yards to the cabin and looked at the front door.

It had a thick padlock on it.

A familiar, scrabbling sound of claws on wood drew his attention away from swearing. The sound came again, and this time he heard it coming from the west side of the cabin. He knew what the sound was. It was a mouse or some small animal running around on the logs. It was something he had to catch. He was still hungry.

Working his way along the front of the cabin, he peeked around the corner and saw that he was right. A chipmunk stood upwind on a window sill with its striped back to him, its tail flicking back and forth like a nervous flag. The rodent held something between its forepaws and nibbled at it with a fastidious neatness.

*I don't plan on being anywhere near that fussy,* Ev thought.

He eased around the side of the cabin, but the chipmunk whirled around immediately, his bright eyes fully on Ev.

*Shit*, Ev thought, but prepared to leap anyway.

A sudden rush of air and whirring of wings froze him in place. He watched helplessly as a red tailed hawk struck with outstretched talons and hauled the squealing rodent skyward. Ev swore and checked the ground for a rock to throw at the predator. He found nothing and swore again. Then he looked at what the chipmunk had left behind on the sill. It was a cracker. Ev grabbed it and put it in his mouth, thanking providence with each chew. Realizing the rodent had to get the cracker from somewhere, he checked the window more closely. It was shattered as if someone had broken it.

*But I don't think that's likely*, he guessed. *This is an out-of-the-way place, and with the padlock on the door, the owners are obviously careful. More likely, hail took it out, and it just hasn't been discovered yet.*

Looking through the glass, he saw the source of the chipmunk's cracker. It was a chewed-upon box of Sociables, lying on its side just past a six-pack of Coors. They both stood on a worn card table placed directly below the window.

Ev reached in carefully past the jagged edges of glass for the crackers. His fingers missed the box by an inch, no matter how far he stretched them. He grabbed the beer instead and hauled the six-pack back through the window. Cracking one open, he drank its warm suds gratefully, then took an unopened can and smashed at the glass with it. Within minutes, he had the window clear. He slid his body gingerly inside the cabin, grabbed the Sociables and rolled off the table to the floor, stuffing the crackers into his mouth and drowning them with beer.

His stomach didn't appreciate his gift to it. After a last swallow of beer, it all came up in a gush that smelled worse than his leg. Ev wiped his mouth and moved away from the mess. He'd suddenly started shivering and was cold. Crawling over to an old Army cot, he untied the hospital gown from his neck and placed it over his body.

The *skree* of a hawk sat him erect out of a feverish doze. Outside the window, a mountain skewered the setting sun. Pulling himself up on the cot, he looked hopefully around the cabin for more food. He felt better now, and he still had an appetite, but a quick search revealed there was nothing--no shelves, no coolers, only another table with metal folding chairs and a well-used Lazy Boy with exposed guts. Beyond them were long olive drab crates stacked against the north wall. A smell of grease came from them, managing to penetrate the smell from his leg. Army surplus, he assumed, used to store hunting weapons and ammo.

Ev checked the swollen wound on his leg, annoyed with it.

*I'll never make it to jump Juliet's bones if I have to crawl, he realized, so I need another crutch.*

Looking around again, he debated tearing a leg off one of the tables, but didn't think he had the strength to get the job done. Then, one of the walls caught his attention. There was a rack on it with two rifles resting in their cradles. One looked like an ancient Hawken's plains rifle.

*It's probably a replica, Ev decided, but the one below it is definitely a modern design.*

It looked like a slicked-up Remington bolt-action sporting rifle with a huge telescopic sight on it. Limping to the wall, he pulled the rifle down, then sat down in a chair to examine the weapon.

Ev was pleased to see it had an adjustable butt-plate like a match competition rifle. They were designed to allow the shooter to fit the stock to reach, but, for him, the butt-plate would act like the foot of a crutch because whoever used the rifle had a long reach like himself. To be safe, he took off the safety and checked the chamber.

*Sure enough, he thought, some fool forgot to unload it.*

He thought briefly about leaving it loaded in case he encountered somebody else who was out to get him, then emptied all six shells onto the floor. In his condition, he decided, he'd be in bigger danger of shooting himself than anyone else. Then, he went across to the window and tossed the weapon outside. Emptying another beer, he tossed the can aside, then slid through the window to pick up the rifle. He grabbed the barrel and planted the butt-stock on the ground, testing it for stability.

*Under the circumstances, he thought, it works as fine as I can hope for.*

Limping away from the cabin toward the south, he cut through the lengthening shadows from the mountains. He hoped it wasn't much farther to Juliet's.

*Because, he realized once again, I'm horny as hell.*

## Chapter 16

### Erection

The huge meadow stretched from the canyon back to the ridge on which Lorena and the stallion stood. She guessed it to be more than three miles to the canyon edge. In the middle of the clearing was a tipi, a sweat lodge, a cabin and a strange, pyramid-shaped building, but it was the massive pole that commanded her attention. It was, Lorena realized, what she'd seen reflecting lightning during the storm on her wild drive to get free of Vern. She studied it as she tried to identify the peculiar odor that seemed to be floating up from the meadow.

The structure was partially completed. The core of it was a huge log pole that she estimated to be four or five feet in diameter and over a hundred feet tall. The surface of the wood was partially covered with copper sheeting that itself was having large quartz pieces attached to it. Next to it stood a huge, white crane. An outsized, red X was on the side of the cab in the midst of other letters she couldn't read from so far away. Looking tiny in comparison, several men stood next to the boom truck, apparently drinking coffee and rubbing their hands together.

Lorena set Thor into a walk down the slope. As they rode through the pines, the men waved at her. Soon, she could read the company name and slogan on the crane's cab and laughed as she realized why Juliet had most likely chosen the service. It read:

ORBIT CRANE  
XCAVATION  
MACHINERY MOVING  
CONSTRUCTION  
*We reach to the heavens!*

Riding the warmblood across the meadow, Lorena stared up at the structure. The closer she got, the more she realized just how big it was.

A burly man in a plaid shirt, jeans, and John Deere cap came up as she brought Thor to a halt.

"Thought you were Juliet Moresdon, riding a horse instead of a pickup for a change," he said. "I'm Jim DeHuis, owner of Orbit."

Lorena leaned down to shake his hand, introduced herself, then said, "I'm staying with Juliet for a while."

DeHuis nodded, saying nothing about the bruises on her face, and Lorena was grateful for the custom of politeness that still held among

many of the Hills men. The owner seemed nearly as massive as the pole he was building.

"This is really something else," she said.

DeHuis pulled his cap off and craned his neck to look up at the structure. "Ain't it, though? My company's never built anything like this before."

Lorena decided to be direct. "What is it?"

He looked back at her and said, "You're a friend of Juliet's. I was hoping you could tell me."

Lorena swept her hand around the meadow. "You built all this, and you don't know what it is?"

"Just the pole. The other buildings were already here. I don't know what any of it's for."

"You're joking, right?" Lorena said.

"No, ma'am," DeHuis said. "Much as I'd like to be, I'm not."

"How can you build something and not know what it is?"

"New experience for me," he said. "I have the plans, and I'm building it, but I don't know what possible use it could be. Maybe a tourist attraction of some kind."

"Way out here?" Lorena said. "The only thing it'll attract this high up is lightning."

The owner shrugged his thick shoulders. "Over the years, I've seen some pretty strange ideas for taking dollars out of tourists' pockets."

"How high is it?" Lorena said. An eagle was soaring above the peak of the pole and seemed to be no more than a foot above it.

"One hundred feet," DeHuis said. "So far."

"You mean it's going higher?"

"The plans call for some sort of stone to be put on top."

"And I don't know what that's for, either," he said, anticipating her question. From the scowl on his stubbly face, Lorena could tell he was annoyed with the mystery surrounding the project.

"You're covering it with quartz?" she asked.

He nodded. "Polished quartz. We take it from a spot near Moresdon Canyon, bring it on over here, and I have a couple of boys do nothing all day but cut and polish it."

"It'll be like a giant mirror when it's done," Juliet said.

"Blind you in a flash if you're in the wrong spot, I expect," DeHuis said. "The Air Force won't appreciate it, I'm sure."

Lorena asked, "Do you really have no idea of what this whole thing is for?"

"Ma'am, if I wanted to lie," he said, waving a hand at the pole, "I couldn't possibly make up anything that would explain this."

"That's a good point."

"Why don't you ask your friend? Maybe she can tell you."

"I will," she said. "But before I go, can you tell me what that smell is?"

"What smell's that?" DeHuis asked.

"I don't know. I've smelled it before. It smells like something from a hospital."

The owner shrugged. "Nothing smells different to me. Probably some of the solvent we use on the tools and parts."

"Well, never mind, then," Lorena said, "My friend here and I want a long ride. Any direction you can recommend?"

DeHuis stroked the horse's neck, and Thor snorted at him. "He's something else, isn't he? I've been riding since I was a boy, and I never seen anything quite like him before."

He pointed toward the rim of the canyon. "There's good wide trail down into the canyon right over there, even though you can't see it from there. Go down it, then ride north about 10 miles. You'll find another trail up through the Hills that'll bring you out near Rushmore Cave. Sharlene's is across the road. You can have lunch there."

"I know the place," Lorena said. "Thanks, I appreciate your talking with me."

"Enjoyed the break," he answered. "I'd appreciate knowing what it is I'm building."

"I'll do my best to find out," she promised as she wheeled the warmblood around. "I'm as curious as you are."

## Chapter 17

### Finders, Weepers

"Where is he, Sheriff? That's what I'd like to know."

Lonny Gunderson glared back across his desk at Vernon Sarvis and Juliet Moresdon. He didn't like either one of them in the best of circumstances, and this was definitely not one of those times. Juliet was just plain strange, but basically harmless as far as he could tell. Sarvis, on the other hand, was a schemer and always had been.

"I don't know where he is, Juliet" Lonny said. "Yet."

Lonny suppressed a smile as he watched Sarvis stare out the window, at the floor, or anywhere but where Juliet sat. She was still naked, much to the consternation of Vern and everyone else in the building.

"How your department plus the entire police force of Rapid City can miss a six-foot-tall naked man on crutches is beyond me!" Juliet said. She dabbed at the tears rolling down her reddened cheeks.

"He's dead," she added. "I just know it."

"You're giving up pretty easily. What makes you think that?" he asked.

Juliet shrugged her bare shoulders. "He's not that resourceful. All the time we were married, he never fixed anything."

"We're not talking handyman skills here," Lonny said. "We're talking survival. You'd be surprised how clever people can get when their life is at stake. Besides, Ev grew up out here, Juliet. He knows the Hills as well as anyone."

"I don't understand why he ran away in the first place," Vern said. "Jesus, right through the window."

"He seems to have an aversion to the media," the sheriff said.

"Nobody hates the media that much," the car dealer said.

"Oh, I don't know," Lonny said. "I've had my days."

"I just don't understand why you can't find him," Juliet said again.

"Look," the sheriff said, annoyed at her fretful tone. "The police department is combing the city, and I've got mounted and helicopter patrols covering the Hills. The military out at Ellsworth has offered us more choppers if we need them. What more do you want?"

"Somebody's going to shoot him," Juliet said. "Have you heard the reports on the radio? They think he's some kind of pervert."

"I wonder where they got that idea," the car dealer said.

Juliet glared at him.

"Look at you," Vernon said. "You're naked, he's naked. What are people supposed to think?"



"They can think whatever they want to think," Juliet said. "It doesn't make any difference to me."

"Yeah, well, they're already thinking what they want to think, aren't they, and look where it's gotten Pick," Vernon said. "I hope you're not as big a help to Lorena."

Juliet turned to the sheriff, her face red with anger. "Lonny, I want you to know that his wife came up to my place, her face black and blue courtesy of this upstanding citizen. She's staying with me for now, and if Vernon Sarvis comes within a mile of my ranch, I'll have him shot for trespassing!"

"Juliet, you're not going to shoot anybody," Lonny said. "Because, Vern, you're not going anywhere near her place. Understand? No contact unless she says so. That means no phone, no e-mail if you've got that--no nothing."

"You're no judge, and she's my wife," the car dealer said.

"Then, why don't you treat her like one?" the sheriff said. "Beating a woman never solved anything."

"He's a coward, that's why he doesn't treat her right," Juliet said. "Any man who beats his wife is a coward."

Sarvis jumped up, tried to look at Juliet and shouted at the sheriff instead. "Look, tell this naked bitch that a man's wife is a man's wife, will you? There's no two ways about it. What business is it of hers, anyway?"

"Lorena made it my business," Juliet said.

In astonishment, Lonny watched as she grabbed his trap-shooting trophy off the shelf, whacked Sarvis up alongside the head with it, and laid him out cold. She placed the trophy neatly back where it belonged, sat down, and gave him a look that dared him to arrest her.

The sheriff gave a deep sigh and glanced out the window when there was a thump against it. The national tabloid media was joining the crowd of local reporters. Cameras and sound equipment were being checked. He knew that the *National Enquirer* and *A Current Affair* were already here, and, supposedly, everyone in town was jockeying to get video of Pick for *America's Funniest Home Videos*. He could see Mindy Rattigan's blonde head bobbing up and down in the crowd.

*She's probably throwing a few elbows to keep everyone at a respectful distance from her story,* Lonny thought. *She's ambitious, and smells Big Time.*

"Christ on a crutch," he said under his breath as he stood up to get help for Sarvis, then added the rueful thought, *I'm beginning to understand why Pick doesn't want to be found.*

## Chapter 18

### Ordering off the Menu

Breathless, Lorena rode out of the Hills and down past Rushmore Cave until she was sure she had Thor under control. It had been touch and go for a while, and she still wasn't sure who was in charge--the horse or the rider. But the warmblood settled down once she turned back toward the cafe.

Lorena smiled as she looked at the place. Although she hadn't been there since her marriage to Vernon, it hadn't changed. It was a small white clapboard building with a Coke machine out front on a tiny crooked porch that held the red letters SHARLENE'S CAFE in disarray along its roof. The creek ran out back, nearly dry at this time of year, and the cafe was surrounded by hardwood trees. Sparse traffic hummed as she dismounted and tied the horse to a rusty bicycle rack that was next to a Custer State Park half-ton pickup. She ran her hand along the stallion's flank. Her hand came away nearly dry.

"You really are something else, aren't you?" she said.

The horse turned his arrogant head toward her, seeming to ask why she was wasting time praising him for what he already knew when there was food to be had.

She laughed and patted him on the neck. "Okay, I'll find you an apple or something, okay?"

A tiny bell over the door rang as she went into the cafe. In the immediate room, four tables covered with plum-colored plastic cloths stood neatly apart from each other. On the wall over the counter was a clock mounted into a leather frame. Reading the time, Lorena was amazed to realize she'd been riding the warmblood for hours.

*It felt like only few minutes,* she thought.

Below the clock on the counter was a tiny black-and-white TV tuned to *One Life to Live*. Next to it was the bowl of fruit she'd hoped to find so she could reward Thor. Lorena looked past the counter to the other room. It held ten tables and one of them was occupied by two park rangers, both thin and wiry in their gray uniforms and work boots. She didn't recognize either one, but nodded at them, and they returned her nod.

Sitting down on a counter stool, Lorena heard rustling sounds out in the kitchen. A moment later, Sharlene Brennan came through the swinging doors with a plate of burgers and fries in each hand. The hamburgers were half the size of the buns and charred. The owner didn't seem to see her as she moved behind the counter at a speed Lorena realized could be beaten by a slow glacier. She hoped the food would still be warm by the time it

got to the rangers, but they seemed to know what to expect. The tall one got up and crossed the room to the tiny old woman.

"Let me help you with that," he told Sharlene.

"I don't need no help, Bill," she protested loudly as he took the plates. The owner was just as Lorena remembered her--a feisty, independent woman with a voice twice the size of her body. The only thing that age seemed to have diminished was the speed of her walk.

"I know that sure as the day is long," he said. "But Mike and me got to get back to the search."

Sharlene wiped her blue-veined hands on her apron. "You haven't found him yet?" she asked.

"Nope," Bill said as he put the plates on the table.

"With all the people you got out there, you can't find one naked man?"

Bill sat down, unperturbed at the apparent shouted accusation, and squeezed catsup onto his tiny hamburger.

"We're not talking about some tourist blundering about the Hills, Sharlene," he said. "We're talking about a home-grown boy. He knows his way around."

"Well, I don't know as how we should claim him as such," the owner said. "I don't hold with perverts."

"Who does?" Bill said, taking a bite of his hamburger. Half the sandwich disappeared into his mouth.

"Don't sound like Pick to me," his partner said.

"People change," Bill said.

Lorena got up from the counter and went to the table. "Excuse me," she said, "I'm Lorena Sarvis."

The two men stood up. "I'm Bill Mohn," the taller one said. "This is Russ Chase."

Sharlene peered at Lorena for a moment, then said, "You're June Sheldon's girl, aren't you?"

"That's right, Sharlene. We came here for years. It was always my favorite place."

The owner beamed at the praise. "Your mother was a good woman, bless her heart; it wasn't fair that cancer got her. It should get old women like me."

"Nonsense," Lorena said. "You're too tough for any cancer to get you. You're going to live longer than all the rest of us put together."

Sharlene laughed and said, "I hope not. One life is enough for anyone."

Lorena turned to the two rangers. "I couldn't help hearing you mention the name Pick. Are you talking about Everett Pick?"

"Where you been?" Bill asked. "The whole area's talking about him."

"I've been out with the flu," she lied. "It laid me low for a while."

"Well, to make a long story short," Bill said, "Pick attacked some TV cameramen, then escaped buck naked from the hospital and flashed some lovers up in Dinosaur Park.

"Don't sound like Pick to me," Russ said again.

"Maybe not," Bill said, "but then maybe you never knew him as well in the first place as you thought you did."

Russ shrugged. "The man pulled me out of a slough when my john boat went over. Can't very well say anything bad about him."

"It's probably best to say nothing, then, isn't it?" Bill said, glaring at him.

"Saved my over-under, too," Russ added.

"So what?"

It was Russ's turn to glare at his partner. "I still have it. It's Italian with engraved silver on the stock. My Dad gave it to me."

Lorena could tell Bill was nonplussed by this information. Next to his pickup, a Hills man's most prized possession was his shotgun or rifle.

"I understand that, but we're talking about a flasher here, maybe even a molester," Bill said after a moment as if he'd finally worked out the proper order of things. "Don't you ever listen to the news on TV? They're always talking to the experts, and they're always saying that there's nothing you can do with those kind of people. They can't change, so you have to lock them up and throw away the key. That's what they're going to have to do with Pick."

"I suppose," Russ said. "If he is one."

"That's what everybody's saying."

Russ took a bite of a French fry and said, "Well, I ain't everybody then, am I?"

"You sure aren't," his partner said.

Bill shook his head in disgust and turned to Lorena.

"You've been out riding. Saw your horse," the ranger said. "Hell of an animal."

"He is," she said, suddenly finding herself wishing that she could gather half as much praise from the men in her life as the horse did.

"I guess you didn't see anything out there, or you would have told us," Bill said.

Lorena laughed. "That's for sure. I only wish I'd known earlier, then I wouldn't have gone out in the first place."

"Don't think you're in much danger," Russ said. "He's on crutches. You'd have to be on the slowest fleabag in the world for him to catch you."

"He's naked and on crutches in this weather?" Lorena said.

Russ nodded. "Sheriff shot him in the leg."

"The poor man."

It was Bill's turn to glare at her.

"Well," she said, "he could be bleeding to death out there, and then you wouldn't be able to bring him to justice, would you?"

"You got a point there," the ranger said. "Doesn't matter, though. We'll find him. They added National Guardsmen to the search."

He took a swallow of coffee, then looked at his partner. "Come on, bleeding heart, let's get back to work."

Handing the money to the owner, Bill said, "The tip's in there, Sharlene. You take care."

"You going to be okay riding up there alone?" he asked Lorena.

"I'll be fine. Thanks for the information."

Both rangers nodded and went out the door.

Lorena turned back to Sharlene.

"Men," the owner said. "I've lived a long life, and I still don't understand how can they do what they do?"

"Fortunately," Lorena answered, "not all of them do it."

Sharlene shuffled behind the counter and laid a menu on top of it. "You came for lunch, not a lecture, didn't you, dear? You can order from here, or I have a nice oxtail soup on the burner in the kitchen that I made because the weather turned cold."

"I'll have the soup, then, and some coffee," Lorena said. After what she'd seen of the burgers, it sounded like the safer bet. At least, it would probably be warm by the time it got to her.

She watched as the owner made her way through the swinging doors, then looked out the window where Thor stood shaking his head impatiently. She suddenly remembered her promise of an apple for the horse. She pulled a Rome Beauty from Sharlene's bowl and went out to feed the animal. As the warmblood snatched the apple out of her grasp, Lorena marveled at the stallion's appetite for the fruit. Stroking his neck, she wondered if Juliet had joined in the search for Everett.

She also wondered if Juliet realized what a mess her ex-husband had apparently made of things.

## Chapter 19

### Sales Motivation

Vern woke up staring at a ceiling fan. Two paramedics stood over him, looking more amused than concerned about his condition. One was fat Leonard Circle Hawk, the Sioux he'd sold the punk '82 Deville to five years ago. Vern assumed it had ended up like all Indian cars ended up--trashed out on the rez. The other was Sam Istas, a former mechanic he'd fired because he couldn't change oil without destroying the engine block.

Sitting up in alarm as his brain finally processed the possibility of these two taking care of him, Vern groaned as a wrecking ball of pain hammered the inside of his skull.

"Jesus, what happened?" he asked.

"The sheriff says that Juliet Moresdon got you with his trophy," Sam said.

"She's as good a shot as he is, I'd say," Leonard Circle Hawk added. "Don't need a gun, either."

"Very funny," Vern said. "Where's the sheriff now?"

"He's booking Juliet on assault charges."

Sarvis rubbed gingerly at his head. "At least, he's doing something right. I'll go add a few charges myself."

"We got to get you over to the hospital," Leonard said. "You need some X-rays to make sure she didn't do some damage to your brain."

"My brain's just fine," Vern said. "Help me up."

The two men pulled him from the floor and put him in a chair. The sour smell of vomit and beer from the drunks in the holding tank drifted into the room. Vern waited until his head stopped swimming and the nausea subsided. The paramedics looked at him expectantly.

"I told you I'm fine," he said. "I'm not going anywhere near Regional. Just let me sit here for a while."

The paramedics looked at each other and shrugged.

"We'll let the sheriff know that you're still here and didn't want to go with us," Leonard said.

"Fine. Cover your asses and get out of here."

Sam went out the door, followed by Leonard whose shirt was hanging out over his broad Indian ass.

*Too lazy as usual,* Vern thought, *to even tuck his shirt tail in.*

Wincing as the throbbing increased, Vern decided the only way to deal with the pain was to ignore it. He walked out of the office and down the corridor. Lonny's deputy grinned at him as he came to the front desk.

Ascher was in the sheriff's physical mold--a big, beefy kid, but with a red complexion that undercut his authority because it looked like he was permanently embarrassed.

"Fuck you, Arlo," Vern said.

The sheriff looked up from the papers he was filling out and asked, "You all right?"

"That's a damned stupid question, and you know it," Vern said.

"Just asking. I could have said you deserved it."

"My head hurts like there's no tomorrow, and the only thing that'll make me feel better is if you've got her strung up by the thumbs."

"I gave up thumb-hanging a long time ago, Vern, so you'll have to be satisfied with me booking her and bringing her up for trial unless she pleads guilty."

"What does she get if she pleads guilty?"

"With Judge Hurd, probably a \$500 fine or ten days in jail or both."

"Sounds pretty lenient to me," Vern said. "That's the second time she's hit me."

The sheriff shrugged. "I didn't see the first time, so this is the best the law allows, right now. You want to sign this?"

Sarvis signed while Lonny said, "You ought to go home and get some rest. You look like you went a minute with Evander Holyfield."

"I'm going back to work."

"You won't sell many Cadillacs looking like somebody whaled the tar out of you," Arlo offered. "Especially when that someone was a woman."

Vern gave him the finger.

"Say hello to Willie for me," the deputy added and laughed.

Vern walked out onto the street, too sore to wonder what Arlo's last remark was about. The cold wind still swept down from the north, but it felt good on his aching head. Ignoring the stares of salespeople in the stores he passed, he walked toward the dealership.

*Arlo was right, he realized, I must look like shit and won't be able to sell many cars. It's time to catch up on paperwork. I'll just lock myself in the office for the rest of the day.*

That plan was canceled when he saw Willie out on the lot. His skinny used car manager leaned against an 85" Deville with his eyes closed, sucking smoke into his lungs and blowing it skyward above sparse hair that looked as if it had styled in a blender. The strong smell of Camels struck Vern's nose as he threaded his way among the cars. His blood pressure soared as he saw what Willie was wearing.

"Bored, Rentz?" Vern asked.

Willie started, dropped the cigarette and ground it out with one of his white bucks.

"You might try selling some cars," Vern said. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Hey, Vern, I'm celebrating, that's all. A bluebird flew in my window this morning and took away that dark cherry 94' Eldorado with the trunk-mounted CD changer."

"How much?"

"Five hundred dollars more than we were asking."

Vern looked at Willie sourly. "And that's the best you could do?"

"Didn't you hear me?" Rentz said. "I said we got \$500 more than we expected."

"It was a bluebird, right?"

"Yeah."

"A bluebird flies in your window, that means it's ripe for the plucking, you moron. You didn't make \$500. You lost \$1,750."

"That's a helluva way to look at it," Willie said.

"It's the only way."

"What happened to your face?" the chastened manager said.

"Don't try changing the subject," Vern said. "I don't know why the hell I keep you out here. You haven't sold jack shit this month."

"Things are slow, you know that." Willie jerked a thumb toward the main showroom. "Nobody's moving much in there, either."

"Those are new cars, Willie, they're expensive and harder to sell in a tough market. So, what's your excuse?"

The manager inspected his feet and said nothing.

"Let me ask you a question, Willie," Vern said, sweeping his hand around the lot. "What kind of cars are we selling?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Cadillacs, mainly."

"That's right. And what kind of people buy Cadillacs?"

"People with money."

"And clothes."

"Clothes?" Willie asked.

"Yeah, clothes. Good clothes. Top of the line clothes. The best whether they're in Brooks Brothers or blue jeans."

Vern watched confusion spread across the manager's face. "So?"

"So, what are you wearing, Willie? What'd you do, dig that suit up from your disco days?"

Looked down at his rumpled suit, his manager brushed ashes from the lapels. The beginnings of a small paunch hung out over the white belt.

"Well, it is an old suit--," Willie began.



"It's polyester, for Christ's sake, and burgundy! You know what you look like, don't you?"

The manager said nothing.

"You look like a goddamned used car salesman, that's what you look like!"

"But that's what I--"

"No, you're not! How many times do I have to tell you that?" Vern asked. "You're a consultant, helping people find the car that truly fits their needs. You're their damned friend, that's what you are! It's not enough to just take their money these days; you have to make them trust you and want to come back so they can give you more of their money. That's what modern salesmanship is all about. Now, how many people are going to trust a guy wearing using a white belt to hold up polyester pants?"

"Nobody said anything," Willie protested.

"They're not going to say anything, you dummy. When people buy a Cadillac, they expect a class act for their money, and when they don't get it, they're just going to walk away and buy their car someplace else."

"I can go change," the manager offered weakly.

"Forget changing," Vern said. "That's not the real problem. You got up on the wrong side of the bottle today, didn't you, Willie?"

Rentz rubbed self-consciously at the gin blossoms on his small nose and said nothing.

"You been so hung over, you didn't even have any clean clothes to wear--am I getting warm?"

Willie nodded.

"You didn't sell that Eldorado, either, did you?"

The manager shook his head.

"Where is it?"

"In the shop," Willie said.

"What'd you do to it?"

"Not much."

"What?"

"Not much," the manager repeated.

"It's not even in the shop, is it?" Vern said. "You totaled it, didn't you? Now I know why Arlo was laughing at me."

Willie gave him a hangdog look.

"Jesus, Rentz, you're not only in the hole with me, but this is your second DUI. One more and your license is gone. What good is a car salesman without a driver's license?"

Willie shuffled his feet like a small child.

"You idiot. I oughta put you back behind the counter and have you pull parts."

Vern thought about planting his fist square in the manager's pouting face. He held off when an idea popped suddenly into his head.

"Instead, I want you to take the rest of the day off to do some thinking about your future with this dealership. I want you to go home, clean up, get out of those ridiculous clothes, then get some sleep so you can take a drive in the Hills."

"Why?"

"So, you can clear your head and do your thinking, you damned fool. And so you can deliver a message for me."

"A message? For who?"

"For my wife."

"Why don't you just call her?"

"She's up at the Moresdon place."

Willie looked confused again. "Doesn't Juliet have phone service?"

"Look, I want you to deliver this message personally. I'll write it, seal it in an envelope, and give it to you so you run it up there--can I possibly make it any clearer for you?"

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Willie asked.

"You want to keep your job or not?"

The manager held his hands up. "Okay, okay, I'll get the job done."

"You're sober now, right? Sober enough to drive?"

"I'm fine," Willie said.

"And you're going to stay sober, right?"

"Honest to God."

Vern snorted. "Give me a moment to write the message, then I'll be back," he said, walking away. "You stay here. I don't want you anywhere near the showroom in that condition."

"Okay," Willie said. "Uh, Vern?"

Vern turned back.

"What should I drive?" the manager asked.

## Chapter 20

### Everything's Covered

"Is she going, Sheriff?"

Lonny glanced up at Merle Simmons sitting on the chair next to Juliet's. A tiny bearded man dressed in jeans, a cowboy shirt and a battered straw hat, Merle exuded a powerful sour smell that said he and showers were not on a first-name basis. His gaunt face and clothing were streaked with dirt and grease. "Yeah, Merle, Juliet will be out of here in a few minutes."

"Thank God, I'm headed for a cell," he said.

"Why, what's the problem?"

"She's trying to heal me. Cure me of my drinking."

"Fat chance of that, Merle."

Merle Simmons laughed and coughed the cough of a man whose lungs had seen far too many cigarettes. He had an advanced degree in lying and was a grizzled old veteran of the jail. Most times, it was simple drunkenness. This time it was attempted theft. Fortunately for Merle, the owner of the gun shop had come in early and heard his screams from the heating duct. Merle had gotten himself wedged in so tight he would have suffocated if Blue Haller hadn't called the rescue squad.

*Merle's fund-raising efforts were usually not successful, Lonny thought, but usually not so dangerous, either.*

Nervous and still mad after the last, smarter thief had taken 15 pieces from his shop, Blue had unlimbered his Smith & Wesson and laid three shots wildly into the ceiling before he realized he was in no danger. Lonny wished he'd been there to see it. Like most red-hot gun advocates, Haller was a crack shot until real danger appeared.

*It never seems to occur to them that there's a big difference between shooting a target and something that shot back at you, he thought in amusement.*

Lonny glanced at Juliet. He'd waited until Vern was gone, then had her brought out front. She looked uncomfortable but determined in orange prisoner overalls. It had taken two deputies to get her into them, and then they'd had to handcuff her to keep her from taking them off.

"It can happen, you know," she said to the sheriff.

"What can happen?" he asked.

"Vibrational healing."

"I'll bite," Lonny said. "What's that?"

"Working with the energy systems of the body" Juliet said. It's simply a matter of identifying the Conditional Code to identify the overall condition, then using the Challenge Code to isolate the specific problem. Then, you use the hands to direct energy to treatment points and program the repair into the appropriate brain center."

"You're cured, Merle," the sheriff said to his prisoner. "No doubt about it."

"I feel better already," the thief said to Juliet. "You don't have to lay no hands on me."

"Unless it's a vibrator you want to use," he added and cackled loudly.

Lonny grinned. Merle was such a thief he'd even stolen Walter Brennan's laugh from television.

Juliet glared at the two men. "Anecdotal and physical evidence exists for cures of cancer using vibrational healing forces."

"Whatever you say, Juliet," Lonny said. "I'm going to release you and let you cure anybody who *wants* to be cured. Just don't go bothering anybody who doesn't want it, all right? Otherwise, you'll have more than one court date to attend."

"If you saw a person who was sick and could heal them, wouldn't you do it, Lonny?" she asked.

"Not unless they wanted me to."

"And I suppose if you saw a man on the ground with a heart attack, you'd just let him die?"

"A different thing," the sheriff said. "I know I can get him some help."

"Real help, you mean."

"That's right, Juliet, real help, from people who are trained to take care of heart attacks."

"That's not the point," she said. "The point is, if I go to them first, they won't have a heart attack."

"You can prevent them, is that what you're telling me?" Lonny asked.

Juliet shook a head full of brown curls.

"Sounds like you're on a mission besides braining Vern over the head."

"Saving lives is always a good mission, isn't it?" she asked.

"Not when I'm getting complaints about it," the sheriff said. "You're worse than a Jehovah's Witness, but it wouldn't be so bad if you'd just wear some damned clothes when you're distributing leaflets outside the Safeway. Did you ever think about that? It's hard for men to concentrate on your message when you're standing out there in all your morning glory. And the women all hate you distracting their men. It's a simple equation, Juliet--wear some clothes and people might listen to you."

"Clothes are an encumbrance, that's why I go skylad," she said.

"Whatever," Lonny said. "No offense, but you just gotta realize that folks around here have got too much common sense for your brand of belief."

"What I do is common sense."

Lonny ignored her retort and continued. "You got to go to someplace provincial like New York or LA to find folks gullible enough to buy into it. And you aren't going to get them by standing outside a grocery store now, are you? No, they want a spa or something so expensive it just has to work. Hell, you've got lots of empty space up there. Your daddy left you money, didn't he? Put it to work. Make them come to you. That way, you can run around naked all you want and stay out of my hair."

"Amen to that," Merle muttered. His eyes were shut, and the sheriff wondered how he could sleep. He smelled like a compost heap that hadn't been turned recently.

Motioning for Arlo to get the thief, Lonny said, "The paperwork's done. Put him in the cell next to those AIM warriors."

He turned back to Juliet. She was uncharacteristically silent.

"Are you okay?" Lonny asked.

She came back from a long way away and said, "I'm fine. You've given me something to think about, Lonny."

"Good," he said. "Now, I'm going to unlock those cuffs, and you're free until the trial. But I'm not going to unlock them until you promise me you're going to keep those coveralls on and go straight home."

Juliet tilted her head up in a determined angle. "I can't promise you that."

"Well, then, you're just going to have to wait around here until I'm good and ready, and then I'm going to load you into the squad car and drive you home myself. Once there, you can take off all the clothes you want."

"Fine," she said and settled back into her chair, apparently deep in thought.

The sheriff grabbed a cup of coffee and sat back down at the desk. He was pretty sure he'd solved his immediate headache with Juliet, but he wasn't sure he hadn't just created a bigger problem.

*Oh well, he thought as he bent to more paperwork, if she takes my idea and runs with it, it'll mean more tourist trade, and what could be wrong with that?*

"By the way," he called to her, "there's still no word on Ev."

Juliet nodded absently.

"Keep her hands off me!" Merle hollered from his cell and cackled.

## Chapter 21

### Willie Wakes

Willie rolled over with a groan when the evening sun came through the trailer window and hit his face. He'd taken a shower as Sarvis instructed, but he'd still needed several shots of whiskey to get to sleep. His stomach churned from its effects and his run-in with Vern. A huge hand had hold of his forehead and was trying to squeeze it into a very small space. Opening one eye, he tried to focus on Elvis who held Vern's envelope in his lap. The large doll was his prize possession, and he'd made no bones about paying \$200 for it, despite what Vern said was a waste of money.

*I love the King, Willie thought. The doll looks exactly like him. Exactly.*

It was two feet high with the cape and white jumpsuit and rhinestones correct down to the last detail. With his black hair slicked back and a curl on his lip, Elvis seemed to be saying to him, "It's all right, boy. I been there myself. I know how you all are feeling."

"Thanks," Willie muttered gratefully and sat up.

It was a mistake. The inside of his head felt like the scene in a pirate movie he'd watched on cable. A cannon had broken loose during a storm and careened around the deck, smashing everything in sight. Somehow, that cannon was now busy trying to break its way through his skull. He threw up when it smashed against his forehead again. When he was done, he cleared a path through the bottles and went to the bathroom for another shower.

An hour later, he was in the Eldorado with the 32-valve Northstar engine. He was feeling better and grinned at the thought of Vern's scowl when he'd discovered it was the only vehicle ready to go on short notice. He picked up a burger, fries and a large coffee, then set the powerful car on the road to Juliet's. Opening the window, he let the cool mountain air dry the sweat that was pouring out of him from last night's drunk despite the showers he'd taken. To keep his mind off his stomach, he tried to remember what had happened.

*I started out at the VFW, I know that, he thought, because Stub Larsen accused me of stiffing him on the Chevy Van 20 I sold to the rancher last January. I didn't take him seriously at first because I thought it was just the whiskey talking.*

But things had gotten serious. Stub took a swing at him, and it was time to leave because although the rancher was big and slow, he fought like a bear--one punch landed and it was all over.

*If I'd stuck around, Will knew, I wouldn't be driving anywhere today.*

He squinted at the road as if that would dredge up the memory of where he'd gone next. It was probably The Nugget. Joe Black Dog, the huge Sioux Maj Reno employed as a bouncer, had talked to him--Willie remembered that. He felt his scalp gingerly at the thought of Black Dog and was relieved to find no bumps. Sitting by the entrance like a big, squat mean-ass toad, the Lakota rapped heads with a thunder horse stick to keep order even when order was already there.

*It's an amusement for him, like swatting flies,* Willie theorized.

Black Dog had probably been feeling good last night which was three-quarters nasty instead of all the way nasty and simply thrown him out the front door. If he didn't want a permanent injury from the Sioux, Willie knew he'd have to cut down on the booze enough so he could navigate safely around Black Dog or else have to drink at a different bar.

*The same way I'll have to navigate around Vern now,* he thought. *I'll just have to be more careful. A hawk doesn't have anything on Sarvis' eyes when it comes to spotting something wrong.*

A thought struck Willie as he thought of Vern. He looked down into the seat, checked the glove box, then cursed his stupidity. He'd left Lorena's envelope behind.

He thought about forgetting the whole thing, but knew Vern would find out if he failed to deliver the message.

*He always finds out everything,* Willie recalled with bitterness.

Furious that his evening was being cut into by acting as Vern's errand boy, Willie swung the Eldorado around and headed back toward the trailer.

*I'll pick up the envelope and stay sober just to prove Sarvis wrong,* he vowed. *Then I'll come back to town for a drink to celebrate after making the delivery to Vern's wife.*

## Chapter 22

### Thor Puts the Hammer Down

As the sun disappeared behind Mt. Rushmore, Lorena came out of the pines and toward Juliet's giant pole. The smell seemed to have packed up along with the workers. Shadows swept a chill across the meadow. Light still struck the top of the structure, sending glittering fragments of reflection toward her as she held Thor to a trot. The horse had spotted the open ground and was urging her to break into a gallop. Jim DeHuis and the other workers waved at her as they drove their pickups toward the east. Waving back, she rode the warmblood through their dust and toward Juliet's home. The stallion was obviously as hungry as she was, and she decided maybe it was time she gave him his head. The full afternoon of riding and the sharp mountain air had revived her spirits, and she felt as wildly wonderful as the horse.

It took only a slight tightening of the legs, and Thor was in full gallop. Lorena gasped at the acceleration, able to appreciate it even more now she and the horse were comfortable with each other. The stallion flew past the pole, adding its own cold wind to that of the mountains as Lorena held the reins loose and bent toward the warmblood's neck. They raced across the meadow, up the ridge, and down onto the flat before she reined in the horse. Protesting only briefly, Thor settled into the requested walk.

"You obey when there's food to be had, don't you?" she told the stallion as she patted its neck.

She walked him about in the grass until he was cooled off, then directed him toward the stable. The warmblood obeyed instantly, while somehow managing to convey the idea that the decision had been his and not hers. Lorena chuckled.

*If a horse could possibly swagger, she thought, Thor is the one who could do it.*

Coming around the side of the stable, she brought the horse to a halt close to the totem pole. She was preparing to dismount when the warmblood gave a startled snort. Lorena caught a brief glance of something bloody as she was catapulted into the air, but she didn't have time to speculate on what it was.

*Thor has bucked me so high, she figured, that I just might enter orbit.*

It was an amusing theory ended by sudden impact with the ground.



## **Chapter 23**

### **Another Erection**

The road up to Juliet's was narrow and full of hairpin turns. That was why Lonny didn't see the stallion. It leaped across the asphalt and headed toward the canyon so fast he spun the wheel and hit the brakes out of reflex. With a dull crumpling of metal, the cruiser slammed into a pine next to the road. The sheriff cursed as the air bag slowly deflated out of his face. Steam rose from the front of the Chevy, and he could smell the sweet, slick smell of leaking antifreeze. The cruiser blocked half the road. He looked over at Juliet.

"You okay?" he asked.

She was obviously stunned, but nodded and pushed hair out of her face.

"That was your horse, wasn't it?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"That's a pretty expensive animal to let run loose."

"Didn't you see, Sheriff?" she said. "He had a saddle on. I told Lorena she could ride him. Maybe she's hurt."

"Well, we'll have to walk the rest of the way to find out," Lonny said.

He radioed Arlo to let him know the situation, then got out of the cruiser to check the damage. The hood was buckled upward and the radiator destroyed.

"I thought Vern said these fleet models were reinforced," he said. "Next lot we buy, I'll have to look at more carefully."

"Forget the car," Juliet said. "Let's see if we can find Lorena."

They walked off the road and headed directly for the house. A half hour later, they came out of the pines and into the driveway. Lonny looked across at the stable.

"Jesus!" he said.

Lorena was on the ground. Kneeling over her was a naked, bloody and armed Everett Pick.

"Pick!" the sheriff shouted and drew his weapon. "Get away from her!"

Everett raised his head. There was a wild and dazed look in the one eye open that Lonny had seen before in crank heads or escaped mental patients. He hated to see that expression because you never knew what to expect from it.

"Get away from her!" he repeated. "Put your hands behind your head."

Pick used the rifle to struggle to his feet. The man was an appalling sight, Lonny decided. One side of his head was a clotted mass of bloody hair, and his leg was swollen like a sausage. In the middle of it all was a

huge erection. Lonny didn't know how Ev had the strength to move, let alone bother Lorena, but he'd learned long ago that men had a capacity for perversions that defied any common logic.

Squinting with his good eye, Pick limped toward them.

"Stop! Now!" the sheriff ordered. He knew he was more than a match physically for Pick, but he also knew madmen could shoot when you least expected it.

Pick ignored the order and continued to come.

"Stop!" Lonny said and reached for his pistol.

The weapon fired with a sharp crack, forcing the smell of gunpowder and smoke into the air. Startled, the sheriff looked down at his injured leg. He'd had no intention of firing it. He'd merely wanted to scare Ev into surrendering.

A sudden noise had made him pull the trigger, the loud screeching of tires and the distant crunch of metal on metal.

## Chapter 24

### Salad Days

Sliding open the patio door Vern went out into the chilly evening air and added the large bowl of Waldorf salad to the rest of his dinner on the table. Lorena had made the salad before she ran away so he'd have something to eat when he needed it.

*I need it now, there was no doubt about it,* he thought as he settled into a chair and pulled the ice bucket closer. Wrapping several cubes in a wash cloth, he applied them to his bruised head. With the other hand, he grabbed the four fingers of scotch he'd poured into a tumbler and took a deep swallow. The burn in his throat felt good as he propped his feet on another chair and watched the sun dip toward Mt. Rushmore. It was a sight he never got tired of.

The impact of one car hitting another echoed in the evening air, and Vern chuckled as he dug into the salad. It was the second one he'd heard in an hour. Tourists were often fooled by the Hills roads. They looked innocent enough, innocent enough to fool you into going faster than you should if you weren't used to them. He raised a glass in salute. It could mean more business for his body shop.

Sharp light flashed across the canyon, striking Vern's eyes.

"Damn!" he said and moved the chair where he wouldn't be bothered by the sun's reflection from Juliet's contraption. Squinting into the gathering darkness, he could see only the tip of what Juliet was building. It was maddening not to know what it was and even more maddening that Jim DeHuis couldn't tell him what was going on. He'd pumped the owner for all he was worth during lunch last week and knew that Jim was telling him the truth. DeHuis was as honest as they came and had a decidedly rigid idea of what was right and wrong.

*Which is why I'm always careful to give him the best deals on his vehicles,* Vern thought. *With his standing in the community, he's not the type of man you want telling potential customers about a bad experience at Sarvis Motors.*

Vern looked across the canyon again. At first, he thought some sharp promoter had talked that fool, Juliet, into drilling for oil in a spot where there wasn't a prayer of finding it. Or, maybe he'd told her that he had found a large vein of gold--that was a perennial favorite in the Hills. Or maybe Willard Water had popped up again, the magic carbon-activated water drawn from the earth that healed burns and cured cancer. But, from the way Jim had described it, there was no drilling or mining equipment

whatsoever. It was just a damned pole, covered with copper and quartz crystal, of all things.

*What in the world could she be doing with that thing?* he wondered. *And why the hell did she have to build it there? It detracts from the grandeur of Rushmore.*

Putting the scotch down, he picked another apple slice from the bowl. Lorena's salad was fine as always. Her momma had taught her good. Even though she wasn't even 18, the woman could cook like nobody's business. It was one of reasons he'd married her. His own mother had cooked everything into lumps of coal, just like his father liked it. The first meal Lorena had ever cooked for him had been a real revelation.

*One more reason for her to get her ass back here,* he thought as he pushed the salad away. He'd only been able to eat about half of it. The scotch was making him sleepy and warm, and he decided a nap was in order before heading back to town to The Nugget. He'd called Willie's trailer to find out Lorena's reaction, but, as usual, Rentz wasn't there. He'd phoned the bar as well but Maj Reno said he hadn't seen Willie yet.

Vern frowned. He hoped Willie hadn't gotten drunk in spite of his orders and forgotten the whole thing. He decided not to worry about it for now. He knew that, sooner or later, Rentz would show up at the bar, and Vern had business with the bar owner, anyway. He zipped up his jacket and settled back into the chair.

A sudden blow brought him violently out of his nap.

Vern toppled out of the chair, striking his head on the patio cement. He lay stunned for a moment, wondering if Juliet had somehow managed to sneak onto his property, then listened as a loud, sloppy chewing drowned out the noise in his head. Sitting up, he waited for the wooziness to pass, then looked toward the sound. It wasn't Juliet.

It was her horse, standing on the patio and eating the salad. The big stallion had knocked him out of his chair to get at it.

"You sonuvabitch!" Vern shouted as he struggled to his feet. "I'm going to blow your fancy behind all the way back across the canyon! That way, Juliet can ride a different piece of you on every day of the week!"

He headed toward the house to get his Browning, then stopped and looked back. The horse still had its saddle and bridle on. That meant it had either bolted or thrown someone. He hoped Juliet's fat rear end had enjoyed receiving a trip through the air from her pride and joy. Grinning, he studied the stallion. It was obviously worth a great deal of money. Even better, it was a horse that could help him kill two birds with one stone-- repay Juliet and get Lorena back.

The grin got wider as he urged the stallion to eat all it wanted.

## Chapter 25

### Willie Doesn't Weep

Juliet listened to the sheriff cry out and drop to the ground, clutching at his thigh. A moment later, Ev joined him, tripping over his crutch and crashing face-first into the asphalt. Juliet winced, then ran over to Lorena. Her friend was on her side, but unconscious. Juliet was grateful she'd worn a helmet. She hadn't really warned Lorena about the powerful horse.

Last week, her sister had hired Wade Lemmon to shoe her horses, so Juliet had trailered Thor down early to her ranch and left him there since she had only two horses and Darlene had ten that needed to be done. When Thor knocked the hammer out of the farrier's hand, the tool struck the concrete and sent a spark into dry hay. In a panic at the sudden blaze, the warmblood kicked a stall board loose and straight into the farrier's face, then trampled him along with the rest of the horses as they fled out the door. Wade had suffered a broken jaw, a fractured leg and three broken ribs, more injuries, he said, than he ever got in ten years of riding bulls. Darlene had pulled him out before the stable and her Airstream burned down, then laid him in the back of her pickup on top of some feed sacks. They'd dropped Thor and the remaining tack at Juliet's on the way to take Wade to the hospital. They'd both agreed he was too valuable a horse to leave let loose.

That thought made Juliet look around. She wondered where the warmblood had got to. He was nowhere in sight, but she wouldn't be able to look for him. Night was settling in. The automatic yard light had snapped on. Her immediate problem was to take care of the three injured people.

*Maybe, she decided, I can heal them right where they lay. The question is simply, who to start with?*

The sheriff's moan made the decision for her.

"I'm going to help you," she told him as she rolled him from his side onto his back. "Just relax and let me see your wound."

Lonny grunted at her through clenched teeth. "There's a lot of blood, isn't there?"

"Yes, but relax. It won't matter."

"What do you mean, it won't matter? I don't want to go into shock. Get a tourniquet on the leg!"

"Shhh," Juliet said. "I'll have you on the mend in no time."

She felt lightly on the leg around the area where the bullet had entered, then thought a moment before making her decision.

"This may hurt a little bit," she told the sheriff. She was reasonably sure the bullet had torn the quadriceps while most likely chipping the femur before exiting through the biceps femoris.

*Blood is obscuring the wound but, luckily, in the New Physiology you don't have to see the actual damage, Juliet remembered. It's only necessary to determine the vibrational frequency of the areas affected and enter the code for the necessary energy repair.*

Kneeling, she tapped the first code into Lonny's leg.

The sheriff screamed.

Juliet ignored him and concentrated on tapping in the next code.

The sheriff screamed again.

"One more," she told him, "and we're all through."

She entered the final code, and this time the sheriff said nothing. Juliet looked at his face. His eyes were closed.

Satisfied, Juliet sat back and rested for a moment so she could mobilize and direct her energy for her next patient, then she got up and went to Lorena, removing the helmet and identifying the area that was swollen. Then, she entered the proper code, and in a moment was standing over Everett. She was looking down at him, not knowing where to start when a voice came out of the dark from beyond the yard light.

"Holy shit, what happened here?"

"Who is it?" Juliet asked.

"Willie Rentz," the man said and stepped into the light. His shirt was torn, and there were grass stains on his pants. "I ran into the sheriff's car down there. It was across the road. Oh, man, Vern is going to be so pissed. I wrecked his car."

"We were avoiding my horse," Juliet said.

"He's going to fire my ass, you just wait and see. He's going to kick it over the Hills and back, and then he's going to fire my ass."

"This is no time to worry about your job," Juliet said.

Willie looked around. "Jesus, was there a fight or something?"

"No, there wasn't any fight. I'll explain it all later."

"How long before the paramedics get here?"

"They're not coming."

Rentz stared at her. "You mean they're out on another call?"

"No. I haven't called them."

"Why not?"

"Energy repairs have been effected."

"What?"

"They're on the mend."

"They don't look healed to me," Willie said. "They look like they need help right now. Where's your phone?"

Juliet sighed. "The portable's in the kitchen."

Watching Rentz run toward the house, she was disappointed. It was such an opportunity for complete healing.

*Still, I've jump started the disrupted energy patterns, allowing the inner blueprints to return to their normal designs, she thought with delight. Conventional medicine could do no harm now to Ev, Lorena, and Lonny unless it was grossly negligent.*

"Help is on the way."

Turning toward the sound of Willie's voice, Juliet asked, "Why did you come up here, Mr. Rentz?"

He nodded toward Lorena. "Vern asked me to deliver a message to his wife."

"What's the message?"

"I don't know," he said and pulled a folded envelope from his pants pocket. "It's in here."

"Let me see it," Juliet said.

"It's not for you."

"Lorena's in no shape to read anything, now, is she? And it might be important."

Willie hesitated, then handed the envelope to Juliet.

"What's it say?" he asked.

Juliet frowned and showed it to him. "Just three words--FOUND YOU ALREADY."

"What does that mean?"

"He beats her. She ran away," she answered.

"Ah, so that's why he's been in such a foul mood."

"I'll keep this," she told Willie. "She's in no shape for that kind of message right now."

"Fine with me," Rentz said, looking around at the unconscious forms lying in the harsh glare of the yard light. "Shouldn't we be doing something while we wait?"

"They're fine," she assured him.

Willie wasn't satisfied. "I still feel helpless not doing anything. Can't we at least move them into the house or something? It's cold out here."

"If you want to do something," Juliet said, "then look for my stallion."

Willie stared at her. "Your horse?"

"It's a big warmblood. It threw Lorena so it'll still have the saddle on."

"Lady, if you think I'm going to stumble around in the dark looking for your horse, you got another think coming. There's a canyon out there, you know!"

"There's a full moon on the rise too," she said.

"I don't care if the damned sun decides to shine at night. I'm not going out looking for a horse."

"You wanted something to do," she pointed out.

He gestured toward the stable. "I meant for these people. They're the ones who need help. The stallion will be fine."

"It's an expensive animal," Juliet said. "I don't want anything happening to it."

"The horse will be fine," he repeated in a harsh tone. "Have you got any blankets in the house? The least we can do is keep them warm."

"Try the highboy in the bedroom at the back of the house."

A few minutes later he was back with a load of blankets under one arm and a bottle of Johnny Walker in his free hand. He waved it at Juliet.

"This was the only thing in the liquor cabinet. Is it okay if I have a drink?"

"Ev left it here after we divorced," she said. "I don't drink so you're welcome to it."

"Thanks," Willie said.

Juliet watched as he set the bottle carefully on the ground, then unfolded the blankets and laid them first over Lorena and Ev. Going to Lonny, he bent low by the sheriff's face. As he threw the blanket over the lawman, Willie looked back at Juliet and said, "His breathing is kind of shallow and rapid. He doesn't look so hot. Jesus!"

"What's the matter?" Juliet asked.

"Blood. Lots of it. We need a tourniquet."

"There's rope in the stable. I'll get some."

Juliet found the rope, then tied it tightly above Lonny's wound. Her hands came away sticky and warm. She looked up to see Willie taking a long pull on the Johnny Walker.

"I have to admit I'm worried now," she said. "How long did they say before they'd arrive?"

"Listen," he answered. "They're practically here already."

Above the drone of the crickets, Juliet heard the biting chop of helicopter blades coming from the north. Relieved, she sat on the ground. Willie joined her, and they watched as the Regional Rescue helicopter sat down in the pasture next to the stable. The wind from the blades hit Juliet's face with dirt and sand while the smell of aviation fuel stung her nose. Two paramedics leaped out of the opened door and ran toward them with litters and bags. They climbed over the fence, then stopped as they saw what lay in front of them.

"Man, what happened here?"

Juliet saw the shirt tail hanging out and realized it was Leonard Circle Hawk that had spoken.



"I think Lorena got thrown by my horse," she said.

"What about the other two?" Leonard's partner asked.

"Is that you, Sam?"

"It's me, Juliet."

"We found Ev by Lorena, then the sheriff shot himself accidentally when Willie crashed his car into ours after Lonny swerved to miss Thor."

The paramedics looked at each other.

"Complicated," Leonard said. "But let's get to work."

Juliet watched as they checked the three victims briefly, then decided the sheriff needed attention first. They loaded him onto a litter, then started an IV drip. As they carried him toward the helicopter, Juliet called out, "Where are the news helicopters? They're usually here before you guys."

"I heard they had fuel problems," Leonard said.

Juliet wasn't sure but she thought that in the harsh yard light, the faintest of smirks had passed between the two men.

In ten minutes, the paramedics had Lorena and Ev loaded in the helicopter with Willie's help. Juliet stood and watched as the craft lifted slowly into the air, then swung toward the north and clattered away over the Hills.

Willie sat back down next to Juliet and leaned his back against the totem pole

"Jesus," he told Juliet as he took a swig of scotch, "I don't know about you, but I've had one shitty day."

## Chapter 26

### Major Deja Vue

Vern opened the door to The Nugget, and the smell of cigarettes and beer rolled in a toxic cloud out into the night air. He coughed and braced himself before he went inside. As usual, the bar was probably full of Marlboro cowboy wannabes who smoked because the advertising had told them to and hang the no smoking laws.

*If there's anything dumber than a cowboy, I can't think of it, he told himself, unless it's Indians because they'd allowed themselves to get beaten by something that stupid. Give a cowboy a way to kill himself, and he'd find it.*

Only a cowboy would translate lung cancer into personal freedom. Personal freedom was the most important thing there was as far as Vern was concerned but it wasn't much good if you weren't around to enjoy it.

Vern stepped through the door as Merle Haggard pumped out from Reno's prized antique Wurlitzer. At the far end of the mahogany bar, it glowed with a rainbow cheerfulness in the dim interior that he found almost as irritating as Joe Black Dog sitting in his usual place with his idiot thunder horse stick lying across a t-shirt covered stomach so big it looked like a vastly over-inflated tire. Beneath a beaded Lakota headband, Joe's long black hair covered his ears and flowed over the shoulders of an open Pendleton shirt large enough to cover the frame of one of his ancestor's tipis. A Crazy Horse pin hung over the ripped left breast pocket. Somehow the Sioux had come up with enough money to buy one of the stupid items Zielwhatski's Indian-loving relatives hawked to continue carving the enormous statue out of the Black Hills. Vern comforted himself with the thought that it wasn't finished yet and with their money troubles might take years to complete. With a little help, it might not ever be done. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't right that any monument should be bigger than Rushmore.

As if reading his thoughts, Joe slid his dark eyes toward him. Vern eased by, keeping out of range of the stick with its horse-hair mane and tail shaking as Black Dog held the hoof end planted in his fat thigh and jerked the head back and forth as if it were a stallion running into battle.

It was easy to find Maj Reno. The squeal of his ill-fitting hearing aid led Vern to his usual position, at the end of the bar as far away from Joe as possible. The Tom Mix hat was pulled down over glittering eyes that were fixed intently on the bouncer.

"Jesus," Vern said as he sat down beside the bar owner who was fiddling with his hearing aid, trying to seal it tight to eliminate the squeal. "Why don't you ever get that thing fixed? You paid enough for it that it ought to work. And why don't you get rid of that ridiculous hat? It's going to grow into a sombrero if you're not careful, and everybody'll think you're a fucking Mex."

"Black Dog gave it to me," the wiry little man said, ignoring the question about the hearing aid. "How many times I got to tell you that?"

"You ever figure it's just some stupid Sioux joke?"

Reno nodded toward the bouncer. "He looks like he's joking?"

Vern shrugged. "Who can tell? He's so goddamned fat, we're lucky we can see his face at all."

He ordered a whiskey while he studied Maj's hat. The eagle feathers stuck in the headband were a nice touch, he had to admit, even if they were a federal offense, but the hat was just too damned big for a man who didn't top five-foot-seven. Reno looked like the Cat in the Hat on a real bad day.

Reno squirmed on the bar stool as if he had a hill of ants in his jock and compulsively peeled the label off his bottle of beer.

"Just because that half-breed gave that hat to you is not a real good reason to keep wearing it as far as I'm concerned," Vern said.

"He said he'd kill me if I took it off."

The Indian was perfectly capable of doing it--Vern knew that from the time Black Dog spent in the state pen for Wounded Knee years ago--if he could ever move his enormous ex-AIM ass off the stool. But, the last time that had happened, the American Indian Movement was new, and Joe was a young buck. Reno was in greater danger from falling in his bathtub as far as Vern was concerned.

"Shit, did you ever tell him that you weren't really related to Major Reno?" he asked.

Vern wasn't sure, but Man seemed embarrassed. With the giant brim shadowing his face, Reno's expressions were hard to read.

"He did find out!" Vern exclaimed. "You been living on that bullshit story about being a descendant of Reno so long, it finally wore through. So why are you still wearing that stupid hat?"

The bar owner was silent for a moment, then took a long swallow of beer before answering. "Black Dog did some research. I *am* related to Major Reno."

"What?" Vern said with a laugh. "He told you that, and you believed him?"

"He showed me genealogical charts."

"Shit, he probably got them mail order and made the whole fucking thing up."

"Nope, I don't think so. Why would he do that?"

"Because he's got your number, that's why," Vern said

"If Joe told you he'd count coup on you if you ever took your hat off, wouldn't you believe him?" Reno asked.

"I don't wear a hat," Vern said. "But if I did, I wouldn't let some goddamned redskin spook me into thinking he was getting revenge for a battle that's over a century old. Besides, like you, Reno didn't do a damned thing. If he'd had some testicles and given the general a little help, Custer might have won Little Big Horn."

"Major Reno couldn't do a damned thing because he was pinned down," Maj said. "Besides, Joe says it don't matter if Reno was a hero or the biggest coward who ever lived. He says Crazy Horse didn't finish the battle properly, so he has to take up the burden of the white men who survived a botched job. He says he sees my hair again, it'll be hanging from his belt."

"Jesus," Vern said. "I suppose you sleep in the damned thing. You're a fucking lunatic, you know that? Why don't you just fire his fat Lakota butt? You're the employer, remember? Not him."

Maj's eyes glittered at him from beneath the brim.

"You want reasons other than being pissed at Custer and Wounded Knee?" Reno said, clipping his words with the rapid-fire precision they'd both learned in the Berets. "Let me put it in a nutshell so we don't have to have this argument all over again for the thousandth mother-loving time. Number one, compared to me, he's bigger than Rushmore. My ass is grass if he ever gets hold of me. Number two, he's content to sit on that stool all night for peanuts. Number three, Black Dog's a rite of passage for every young blood comes to drinking age in this town."

"Tourist attraction, too," he added, "for your more adventuresome types. During and after the Sturgis rally, usually five or six biker studs come in and Joe nails their balls to the wall with that stick of his, and, of course, that brings more of them in. If bikers are anything, they're stupid, I'll give them that. They operate on less cylinders than they got in their hawgs."

"Wonderfully reasoned," Vern said. "But it's all so much bullshit. You're just scared of losing that pretty blond hair. You're vainer than a TV news turd."

Reno wagged a middle finger at him, and Vern gave up on ever winning the argument about the bouncer. "Where's Blue?" he asked.

Maj snickered. "Probably trying to glue his nerves back together."

Vern looked around to make sure no one was sitting close to them. "What the hell happened?"

"Merle Simmons, that's what happened. Evidently, the old fool read about last month's robbery and decided he could make money the same way so he could get more booze. Instead of busting through the door, he ends up going through the ductwork and getting stuck and making so much noise, it spooked the shit out of Blue. He thought it was real robbers this time, and he unloaded on Merle. "

He snickered again. "Three shots and missed him every time. How the hell do you miss a stationary target?"

"Blue probably wasn't expecting a voice coming out of the woodwork," Vern said.

The bar owner shrugged. "Probably wasn't any different from the other voices he's been hearing."

"What do you mean? Vern demanded.

"He's been sampling the product."

"He's not the only one." Vern nodded at the bandaged arm.

Reno tipped his Tom Mix hat back on his head. Above the blond walrus moustache, two ice-dark eyes challenged Vern from a sweaty, blotched face.

"Hey, I can screw until sunup on this stuff. I can handle it, so don't knock it. And I pay for it."

"I don't care if you can screw until your dick falls off," Vern whispered. "Just keep yourself out of the goddamned hospital, okay? What the hell's the matter with you, anyway?"

"It was a couple of Mexicans, okay? What was I supposed to do, let them take the shit away from me? They drew down on me, so I gave them the answer they didn't want."

"Right," Vern said. "They got you. Did you get them?"

Reno didn't say anything.

"It's supposed to be "Yes," Maj. "Yes" is the answer I want."

"Shit, I'm lucky to be alive. They were two young fuckers, and one of them pulled a Mauser on me."

"So, they put you down and got the stuff too?"

"Yeah," Reno said.

"How come they didn't finish you off?"

Maj shifted uncomfortably. "I'm the messenger boy."

"What's the message?"

"They're coming from the Coast. Stay out of the way."

"That's it?"

"Fuck, what more did they have to say?" Reno asked.

"Did you tell them we're not in it for good, that we got better things to do with our time?"

"They weren't in a mood to listen."

"Shit! Did you get any names we can talk to?"

"No, I wanted to live, you know?"

"You probably melted like butter at the sight of them."

"Hey! I was there. You weren't. Don't forget that."

"If you'd kept off the shit like I asked, you might have been able to handle it," Vern said. "This is business we're talking about, profits, you know what I'm saying? For us and for the militia. You're losing us money at both ends."

Reno started to reply, but Vern cut him off. "Never mind that, for Christ's sake. One thing at a time. I'll think about the greasers, but I want you both off the stuff. We gotta move the lab again."

"What for?" the bar owner asked. "It's out in the middle of nowhere."

"Juliet's building some fool thing out on her place, and it's too damned close. It's downwind there most of the time. You know how that stuff stinks. They get too damned curious, let Gunderson know and there goes our operation. I hear Lonny already has his suspicions."

The bar owner seemed unmoved, and Vern remembered his sales training--always determine what the customer needs and wants, then give it to him. He already knew what Reno wanted.

"And there goes your supply," Vern added. "When the sheriff comes after you with the Feds, you not only won't be able to screw until dawn, you won't be able to screw at all unless you love faggots reaming you behind bars."

"Shit, man," Reno complained. "That means we got to shut down production, and we got distributors waiting."

"Give them a rain check, for Christ's sake. If they don't like it, ask them how they'd like production to dry up permanently. Now I want you and Blue to get your asses out there--"

Vern cut his sentence off as he saw Willie edge his way past Joe Black Dog. He scowled when he saw that his manager was drunk and agitated.

"You sonuvabitch!" he said when Willie sat down.

"I delivered the message, I delivered it," Willie said. "I was sober when I delivered it, it's God's truth."

"You better not be lying to me, you sack of shit," Vern said. "If you're not lying, then why are you shaking so hard?"

The manager wiped his forehead with a dirty sleeve. "It was the damnedest thing I've ever seen, Vern. You wouldn't believe me."

"You got that right."

Willie managed to look offended. "No, no, no. It's true. When I got there, there was three people lying on the ground--Lorena out cold, Sheriff Gunderson moaning about being shot through the leg, and some naked guy

I don't know all bloody and mangled about the head. And, get this, Juliet was trying to heal them."

"Lorena?" Vern asked. "Is she okay?"

"I think so. Juliet said that fancy horse threw her, but she had a helmet on. I called Regional, and they flew out a helicopter and took them all in to the hospital."

"What'd you say Juliet was trying to do?" Vern asked.

"Heal them. Those are her words, not mine."

"What the hell does she know about healing?"

Willie shrugged. "She kept talking about energy repairs."

"Repairs, my ass," Vern said. "That woman had any more air in her head, they'd have to tether and dock her like the Goodyear blimp."

Willie looked nervously around for the bartender. "I just come to tell you about what happened and to let you know that I called the hospital and found out that Lorena's in Room 202. I thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah, thanks," Vern said. "I'll have to get myself on up there. The sheriff was shot, you say?"

Willie nodded. "Beer and a bump. He didn't look so hot. He's not going to be out cruising the county anytime soon, I'll tell you that."

Vern looked at Reno. A smirk appeared under the brim of the Tom Mix hat.

"This other man, was he kind of tall and big?" Vern asked.

"He was bare-ass naked, that's what he was!" Willie said.

Vern laughed. "Don't you ever listen to the news, Rentz? That's Everett Pick."

"I don't watch much TV," Willie said, taking a hit of whiskey and following it with beer.

"You were out cold, you mean," Vern said. "Pick shot him, though?"

Willie shrugged. "I guess. Like I said, they were both on the ground when I got there along with Lorena."

"Pick's the last person I'd think would ever shoot someone, let alone the sheriff. Christ, where'd he get the strength to get cross country to do that?"

"Ain't he full of surprises, though?" Maj said.

"I suppose," Willie said. His beer and a bump was gone already, and he still seemed shaky.

"Give him another," Vern told the bartender. "Kind of jolt you, did it, Willie?"

The manager nodded. "I haven't seen that much blood since Dan Sobeck got both arms torn off in his power take-off, but that was just an accident, not somebody trying to kill somebody else."

Vern watched Willie's hands quiver as he lifted the shot glass to his lips.

"It's all right, Willie," he said. "Thanks for calling Regional."

Then he turned to Rentz and said, "I'm going over to the hospital. Get it done."

Maj nodded.

Vern looked at his used car manager and the bar owner. Both were shaking, one from shock and one because he was wired to the gills.

*How do I manage to get involved with so many losers?* he wondered.

Shaking his head clear of negative thoughts, he turned away from the bar. All in all, it was a good night. The sheriff was out of action for a while, and Lorena was where he could find her. As he got near the door, he caught a swift motion of horse hair out of the corner of his eye. He'd forgotten Joe Black Dog.

A sharp crack across the head with the thunder stick sent him stumbling into the night.



## **Chapter 27**

### **Bed Unrest**

Buried in the Badlands again, Ev couldn't move. The helicopters had found him and with their chattering blades, they'd brought him back and they'd dropped him from a great height and with great precision into mud up to his chin, mud that had dried as quickly as he entered it. There was no hope of escape, but he struggled anyway.

"Help me!" he shouted. "Anyone, please!"

"Mr. Pick!" a familiar but impatient voice called to him from a distance. "Mr. Pick, stop shouting!"

Ev opened his eyes to a nurse standing next to his bed. It was Rowena. A faint, familiar odor--one that didn't belong in a hospital-- stirred in the air as she moved about.

"Oh, merciless God," he said. "I'm paralyzed!"

"Relax. You're okay. We've just got you restrained, that's all."

Ev lifted his head and looked down at the straps over his arms.

"Why am I restrained?"

Rowena's lips drew themselves into a thin line. "You know you don't need to ask that question. You destroyed a valuable EKG machine, shattered a window in your escape, then attacked the sheriff."

"I did?"

The lips drew a thinner line.

"We all need attention, Mr. Pick, but I've never met anyone who would go to such great lengths to draw it. You must have a very low opinion of yourself."

Ev dropped his head back into the pillow. "Nearly as low as everyone else."

His leg still hurt fiercely, and fever ran up and down his body as he looked about. It was the same room he'd escaped from, he was sure. There was a sheet of plywood over the window to his right. A curtain was drawn on the left. He looked nervously toward the open door.

"The media's not out there again, are they?" he asked.

"They're nowhere in sight," she assured him. "You won't be getting any attention from that direction."

"I don't feel very well," he told the nurse. "What's that smell?"

"It's probably just your leg," she said. "It's badly infected, and you're suffering from exposure and lack of food. There's no reason you should feel good."

A groan rose from behind the curtain, hovered in the upper register of a man's voice, then subsided.

"Who's that?" Ev asked.

"The sheriff," the nurse answered, then gave him a skeptical look. "I suppose you're going to tell me that you don't remember shooting him?"

"I don't," Ev said. "I haven't shot so much as a pheasant in forty years. I don't even own a gun."

"The sheriff was shot with his own gun, they tell me," the nurse said.

"Rowena, do I look like a man who could take a gun away from Lonny Gunderson?"

"You managed to throw the portable EKG through the window, bad leg and all, didn't you?" she reminded him.

"Windows don't fight back."

The nurse was not impressed. "That admission who was in the bed next to you? He was hopped up on crank. It took four of us to subdue him, and he couldn't have weighed over a hundred and fifty. He broke one nurse's arm."

"I haven't taken any drugs since I tried hashish in college and ended up thinking the aliens were coming to get me," Ev. "Not willingly, anyway."

Rowena was equally unimpressed with this information. There was an itching on the side of Ev's head, and it was maddening because he couldn't reach it.

"My ear," he said, suddenly remembering.

"That's the worst damage I've seen in a long time," the nurse said. "If I had a dollar for every ear that's been bitten off in a fight around here, I'd be a rich woman."

"Lonny didn't bite it off," Ev said. "A bear took a swipe at it."

Skepticism reached new heights in Rowena's expression as she said, "You fought the sheriff *and* a bear?"

"A bear, anyway," Ev answered. "I don't know about the sheriff."

"I think you were hallucinating," the nurse said. "There are no bears in the Hills."

"There are in Bear Country."

"Tame as rabbits. Why would one of their bears want to attack you?"

"It didn't want to share," Ev said. "Chokecherries."

The nurse studied him for a long moment, then said, "Well, whether it was a bear or the sheriff, your ear is lost, I'm afraid. Even if they could find it, it'd be too far gone to sew back on. You'll just have to grow your hair long. Now, you'll excuse me. I think the sheriff's coming out of the anesthetic."

Ev could hear Lonny thrashing about as Rowena went to the other side of the curtain.

"Sheriff!" she said. "Sheriff, this is Rowena Gruver. You've been shot, but you're in the hospital and you're okay."

"Huh?" Lonny grunted.

"You're okay," the nurse repeated. "The anesthetic will wear off after a while, and you'll feel better."

Ev heard the sheriff whisper hoarsely, then Rowena answered. "Lorena is still unconscious, but the x-rays look good. Everett Pick is right on the other side of that curtain. We've got him on restraints if you're worried about that."

There was another whisper. Rowena said, "If that's what you want," and pulled back the curtain.

Ev looked over at the sheriff. He was very pale under his tan, and his right leg poked out from under the sheet, thick with bandages. Lonny motioned to the nurse for a drink. She held the straw to his lips until he motioned he'd had enough.

"Pick--" the sheriff started, then cleared his throat. "Pick, what the hell's the matter with you?"

A sudden clattering and thumping from down the hall prevented Ev from giving an immediate answer.

"Oh, damn!" Rowena said. "What a shift this is!"

Ev watched her run from the room, then turned back to the sheriff.

"I'm sorry I shot you," he said.

Lonny stared back at him. "Who said you shot me?"

"Rowena."

The sheriff took a deep breath, then looked up at the ceiling. His lips moved as if he were counting up to a hundred. "I can't tell you how much it pains me to admit this, Pick, since you've been more trouble than you could possibly be worth, but you didn't shoot me."

"Well, who did then?"

Ev watched as Lonny took another breath. "I shot myself. Jesus, I'm never going to live this one down."

Ev was delighted to discover he hadn't hurt anyone, but kept silent.

"You were coming toward me delirious, I think," the sheriff said, "and I was drawing just so I could get your attention when there was this noise--an accident, and I knew it was my cruiser that was involved because I'd left it crossways on the road after smashing it into a tree trying to avoid Juliet's horse. It startled me so much I pulled the trigger."

Lonny turned his head to glare at Ev. "It's still your fault, though, remember that. If you hadn't smashed that damned camera, then run off from this place, none of it would have happened. What is your problem, anyway, Pick?"

The itching in Ev's lost ear had grown worse. He tried rubbing his head against the pillow but the bandage prevented any relief.

"Did you hear me, Pick?"

"I heard you, Sheriff. My problem is that--"

Ev thought about it for a moment, then tried again. "My problem is that--"

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Lonny said. "It can't be that hard."

"Sheriff, my problem is that everyone else thinks I have a problem."

Lonny stared at him. "What kind of answer is that?"

It didn't take long to answer that question. "One that's just about perfect," Ev said.

"Good God," the sheriff muttered. Both he and Ev started at the sudden clattering in the hall.

"What the hell is happening out there?" Lonny shouted. "Keep it down, will you?"

A scream pierced through the rolling racket of hospital carts and hiss of elevator doors. Ev jerked up against his restraints and looked at Lonny who glared in frustration down at his leg.

Whatever was going on, there was nothing either of them could do about it.

## **Chapter 28**

### **Oxygen Therapy**

Vern stepped from the elevator onto the second floor, annoyed that the media had hounded him all the way from the parking lot to the hospital entrance. He stopped, sniffing the air. He'd always hated the smell of Regional, but this was a pleasant, sharp odor that had no place in a hospital. When he couldn't identify it, he dismissed his puzzlement and checked with the harried nurse at the station to confirm Lorena's room number. As he went down the hall, he hoped she was conscious because they certainly had some talking to do.

When he opened the door, the mysterious smell struck him full force. Lorena lay in the bed with her eyes closed, coughing and muttering under the oxygen mask. Juliet was next to his wife, seated behind a small table. To Vern's relief, she was wearing clothes. Along with a white ermine hat, she wore a silk shirt and a full Navaho-style skirt. A turquoise stone hung from a gold chain around her neck. On the table surface, a tall, white candle stood in a brass holder. Its flame danced as Juliet threw pinches of something into it and mumbled to the air with her eyes closed. Smoke and a pungent odor rolled up toward the ceiling.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Vern asked.

Juliet opened her eyes and looked at him from a long way away. "I'm using consecrated sage to aid Lorena's healing. It should be an infusion of one gram in 100 milliliters of water, but since she can't drink, I chose another option."

"She's on oxygen, you brainless bitch!" Vern said. "Put that out."

"My spell will protect her."

"My ass," Vern said. Striding across the room, he pinched out the flame. Then, he picked up the candle and kicked the table out from underneath it.

"Is that head of yours completely empty?" he asked as he set the candle and its holder on the floor. "You could have sent this whole place up in flames."

Vern clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to prevent himself from working up into a fit of anger, but the sight of Juliet holding the turquoise in front of her sent him over the edge.

"What the devil is that?" he asked.

"It's a protection stone."

"Well, protect this, then," Vern said and backhanded her. Juliet fell over her chair. Yanking the chain from her neck, he threw it into the corner, then pulled her up by the blouse and hit her again.

"You butt in where you've got no business and try to kill people in the bargain. You're so damned dumb, it defies imagination."

The scared but defiant look in her eyes enraged him further. He retrieved the candleholder and held it so she could see it plainly.

"You want magic? I'll show you some magic that might knock some sense into you."

The candleholder was on its third down stroke when a voice stopped his arm. A blonde-haired nurse stood by the door frowning at him. She wore a long, open coat.

"Excuse me," she said again. "I was just going off shift and stopped back in to see how Mrs. Sarvis is doing," she said, "but I see she's not the only one who has trouble."

Vern nodded toward Juliet. "She just fell down, and I'm helping her out."

"Right," the nurse said, unconvinced.

Vern pulled Juliet up and helped her sit in the chair. "What do you need?" he asked the nurse.

"Like I said, I was just going off shift and just stopped by."

"Lorena is about the same, as you can see," Vern said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Did the doctor have anything new to say?"

"She said we'll just have to wait. The horse threw her hard."

"Ah, so that's how it happened?"

At that question, Vern checked the nurse more closely. She was reluctant to come away from the door and seemed preoccupied with keeping the coat open.

"Are you all right?" the nurse asked Juliet.

"I'm fine now that you're here," Juliet answered.

"Maybe you'd better come with me," the nurse said. "It might be--"

"Warm?" Vern interrupted. "Why don't you take your coat off?"

"No," she said. "Like I said, I'm on my way home."

Vern studied the face. It was very familiar, but the hair was all wrong. Then, he knew.

"Mindy!" he shouted and jumped across the room at her. "Give me that damned camera!"

He got one hand on her coat, but she slipped from it and ran out of the room. Vern ran past the nurse's station after her and came around the corner just as the reporter collided with a burly orderly pushing a cart. Mindy screamed as she bounced off and collapsed to the floor face down in the contents of several clattering bedpans.

Vern grinned as he ran toward the stunned reporter. It couldn't have worked out any better, as far as he was concerned. All he needed to do was check the hidden camera and see if she'd captured his thrashing of Juliet on tape. If she hadn't, he was home free. If she had, he'd destroy it and he was home free. It'd be his word against Juliet and Mindy's.

Kneeling by the unconscious reporter, he gingerly pulled her coat out of the stinking mess she'd landed in. The camera detached easily from a support belt. He cracked it open and removed the cassette. Losing his balance, he dropped the camera while to steady himself with one hand while the other held the tape high.

*Got it!* he exulted.

Suddenly, the cassette disappeared out of his hand.

Vern hollered in rage as Juliet ran down the hall with the tape as fast as her weight would allow, then disappeared through an exit door. Vern struck the floor with his fist and got up to chase after her. There was no way the fat bitch could outrun him. Then, he looked past the orderly and the reporter into an open room.

Lying in their beds, Everett Pick and Lonny Gunderson had very big question marks in their eyes.

## Chapter 29

### Triple Jeopardy

"Vern, what the devil are you up to?" Lonny asked. A nurse was on the floor, and Juliet had just grabbed something from Sarvis' hand and run off as fast as she could go. The car dealer was looking into the room with an expressionless face. Lonny had seen that look a thousand times before. It usually meant guilt lurked behind it.

Sarvis hesitated briefly, then entered the room as the orderly and a nurse tended to the woman on the floor.

"She's not a nurse, Sheriff," he said. "It's Mindy Rattigan. She sneaked into our room, trying to film Lorena. She probably wanted to sell it to *Hard Copy* or some schlock program like that. I won't stand for that kind of exploitation of my wife."

"So, you had to knock Mindy to the floor?" Lonny asked.

"I didn't touch her. I was chasing her down the hall when she ran into that orderly. Ask him, he'll tell you."

The orderly nodded as Lonny looked past Vern.

"Okay," the sheriff said, "So why did Juliet grab the camera and run?"

Vern pulled up a chair and sat beside Lonny's bed. "You won't believe it. They've got Lorena on oxygen and when I came in the room, here's Juliet burning sage over an open flame."

Lonny winced as he remembered Juliet's tapping on his leg. "Don't tell me. She was trying to heal her."

"Exactly," Vern said. "Mindy got me on tape telling Juliet she could send the whole place up in flames. Juliet didn't want anybody seeing that, of course."

Lonny studied Sarvis' face for signs of lying. His story was plausible enough, but good liars had the knack of giving you just enough information to make everything sound like the truth. And a man who beat his wife was not a candidate for sainthood. He sighed inwardly, hoping he wasn't getting too cynical after 25 years on the job. There was nothing he could do now, he knew that. He'd just have to reserve judgment.

"You want me to send Arlo over to talk to her about the tape?" he asked.

"No," Vern answered. "She'll have it destroyed by the time he gets there, anyway. No harm done. Forget about it."

"Fine by me," the sheriff said. "One less headache."

Sarvis looked over at Pick, then back at Lonny. "How's it feel to be in the same room with the man who shot you?"



Lonny gritted his teeth, wondering how many times he was going to have to explain the situation, then answered. "Ev didn't shoot me. I shot myself."

He glared as Vern struggled to keep a straight face.

"Laugh, you sonuvabitch," he said. "I had some help in doing it."

"What are you talking about?" Sarvis said after he'd gotten control of himself.

"It was your man, Willie, who caused it. Juliet tells me he smacked one of your cars into my cruiser, and the noise of that made me pull the trigger prematurely."

Lonny watched with some satisfaction as Vern's face got red.

"He didn't tell me about that," Sarvis said.

"I suppose he didn't," Lonny said, "just like you didn't tell me about those cruisers we bought from you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I smacked into a tree trying to avoid a runaway horse. That front end crumpled like tissue paper. I thought they were supposed to be reinforced."

"They are," Vern said.

"I'm going to have Arlo check those cars out with a couple of local garages."

"You do that, Sheriff. If there was a mix-up, I'll make it good with you."

"Nobody likes paying top dollar for equipment, Vern, and not getting their money's worth--especially when their lives might on the line."

"I hear you, Lonny," Sarvis said. "Willie handled that order from the manufacturer for me. If he was into the bottle again, he could have screwed it up."

"I'll bet," Lonny said. If he didn't know if Vern was lying about the camera, he knew he was lying about the cruisers. Lonny had the feeling the man worked twice as hard at cheating people as he would at making an honest living.

"Trust me," Vern said.

"Of course," Lonny said. It was his turn to lie.

"What are you going to do about him?" Vern said, nodding at Pick.

"When you come down to it, the only things we can charge him with are damaged property and the stolen Remington, but that should be more than enough to keep him occupied for a while. He owes the station \$40,000 for the camera and the hospital for the window and the EKG machine. Plus expenses for medical care, hospital transportation, and salary and equipment expenses for mounting a search. Plus damages to my cruiser and your car."

Lonny looked over at Ev for a reaction. It was better than he could have hoped for. Pick's eyes were wide with horror, and he tugged at the restraints with desperate effort.

Deciding to take pity on him, the sheriff said, "Pick, it's not that bad. It could have been far worse, you know. It's only money."

Then, he realized that Ev hadn't heard a word he'd said. His eyes were fixed on the strong-looking blonde woman in the doorway, holding a brand new spade at port arms.

"Hello, Mary Fae," he heard Pick say in a strangled voice.

## Chapter 30

### Spade, But Not Neutered

"Relax, Everett Pick," Mary Fae said as she came into the room. "I'm not going to brain you with this spade--at least, not yet. It cost me \$15.65 for a new one, but it was worth it just for the look on your miserable face."

Ev sagged back into his bed as she set the shovel in the corner and pulled the strap of a leather briefcase off her shoulder.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

Mary Fae laughed as she pulled up a chair and sat down beside him while she rummaged through the briefcase. "How did I *not* find you, you mean. Look at these."

Ev winced as he looked at the tabloid newspapers she spread out for him on the bed. The *National Enquirer* had an aerial shot of him running buck naked and full bore toward the photographer with the spade raised high overhead. The Star had three photos taken from videotape showing him crumpling to the ground as the sheriff's bullet hit his leg. The third newspaper showed him spread-eagled on the ground with a goofy expression on his face as if he'd just enjoyed being shot. One of the headlines talked about a naked maniac loose in the Badlands; the second described a mad sex-crazed alien crashing in the desert; the third, in screaming headlines that took up half the front page, speculated "MISSING LINK?"

"I like that last one the best," Mary Fae said. "I'll get you some tapes of *Hard Copy* too so you can watch while you're recuperating. The footage is stunning."

"Is that why you're here?" Ev asked. "Because you want to torment me with these things?"

"Exactly," she said. "In fact, I switched a training assignment in Hawaii for one here just so I could come and see you. I'll be around for the next week, and I'll visit you every morning before class and every evening after class. Aren't you pleased?"

"Ecstatic," Ev said. He glanced over at the sheriff and Vern. Lonny returned a pitying raise of the eyebrows, but Sarvis had interested eyes on Mary Fae.

"Mary Fae Jarsted?" he asked.

"That's me. Who's asking?"

"Vernon Sarvis, Sarvis Cadillac."

"Ah, then it's your troops I'll be training," Mary Fae said.

Ev watched Vern's face light up at the mention of troops.

*Once a Green Beret, always a Green Beret*, he thought.

"That's right," Sarvis said. "You know Pick?"

Mary Fae nodded curtly. "We had a relationship. A very unsatisfactory one."

Ev saw Vern's mouth curl up into a tight smile. It was obvious he was pleased with this information

*Be careful, Vern*, Ev thought. *Stepping in between two lovers can be very dangerous indeed, especially where Mary Fae was concerned.*

"But that has nothing to do with business," Mary Fae continued. "I'm here to get your sales up where you want them to be."

"No offense," Vern said. "But what makes you think you can do that?"

Mary Fae adopted the severe look that Ev knew so well.

"You didn't read my bio? I faxed it to you."

Sarvis shook his head, then nodded toward Ev. "He's kind of taken up our time around here."

Turning a cold look on Ev, she said, "I can well believe that. To make a long story short, I'm the best salesperson Cadillac has ever had. I can sell more cars in a week than your salespeople can in a month. They won't meet that standard, but, I promise you, after a week with me, they'll have their sales up by at least 20%. How well they continue to do after that is up to you and any refresher courses I might offer."

"If you're that good a salesman," Vern said, "why are you in training?"

"Why am I not still on the front lines doing what I do best and making more money than I could ever make in training, that's what you're asking, isn't it? A real salesperson would still be out there selling, right?"

Sarvis nodded.

"A good question," she said. "The best kind of question, in fact."

"And the answer is?"

"The long answer is, I have higher ambitions. The short answer is, I'm so good at what I do that GM pays me a handsome retainer plus a percentage to get dealer sales forces even remotely close to what I can achieve."

Ev watched as doubt showed on Vern's face.

"You're skeptical?" Mary Fae asked.

"That's right," Vern said.

Mary Fae reached into her briefcase and pulled out a sheet of paper without even looking down, and Ev admired her organization again. She knew where everything was.

Holding the paper up so Vern could see it, she informed him, "Here's a list of 25 dealers and their numbers. I have many more if you need them. I want you to call them before I start with your salespeople and ask them

about the results of my training. After you do that, there'll be no doubt about my effectiveness. How does that sound to you?"

"That sounds okay for now," Vern said.

She rattled the paper at him again. "Hardly a ringing endorsement. You *will* call these people, won't you?"

"Some of them."

"All of them," she insisted.

"Hey," Vern said, "I'll take your word for it."

The severe look hardened on Mary Fae's face. "Never do that. I want you to call all 25 personally, or the training will not proceed."

An expression of respect spread over Vern's face. It was a look Ev had often had himself.

"All right," Sarvis said. "I'll just do that. In fact, let's go over to the dealership now. I'll make those calls while you have a look around."

"Fine," Mary Fae said, then stood up and looked at Ev. "We'll have a great week together, won't we, Ev?"

"Just dandy, I'll bet."

His ex-lover looked over into the corner. "I think I'll leave the spade here, Ev, in case I need to work on my stroke. My aim could use some sharpening."

Gazing up into the stern features of Mary Fae, Ev knew she meant it. She was a woman who, once she set her course, never deviated from it--and was single-minded enough to announce her intention in front of strangers on the assumption that no one would dare block her path.

A sudden desperate burst of imagination struck Ev, and he said, "You don't want to kill me."

"Oh, yes, I do. In the worst way."

Ev rose up and looked over at Lonny, who stared back in disbelief.

"Well, then, I'm glad you chose this spot and time to do it."

"Why's that?"

"Because you haven't met my roommate. Mary Fae, this Lonny Gunderson, sheriff of Pennington County. Sheriff, Mary Fae Jarsted."

Smiling, Ev dropped his head back into the pillow as Mary Fae began to backpedal on her intentions for Lonny's benefit. For the first time in days--he had no idea of how many had actually passed--things were looking up.

## Chapter 31

### Moses Occupies the Chairs

The sheriff waited impatiently for Vern and the obnoxious Jarsted woman to leave, because he was anxious to ask Pick if his girlfriend had actually been serious about killing him. When Moses Brubaker wheezed through the door, the question died in Lonny's mouth.

He watched with resignation as the minister pulled two chairs up to the bed and landed hard on both them like one of those C5As that came in at Ellsworth from time to time. The Air Force had one of the world's biggest planes; as sheriff, he had one of its biggest peckerheads. At 400 very odd pounds, Moses could be more than a match for unwary furniture.

The sheriff glanced over at his latest copy of *Bon Appetit* that Arlo had dropped off for him. He loved good food more than just about anything, and he hated it when the preacher showed up as a prime representative of the dark, gluttonous side of eating.

"What do you need, Moses?" Lonny asked, irritated. "I know you're not up here on a social call."

The minister held his hand up to signal for patience while he gulped for air and fanned his red face with a handkerchief bigger than one of Merle Simmons' lies. Dressed in a blue double-breasted suit with a blue button-down shirt and blue tie, all of different hues, the clothing made Moses look like three layers of slightly mismatched paint, in Lonny's judgment. Bleached by the sun, the preacher's blonde hair was nearly invisible on the pink scalp, making him appear almost bald and failing to hide ears that looked like fat question marks that had been stretched wide and hung out to dry on the side of his head. Blue eyes gazed with hurt accusation at Lonny from under fuzzy eyebrows nearly as transparent as the minister's hair.

The sheriff winced when Moses finally spoke, saying "I did come up to visit you." Even when he was out of breath, the man rendered a PA system helpless. The minister waved his arm vaguely toward the door and the smell of an unwashed continent of skin swept into Lonny's nose.

"I was making my regular rounds and simply added you to the list. I knew you were likely in pain and came by to offer you comfort. And this is how you greet me."

Unimpressed, Lonny decided to be blunt. "Moses, you've come down off your mountain six times this year, and the only thing different about this time is the fact that I can't get away from you. My leg hurts like fire,

and I'm not in a good mood, so say what you're going to say, then get on out of here."

Moses registered a hurt look on his face. To Lonny, it looked a bit like the Michelin man had just lost a big tire sale.

"Very well, then." The minister ticked off the first item on a pudgy forefinger. "I want you to stop spying on us."

"Nobody's spying on anybody. And if I wanted to, I haven't got enough people to do it, anyway."

"My people reported that they saw one of your cruisers near the Temple at 3 a.m. on Tuesday."

"That's right."

"And that's not spying, Sheriff?"

"Maybe in your Book of Revelations it is, Moses," Lonny answered. "But in mine, it's called a patrol. We stagger the times so we don't get into a predictable routine. Usually, it's Arlo; sometimes, it's somebody else. We're protecting your property."

The minister was clearly not impressed and said, "Let's move on to the next item, then. Our sources tell us that a pornography ring has decided to move outside the city limits and set up in the county."

"Right again," the sheriff said. "Your sources can read the newspaper as well as I can, it seems."

"My sources are not the issue," Moses said. "What are you going to do about it, that's the issue."

"Not a thing."

"How can you lie there and give me such an answer?"

"Because, at the present time, Riggleman's adult bookstore is within county and state laws, and that means there isn't a damned thing I can do about it even if I wanted to. Besides, you and I both went to school with Jeff, and we know that all he can't tie his shoes unless he's got his wife there to point out their location. He'll be out of business before you can shake one of your picket signs at him."

"Unfortunately, pornography is a very profitable business," Moses said. "He may just succeed this time."

"Have you seen his place?" Lonny asked.

The preacher shook his head.

"It's that old fireworks stand Roy Harvill had before he sent himself up along with one of his displays on the Fourth. It's not much bigger than a breadbox, and the wind goes through it so fast it doesn't even notice that it's there. Believe me, the only reason Jeff has opened the store is so he can look at the pictures and not get eyestrain from too much reading."

"We'll see," Moses said. "But that's not the way things should be, is it?"

"Maybe not, but you'll have to talk to the politicians about that."

"Well, what about the new restaurant that's coming in, then?" the preacher asked.

"What about it?" the sheriff asked.

"I hear its run by a couple of Lesbians."

"Maybe, but that's not what I want to know about them," Lonny said.

"What else would you want to know about them?" Moses asked.

"Can they cook? God knows, this town could use a decent restaurant."

The preacher scowled at him, but Lonny ignored it as pain rippled along his leg, and he shifted position, hoping to ease the discomfort. "Being Lesbian isn't a crime, anymore, Moses, so is that about it for this time?" he asked. "I sure hope so because I could use some rest."

"Just one thing more, Sheriff, and it concerns your roommate."

Lonny turned to look at Pick. "What about him?"

"Well, it's not about him per se. It's about his wife."

"Ex-wife," Pick corrected.

"Juliet?" the sheriff asked.

"That woman was naked and on a motorcycle, and I know you were there so don't deny it."

"That's true," Lonny said. "It wasn't a pretty sight--no offense, Ev."

"None taken."

"I talked to her about it, Moses. She does it again, I'll arrest her, okay?"

The preacher nodded, but didn't seem satisfied with this concession. "I hear she's become an avowed Lesbian."

"Really? Is that true, Ev?" the sheriff asked.

Pick looked at the ceiling as if its white paint was more interesting than the conversation. "Today, maybe. Tomorrow, who knows? Ask me then."

"That kind of life style may be acceptable in New York City or San Francisco, but it's not acceptable out here," Moses said.

"Maybe, maybe not," Lonny said. "But there's nothing you can do about it, is there? There's no law on the books against it which means it's none of my business."

"There are rumors of witchcraft as well," the preacher said in an insistent tone.

"She's become a real threat to the nation, hasn't she?" the sheriff said, then shook his head when the preacher failed to detect the sarcasm behind his remark.

"It's New Age humanism," Moses said. "It's a definite threat to our way of life as we know it."

"Well, then, I guess you're going to have to throw your moral weight at a problem that big," the sheriff said. "I'm just here to enforce the laws. You got that fancy TV and radio station up there at Temple America. Use it, why don't you?"



"I plan to," Moses said. "I thought I would see if I could get some satisfaction from your office first. As usual, that's not the case. I thought the law was for the people. That's the way it should be."

"You thought exactly right," Lonny said. "For all the people, not just a preacher and his flock."

The preacher's thick nostrils flared. "We represent a majority in this state."

The sheriff looked at Moses and said, "Now that's the first lie you've told me today. Don't let your passion for preaching nudge truth to the side."

"Well, we soon will be a majority," the minister amended. "People are seeing the light, and the political trend is turning our way."

The sheriff sighed as the ache in his leg intensified. He found the morphine drip, pushed the button and said, "Then, when your people get in and change the laws, I'll enforce them too, okay? Now just go away and leave me alone. My wound's killing me, and you're just speeding up the process."

The minister used the bed railing to heave himself erect. He stood panting for a moment while Lonny prayed that the preacher wouldn't have a heart attack and topple over. If Moses did fall, Lonny knew he'd have a lot more than just his injured leg to worry about.

He was relieved when the minister finally caught his breath and said in his naturally amplified voice, "I'll pray for your speedy recovery. And to open your eyes to the truth of what goes on around here."

"My problem is that I know too much of what goes on around here," Lonny said, "So you better pray for something else."

Moses delivered what the sheriff knew would be his usual parting shot. "Your mother was a churchgoer."

"No doubt about that."

"She'd be disappointed in you."

"Believe me, that'd be a long way down the list of disappointments she got from me. First on the list was becoming a sheriff when I could have been an engineer. I'm beginning to think she was right about that one."

The preacher would not be swayed from his course. "She never missed a Sunday."

"Not even when she died," the sheriff said. "My mother was a devout woman."

"You'd think she would have passed some of that on."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Lonny was simultaneously sleepy and in pain and wished Moses would take the hint and leave.

"You don't want to end up like Pick here, do you?" the preacher said. "In trouble everywhere you look?"

Lonny looked at Pick who was still staring at the ceiling. For a man buried up to his neck in problems with the law, he had a curiously peaceful smile on his lips, as if everything had been stripped away from him and there was simply nothing more to worry about. The sheriff felt a stab of irrational anger as this thought occurred to him, and he didn't answer the preacher, but simply nodded when Moses finally said goodbye and left behind a breeze heavily freighted with the smell of over 400 pounds of sweaty flesh.

Lonny rubbed at his nostrils, irritated with his mother's gift of a sensitive nose. When she was alive, she could bite into a slice of pizza and tell you every ingredient that was in it. Lonny had inherited her super palate. The ability to isolate every scent on a breeze or a taste in a dish was a pleasure most times, but the other side of the coin was the bad odors that came along with the good. After all the years in law enforcement, the smell of piss, vomit, blood, and unbathed skin was still like a hammer blow to his nose.

Battling the insistent and annoying thought that Moses' body odor had never reached the nose of Everett Pick, the sheriff fell asleep in the soft warmth of the morphine.

## Chapter 32

### Vern Makes a Cold Call

After lunch, Vern took Mary Fae to the dealership. It hadn't been hard to keep up his end of the conversation. She'd checked her DayTimer to refresh her memory, then spent the hour between bites of fried chicken and mashed potatoes laying out the plans for the training as if they were etched into concrete. All he'd had to do was nod to pretend that he was listening. It'd been hard to pay attention to what she was saying because she was a handsome, blonde woman, who filled out a business suit with muscular good health. She had an appetite, too. Unlike Lorena, she didn't priss about, eating only salad and complaining about how much weight she was putting on. This was a woman who was sure and confident of herself.

*I'll be digging my own grave if I come on too strong and fast, he decided. It'll take time to get her into bed, but I'll bet the effort will be well worth it.*

He could see why Pick hadn't been able to keep her. What he couldn't understand was why she'd chosen him in the first place, but that was the good thing about women--they weren't always rational about men.

When they entered the showroom, Vern told her, "I'm going to make those calls now. Talk to anybody you want. I let them know you're coming and why you're here. When I'm finished, we'll finalize the training plans, okay?"

She nodded and headed immediately toward two of his salespeople. Elmo Moore sat on the hood of an Eldorado, filling his large belly with a second Big Mac. Eddie Thrash sat at his desk, feet propped up on a chair, brushing traces of an Indian taco from his shirt. Vern was embarrassed for a moment. He'd been too involved with militia business to keep as tight a rein as he should on the slackers he had for salespeople, then amused himself with the thought, *If they think some customers are be hell on wheels, wait until they get a load of Mary Fae.*

Looking out at the used car office, Vern saw that Willie wasn't doing much better than his other salespeople. He sat with his back toward Vern, but telltale cigarette smoke still curled out the window. Vern decided against going out there and jerking Willie's string; there were more important things to do.

Going to his office, he closed the door, then dialed Juliet's number. He wasn't surprised when it took a number of rings to get through.

"Hello?" Juliet said finally.

"It's Vern," he said while wondering how Pick had stood the sound of the irksome little girl voice for so many years.

"I thought it would be," she said.

"You have something I want," Vern said.

"I'll just bet I do, but you're not getting your hands on it. It's going straight to the sheriff's office."

"I'd like you to reconsider that course of action, Juliet."

"Not a chance," she said. "Cowards like you think you can beat on women anytime you want. I'm here to tell you one thing--not any more!"

"Spare me the moral crusade," he said. "I want the tape, but I'm willing to give you something of more than equal value for it."

After a brief silence, Juliet asked, "What are you talking about?"

"You're missing a valuable item from your stable, I understand."

There was a sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line.

"Thor! Have you got him? Where is he?"

"Safe."

"Where?"

"Juliet," Vern said, "when shall we meet?"

There was silence again, then she said, "Stalemate, Vern. We've both got what the other one wants and can't make a move."

"Not quite," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Videotapes can't suffer before they die."

Juliet gasped. "You wouldn't?"

Vern said nothing.

"When do you want to meet?" Juliet said.

"When I'm ready," he said. It felt great to let her sweat for a little. "Just hang onto that tape for now. Or better yet, destroy it now, and I'll see that the horse is delivered to you."

"Not a chance," she said.

"Then I'll be in touch," he said and hung up.

When he looked out onto the showroom floor, he felt even better. Mary Fae had Elmo and Eddie braced for inspection. They both looked like they'd been hit over the head with very big and unexpected clubs.

Vern rubbed his head where Juliet had hit him with the sheriff's trophy. He knew very well how his salesmen felt.

*It's payback time, he thought, but let's not waste energy gloating.*

The phone rang before he was able to start contacting Mary Fae's proof sources. He answered and listened for a long time before saying, "We'll accept the order. Make the delivery soon."

As he hung up, he thought, *Mary Fae's proof sources can wait. It's time to schedule another militia meeting, because I've got some big news to announce.*

He picked up the phone and speed-dialed Maj Reno's number.

## Chapter 33

### An Exclusive

Three days after Mary Fae's first visit, they took the restraints off Ev when the sheriff told them that he was more of a danger to himself than anyone else. Ev didn't think the joke was as funny as Lonny and the nurse thought, but he said nothing because he was so glad to have his freedom again. Napping comfortably for the first time since Mary Fae had tried to brain him with the spade, he woke in mid-afternoon. A warm breeze infiltrated the room from the boarded up window, and he knew the weather had returned to normal. It made him feel good enough to test his leg out. He flipped the sheet back and looked down at its bandaged length, then made a tentative attempt at lifting it. There was still pain, but he knew he could handle it for a chance to get out of bed and simply move around even if it was only in a wheelchair.

Looking over at the sheriff, Ev wondering if he might have any objections, but Lonny was still sleeping as he had been for most of the time he'd been in the room.

*The bullet wound seems to be painning him heavily, Ev thought, if the grunts and groans are any indication.*

Reaching down, Ev pushed the call button, and, three buzzes later, the nurse came in with a harried expression on her face.

"What is it?" Rowena asked. "We just had a cardiac arrest."

"Sorry," Ev said. "I didn't know you were busy."

"What do you need?" she demanded.

"A wheelchair."

Rowena's eyebrow's rose. "With that leg?"

"It feels better."

"It won't when you get out of bed," she said, "I can promise you that."

"I need to get up and around," Ev insisted.

"I need the doctor's permission for that."

"Well, get it, please."

"He's with the cardiac patient."

"You know what?" Ev said to the nurse. "I think you're stalling me. I don't think you just don't want me to get into that wheelchair."

"It doesn't matter, either way, then, does it?" she said. "You stay in that bed where you belong. Give your leg a chance to heal. Now, I have to get back to that patient."

Waiting until the nurse had left, Ev gave her vacated space the one-finger salute. He lay back and tried to go back to sleep, but his body felt an

itchy need to be free of the bed. He rose up on his elbows and craned his neck to see if a wheelchair was in sight. There wasn't.

*But, he reasoned, there's bound to be one somewhere in the hall. It's just a matter of finding a way to get to one.*

He checked the room in case crutches had been left there by previous patients. He saw none, but then he spotted the solution.

Mary Fae's new spade.

It was still propped up in the corner.

Ev swung his leg out from the bed and sat up. His head swam for a moment from weakness, then cleared enough for him to attempt a standing position. Grabbing a railing, he put his good leg on the floor and tested its strength. When he had confidence in it, he stood, carefully keeping his weight off the injured leg. It screamed at him, anyway. Ignoring the pain, he got his hands on a chair back and used it like a walker to maneuver across the room, then he snatched the spade out of the corner and gripped its handle tightly. He used the shovel to get back to the bed. He checked the length of the handle under his arm, then pulled the two pillows off the sheets and stuffed them under his armpit and positioned the handle underneath them until he had firm support. The sheriff grunted and rolled his head from side to side in his sleep as if he were disapproving of Ev's actions. Ev gave him the same finger he'd given the nurse.

Limping to the door, Ev checked the hallway. Everyone seemed to be at the far end of the corridor, crowded around the room where he assumed the cardiac patient lay. There were no wheelchairs in that direction. He looked the other way and saw no wheelchairs, either. Cursing under his breath, he decided he'd get as much of a walk in as he could manage before they caught him and brought him back to the confinement of the bed.

He swung the spade out and started down the hall away from all the commotion. His leg hurt fiercely, but he felt better than he had for days. The shovel blade dug into the tile with a dull cutting sound as he pushed it out in front of him. He made it down to the end of the corridor and was half way back when he saw Rowena and the doctor come out of the cardiac patient's room, shaking their heads. It was obvious things hadn't gone well, and Ev didn't feel like facing the nurse when she was in even a worse mood. Measuring the distance to his room, he decided he couldn't make it. Instead, he chose the door nearest to him and headed for it, hoping the room was empty. He hobbled inside and closed the door as Rowena and the doctor walked by. He waited until their voices died away, and when he turned to find a place to sit down and rest, he discovered the room wasn't empty.

Sitting up in bed with a pale and bruised face, Lorena glared at Ev, then raised an accusing finger at him.

"God, I'm sorry," Ev said. "I didn't mean to--"

"Get her out of here!" Lorena said.

"What?"

"Get her out!" she repeated and swung her pointing finger to the other bed in the room.

Ev looked beyond the curtain but couldn't see the face of the patient who seemed to be thrashing around and mumbling into her pillow.

"Does she need more medication?" Ev asked. "I can get a nurse."

"Get her out!"

The intensity of Lorena's scream made Ev back up against the wall. He looked at the other patient again, and this time was far enough toward her bed to see the face.

It was Mindy Rattigan.



## **Chapter 34**

### **Legwork**

The blonde reporter was talking into a tiny tape recorder. Ev could only catch snatches of what phrases she was laying heavy emphasis on--"raised from dead"..."miraculous recovery"..."tunnel of light"..."grateful for family."

He looked back at Lorena and said, "I'd do something if I could, but, as you can see, I'm not in shape for tossing anybody out of this room."

Lorena regarded him as if he were totally useless. "Get her camera then."

"I don't see any camera," Ev said. "Just a tape recorder."

"It's there," she said. "I heard the damned thing whirring. That's what woke me up. She was pointing it in my face. She won't even leave you alone when you're unconscious."

"I know the feeling," Ev said.

Swinging the spade around, he hopped across the room to Mindy. The reporter had a dressing on her forehead. She turned away from the tape recorder and looked belligerently up at him.

"You look awful," she said. "It's true, then, what the nurses said about your ear. How did that happen? How do you feel?"

"Shut up," Ev said. "Where's the camera?"

"I haven't got a camera. They took it and my cassette when I ran into that mountain in the hall."

"Stop lying, Mindy. I saw Juliet run off with one cassette, and Vern dropped the camera, so it's still here. And I know a good reporter like you would always have a spare cassette handy."

"That's not true."

"Where is it?" Ev asked again.

When the reporter remained rigid and silent, he dug his hand under her pillow.

"Keep away from me!" she said.

Ev found nothing and looked behind and under the bed.

"I don't see it," Ev told Lorena.

"She's probably lying on it or got it between her legs. Look there," she said.

"What?" Ev said. "I can't do that."

"That's where I'd put it if I were a media whore," Lorena said. "Do it."

"I'll cry rape," Mindy warned. "I'll scream my bloody head off!"

"Lorena, I just can't do it," Ev said.

She looked at him, stone-faced. "You're the reason I'm in this hospital, aren't you?"

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Ev said under his breath and stripped the sheet off the reporter's body. He pulled up her gown and saw the camera between white thighs, the lens pointed upward, just before Mindy cut loose with a piercing shriek.

"Rape!" she screamed. "Rape!"

He had time to snatch the camera and toss it over to Lorena before the huge orderly ran into the room and charged at him. Ev had a moment to bring the spade up to ward the man off before the blade was shoved hard back into his face.

## Chapter 35

### Things Speed Up

Screams brought Lonny out of a sleep that was nagging him to remember something he couldn't seem to define. His leg still hurt badly, and it made him irritable.

*I wish they'd give that screaming female medication so I could get some peace and quiet,* he grumbled in his mind. *I've never been in such a noisy place.*

He looked over to see if Pick, but the bed was empty. Lonny assumed they'd taken him for X-rays, but a few minutes later, they wheeled him in on a gurney with a bloodied face and dumped him on the mattress, then restrained him again.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Tried to rape a patient," the large orderly said.

"Pick?"

The orderly nodded. "I caught him myself."

Lonny looked the man over. It was obvious he lifted weights--lots of them. It was also obvious there wasn't a mark on him. "He seems to have gotten the worst of it."

"Yeah," the orderly said, "I don't know what the hell he thought he could do in his condition. Deviants just can't help it, I guess, no matter what shape they're in."

"No argument there," the sheriff said.

The orderly pulled the spade off the gurney and showed it to Lonny. "He used this as a crutch to get to her room, then threatened her with it."

Lonny watched as the spade was put back in the corner. Blood dripped from its edge.

"I'll be back with a doctor," the orderly said. "If he comes to and gets violent, let me know."

"I will," Lonny promised.

Lonny checked Pick again. After all his years as sheriff, he'd picked up a pretty fair idea of what injuries had been inflicted on a person, and he was sure Ev had a broken nose minimum. The man had a dubious talent for attracting trouble, that was for sure.

*He also has a talent for getting around with the damnedest things,* Lonny added as he looked at the spade in the corner. *Crutches and shovels and rifles.*

"That's it," he said, finally discovering what had been nagging him during his sleep. "The rifle."

Arlo had told him it looked like a Remington Model 700 sporting rifle. And it was, Lonny was sure, except for two things. It was painted camouflage green, and it had an outsized telescopic sight on it. He racked his brains for all the weapons that had come through his office through the years and came up with nothing. Then, he harked back to his Airborne training, and the answer came with chilling suddenness.

The weapon he was familiar with was an M21 with an ART II telescopic sight. The one Pick had stolen was newer. It was probably an M24. Lonny had seen it described in the *Soldier of Fortune* magazine that Arlo had picked up in Denver. The M24 was a 7.62 caliber NATO weapon with a muzzle velocity of 2550 feet per second. It was equipped with an Ultra M3 ten-power, variable telescopic sight with a built-in bullet drop compensator.

Pick's crutch was a state-of-the-art military sniper rifle.

Lonny looked over at Ev again.

"Now where the hell did you steal that?" he asked the unconscious form.

## Chapter 36

### Lorena Has An Impact

Lonny was trying to visualize the country that Pick had covered and where he might have found the sniper rifle when a tight-lipped Rowena wheeled Lorena Sarvis into the room. Beneath a tumble of long, brown hair, the girl's face was bruised and pale.

*She's handsome for all that,* the sheriff thought.

She was one of those young women whose facial parts, taken individually, added up to nothing much, but put all together created a deep sweetness that couldn't help affect a man.

*Except for Sarvis, evidently,* he amended silently.

"Are you all right?" he asked as the nurse maneuvered her close to the bed.

"I'm fine," Lorena said, but her voice was shaky and low.

"Pick did all this to you?"

Startled, the girl said, "No!"

"He attacked that television reporter, Mindy Rattigan," Rowena said, quivering with indignation.

"No!" Lorena said in a trembling, but vehement voice. "No! He didn't attack anyone. I keep telling you people that, but no one listens."

"Okay, okay, everybody just take it easy," Lonny said. He shifted himself higher on the bed and gasped as pain shot through his leg.

"Now, did you see what happened?" he asked the nurse.

"No, but Arnie told us all about it," Rowena answered.

"That's the orderly?"

The nurse nodded.

"He just saw the end of it," Lorena said, "and got it all wrong."

"What do you mean?" Lonny asked.

"When I woke up, I found a camera in my face," she answered in a rush of words. "It scared the devil out of me, just this lens staring into my eyes. I thought it was some kind of nightmare at first, and I begged the camera to go away. Then, I could see Mindy behind it. She started asking me questions about how does it feel to come out of a coma after being attacked by a wild man, and I screamed at her to go away and leave me alone, but she just kept the camera and the questions going. Then she dove into the bed when Ev came into the room. I asked him to take the camera away from her. He didn't want to do it, especially after Mindy threatened to cry rape. I was so mad I insisted he grab it. I told him he owed me one after spooking the horse, so he tried to get the camera for me. And he did

it. That's when Mindy started screaming, and the orderly came in and bashed the poor man in the face with the shovel."

Lonny winced.

"I insisted Rowena bring me down here to see how he's doing. I want to tell him I'm so sorry," Lorena said.

"Where's Mindy?" he asked Rowena.

"Last we saw of her, she was running out of the hospital," the nurse said. "The poor thing was so terrified, she didn't change out of her gown."

"Was she carrying that camera?" Lonny asked.

"Yes, she was," Rowena said.

"Terrified, my ass," the sheriff said.

"Sheriff!" the nurse said.

"Rowena, for Christ's sake, use your head. Does Lorena look like the kind of woman to make something up? And Pick? The shape he's in, he couldn't rape a woman if she was tied down with chains, and someone lifted him on top of her."

Rowena blushed at this remark, but the sheriff continued. "Then, there's Mindy. She's not above claiming she was violated by the Pope, the Supreme Court justices, and the four presidents themselves, if it got her story on the air."

Rowena was about to answer when another nurse called to her out to the hall.

"Thank you," Lorena said. She looked over at Ev. "I hope he's going to be okay."

"He'll survive," the sheriff said. "I don't think I've ever seen a man absorb so much punishment and still keep going."

"But what about you?" he asked. "How are you doing?"

"I'm weak, but okay," Lorena said. "It feels as if that horse threw me three miles."

"I wasn't talking about the horse," Lonny said.

She lowered her head toward the floor. "What do you mean?"

"You and Vern. You didn't get those bruises from a horse, no matter how far he threw you."

Lorena was silent.

"I been at this long enough, Lorena, that I know when a husband is beating his wife."

He waited for her to respond and, after a long moment, she nodded.

"Why didn't you come to my office?"

Lorena lifted her head and looked out the window. Tears rolled down her bruised cheeks.

"I don't know," she said. "For the longest time, it just seemed like it was all my fault, but, no matter what I did, he just got more violent. Then, I did go to your office, but that didn't do any good."

"What?" Lonny said. "You didn't come to me."

"No," she said. "You were out, so I talked to Arlo a couple of times. He said it was a domestic dispute, and it should be settled in the family."

*That son of a bitch*, Lonny thought. *All the damned training I give him goes in one ear and out the other.*

"I'm sorry," he said. "He was flat out wrong. If you want help, I'll get it for you."

"I need time to think about it," she said.

"What's to think about, for Christ's sake? He'll kill you eventually. Or you'll kill him."

Lorena stared at him, startled. "I couldn't kill anybody."

"Believe me, if you're shoved hard enough, you'll find a weapon and blow his brains out. I've seen women meek as mice put a 12-gauge to their husband's heads because they've been pushed too far or the kids have been threatened. Vern would deserve it, too, but the courts wouldn't see it that way. You'd end up in prison and probably not see a day of freedom for the rest of your life. This is a tough state on murder."

"I couldn't kill anybody," she repeated.

"You're tougher than you think," Lonny said. "And you're like everybody else--if your life is in danger, you'll fight back."

"Vern wouldn't try to kill me."

"What? You think he's different from other men like him?"

"Yes," she said, and her eyes slid toward the boarded up window as if she didn't want to say what she was going to say about her husband. "He's smarter."

"They all think they're smarter," the sheriff said.

"But he *is* smarter," she insisted. "I don't mean like a professor or anything. He just can't stop being a businessman in every part of our lives."

"He sees angles."

"Yes. Sometimes, I feel we're not conducting a marriage, but one of those cost-benefit analyses he's always talking about."

A chill ran through Lonny's body. It could be worse than he thought, he realized. A passionate, hotheaded, controlling, emotionally-immature husband *might* be dangerous. A coldly rational one definitely *would* be at some future time because that type always believed they could prepare for and get away with anything--and often did.

"You're staying up at Juliet's?" he asked.

"How did you know that?"

"She told us when we were digging Pick out of the mud in the Badlands."

"I should be safe at her place for a while."

Lonny shook his head. "Vern already knows you're there. He was with us."

A pained expression crossed Lorena's face. "Juliet said she wouldn't tell anyone."

"With Juliet, sense is less than common."

"Oh, God, what should I do?"

"I'd stay there for now," Lonny said. "I've warned him to keep away and, if he's as smart as you say he is, he's not going to pull anything that will draw attention to himself. My guess is that you don't have anything to worry about for the next few weeks, but I'll increase the patrols out there, anyway. That'll give you the time to think about what it is you want to do."

"Thank you," Lorena said. "I can't tell you how much this means to me."

"No problem," Lonny said.

Lorena smiled at him and patted his hand, then wheeled her chair around to Pick's bedside.

Settling back into the bed, Lonny rubbed gingerly at his aching leg and pressed the morphine button again. Drowsiness from the medication started to come on as he looked across at Lorena holding Pick's hand and stroking it as if hoping that would bring him awake so she could apologize.

*No problem?* he thought just before sleep took him, *What a helluva liar you are, Lonny Gunderson.*



## Chapter 37

### Sizing Up

Vern watched the waiter take away the mashed potatoes and gravy and roast beef, then leaned back with his glass and sniffed the single malt scotch with appreciation. Its smoky, biting smell reminded him of good days in the Berets. Mary Fae sat relaxed, but upright, in her chair with a double shot of Jack Daniels Black.

"To good training," Vern said, saluting her with an uplifted glass.

"To great training," she replied. "I don't do any other kind."

"Amen to that," Vern said. "After two weeks, my people are ready to steal cars off other lots and sell them to double their quota. In fact, Willie, of all people, *has* made three sales off the used car lot."

He didn't tell her about one of the sales he was especially fond of--an out-of-state, flood damaged, fully equipped bomb of a Blazer he'd been trying to unload ever since he'd discovered another dealer had stuck him with it. Willie said he'd sold it to a father and his geeky teenage son twice as smart as his dad who bought it at \$500 over the price Vern had wanted, despite the boy's objections--and it was the second vehicle he'd dumped on the guy who'd come back in spite of the fact that the original car--a Bronco--had dumped its transmission on the first washboard road it met. Willie had sold him a story that his troubles had been due to his rough handling of the Bronco. Anybody stupid to believe Willie was not likely to sue the dealership over another purchase gone bad.

"The one thing I've observed over the years," she told him, obviously pleased at his remarks, "is that anybody--short of a total idiot--can sell. They may not be world-beaters, but they can sell. All you need to do is give them a set of rules."

"Selling skills," Vern said, holding up the laminated plastic skill guide card that came with her seminar.

"Have you memorized them yet?" she challenged.

"I already know them."

"Then, you haven't been using them," she said. "Your sales aren't up high enough."

"Fingers in other pies," he said.

"Such as?"

"Other businesses," he said. "But, quite frankly, it's not so much that. Lorena and I have been having trouble, and that's taking up most of my time lately."

Mary Fae swallowed a sip of whiskey, then said, "I can appreciate that. It sounds familiar."

"You and Pick."

She nodded.

"You appreciate bluntness," Vern said, deciding to take a chance with this woman, "So I'll be blunt. Pick was a strange choice for you, to say the least."

Mary Fae swirled the whiskey in the glass. "And you'd like an explanation?"

"Yes."

"It's simple," she said. "He was a project. No, that's not quite right. He was a challenge I couldn't resist. He was such a shambles, such a child."

"He's over six feet tall," Vern said. "That's a helluva child."

Mary Fae gave him a scornful look. "Only men think that way. Believe me, women look at Ev and see a helpless little boy who badly needs their attention and who will do all right if you just provide him with the guidance he needs."

"I'll never saw that in him, I'll have to admit," Vern said.

"It's a blessing for him, and a curse for all the women he attracts."

"All the women? He doesn't like he could handle one."

"Trust me," Mary Fae said. "He'll never lack for women in his life. And it'll all be to their regret."

"Bitter?"

"About Ev? No. He's my one failure, my one problem that I never solved. I do hate unfinished business like that."

"Sounds like you want to give him another try," Vern said.

"Maybe, but I don't think so," she said. "I'll my experience with him as a warning against overconfidence. Ev has been good for me. I think about him, and I stay humble."

After a moment, Mary Fae looked at him and said, "You're smiling. You don't think I'm the humble type?"

Vern laughed. "You're not the humble type, and I wouldn't have you any other way. But I wasn't smiling about that. I was just thinking that Lorena's somewhat the same for me. Like a child who knows the rules but can't help ignoring or breaking them. That's what our fight is all about. She just kept forgetting her half of the bargain. Take care of the house in a decent fashion, that's all I'm asking. She never seems to be able to get it the way it should be. It doesn't take all that much work. She spends more time with those money-burning horses than she does on the dusting."

"I used to ride when I was a girl," Mary Fae said.

"You and every other girl who came into contact with a pony," Vern said. "I can't count how many times I've seen that look on a woman's face. It's enough to make a man wish he was a horse.

Mary Fae laughed. "You don't like horses?"

"I don't like them or dislike them, except when they don't return the investment I put into them," he said. "I grew up out here so I can ride, but I'm not a brainless, bulldogging cowboy without a dime in his pocket from spending all his money on his string and a case of beer, that's for sure."

"I imagine they are expensive," she said.

"Damned expensive. Feed, shoeing, and vet costs, not to mention all the tack expenditures and entry fees for shows."

"The cost of doing business."

"Business, hell," Vern said. "The cost of doing a hobby, mainly. Fortunately, trading horses is like selling cars; you find the right buyer, and you've got a sale."

"Does Lorena mind your selling them?"

"Why should she?"

"Most girls I knew grew very attached to their horses."

"These are too expensive to grow attached to," Vern said. "They're Arabians with good bloodlines."

"What does she do with them? Barrel racing, calf roping?"

"No, she doesn't believe in real work for her horses. She's into the English stuff, jumping and dressage, nothing of any value in the real world."

"It takes some courage to go over those fences," Mary Fae pointed out.

Vern was about to say anybody with half a brain could do it when she added, "I know. I've done it."

"You ride?" he asked.

"Yes."

Vern smiled inwardly. There was opportunity here. He could sense it.

"It can be dangerous, no doubt about that," he said, immediately changing his tack. "Lorena's fallen off more than once, and she broke her arm at the Harvest Invitational over in St. Paul a while back. Of course, she was going over six foot fences, so I suppose it's understandable."

It had only been five foot fences, Vern knew, but he guessed that Mary Fae wouldn't take the bait unless the challenge was great enough.

"Lorena's pretty timid. If she can do six, I'll bet you go higher."

"Such flattery, but I've only done five-and-a-half myself," Mary Fae said.

"I'll tell you what," Vern said. "When you're good and ready, why don't you come out to my place? We'll find a horse, and you can get some practice in."

"It's appealing," she said with a sigh. "But I don't have much time for that kind of thing, any more."

"I seem to recall from your seminar that one of the worst things a salesperson can do is get stale. "You need a break from routine now and then to clear your mind and re-charge your batteries." Is that pretty much a direct quote?"

"It is," she said. "You have a good memory. But I'm always on a plane somewhere. I barely get to ride the horse I've got now, and the cost of another one wouldn't justify the expenditure."

"Who said you had to buy a horse?" Vern said. "All you have to do is come visit here more often. You said you've got complete control of your schedule. Put on some more training sessions in the area, then come out to the ranch. There'll always be a horse there for you. It's the least I could do for the training you're providing my people."

Mary Fae looked at him, her eyes brimming. It unnerved Vern for a moment. She was so self-assured, he didn't think of her as being capable of tears.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll do that."

Vern paid the check, and they went out into the pine-scented evening air. He took her back to the Holiday Inn and shook hands in the lobby. Then, he hopped in his Caddy and headed for the ranch, pleased with the entire evening. They hadn't ended up in bed together, that was true, but he'd found the key that would eventually get them there. She liked horses. But, of course, no common nag would get her into bed and under him. It would take time, but, fortunately, he might just have the horse to get the job done. He looked off into the Hills.

First, there was the matter of the videotape.

## Chapter 38

### The Protector

Juliet had watched the videotape enough that it had become obvious that Mindy had long experience with hidden cameras. The tape plainly showed Vern striking her, and the reporter had caught both their faces in close up--hers in tears and terror and Sarvis' contorted with rage. The best part was the dawning realization on Vern's part when he realized that he'd been caught on tape, then his angry rush toward the camera.

Juliet shut the machine off and leaned back into the couch with a sigh. She had the goods on Sarvis, and there was nothing she could do about it. He had Thor. All she could do was to wait for him to call. Tomorrow, she would make the copy of the tape for insurance.

Turning out the light, she looked out at the night beyond the aging redwood deck and the railing that she kept forgetting to fix. The pines swayed in the warm wind that she had conjured up. The fire danger would be high because of it, she supposed, and she was sorry that she'd grown weary of the weather and decided to change it. She hoped that Vern hadn't put the warmblood somewhere that might be prone to combustion from lightning strokes. Unable to sit still, she got up and paced the living room.

*I have to find Thor, she thought, that's all there is to it. There's no location spell that I'm aware of, but maybe I can complete a divination ritual that will point me in the right direction. The conditions are right. The sun has set, and it's the time of the waxing moon. Everything seems right.*

Going to the kitchen, Juliet pulled two clear glass bowls from the cupboard. She set them on the counter, then went to the walk-in pantry and got the rest of the essential materials. First, she poured well water she'd collected that morning into the bowls. Then, she put red ink into one bowl and blue ink into the other. She carried them to her ritual spot where her protector, a foot-high ivory Buddha, guarded her space. Smiling at him, she thanked him for his protection, then sat down and lit the burner and threw a pinch of henbane into the flame, saying three times, "Henbane is my guide; my future shall be descried." She fixed her sight on a point in the middle of the bowls and slightly crossed her eyes. In a moment, the two bowls became three--one red, one blue, and one both red and blue. Juliet relaxed more, and the two outside bowls disappeared. Only the middle one remained in which she would see the future.

*Except, I don't see anything, she thought with a frown.*

Throwing a larger pinch of henbane on the fire, she tried again. The results were the same. She tried another time, trying not to inhale the pungent aroma of the herb, but it was hard because air currents spread it quickly. She concentrated harder on the bowls, trying to see a future in which her horse could be located. This time, the bowls cooperated. Their shapes wavered like the flame in the burner and merged into one.

Juliet gasped as her own face appeared in the well water, then relaxed as her double smiled and pointed behind her. As she looked in the direction of the pointing finger, her image disappeared and that of a stable sprang up, rushing toward her and dissolving open to show the interior. Thor was in a stall. He stared directly at her and snorted impatiently, as if asking her why she hadn't rescued him yet.

"I'm coming," she reassured him. "I'll find you."

The stallion whinnied and turned its back on her.

"I will," she said. "I will!"

Thor flicked his head toward the interior of the stable several times, and Juliet had a sensation of warmth. She strained to see what the horse was looking at, but the image was disintegrating from the edge inward, as if it were being eaten by an unseen force, and the smaller it got, the hotter Juliet felt as if her divination were throwing out unwanted heat as it disappeared. She sat back as the image snapped itself into nothing and looked down at her body. Sweat stained every part of her blouse and dripped down onto her jeans. She raised an arm and looked at it. Perspiration rolled off her skin like it was rain, and, inside, she burned with fire from the conjuration.

Juliet stood up and caught the back of a chair to hold herself steady while she stripped her clothes off. She ran her hands across her belly, and they came away slick and heavy with moisture. The divination fire rose higher within, and she struggled for breath, then rushed for the deck, slid open the glass door, and ran out into the cool, night air. Her toe caught in a plank, and she stumbled forward into the railing. It held her for a moment, then with an agonized splintering, let her fall into the night air behind the house.

She had time to wish she could weave a protection spell before she hit the ground twenty feet below, but the proper words wouldn't come. She braced for the impact, and it came.

But not as she expected.

She hit someone, hitting him hard enough to drive a huge masculine "Ooofff!" from his body. Juliet bounced down, striking her head against the rocky ground. Light sparkled across her eyes like fireworks as she looked up into the starry sky. She heard a grunting, and then a huge, dark figure stood over her for a moment before striding off into the night.

She closed her eyes and when she opened them again, the figure was above her, kneeling on the deck.

"Use your magic now, Juliet," he said.

The commanding tone told her who it was. Before, she'd thought he was just some stranger who'd happened to be in the right place at the right time, but now she knew. A smile spread across her face.

It was the ivory Buddha.

It was her protector.

The phrase resounded through her head. *Use your magic now, Juliet.*

"I will," she said in a surge of rapture before Mother Earth pulled her into the warm darkness of her womb. "Oh, yes, I will. I will!"

## Chapter 39

### Hide Me

When Ev woke up, someone had placed an enormous weight on his face. He raised his hand to pull it off and winced when he found out it was his nose. He remembered where he was and decided he was going to keep his eyes closed.

*There's nothing I want to see, he thought. My leg hurts, my nose hurts, and if I tried to take a look at what's going on around me, I'll get hurt again. I'm going to stay in this bed forever.*

He would let them feed him and empty his bowels and attempt to figure out what was wrong with him until the day he died. It was a very satisfying solution to the whole matter of his life, as far as he was concerned. He pushed his head back into the pillow, determined to enjoy himself when he became aware of a pleasant sensation. Someone was stroking his hand. The light touch meant it was a woman. Ev panicked for a moment, thinking it might be Mary Rae, then dismissed that thought. She would have brought him out of his sleep with a sledgehammer. He knew it couldn't be Rowena. She had a heavy-handed approach that obviously came from too many years in her profession. When he couldn't figure out who it was, Ev risked opening one eye.

It was Lorena.

Jerking his hand out of her grasp, he did his best to move as far away as possible from her.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking hurt. "I truly am. I didn't mean to get you in trouble. That Rattigan woman scared me so much, I panicked. I thought I was having a nightmare."

Ev didn't say anything. He didn't plan on trusting anyone in this place, and the less he said, the better off he was.

Lorena looked down into her lap, then up at the bed railings. "I got them to take the restraints off," she said. "And I told them that you in no way, shape or form tried to rape that reporter."

"What's more," she added, nodding at the other bed, "I told the sheriff, and he agrees with me."

Ev looked over at Lonny. Gunderson was asleep, but restless in his bed.

*His leg's probably hurting him, Ev thought, and he's probably having the same kind of bad dreams plaguing my own sleep.*

After several moment of silence had passed, Lorena asked, "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Ev shook his head, and she asked, "Why not?"



He remained silent again until she repeated a frustrated, "Why not?"

Looking at her, Ev wondered whether he could risk it or not. It was her bruised face that decided him. It looked like it had troubles in it piled almost as high as his. Her eyes had the transparency that came only from an accumulation of hurts.

"I'll get in trouble," he said finally.

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll get in trouble if I talk. Or move. I'm staying here forever and not moving one inch."

The girl gave him an uncertain look. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I want you to cover me with bandages from head to toe. Just leave me room to breathe. I'll be the soldier in white. They'll keep me spick-and-span."

"What are you talking about?"

"Will you do it, please? You owe me one, now."

"But the doctors and nurses wouldn't let me do that, even if I wanted to," Lorena protested.

"There's always a catch," Ev said and thought for a moment. "Then, wrap me up and transfer me to another hospital. Tell them I'm a medical puzzle that can't be solved. Experts will love that. I'll be a challenge for them. Think of the possibilities. CAT scans, MRIs, nuclear medicine, gene splicing."

Lorena looked about the room as if searching for help.

"There is none," he assured her.

"None what?"

"Help. There is none."

"You're just depressed. After all you've gone through, it's understandable."

"I'm not depressed," Ev said. "After all I've been through, I'm clear-sighted, far-seeing, and altogether prescient."

"What?"

"I can see the future," he said. "I'm not in it."

"How can you see the future and not be in it?" Lorena asked.

"It's not easy, but somehow I've managed it. There will be no me there, I'm sure of that."

He took her hand and patted it. "You won't be there, either."

"You're not making much sense," she said.

"You won't be there, either," he repeated, "unless we do something about it."

"All right," Lorena said. "That does make sense. I'm a practical woman. What can we do about it?"

"Stop humoring me," Ev said. "I don't know what we can do about it. Not yet, anyway. If people will just let me alone, I can think about it and come up with solution. But this is America. Nobody leaves anybody alone, anymore. You can't have a moment's peace."

He stopped patting her hand and grabbed it, squeezing firmly. "That's why you have to get me out of the hospital."

"You're serious," she said.

"Hide me."

She looked around the room again in confusion as if searching for an answer that would placate him.

"I can't do that," she said finally, and he admired her honest reply. "I wouldn't know where to take you. I don't have a home of my own right now. I ran away from my husband. That's why I'm staying with Juliet."

"Just get me out of here, then. I'll find my own place to hide."

"Be sensible, Ev. You can't go anywhere. You need more medical attention."

"I'll heal faster if I'm by myself," he said. "People keep trying to hurt or kill me, so I'm staying away from them."

"I wasn't trying to hurt you," she pointed out.

"But you did."

"I didn't mean to."

"My nose doesn't know the difference."

Ev could see that she was becoming angry. Beneath the bruises, the skin flushed pink.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to make you feel guilty."

"I already feel guilty."

"If you won't help me get out of here, then come visit me. Will that help the guilt?"

"Yes," she said.

"I'd like that," he said.

She smiled. "You enjoy my company."

"I don't know," he said, deciding to be as honest as she'd been. "With you, I might at least have a chance of surviving."

It was the wrong thing to say. Tight-lipped, Lorena said "I'll come visit you" and wheeled herself quickly out of the room.

Ev shut his eyes and cursed his stupidity for not knowing that honesty could be a sword.

He'd just fallen on it.

## Chapter 40

### Tape and Deck

Vern drove his Jimmy up to Juliet's house and parked it by the garage. Although Maj had disagreed, he'd decided that the direct approach was the best way to go with her tonight. He knew women and their horses. They couldn't stand to think of them being hurt. So, he'd detail what he'd do to Thor if she didn't turn over the cassette. The threat would be enough, he was sure of that. If she surprised him and refused, he'd simply take it from her any way he could.

He went up to the front door and rang the bell. When there was no answer, he rang again, then knocked hard. Silence made him open the door and holler inside, "Juliet! It's Vernon Sarvis. Let's talk." There was no answer, so he went in and shouted again. When he didn't hear Juliet's voice, he entered the living room. A peculiar smell in the air made him suppose she'd been burning her herbs again. Checking around, he saw a lit candle over in a corner, its light flickering on an ivory figure of Buddha. Below it were two glass bowls, one filled with a red liquid, the other with green.

"Good God," Vern muttered and turned back to the television and VCR. He searched the tape rack and found nothing. He got up and went around the room, opening drawers, throwing things out and trying to figure out spots where she would have hidden the tape.

After several minutes of searching, he stopped and said, "Wait a minute. I'm dealing with Juliet."

He headed straight for the VCR, turned it on and pushed the eject button. A cassette slid out. Vern laughed, pushed it back in and turned on the television, then started the tape.

"Sure enough," he said as he watched himself launch a good one into Juliet's face.

Stopping the machine, he pulled the cassette out as a gust of warm wind made the curtains flutter. Vern looked and saw that the door to Juliet's deck was open. The far railing was splintered and broken.

*Typical, he thought, she's too busy burning plants to do something practical like fix a dangerous deck.*

He walked out through the door to see if Juliet was in the back yard. Checking both sides of the deck, he saw nothing but heat lightning flaring beyond the Hills. A distant boom rolled across the mountains. He went to the damaged railing and looked out into the dark. The yard light showed him something on the ground.

Right beneath him, Juliet lay naked on the ground.

Vernon looked at the railing again and shook his head. She'd paid the price for her own negligence. Squatting down to get a better view, he saw the huge breasts rising. He was amazed that someone as fat as Juliet could survive a fall of that height onto the rocky ground of the Hills.

*Still, he thought, she'll have to get up all by herself. There's still hope.*

"Use your magic now, Juliet," Vern said and left the deck.

Going out of the house, he threw the cassette in the back seat in the backseat of the Jimmy, wishing that he'd brought the Caddy instead so he could have left the top down to enjoy the warm breeze and a sky heavily laced with glittering stars.

*But, all in all, he decided, it's a good night.*

He gunned the truck down the hill and onto the road, letting the night wind wash away his sweat. Five miles past his place, he cut off the road onto an abandoned fire trail. The vehicle bounced him hard despite its heavy-duty suspension as he stepped on the accelerator, testing his skills at dodging the trees. Half-an-hour later, he broke free of the pines and pushed the Jimmy to the top of the hill and stopped and to down into the pasture. There was a light on in the cabin, so the others had beaten him there.

*Which is fine as far as I'm concerned, Vern thought. A good leader always makes a good entrance and always keeps his men waiting on him. And what he had to tell them tonight would make the wait really worth while.*

Throwing the Jimmy into gear, he headed down the hill at speed, then jolted across the pasture to the cabin. When he got inside, Arlo was lighting another Coleman lamp. Willie sat in the corner, drinking a beer. The secretive park ranger, Marv Pirnie, sat apart as usual, inspecting the blades of his Swiss Army knife. For some reason, Maj Reno and Blue Haller were inspecting the area around the window. There were ten others in the room, all of whom Vern knew except for the neatly-dressed, thin boy who seemed especially interested in the contents of their small library. The teenager had already taken two or three books and was helping himself to several copies of the newsletter. Vern was pleased and irritated at the same time. The organization needed younger blood, but kids had a hard time keeping their mouths shut. After the meeting, he'd find out who brought the teenager and give him hell for breach of security, then talk to the boy to see if he was a risk or had potential. Vern nodded at everyone and called them to order.

"We got a problem, Vern" Reno said before he could get to the first item on the agenda.

"What's that?" Vern said, irritated at the interruption.

"Someone's been in here. The window's broken."

"Could have been hail," Vern said. "Nobody comes out this way."

"Hail doesn't bleed, and it doesn't eat crackers." Maj shook an empty box of Sociables at him

Blue Haller pointed at the wall. "Most of all, it don't take an M24 sniper rifle."

"Jesus," Vern said. "Did they find the mine shaft?"

"No," Maj said. "Everything's accounted for in there."

Vern checked the empty gun cradle. "Shit," he said. "I'd planned to go over an important operation tonight, but it looks like we'll have to punt."

"Yeah," Arlo said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the mine shaft. "Like where are we going to put this stuff now and how are we going to get it there in a hurry?"

"We're in trouble," Willie said.

"Shut up, Willie," Vern said. "We just have to improvise, that's all."

"We need a truck, which you can supply," Blue told Vern. "The question is, where do we put it?"

Vern thought as the group argued for one location over another. The answer came to him when he looked at the tall and edgy ranger. Marv was a man with a useful vigilance.

"We'll put it someplace obvious," he said loudly to quiet everyone.

"What do you mean?" Maj asked.

"Marv, you're going to hide it for us," Vern said.

Pirnie looked up in surprise. "I am? Where?"

"In the cave."

"Are you nuts?" the park ranger asked.

"You've been working there for 20 years, and you've hauled your skinny ass through every inch of it."

"So? It doesn't matter, anyway. You can't haul that stuff through the main entrance. It wouldn't fit. The cave's too small in that section."

Vern said, "We don't have to go through the main entrance."

"That's the only place it can go through."

"How much space does Wind Cave occupy, Marv? How many miles does it stretch?"

"No one knows for sure," Pirnie said.

"Who's explored more of it than anyone else?" Vern asked.

The ranger remained silent.

"And who hasn't told anyone about some unexplored rooms?"

Vern watched Pirnie intently. He was guessing about the ranger's knowledge, but Marv was a man who collected secrets like other people collected beer bottles. Most of them were important only to the ranger, but the man did know the cave.

"I might know a spot or two," Pirnie admitted, "but, Jesus, how are we going to get that shit in there without anyone seeing us?"

"You have access at all times, don't you?" Vern asked. "We go in at night."

The ranger looked around at the others. "It's a helluva job to haul all that in through the cave. I can guarantee it's going to take us more than one night."

"So, it takes more than one night," Vern said. "The decision is made. Willie, I want you to get the truck ready. Blue, you get the weapons and explosives ready to go and coordinate with Willie on getting the stuff loaded. Marv, find a spot in the cave and measure it carefully. Make sure we can get the materials in there. We don't want to haul our behinds all the way in there only to find we've stuck our thumbs up them. Details, gentlemen, always remember the details. If you don't, they'll kill you. When we're ready to go, I'll let you know. If there aren't any questions, you're dismissed."

There weren't any questions, and most seemed glad to leave the cabin. Vern shook his head at their apprehension, but reminded himself that most of them didn't have military training. When the time came, he'd have to keep a tight rein on the group, especially when he laid the big news on them. He listened to engines start up and trucks drive off, then he turned back to the only one left in the cabin.

"Did you get it done?" he asked Reno.

Maj shook his head.

"Jesus! Why the hell not?"

"I didn't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"It blew up," Maj said.

"What are you talking about?" Vern asked.

Reno flicked his fingers upward and said, "Boom!"

Vern remembered the heat lightning he thought he'd seen earlier. "I told you to move it, not get rid of it!"

"I didn't do a damned thing," the bar owner said. "It was gone when I got there. Nothing but ashes and a bad smell. That stuff's volatile. I told Leon to be careful. The moral is, don't use someone who's dumb as a post to cook up the crank."

"Who else is going to do it?" Vern said, kicking a chair. "Besides, how do you know those Mexicans didn't do it?"

"I don't," Maj admitted. "But you know crank. Look at it wrong, and the ether explodes."

"Goddamn it!" Vern swore. "If we're going to get more weapons, we need that money."

"Relax," Reno said. "Maybe Leon or the Mexicans did us a favor. We were going to move anyway, and he destroyed the evidence along with himself. It's cheap shit, easy to make, remember? That's why we got into it."

"It still pisses me off," Vern said. "I wish there was another damned way to make the money. But you're right. We had to find a place for all those pieces, now we'll just have to find one for another lab."

"Any ideas?" Maj asked.

"It's tough," Vern said. "That stuff smells so god-awful when it's being cooked."

He sorted through locations in his mind and didn't hit upon the one he wanted.

"This has been a piss poor night," he said, then laughed, remembering that earlier, at Juliet's place, he'd thought it couldn't get any better.

"Juliet!" he said suddenly.

"What about her?" Reno asked.

"Not her. Her horse. I've got it in a great spot, nobody around for miles."

"What are you doing with her horse?" the bar owner asked.

"Never mind," Vern said, checking the broken window. "Here's a better question to ask. Who the hell broke in here and what does he know?"

Reno suddenly looked uncomfortable.

Vern glared at him. "You know what it is?"

Maj pulled a bloody hospital gown from behind the cot. "I got here before the others and found this."

"Whose is it?"

"It was Pick."

"How do you know that?" Vern demanded.

"Because it's got 'regional' stamped on it."

"And that's all?"

Reno pulled his hat up from his head, something he rarely did, and rubbed his at his long blonde hair. "At the bar the other night, you wondered how he was able to get all the way to Juliet's."

"You shot him up?"

"I didn't shoot anybody up," Maj said. "I gave it to him in the hospital, and he shot himself up, that's all."

"Are you out of your fucking mind?"

"Hell, I was feeling pretty good myself, and he wanted out in the worst way, so I thought I'd help him out. I didn't know who he was at the time."

"Sonuvabitch!" Vern said. He wanted to deck the bar owner, but restrained himself and said, "Pick might just be smart enough to figure it out. That's all we need."

"I don't know," Maj said. "He was in pretty bad shape. Maybe he doesn't remember a thing."

"Maybe," Vern allowed. "As long as no one else knows about it, we're probably safe. Pick's credibility is shot, at the moment."

"Nobody else knows," Reno assured him.

"You're sure about that," Vern asked him sharply. "Who was that kid here tonight?"

Maj gave him a blank look. "You mean you don't know?"

"Goddamn right, I don't know. Who brought him here? It's a violation of security, for Christ's sake."

The blank look continued beneath the hat, irritating Vern but he kept his temper and demanded, "Well?"

"Vern," Reno said in an uncharacteristically soft voice, "he said *you* invited him here."

"Shit and double shit!" Vern said. "What the hell else can go wrong this evening? Find out who he is. I'll take care of Pick. And once we get everything moved, you can have some demolition practice with this cabin."

Under the hat, Maj's eyes gleamed. "All right! Any way I want?"

"Any way you want," Vern said. "Just level it."

Leaving Reno to eyeball the cabin for the best way to destroy it, Vern went out to the Jimmy. Before he stepped in, a hunch made him check the seat. It proved right. The videotape was gone. Vern took a deep breath and looked up into the sky for an answer to the question he screamed into the night air.

"Just what the fuck is going on around here?"



## Chapter 41

### The Nightshade Rises

Juliet woke to the high-pitched scream of a red-tailed hawk. Sitting at the top of a Norway pine, it swayed in the high, warm wind agitating the forest. Light shone on the luminous pink feathers and dark belly band of the raptor's underside. Juliet turned her head toward the east. The beautiful yellow rays of the sun shot from the Badlands into the Hills like spears of self-knowledge.

The hawk screamed again, and she knew its piercing cry had been sent to bring her to consciousness. Sitting up, she smiled at the aches that shot through her body. They were nothing compared to what she'd experienced last night, she knew. She let the pain wash away in the flood of warm memory.

Looking up at the broken railing, she realized it all had a larger purpose. The falling, the landing on her protector, his second appearance on the deck--that had been a mere prelude, an introduction to the visitors that had induced her unconsciousness in order to give her unfettered access to the higher planes.

In the middle of the Black Hills, in the middle of Mother Earth's forest, the Ascended Beings had come to her. They were souls who'd transcended matter and made the evolutionary leap into the Light Body and a higher soul plane long ago. There were only 11 teachers in the world empowered by them to teach the highest levels of the Light Body.

Now Juliet was the twelfth.

And the most important, they'd said.

They did not explain why.

They only said that she was most clear on her intention to go Higher and truly desired the calm and peace of the Soul planes.

She'd accepted the honor without hesitation, knowing it was right. The other teachers were there to lead others into new energetic pathways.

Juliet Moresdon was there to lead them *all* to the Soul's true plane.

Bounding to her feet, she felt light as one of the feathers on the red-tailed hawk. Energy surged through her veins.

*There are things to be done, so many of them, she realized, if I'm to bring the world to the Black Hills, and it's time to get started.*

She went straight to the kitchen to prepare for the journey ahead. She infused 4 grams of chamomile in 100 milliliters of well water to bring peace and ready her mind and body for magic operations. Then, she called the power air and placed a laurel garland over her head to open herself to

the possibility of great fame and victory in her activities. When the spell was complete, she went to the bathroom and drew a hot bath, throwing a handful of thyme onto the water to inspire courage and strength in the difficult situations ahead. About to step into the tub, she realized she'd forgotten one last incantation to insure success. She went back to the kitchen and found her vial of nightshade. Pouring a small amount of the powdered herb into her palm, she went out onto the deck and checked the wind. It gusted hot and dry out of the west, as it needed to be for proper application of *Solanum nigrum*. She called the power air again, then tossed the nightshade into the breeze. The wind swirled it about, blowing some of it back into her face, then scattering it off toward the east. Juliet breathed deeply. The incantation would free her energy and help her find out what she really wanted to do.

She turned back into the living room. It was then she saw the things scattered about the floor.

*I must have been deep into my spell last night to have created this mess and not noticed it at all,* she decided with pleasure.

She couldn't abide a cluttered room, but the disarray pleased her this time. It was proof that her power was increasing, that she had the ability to generate powerful incantations.

The warm, moist air in the bathroom smelled pungently of thyme as she got into tub and slipped into the relaxing water to think. The sheriff had given her the idea for making use of her powers, but she hadn't been able to figure out how to do it until now. And last night she'd seen the future, with all its terrors and wonders, and still not known how to proceed until the Protector had brought her a powerful awakening. Now, as she sank deeper into water that seemed to curl up into the mist of ancient times and times to come, she knew what the future was, and the future had a name.

It was Lyle Teesacker.

Juliet frowned and thought, *That was not quite the name I had in mind, but the future has chosen her as much as I've chosen it, so there was nothing I can do about it.*

She simply couldn't think about it any more. Last night had exhausted her, and she hadn't had anything to eat since yesterday. She was feeling quite dizzy and closed her eyes for some well-deserved rest.

A high-pitched squeal of terror briefly brought her out of her sleep. She nodded sadly at the sound. The red-tailed hawk had got itself a poor cottontail and was probably right now feeding upon it in a clearing close to the house. Juliet wished she had some marjoram to burn to accompany the rabbit in its travel to other worlds, but she was too sleepy to move. She comforted herself by remembering the ancient and insoluble relationship of predator and prey.

It was the natural order of things.

## Chapter 42

### Moses Again

When the sheriff woke to a clattering of trays out in the hospital corridor, it was evening.

*As far as I'm concerned, the orderlies here are noisier than the trustees in my jail and twice as surly,* he thought.

Two of them wheeled an elderly patient by the door, and the smell of incontinence followed in their wake. It briefly dimmed his appetite, but then hunger returned with a sharp pang in his stomach, and Lonny knew he was on the mend. He hadn't felt like eating for days.

The balky air conditioning sputtered to life, quit, then started again, causing the vents to groan as cool air contracted sheet metal. Lonny looked out the window at the cloudless sky, then flicked on the TV and muted it while he waited for the weather conditions to crawl across the screen. When they came, the report said it was already 78 degrees with a high predicted to be 105. The vents continued their annoying grumbling as the sheriff looked over at Pick, wondering if he was feeling better.

It seemed to be. Color had come back into the stubbly cheeks, and his nose had shrunk from the size of a potato to that of a colossal black olive. His eyes were closed, but Lonny had learned that, with Pick, that didn't necessarily mean he was asleep. Ev was a man who kept his own counsel.

*And probably needs to,* Lonny thought, *with all that's happened to him in the past few days.*

He should leave him alone, the sheriff knew, but he couldn't help it. He was feeling good and restless and wanted an answer to the question that had occurred to him earlier in the week.

"Pick," the sheriff said. "Wake up."

Ev didn't move.

"Wake up!" Lonny said. "I want to talk to you."

"I'm not asleep, Sheriff."

"Then why aren't you answering?"

"I'll just get in more trouble."

"Oh, stop feeling sorry for yourself," Lonny said. "I'm feeling better, and you're looking better. I can see it in your face. Talk to me."

Pick turned toward the sheriff and opened his eyes. They looked like bloodshot buttons astride the swollen nose.

"I don't want to."

"Where'd you get that weapon?" Lonny asked. "The one you used as a crutch."

Pick said, "I don't know."

"Did you know what you had there?"

"No, I wasn't in much shape to pay attention at the time."

"It's a sniper rifle, Pick," Lonny said. "An M-24."

"So?"

"Who needs a military sniper rifle in the middle of the Hills?"

"These days, just about anyone who has the cash for them," Pick said.

"And what the hell would they use it for?"

"Popping chipmunks and rabbits, I suppose. There's always somebody out there who loves armament that will do the job ten times over. It's better than sex for them."

"No argument there," the sheriff said. "But this smells different to me. Now, let me ask you again--where did you get it?"

"A cabin, that's all I remember. I had to go in through the window because the door was locked."

"Where's it located?"

"How the hell do I know?" Pick said. "I was out of my head. I don't remember half the trip. It's somewhere between Juliet's place and here."

"Did you at least look around in there?"

"Sheriff, all I saw was crackers, beer and that rifle. There were some crates in back, but I wasn't in the mood to check them out."

"Crates? What'd they look like?"

"Long and green."

"Weapons?"

"Who knows?"

"Jesus, Pick, you were in the Army. You know what military boxes look--what the hell is that?"

A faint thumping had started outside the window, ragged at first, then gaining in intensity. Soon, voices rose above the sound.

"Indians," the sheriff said, answering his own question.

Someone was drumming, and Indian voices chanted in the rising and falling song that always sounded to Lonny like endless repetition of the word "Hey."

He rang for the nurse and, after the third try, Rowena stuck her head in the door.

"What's going on?" he asked her.

"I was just down there. They're serenading you, Sheriff," she said.

"AIM?"

"Yes. They're not happy with the arrests you made."

"Hell," Lonny said, "I'm not the one who poured paint all over Rushmore."

"They say they're outraged and staying until you meet their demands and give them an apology."

"Fat chance on the apology," Lonny said. "What are their demands?"

"I don't know," the nurse said. "Nobody's seen them yet."

Looking down the corridor, Rowena said, "Gotta go. Another patient needs me."

Lonny rubbed at his aching leg, then told Pick as the drumming grew louder, "Shit, I was feeling pretty good when I woke up this morning. Now I'm of the opinion that things couldn't get much worse."

Ev offered him a weak smile and nodded toward the door. Two visitors had just entered the room.

"Hello, Mary Fae," Pick said

"Moses, you're back," Lonny with an equal lack of enthusiasm.

Pulling two chairs up to the foot of the bed, the preacher situated himself between the sheriff and the door. Just as Moses planted his bottom on the seats, the cooling vents coughed and gave a great fading sigh.

As if it knew it had finally met its match, the air conditioning had quit.

## Chapter 43

### The Ascended Beings Rise Ever so Slightly in the Air

Juliet had barely spoken to her sister after she and her husband joined Temple America.

*Trust Wayne to find religion, but not a job,* she thought as she drove up to the dirt road to the Teesacker house. She consoled herself by adding, *But it's not them I've come to see.*

Eileen came out onto the patio as Juliet parked and turned off the engine. Over the roof of the house, dusk was settling upon the mountains, but Juliet could see her sister clearly under the yard light.

*It's like looking at myself,* she thought as she got out of the car, echoing the many reminders people had given them in the days when they still walked the mall together, endlessly hunting bargains.

*Except that Eileen is now twenty pounds lighter than I am,* she amended ruefully as she crossed the heat-stricken grass of the front yard. Every step was filled with the crunch of grasshoppers underfoot as the horde of insects whirred into the air.

Stepping onto the patio, Juliet saw that Wayne lay in a chaise lounge, nursing a Coors as usual. Juliet did what she always did when she saw Wayne--heave a deep internal sigh.

*I have absolutely no idea what she sees in him and never have,* Juliet thought. *He works harder at avoiding success than any man I've ever met. With him, it's a talent.*

Juliet glanced over at the lighted window of their son's room and permitted herself an ever greater astonishment. *How in the world they ever produced a boy like that, I'll never ever figure out.*

Somehow, the union had meshed the intelligence of the Moresdon family with the Teesacker legacy of check bouncing, petty theft and habitual lying to produce a prodigiously gifted teenager with an intelligence so ruthless in its logic it was like talking to a computer.

*He's as unnervingly rational as one of his machines,* she thought, *but he's just what I need right now.*

"Good evening," Juliet said to the Teesackers.

"What do you want?" Wayne asked. He was a small man, both physically and mentally, as far as Juliet was concerned, habitually dressing in a t-shirt, green shorts and thongs. She wondered if he ever changed any item of clothing while wondering at the same time if Moses was able to get any work out of him. Eileen had told her he was working as a custodian at Temple America.

"I came to see Lyle," she said.

Wayne brushed his hand over his stubby brown hair and looked toward his wife. "We don't get people out here in months and, wham, we get three in one night."

"What do you mean?" Juliet asked.

"That FBI agent, Johnson, checked on Lyle earlier, then Moses came and left here about half an hour ago," Eileen said. From the tired thinness in her sister's face, Juliet saw that the weight loss had most likely not been from dieting but from worry about her only son.

"I know why the FBI agent was here, but what about Moses?" she asked Eileen.

"He wants to save Lyle. He wants him back in the flock."

"Your boy left Temple America?"

Eileen nodded. "Said he didn't want anything to do with Moses or religion. It's for idiots, he says."

"Damned fool," Wayne said after a hefty swallow of beer.

*Smart boy*, Juliet told herself while out loud, she said, "That's too bad."

Eileen's husband snorted at this remark. "What do you care? You haven't got any time for Moses, either."

"That's true, Wayne, but despite that, I think a family should stay together."

"There is no family here," Wayne said, "except for Eileen and me. The boy's been too damned good for us for a long time now."

"That's not true," Eileen said. "He's different in many ways, but he's still our son, and he's still part of the family."

"Yeah, right," Wayne said without enthusiasm. "He never comes out of his room. He never comes out in the daytime or does a lick of work around here. Look at that damned stable."

Juliet turned in the direction of Teesacker's pointing finger. The small building was badly in need of paint, and one end of the corral had collapsed onto the ground.

"He's brought us more money than we ever dreamed of, you just remember that, Wayne," Eileen said.

"Money we can't get at because of the feds. Hell, I never dreamed of becoming involved with the FBI, either, woman."

Juliet's sister turned back toward her. "The doctor says Lyle may have agoraphobia, that's why he doesn't come out during the day. Of course, he isn't supposed to go out at night, either, under the conditions of his parole, yet he does it anyway. But he's a sixteen-year-old. You can't expect him to stay cooped up all the time."

"Of course not," Juliet said.

"It makes him do crazy things," Eileen said.



"Like what?" Juliet prompted, seeing that her sister had to get it out of her system.

"Like tonight," Eileen said, wiping her hands compulsively on her dress. "He chased poor Moses out of the room."

"Tell the whole thing," Wayne said. "Don't stop there."

"He threw something at Moses--a modem, I think--and hit him in the head. It left a huge bruise."

"My God," Juliet said. "Did Lyle say why he'd do such a thing?"

Eileen shook her head. "He said he didn't want to talk about it."

"Come on," Wayne said. "Fill in the whole story."

"Oh, shut up!" Eileen shouted and, with her eyes, dared him to respond. When he remained silent, she said in a whisper, "He said he'd kill Moses if he showed up at our place again."

Juliet didn't know what to say except, "I'm sure he didn't mean that."

"I don't know," Eileen said with a stifled sob. "I never know what he's thinking and he's my own son."

Juliet hugged her sister while she thanked her luck that Lyle and the preacher were at odds. It didn't matter what had come between them, as far as she was concerned; it only meant that she had the clear field she'd been expecting with the boy. It was frightening enough to deal with the teenager without added complications.

"Well, his house arrest is nearly over, isn't it?" she said to her sister. "That's something, isn't it?"

Eileen shook her head. "They extended it another six months. The parole officer said he hadn't found any change in Lyle's attitude."

"I'm sorry," Juliet said. "Is it all right if I visit with him? Maybe I can find something out for you. There are times when a teenager will confide in another member of the family when he won't tell his own folks a thing."

Eileen looked over at Wayne, who waved a hand at the house, "Go ahead, talk to him for all the good it'll do. He doesn't listen to anybody."

*Why should he?* Juliet asked silently as she pulled open the creaking screen door and entered her sister's home. *Anybody who could finish a computer science degree at MIT before he was sixteen was not meant to be a listener.*

She knocked on the boy's room and when there was no answer, opened the door and peered in. As small as his father, Lyle muttered something into a monitor and worked the keyboard, not responding to her, "Lyle?" Juliet decided to be patient. She cleared a newsletter called "The High Plains Militia" and tossed it on the bed, then sat quickly and looked around. It was his harshly lit bedroom, she decided, that alarmed her as much as the subject of the book did.

*It's unlike any teenager's room I've ever seen, she decided. The walls should be covered with posters of motorcycles and half-naked women and defiant slogans of rock and roll rebellion. The carpet should be littered with socks and Big Mac wrappers and cups still half-full of Mountain Dew seeping into the fibers. The bed should be rumpled with sheets that haven't been washed, and there should be a smell of a room never aired out. It's none of these.*

Lyle's room was spotless.

The ceiling was white; the walls, devoid of decoration except for a Young Republican poster with a large red X slashed across it, were a light beige; the carpet a dark brown. The only sign of clutter was in the tangle of cables leading to and from printers, monitors, scanners and fax machines. The only smells in the room were those of strong coffee and ozone from machines that apparently hummed twenty-four hours a day. The only reading material was computer manuals in a cheap white bookcase. Except, Juliet noted, for the pile of books and newsletters on the reading table beside Lyle's bed. She craned her neck to read the titles. One of them said *ZOG, Zionist Occupational Government*. She had no idea what that book was about, but she had no trouble recognizing the title above it. It was *Mein Kampf*.

Swinging abruptly away from the computer, the boy startled her with the flopping of the bright red hair he'd inherited from his mother. It was divided exactly in the middle and hung on either side of his face down to his jaw line, making it look as if someone had opened a book on the top of his head and let the pages hang over his ears.

"More house arrest, huh?" she said, hoping to strike a note of empathy with her sister's son. Lyle didn't like to talk with "idiots," which left few people in the world able to meet his standards as far as he was concerned.

"What do you want, Aunt Juliet?" he asked in his brusque manner while he scratched at an itch beneath his immaculately white t-shirt. Dressed in baggy blue jeans, Lyle looked like a typical teenager, but his voice had nothing of a teenager's cracking in it. It was as steady and precise and modulated as one of his machines.

"But they let you have your computer back?"

"As long as I stay out of all financial institutions, government programs, and any military operations. They monitor me constantly to make sure it doesn't happen."

Juliet looked around nervously. "You mean they've bugged your room?"

The boy gave a small exasperated grunt of contempt. "No, they monitor my system, and the FBI agents check on me on a regular basis. Now, what do you want?"

"Help."

"Doing what?"

"Getting my message out."

Long fingers flicked hair out of his eyes, revealing the smooth white skin of a young face. "What message?" he asked.

"I want to get the word out about the Gathering."

Lyle drank from a can of Surge, then asked without any apparent interest, "And what is the Gathering?"

She decided to be direct. "It'll be an event at my place to celebrate the coming of the Ascended Beings."

"I'll bite," he said. "Who or what are the Ascended Beings?"

"They're people who've gone on before us by evolving to a higher plane."

"Sounds like New Age bullshit to me," Lyle responded in his typically direct manner. Flowers and herbs and magic and brains gone soft as Jello. You're as nutty as the preacher."

Silently, Juliet recited an incantation to keep her temper in check. After all, she told herself, she was dealing with a 16-year-old, not an adult.

"I hope you're not going to hit me as well," she said.

Lyle's eyes flicked up and down her body as if the effort wouldn't be worth it.

"Why did you hit him?" Juliet asked.

"None of your business," he responded with heat. "None of your goddamned business."

"All right, all right," she said. Anyway, it doesn't matter what you think about what I'm doing, does it, as long as you're paid for it?" she said.

Lyle shrugged while he flicked a bit of perforated paper from his jeans. "Since you came to me, I assume you're talking about a Web page. That doesn't interest me much, no matter how much the money. I create them all the time. It's wallpaper for me. No challenge, especially for crackpot ideas."

"I'm not a crackpot!" Juliet said.

"In my book, you are," her nephew said. His eyes, intensely blue, regarded her as a computer would--objectively and without interest. "In fact, in just about everyone's book around here, you are."

"I read somewhere that the Net has room for everyone," she said.

"That's true," he said. "But that doesn't mean I have to make that room. Find someone who shares your silly beliefs."

"No one around here has your kind of ability, you know that."

"Too bad," he said.

"You don't want money, and you don't like what I believe in."

"That about covers it, Aunt Juliet."

"There's nothing that will convince you to help me?"

"I can't think of a single thing," he said.

"I can."

He sipped his Surge again. "And what's that?"

"I was thinking about more than a Web page, actually."

"Explain."

"Well, it would depend upon your ability and whether you're up to the job or not. You--" she began.

"Trying to challenge me?" Lyle asked. "You're not very good at tricks. You're as transparent as glass."

"I suppose I am, aren't I?" she said.

"Just get to the point," he replied.

"Okay. The point is that I was thinking with your abilities you would be able to get me air time on local television. Free air time. You see, I don't have much money left and in order for the Gathering to be a success I have to get the word out so I can bring in the funds I need."

Lowering the soft drink, Lyle stared hard at her. "You want advertising free, and you want me to violate several FCC laws at the same time?"

"Well, yes," Juliet said, nervous under Lyle's ability to go without blinking for long periods of time. It made her feel like she was being dissected under a microscope. "Can you do it?"

"The question is not can I do it, but will I do it?" he answered.

"Will you?" she asked.

"Aunt Juliet, I'm under house arrest. FBI Special Agent Johnson checks on me all the time. All my money is tied up by the feds, pending the completion of the investigation. Even if I wanted to do it, it'd be hard to accomplish with everybody on my tail all the time."

"Your mom says you leave the house at night," Juliet pointed out.

"I do," Lyle answered, "but I come back. Physically, I'm no match for an FBI agent. Johnson would catch me unless I had someplace definite to go to."

Juliet thought for a moment, wondering if the boy was slyly seeking her help, then took a deep breath and asked, "Do you want help getting out of here?"

The teenager raised an eyebrow. "I'd guess that would fall somewhere under aiding and abetting or something like that, Aunt Juliet. Are you willing to chance prison time?"

"Yes," she said. "There's a higher purpose here, and I intend to pursue it no matter what the consequences."

"Fuck the higher purpose," the teenager said.

Juliet held her temper. Lyle was the smartest person she'd ever met in her life, but he was still a sixteen-year-old, she reminded herself, full of crudeness and a willingness, a need, to shock his elders.

*In that, at least, she thought, he's like any normal teen.*

"Fine," she said. "But however you feel about what I'm doing, if I can get you free, will you do it?"

Lyle gave an infuriating shrug of his skinny shoulders. "Maybe."

She decided to try a different tack. "I read somewhere that you hackers--if that's the right term--like to impress each other with your abilities.

The teenager shrugged again. "That's a given."

"Well, wouldn't something like what I've proposed put your name on the computer world's map, Lyle?"

"We live in South Dakota, Aunt Juliet. The rest of the country doesn't even know we exist, except for Rushmore. That means nobody would care. Local happenings don't mean a thing unless they occur in New York, Washington, or the West Coast."

"Well, then, just think of it as a start," she said in frustration. "You're the smart one. There must be something you could do nationally with it eventually, isn't there? Isn't that what this new technology is all about--finding as many applications for it as possible?"

The first glimmer of interest showed in the boy. Juliet knew because his eyes melted from an icy blue to a softer tone.

"You have an idea?" she asked.

Lyle didn't answer a long time, acting as if he were checking some internal processor to make sure his calculations were correct.

"Lyle?" she prompted.

Breaking his interior gaze, the teenager gave her a twitch of a smile. "I'll do it."

"Just like that--you'll do it?" she asked.

"I make quick decisions, Aunt Juliet. That's part of what makes me as good as I am."

Juliet wasn't so sure about his reasons, but it was the first step toward putting the Gathering into public view, so she wasn't about to press him further.

"First, I need to get out of here," he told her, "then I'll need a place to hide and good equipment unless you can figure out a way of getting my system out of here with me."

Taking a deep breath and hoping that Ev would have the money she planned to ask for, she continued, "I'll give you all the equipment you need free and you can set up shop wherever you feel is safe."

A smile broke out beneath Lyle's sharply-ridged nose like a sudden crack in tempered glass. "So, how do you plan to get me out of here?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't normally do this kind of thing, you know."

"Maybe I can be some help in that area," Lyle said in a dry, insulting tone.

"Do you have a plan already?" she asked.

"Of course not. I'll have to think about it for a bit," he answered.

Juliet was satisfied with this answer, but couldn't help worrying about her sister. "But what about your parents? They're bound to ask questions."

"Frankly, they'll be glad to be rid of me, won't they?" he said. "I've been a real disappointment to them lately. All that money my Dad planned to spend, and now it's all frozen in the accounts."

"How do you feel about leaving them?" Juliet asked.

"Whatever," the boy said in an irritable tone that said he was bored with the conversation now that the main points had been established.

Juliet could well imagine her sister wanting the boy out of the house. Eileen had told her often enough over the phone that Lyle rarely came out of his room, except for food or to violate his sentence by driving off into the night in the used Blazer he'd bought with his own money from the sale of his computer game, *Planetbreaker*. Neither she nor her husband could do much with him, she'd confessed. The boy had unnerved them from childhood. he'd been neat and polite and read books at a rate that kept them charging off to the library on a daily basis until Eileen had bought him his first computer. That was the last they'd really seen of him, Eileen had joked, but Juliet had not sensed humor in her sister's tone. It was more of a weary puzzlement, as if the boy were an incomprehensible burden that had been visited upon them. By helping Lyle escape, she would be removing that burden. It was all working out so well, she thought, it was obvious that the Ascended Beings were at work in her.

"Are we agreed then?" she asked.

He nodded.

"When do you want to get started?"

"I'll think about the plan and make a list of the equipment I'll need," he said. "As soon as you get the equipment, we'll be ready."

"How do I get hold of you?" she asked. "I don't think we should use the telephone."

Lyle thought for a moment, then said, "Meet me at Turner Wash at 1:00 a.m. tomorrow night."

"That quickly?" Juliet asked.

"If I'm not there, it means the FBI agent is around. Do the same thing the next night until I show up."

"Fine," Juliet said. She went out the door and had started down the hall when Lyle called after her, "Close it."

As Juliet grabbed the handle, Lyle was already at his computer. She was about to swing the door shut when she heard a strange sound. The boy tapped impatiently on his mouse as he stared into the screen, but that was not the noise she was hearing. She listened for a moment, trying to isolate it, then knew what it was.

Lyle hummed in a low rasping tone along with his computer. Her nephew's voice harmonized tunelessly with the machine in front of him. Juliet shivered at the sound as she closed the door.

It was the steady, whirring drone of endlessly patient power.

## Chapter 44

### A Pressing Engagement

"I've been to see you every day, just as I promised," Mary Fae told Ev as she pulled a chair up and sat down. "Aren't you pleased?"

Ev closed his eyes and didn't answer. The air conditioning had quit, and sweat trickled down into his wound, driving him mad with its itching. To make things worse, an orderly had just mopped the floor, adding more moisture to the air.

"My, you are ungrateful, aren't you?" she said. "I bring you all the latest news, and you don't care."

"My profoundest thanks," he said.

"You're welcome. Today, I have some good news for you and some bad."

"Let me hear the good first."

"I'm leaving this afternoon."

Ev opened his eyes and saw that Mary Fae was dressed in a black business suit with a diagonal slash of white running from the padded shoulders across to her slim hips. Framed by her blonde hair, her face was fashionably pale above the white silk scarf. Dark, amused eyes watched him as tiny beads of sweat rolled down her temples.

"No, I'm not kidding," she said. "I'm not as cruel as you think I am. I *am* leaving. I have contracts to meet, you know, but I will be back. I'm taking up riding out here."

"Someone besides me, you mean?"

Mary Fae tsk-tsked him. "Not kind, Everett. But, you'll be glad to know you'll have some relief from me for the next few weeks. I'm in Chicago, then on to LA."

"Have a good trip," he said. "What's the bad news?"

"Superamerica is pressing charges for the gasoline you stole on your trip out here."

"They can get in line like everyone else," he said.

"I also found out that there are rumblings at home about extraditing you back to Eden Valley on child molestation charges."

"I never hurt a child in my life, Mary Fae, and you know it."

"I know," she said, but there was a vengeful smile on her lips.

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?" Ev said.

Mary Fae ignored the question, instead saying "I forgot the other piece of good news. That Rattigan woman is willing to drop the rape charges."



Ev got excited for a moment, then let reality bring him back to earth. "In exchange for what?"

"An exclusive, live interview with you."

Ev stared at his ex-lover, then said, "No."

"No?" she said. "That's it? You're willing to face the possibility of prison rather than go on television?"

"Yes."

"But it's a chance to tell your side of the story. Think of the exposure."

"I am," Ev said. "Believe me, I am."

Now Mary Fae stared at him in disbelief. "In politics and business, there's an old saying, Ev--perception is everything. If you refuse to be interviewed and go to trial, everyone will think you're a rapist."

"They already think that," he said.

"You're not considering the big picture," she said. "If you talk to her, then you've got all the tie-ins--articles, maybe a book, maybe a pay-per-view interview. That'll give you the money you need to fight all the other charges you're facing."

"No," Ev said.

"Is that all you can say?" Mary Fae said.

"Yes."

"These are not the times to be a man of few words, Everett Pick."

"I'm very aware of that," he said.

"I don't think so; otherwise, you'd be defending yourself with everything you've got."

"Haven't we had this argument before?" he asked wearily.

"Yes, dammit! And we'll keep on having it until I get it through your head that you have to stand up for yourself--nobody else will."

"She's right, you know," a loud voice said from the other side of the room.

Ev looked in its direction. Moses still sat on the two chairs at the foot of the sheriff's bed. Lonny had a pained expression on his face. His eyes were closed, and his nose was wrinkled. Ev could see why. The air conditioning had quit, and the preacher looked like he was being done on a spit. A high tide of perspiration swept down his florid cheeks, washing away the handkerchief every time he applied it to his bruised forehead, and rolled down folds of flesh in the neck and onto the suit where it added salt to the deposits already extensive in the armpit areas.

"You do have to stand up for yourself. It's the only way," Moses said. "Those who don't get themselves run over."

"Blessed are the less than meek," Ev said.

The preacher shrugged his shoulders, and the fabric of his blue suit billowed like the ocean. "You have to deal with life as it is. The Lord helps those who help themselves."

"How come you're so concerned with my welfare all of a sudden?" Ev asked.

"Every man is my concern," the preacher said.

"My ass."

A snort of laughter escaped the sheriff's mouth, but he kept his eyes closed. Moses glared at him, then at Ev.

"All right then, Everett Pick, it's true I have little time for destroyers of property and child molesters and rapists, but neither can I stand to see someone just roll over and not fight for themselves."

"Why don't you let me make my own decisions--both of you?"

"Because you won't," Mary Fae said, "that's why someone has to do it for you."

"That's right," the preacher said.

Ev watched as his ex-girlfriend smiled with approval at Moses. The preacher returned a beaming smile, sat a little straighter in his chair, then shook himself into a serious expression aimed at the sheriff.

*Now there's a match made in hell,* Ev thought

"But that's not why I came here," Moses said. "Sheriff, stop ignoring me. I told you, I know what Juliet is building out there."

"Sheriff?" he prompted in a sharp tone.

"Leave me alone," Lonny said. "I've got a headache the size of your Temple revenues."

"Sheriff!" the preacher said sharply.

Opening his eyes, Lonny turned his head toward Ev and asked, "Why is it that the more income people earn, the more reluctant they are to talk about it? The entire American capitalist system is designed to earn profits and what's the one thing you can't talk about?"

"Money," Ev said, supplying the expected answer.

"Sheriff! We're not here to talk about non-profit earnings--" Moses began.

"Of course not," Lonny interrupted.

"We're talking about Juliet," the preacher said, plowing on. "We're talking about--"

An irate expression settled on Lonny's face, and he asked, "How do you know what she's building?"

"Because I saw it!" Moses said.

"You've been on her property?"

"No, I can see it from the Temple grounds."

"How'd you get that bruise?" the sheriff pressed.

The preacher covered the wound with his handkerchief. "In scrambling up a hill to get a better look, I knocked a large rock loose, and it struck me in the head. It knocked me down, as a matter of fact, but I got up and carried on."

"Your bravery has been a legend since we were kids together," Lonny said. "So, what did you see?"

"There's no need to be insulting," Moses said. "It's all true."

The sheriff nodded and made a "Get on with it" motion with his hand.

Ev watched the preacher lean as far forward as his stomach would let him. "It's an altar for worship."

"How do you know this?" the sheriff asked.

"What other purpose could it have?"

"You never know with Juliet," Lonny answered with an apologetic glance toward Ev.

"Sheriff, it's a pole that's at least a hundred feet high or more. It's not finished yet."

"So?" the lawman said. "Her father left her money. She can waste it as she wants. It's her property--you of all people should respect that. I don't see Juliet pissed because you built your Temple and that TV station on your land."

"Sheriff!" Moses said in exasperation. "I saw it--it's covered with crystal and copper and leather. Those are signs of heathen and New Age worship."

"What's the one thing businessmen worship the most and yet can't stand?" the sheriff asked, turning to Ev again.

"Competition," Ev answered.

The preacher's deep voice thundered in the room. "I am *not* a businessman. I am a religious leader!"

"It's okay, Moses," the sheriff said. "In the U.S., it's all one and the same these days."

"This is Christian country around here," the preacher said, pronouncing his words slowly as if he were talking to a little boy who needed considerable enlightenment. It was not the right tone to take, Ev saw. Lonny's face hardened at the words.

"And a Christian country," the preacher continued, "Does not tolerate anti-Christian practices."

"Maybe not, Moses, but the law does, and I'm sworn to uphold the law, not you."

"I want you to take a close look at that altar."

"For what?" the sheriff asked. "It's none of my affair."

"If not for my sake, then for the sake of the county. I'd wager it violates building codes."

"This is South Dakota, Moses. Codes are against the unwritten law of the frontier spirit."

"Then it must be a hazard to air traffic. There are no lights on it."

"For God's sake," Lonny said. "Give it up, will you? I know that area. The mountains around it are at least a thousand feet higher. A pilot would have to be totally incompetent to hit Juliet's whatever."

The preacher leaned back in his chairs with an air of satisfaction as if he'd finally led the sheriff to where he wanted him. "Then, what about drugs?"

Lonny looked sharply at him. "Now that gets my attention."

"I could smell them."

"From across the canyon?"

Moses nodded.

"You have a helluva smell," the sheriff said. "You sure you weren't on her land?"

"I swear," the preacher said. "I was downwind, that's how I could smell it."

"What'd it smell like?"

"There were two odors," Moses said. "One was kind of sweet and sharp; the other was a pungent and strong smell, like some kind of herb or plant."

"Well, I'll send Arlo out to investigate," the sheriff said before any more words could escape the preacher's mouth. "That's about all I can do for you right now."

"I want your personal involvement."

"Moses, do I look like I'm going anywhere?"

"Then I want you to call Arlo immediately and tell him to get out there."

"You can want all you want," Lonny said. "When you're sheriff, then you can give orders."

"I'm going to sit here until you do."

Ev watched the sheriff's eyes narrow at this remark.

"You'll never last beyond supper time," Lonny said.

"I'm a man of great patience and resolve when I have to be," the preacher said. "It's only a phone call. Do it now. Or the Temple will have to do something about it."

The sheriff pushed himself up in bed and pulled antacid from the tray. Gulping it down quickly, he took a hard look at the corner of the room as he wiped chalky froth from his lips. He whipped the sheet to one side and sat up cautiously.

"You'll never get past me, sheriff," Moses said.

"I don't want to get past you," Lonny said, grunting as he pushed himself into an upright position. He pulled the tray close, then used it as a crutch as he worked his way past Ev's bed and Mary Fae.

"What are you doing?" the preacher asked.

The sheriff didn't answer. He had nearly reached the spade when Mary Fae snatched it away from him. Although she was a strong and tall woman, next to Lonny she looked like a little girl holding a sandbox shovel.

"You're not going to hit him," she said.

"Who's going to hit him?" Lonny answered and ripped the spade out of her hands.

"Then what are you going to do with it?" she demanded.

The sheriff ignored the question and shuffled toward the boarded up window.

"Pick," he said. "You want to show me how you did this?"

Mary Fae screamed and grabbed hold of the spade handle again. For the first time, Ev was able to appreciate how strong she really was. The sheriff, nearly two heads taller than she was, tried to tear the shovel back out of her grasp, but she hung on even when Lonny braced his back against the wall and lifted her up into the air. She kicked him in his bad leg, and Ev saw him wince and almost go down. Instead, he overbalanced and fell away from the wall just as Moses heaved his bulk free of the chairs. The preacher seized the handle and pulled it hard. The sheriff and Mary Fae crashed into Moses, and all three of them fell toward Ev's bed.

Ev could see it coming--it was like watching the walls of an imploded building toppling in slow motion--but there was nothing he could do about it. His bad leg was tangled up in the sheet and he couldn't get it loose. The objective part of his mind estimated that a total of nearly 800 pounds was coming down on him; the rest simply screamed along with the falling bodies.

Moses hit him first, and that was enough to collapse the bed hard to the floor in a screeching of metal, then Lonny and Mary Fae followed, driving the wind out of his lungs. The impact threw glittering lights across his darkened eyesight, then he tried to breathe.

And couldn't.

Struggling to get free of the crushing weight, Ev found he couldn't move. A vision of his burial in the Badlands flashed through his head, and he panicked, straining to wriggle out from beneath the preacher. It didn't work. He was trapped. The only thing he could move was his nostrils, and the all that brought him was the antiseptic odor of the sheriff's healing leg, Mary Fae's strong perfume, and, most of all, the sour, sweaty smell of Moses

Then, Ev felt a hand grab his and pull hard. A second tug made him realize he might live, and he began squirming in the direction of the helping hand. One last hard jerk pulled him free, and he heard the preacher hit the floor with a huge "Ooof!" Ev lay gasping for air for what seemed like an eternity, then when he had enough breath, thanked his savior.

"Thank God, you came along!" he managed to say, then opened his eyes. When his eyesight cleared, he saw who it was.

Dressed from head to toe in a hooded robe of immaculately white cotton, Juliet stood above him, holding a wooden staff wrapped in copper and rawhide and topped with a large, beveled crystal. A beatific smile floated on her face, looking as if it were towing the rest of her body behind it. Her brown eyes glowed with purpose and satisfaction. Ev rolled his head to one side and looked at the flailing bodies struggling to get loose of each other. For a moment, he considered crawling back beneath Moses and letting the inevitable happen. It seemed more peaceful. He'd escaped death only to run up against the one obligation he couldn't possibly shirk.

He owed Juliet one.

What was worse, by the expression on her face, she knew it.

Stretching out her hand again, she helped him to his feet.

"Come on, Everett Pick," she said in her helium voice. "The doctor says you can go home."

As she maneuvered him toward a chair, she said, "What's that spade doing in the corner?"

"Never mind."

He ignored the curious look she gave him.

"Does anybody have a claim on it, Ev?"

He glanced over at Mary Fae, who was busy smoothing out her dress while she snapped at the prostrate sheriff and preacher.

"No," he said.

"Then, it's mine," Juliet said. "I might as well take something useful home with me."

## Chapter 45

### Tarot, Taroo--Ev Gets the Gathering Explained to Him

"Juliet, why did you want me back here from Minnesota?" Ev asked. "The real reason."

"I'll show you," she said, pulling the hem of robe high to get it out of the dew. Her other hand held the oaken power rod. Light refracted off the crystal she'd set on top of the staff, sending blinding flashes into Ev's eyes. She added, "It's just over the hill."

"Damn, I'm tired. My leg hurts," Ev said. "I don't know if I can make it up that far. What's so important, anyway? It's just the meadow on the edge of the canyon, isn't it?"

"I told you, I'll show you, Ev."

"Mysteries. I don't like mysteries, Juliet. You know that."

"Oh, come on, anyway," she said. "Stop complaining, and I'll help you get up there. We could have ridden horses like I suggested."

"Not a chance," Ev said. "My leg would hurt worse from the pounding a mount would give it."

"Then, be quiet, and we'll take our time getting up there. It's a beautiful day, and you're home. What more could you ask?"

Ev resigned himself to limping up the hill.

*It is a beautiful day*, he thought. Over the mountains, the sky was cloudless and intensely blue, making it easy to spot the hawks circling in the updrafts. The smell of pine and clover sweetened the air. Jays kibitzed on their progress as they trudged up the worn path to the ridge of the hill. Ev reached the top out of breath and with his leg complaining fiercely about overuse.

Pointing the power rod down toward the canyon, Juliet swept her arms wide, Ev looked at where she pointed and asked the first question that popped into his mind.

"What the hell is it?"

"It's the Gathering Place," she answered.

Using his cane, Ev sat down gingerly, stretching the bad leg out straight. "Which explains nothing," he said. "I recognize the Faery Cabin, but what are all those other structures?"

She pointed them one by one. "There's the sweat lodge. The pyramid shaped one is the Soundchamber, where you can listen to the music and voices of the Ascended Ones. The Tipi on the Meadow--Ray Iron Eagle helped me raise that and the sweat lodge."

"Who's Ray Iron Eagle?" Ev asked.

"A Lakota medicine man," she answered. "A very wise man."

*Probably because he's a lot richer now,* Ev thought sourly. *Con men came in all sizes and shapes.*

Instead of voicing this thought, he asked, "What's that in the middle of everything?"

Juliet smiled, coyly he thought, and said, "You should recognize that, Ev. I have something like it with me everyday."

Ev studied her until his eyes stopped on the staff in her hand. "It's another power rod?" he asked.

"Yes!" she said, pleased as a child. "That's what it is. A giant power rod. The biggest ever."

"Okay," Ev said. "Then the next question is 'Why?'"

"To provide an avenue, a channel, to the Higher Plane so we can join the Ascended Beings."

"Oh," Ev said. He looked down the hill again, noticing the heavy equipment clustered around the pole.

*That crane and all the other machinery must have cost a pretty penny,* he thought. A sudden suspicion struck him so he ventured, "It must be an expensive proposition."

When his ex-wife sighed dramatically, the suspicion was confirmed. "Yes, it is."

"You need more money?"

Bowing her head, she looked down at him out of the corner of her eyes like a little girl who's asked for something she knew she shouldn't have, but wanted anyway.

*All you need to do now is bat your lashes at me,* Ev thought. To forestall that possibility, he asked quickly, "How much do you owe?"

"Oh, several thousand to Jim DeHuis, but that's not really the important part," she answered.

"I'll bet it is to Jim."

"When I was at the sheriff's office, Lonny gave me a good idea, one I should have thought of myself, but I just wasn't thinking big enough. I've tried to get people around here to share in my mission, but they're too hard-headed to accept anything new. Lonny suggested I go national and attract people from the coasts."

"The sheriff suggested that?" Ev said.

"Oh, he meant it as a joke. He just wanted to get rid of me like he always does, but when I considered it, I thought it was a great idea."

"What do you plan to do then?" Ev asked.

"Advertise, of course. In all the New Age magazines, of course, but I'm thinking of a larger market you can reach with television. We can only pay for local advertising, of course, but you never know--it could lead to



something big, something that will attract thousands of people so they can share in the joy of the Ascended Beings."

Ev considered the prospect of crowds- trampling the meadow and was not pleased at the prospect.

"Juliet," he said, "I don't have any money to give you."

"You don't?" she said in genuine surprise.

"No."

His ex-wife said, "Teachers are always so conservative, or at least they're thought of that way by the banks which makes people like you such good credit risks."

"Most teachers *are* good credit risks," Ev said. "*I'm* not."

"Why not?"

"Juliet, I've put most of savings over the past few years into a very bad investment--booze."

"You?" she said. "You never had a problem with the bottle when we were together."

"That you knew of," he said.

"All those years together, and you still had secrets from me," she said in an accusing tone.

"It was no secret, Juliet. You just didn't see it, that's all."

His ex-wife poked at the ground with her power rod, obviously disappointed. Well," she said after a moment's consideration, "could you borrow some?"

"Juliet, do I look like the kind of person a banker would feel secure with? I have a few hundred dollars in the bank, and I'm a man the law wants to see. Use some sense here."

Frowning, she said, "I was hoping to get things rolling with a new computer system to organize things."

"Juliet, unless you've changed in the last few years, you don't know anything about computers."

"That's still true, Ev, but I can hire people to do that kind of thing."

"Which calls for more money."

"Yes."

"You've spent all your father's money on the Faery Cabin and the pole and all those other things?" he asked.

"Most of it. Chief Iron Eagle finds me what I need."

"Well, Juliet," he said. "I don't know what to tell you. You got me all the way out here--to spite Mary Fae, I thought--and here we are--I'm broke, and you're broke. You'll just have to give up the idea."

"Not a chance, Everett Pick! This is truly an idea whose time has come. I'd been shirking my calling if I didn't have the Gathering ready by the time of next year's vernal equinox."

"Why then?" he asked.

"It's the time of convergence, the time of greatest power and connection," she said. "It's the time for successful joining with the Ascended Beings."

Ev muttered to the ground, causing Juliet to ask a sharp, "What did you say?"

"I said, I thought you'd changed," he answered with equal sharpness. "In the letter, you said you'd changed. I was hoping it was true."

"It is true!" she said. "I have changed! I have my eyes on a higher purpose. Can't you see that?"

"No," he said. "I don't see one damned bit of change, just another chasing after the latest craze."

"You're such a cynic, Everett Pick. You don't believe in anything, do you?"

"What I don't believe is that you've changed," he answered.

"Well, I have," she said, setting her lips into a thin line of self-righteousness. "Like I said, I have a calling, and I intend to honor that calling, no matter what it takes."

"Money is apparently what it takes," Ev pointed out. "You haven't got any of that, from what you tell me."

"All I need is a few thousand dollars for the computer equipment, then the money will generate itself."

"Juliet, it takes more than a monitor and a CPU to make an event happen. You need organization and staff."

"Not in this case," she responded. "Not initially, anyway."

"I don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"I can't tell you right now," she said.

Ev frowned. "It's not something illegal, is it?"

"No, no," she said. "It's just that I can't let word get out. There are other people who hold these gatherings, you know, and they're not above stealing good ideas."

"I'm sure," Ev said in a tone that provoked his ex-wife to say, "Don't condescend to me, Everett Pick."

"Juliet, you've never organized anything larger than your closet. What makes you think you can pull something like this off?"

"I told you, I have a higher purpose now. That makes all the difference," she said with a fiercely determined expression.

"All right, all right," Ev said, "but you brought me here for money, and I have none to give you. Why should I stay?"

"Because you want to, that's what I'd hope," Juliet answered. "Or because you have to."

"Well, I don't want to, that's for damned sure. And nobody but you wants me around."

"You can't go back to Minnesota," Juliet said.

"No."

"Then why not make yourself useful around here until this whole thing is resolved?" she said.

Ev looked back at the house. "I don't know. Your house guests don't particularly like me."

"I've told them you're innocent of those rumors of child molestation," she said.

"They don't seem to believe it."

"Well, I've given you a look at the Gathering site, so let's go back. I have something I need to do concerning Lorena."

"What?" Ev asked.

"It'll be easier to show you than tell you."

By the time they reached the house, Ev's leg ached with the ferocity of a bad toothache. He found the aspirin, then joined Juliet in the living room.

"What are you doing, Juliet?" Ev wearily asked his ex-wife as he watched her unfold a silk cloth on a small table to reveal a deck of cards. He reached out to pick up a card, but she slapped his hand away.

"I just want to see what they look like," he said.

"Don't touch them, Ev!"

"Why not? What are they?"

"They're tarot cards. Another person must never touch your deck. If you do touch them, then it will disturb my vibratory bond to the deck by mixing up your vibrations with mine. I keep it in my pocket at all times to increase the impregnation of my vibrations, and I don't want them messed up."

"They're just cards," Ev said, sighing inwardly. "You probably sleep with the damned things."

"As a matter of fact, I do," she replied. "Under my pillow."

"No surprise there," Ev said under his breath.

"If you're going to make snide comments, make them to my face," Juliet said. "Otherwise, don't make them at all."

"Sorry," Ev said, feeling as if he'd just been reprimanded by Lydia Ellwood. His heart felt a pang at the thought of the principal. He wondered how her rehabilitation was going. "What's all the rest of this stuff?"

"The silk cloth protects the cards from outside vibrations when I'm not using them. It's my Soul Color of royal blue."

"Soul Color?"

"Soul Color," she affirmed without explanation and tapped on a wooden box. "When I don't have the cards in my pocket, I keep them in

this mahogany box. It further protects the cards from negative influences--like you."

"What's this other cloth?" Ev asked, letting her comment slide by. "It's the same color as the other one."

"It's also made of silk," she said. "It's the tarot cover. It prevents me from picking up distracting influences."

His ex-wife gave him a penetrating look after this last remark until he said, "I'll try not to disturb your vibrations. What's next?"

"I have a Daily Record Book to record information I might not understand immediately," she answered. "And you'll notice I pulled this old writing table out of the bedroom. It's made of solid pine, the wood that's been preferred by Tarot Masters down through the centuries. The natural vibrations of the pine increase my awareness and help me tune in to the higher energies."

"Fine and dandy," Ev said, "but what's this got to do with Lorena Sarvis?"

His ex-wife held her hand up. "I want to ask the cards about her future."

Ev could help it. He made a disparaging noise. "They're just cards. They can't tell anything about the future."

"Oh, yes, they can," Juliet said. "Now we want to write a question about Lorena on a piece of paper and put in the center of the table."

"What kind of question?"

"Whatever it is we want to know about her future."

"I haven't got time for this," Ev said.

"Please! Get a piece of paper for me and write down, uh, "What is Lorena's fate?"

Pulling a memo slip from Juliet's desk, he wrote down the question, and placed it on the tarot cover. As soon as the paper was down, Juliet laid the cards out in a pattern on the table.

"Why in that order?" Ev asked.

"It's the Celtic Cross Spread, very ancient," Juliet answered, then said "Oh, my!" as she laid the last card down.

"Don't tell me," Ev said. "She's in trouble. From what you've told me, we already know that."

"Of course, we do," his ex-wife answered. "Don't be absurd. But now we know more about the nature of that trouble."

"We do?"

"Look at that," she said. "It's the Three of Swords, a minor mentor."

"So?"

"The key to this is that's difficult for Lorena to understand why she's afflicted with such deep sorrow."

"That's big news," Ev said.

"Don't be sarcastic!" Juliet cautioned him. "There's more. Upheaval in family situation, upset and tears. And, look, I've laid out a profusion of swords!"

"Is that bad?" Ev asked.

"Such a spread generally indicates a time of struggle and animosity."

"Another big surprise," he said. "She's married to Vern Sarvis, for God's sake."

Juliet glared at him. "I warned you! Now be quiet. Here's another one--the Nine of Swords. Death and anxiety are causing misery and a sense of hopelessness. Inconsolable unhappiness."

"Juliet, we know all this stuff already! We don't need any of these damned tarot cards."

"The cards are a guide. They point the way," she said.

"We already know the damned way," Ev said. "Get her away from Sarvis. That's the first step, and you've already taken that."

"Be quiet!" Juliet said. "I'm not finished with my reading of the cards."

"Well, I am," he responded and stood up. "I'm going outside."

"And do what?"

"I don't know. I'm so frustrated by all this I can't think straight from one moment to the next."

"Do something useful then," Juliet said. "That always helps."

"Like what?"

His ex-wife shrugged. "Repair the deck railing. Water the flowers. Something. I'll finish the reading and give you the results."

"I can hardly wait," Ev said as he headed out of the living room.

Lorena Sarvis and Matty Singlin, the newest recruit to the Gathering, came out of the laundry room, each bearing a filled clothes basket and an expression of distaste when they saw him.

"Ladies," he said.

"Mr. Pick," Lorena said with coolness while the Singlin woman simply glared at him.

"I'm not a child molester," he said, angered by their obvious loathing. "I'll keep repeating that until you find out that it's true. I've never harmed any child in my life."

They brushed past without a word. Ev swore and pulled the door open.

Outside, the sun continued its baking of the Hills to a dry brown as if it were trying to turn the land into twisted bread. Shimmers of heat danced on the driveway's asphalt. He glanced at the thermometer on the wall. It read 103 degrees. Beside the steps, the hose was coiled on the reel he'd mounted years ago. Jumping down, he turned on the faucet. In this kind of heat, watering flowers seemed the only cool thing to do. He'd been at it for

a few minutes when a commanding mention of his name froze him in front of Juliet's marigolds

"PICK!" it said.

Ev's hand involuntarily moved the hose from soaking the flowers to soaking his shoes, but he didn't dare budge. Only the fact that the voice from behind him was a bit higher and had a white, Georgian tinge to it told him that, 30 years later, Drill Sergeant Hagedorn hadn't miraculously and horribly shown up on his doorstep, demanding that he return to boot camp.

"PICK! ARE YOU EVERETT PICK?"

Ev nodded.

"THEN, TURN AROUND, GODDAMN IT!"

Doing as he was ordered, Ev saw two sharply dressed men.

*Policemen of some type*, he guessed from their rigid postures.

One was a tall young man with strawberry blond hair that stayed carefully in place despite the gusts of wind coming off the mountains. Despite a purposely bland face of a law enforcement officer, the freckles and snub nose made Ev think of a leaner and meaner Huckleberry Finn. The other man was short, balding and middle-aged. Behind them was a Jeep Cherokee with another man inside.

"From city, county or state law enforcement?" he asked.

Giving him an unpleasantly tight smile, the shorter man flipped his identification open.

"FBI," he said.

## **Chapter 46**

### **Everybody Needs An Agent**

"I'm Special Agent Cyrus Rimer, and this is Agent Johnson," the shorter man announced to Ev as if God himself had arrived and wasn't going to take any shit about it. While he said it, his gaze traveled up and down Ev and seemed to arrive at the same conclusion that Drill Sergeant Hagedorn had often reached--that Everett Pick was a worthless piece of crap and the government had wasted its money in expecting him to be of any service to the United States of America.

"You're the child molester, aren't you?" the agent asked.

"I'm not a child molester," Ev replied.

"Maybe," Rimer said. "It's state business, anyway, not ours."

"Then why are you out here hollering at me?"

"Do you know a young man by the name of Lyle Teesacker?" Rimer demanded. The "young man" carried an emphasis of revulsion, as if the agent were talking about a particularly loathsome species of slime.

"Yeah," Ev said, searching his memory then recalling Juliet's red-haired nephew with a computer for a brain. "What do you need him for?"

Ignoring the question, the agent asked, "Do you know where he is?"

"Not a clue," Ev said. "I haven't seen him for at least three or four years."

Rimer nodded back toward his partner. "Agent Johnson says he's missing."

"Somebody's abducted him?" Ev asked.

"No, you idiot. He fled house arrest."

"I don't understand," Ev said. "What's he done?"

The Special Agent regarded him skeptically for a moment, then said, "You don't know anything about the boy, do you?"

"Special Agent, this is the first time I've back into South Dakota in years."

"Yeah, well, we all know why that is, don't we?"

"I've never molested any children, ever! How many times do I have to repeat it?"

Rimer shrugged. "I'm sure the courts will decide that once they get around to it, but I came here to talk to your wife, not you."

"Ex-wife," Ev corrected.

"Whatever. She's the boy's aunt. Maybe she knows where he is. Where is she?"

"Inside," Ev said.

"Take us to her," the Special Agent ordered.

Ev showed them inside where Juliet still sat at the table poring over the tarot cards. He watched as Rimer rolled his eyes when he saw what the cards were about and then went straight to the point after introducing himself and the other agent.

"We have reason to believe you know where Lyle Teesacker is," Rimer said.

"Me? Why me?" Juliet asked.

"Because your sister and your husband told me you were the last person to visit him before he disappeared," the agent said.

"Your agent and Moses Brubaker were there the same day," she pointed out.

Rimer said, "You leave the preacher to me. That's our business. Now, where is the teenager?"

"I don't know," Juliet said.

"You're absolutely sure of that?"

"Yes," she said. "Absolutely."

"What did you and he talk about?" the FBI man asked.

"I offered him my guidance and help if he needed it," she answered.

"What kind of help would that be?"

"Mr. Rimer, I am a representative of the Ascended Beings on this earthly plane. I offered him spiritual help."

Rimer raised a skeptical eyebrow. "You didn't offer him any help with computers?"

"None. I know nothing about computers."

"The fact is, Lyle Teesacker disappeared soon after you met with him. He slipped past Agent Johnson here and got away." Rimer turned to look at his fellow agent and added, "Well, "Slipped away" is the not best choice of words, is it, Johnson?"

The agent became tight-lipped but said nothing.

"What did he do?" Ev asked.

"He planted some sort of device in the vehicle."

"Device?" Juliet said.

"A bomb," Rimer said. "A small one, but effective. Just enough to disable the car once the ignition was turned. The boy is smart. He knows you don't kill an FBI agent."

"Lyle wouldn't kill anyone!" Juliet cried.

"Maybe not," the Special Agent said, "but if he's smart enough to do what he did to Johnson, who knows?"

They sat in silence until Juliet started fidgeting under the hard stare of the two FBI agents.



"Well," she said finally. "Do you have any more questions, Agent Rimer?"

"Just one," he said. "Where is he?"

"I don't know, I told you that."

Rimer sighed in exasperation, but said, "I'll have to accept that for now, but should I find out you're harboring this boy, you'll be facing federal charges, charges that can be harsh, Ms. Moresdon. Are you willing to face them?"

"Of course," Juliet said. "I don't know where he is, so I have nothing to fear."

Rimer stood up. "We'll see about that."

When the FBI men were out of the house, Ev turned to Juliet and asked, "What was that all about?"

Juliet shrugged. "They had Lyle under house arrest for computer crimes, and now they've lost him, it seems."

"And you didn't have anything to do with it?" he asked.

"Didn't you hear what I told them?" she said, keeping her eyes on the cards.

"Juliet, look at me, not the damned cards!"

She looked up at him in defiance.

"Answer me," he said. "Did you help him escape? Is that who you need the computer equipment for?"

"Of course not," she answered. "I didn't have anything to do with that business."

With a steady gaze, she held his eyes, defying him to contradict her. He said nothing, but there was a slight, self-righteous expression on her lips that told him the truth. He'd seen it many times before in their marriage. Juliet was lying.

*Lying big time, Ev thought to himself, when you fuck with the FBI.*

## Chapter 47

### Lyle Surfaces

*I wasn't exactly lying when I told Ev and the agent that I didn't know where Lyle is, Juliet thought as she peeled potatoes for a late supper. Beyond the kitchen window, dark rolled toward the west, allowing only the peaks of the mountains to show sunlight. I know he's gone, but he never showed up for our rendezvous. Where in the world has he gone? It's been a week.*

"You look worried," Lorena said, placing iceberg lettuce in the salad spinner. "Is something bothering you?"

"No," Juliet answered, her mind split between her own worries and the terrible thinness imposed upon the girl by Sarvis. "Just thinking about the Gathering, that's all."

"You're sure it's not about Vern and me?"

"Of course not. You're safe here, and you can stay here as long as you like."

Lorena stopped spinning the salad and looked directly at her. "You've been so kind to let me stay here. Let me do something in return. I know that's not all you have on your mind, Juliet."

"It's Thor," she said. "I can't help wondering where he is--where he's got to."

*I can't tell her that Vern has the warmblood, Juliet thought as the words came out of her mouth. His call said he gets the tape for the horse. I don't know what to do. I don't trust Sarvis.*

Lorena laughed and said, "If ever there was a horse that could take care of himself, it's that stallion. He's probably roaming the Hills, searching for the best grass. Believe me, he'll turn up sooner or later and when he does, you can bet he'll be in fine shape."

"Thank you, dear," Juliet said as lightly as she could. Finishing the peeling, she quartered the potatoes and tossed them into the boiling water. Mashed potatoes, fried chicken and tiny peas that had suddenly sounded good to her. It was too bad she'd given up meat and poultry.

*Comfort food, she thought. Food that reminds you of your childhood when you were safe and warm with your parents in your house. Oh well, I can watch the others eat the drumsticks. And, besides, I really made it for Lorena, not myself.*

An hour later, the supper was ready. They all sat down at the dining room table. Juliet frowned as Lorena and Matty flanked her, not to be

close, but to be as far away as possible from Ev, who sat isolated at the far end with a sourly resigned expression on his face.

The dishes passed around the table in silence until Juliet could take it no longer and said to Lorena and Matty, "Look, you two, my ex-husband and I have our differences, but one thing I do know--he's not a child molester, so I wish you would stop freezing him out of our conversations. If we're going to make the Gathering a success, we all have to work together."

Matty did not seem at all convinced. To Juliet, it looked as if she were biting into the chicken leg wishing it was one of Ev's. Lorena, at least, looked uncertain. Juliet couldn't blame her for a negative reaction. Living with Vern, it probably had become a knee jerk response for the girl whenever a man was around.

"Eat more," she urged Lorena. "You need to put on some pounds. It'll give you strength, and you won't feel so blue."

"I'll do just that," the girl said with a smile, but continued to fuss with her potatoes and gravy without eating much of it.

Juliet turned her attention back to Matty. The Rock Woman was a welcome addition to the Gathering staff, but she had a temper worthy of a diva which apparently she had been at one time if the hints were to be interpreted correctly. She'd simply shown up at the door one day, saying the Rock People had sent her as a messenger to tell Juliet that they supported her undertaking.

*And she has definite black and white ideas about men, she thought, especially Ev.*

*The two mix like oil and water.*

"Matty, I was married to this man for 25 years. Although his shortcomings are considerable, he's not a sexual pervert."

Matty brushed her red hair back with the hand holding the chicken leg, then said, "How do you know?"

"I just know," Juliet answered.

"Well, I don't," the Rock Woman said. "Child molesters are first and foremost secretive. They can go for years without being discovered, even by someone close to them."

"But that's not really fair, now, is it?" Juliet pointed out. "He's been accused of a crime, but he hasn't been convicted. If and when it goes to trial, I'm sure he'll be exonerated."

"Children don't lie," Matty said with certainty as she laid down the chicken bone and forked mashed potatoes up from her plate. "It's that simple."

Juliet sighed and looked at Ev. Stony-faced, he ate without pleasure. For some reason, it irritated her, and she said, "Well, aren't you going to defend yourself? You haven't said a word."

Her ex-husband glanced at her and the other two women and answered, "I'm already convicted. What's the point?"

"You could at least put up some sort of defense," she said.

Ev shrugged with resignation on his face. "The more I defend, the guiltier I become. The more I remain silent, the guiltier I become. Silence takes less energy."

"You poor man," Matty said in a mocking tone. "Life is tough, isn't it? But that's the way it should be for people like you."

With some small satisfaction, Juliet watched anger flash in Ev's eyes.

*At least there's life in there somewhere,* she thought.

"That may be," he said to Matty, "but I don't spend my life scamming people, either."

The woman's green eyes flared, lighting up the flawless complexion, and Juliet marveled once again at her beauty. Finding Matty on her doorstep had been like discovering that Sleeping Beauty had shown up and wanted to stay with you.

"I am not a scam artist!" she said.

Ev gave an unpleasant snigger. "Rock People--coming from the center of the earth. And you're the spokesman for their leader. If that's not a scam, I don't know what is."

"Rojah exists. The Rock People exist. I channel for them," Matty insisted.

"I'm sure you do," Ev said, returning her earlier mocking tone. "I'll bet you even collect and keep the donations for Rojah and the Rock People. They wouldn't have use for money, anyway, would they, but I'm sure you would."

Matty's fork whipped past Ev's head and clattered against the wall, splattering mashed potatoes and brown gravy over the paint.

"Matty!" Juliet said sharply.

"Pick, I'm not a scam artist, and I'm not the same as a child molester like you!" the Rock Woman shouted.

Ev smiled and with a nasty satisfaction that Juliet found uncharacteristic, "How does it feel not to be believed, Matty? Enjoying the experience?"

*Touché!* Juliet thought.

The table fell silent again as Ev and Matty glared at each other while they ate their food. Juliet searched for something to say to bring peace back to the room, but could think of nothing. Then a voice relieved her of the responsibility.

"Having New Age fun, are we?"

Juliet turned sharply and looked into the kitchen.

It was Lyle, scooping the extra peas from a bowl and popping them into his mouth one at a time. Dressed in a denim shirt, blue jeans, and running shoes, the boy was still computer-room pale, but looked rested and fit and still carried an attitude about him.

*Wherever he's been, Juliet thought, he feels very safe. The FBI doesn't have a clue.*

"How did you get in here?" Juliet demanded. "Where have you been?"

"As to the first," the teenager said, "I simply walked in. With all the noise in here, an elephant could have fed his face three times over and left unnoticed. As to the second, that's my affair."

"Juliet," Ev said. "You told the FBI you didn't know where he was."

"I didn't. Not exactly, anyway."

"What's he doing here then?" Ev asked.

"I'm going to help Aunt Juliet, Uncle Ev," Lyle said, "because she helped me escape."

All eyes swung to Juliet.

"Well, I was going to help him," she said. "I mean I was supposed to help him, but he didn't come as he--" She was suddenly angry at the teenager and didn't want to explain anything more. "Why didn't you show up?" she demanded.

"Why? Because I'm not stupid, Aunt Juliet," the boy answered. "You like to talk, and I couldn't take a chance on my folks or someone else finding out about my plans. Besides, I had other things to do."

"Like what?" Juliet said.

"Business," Lyle said. His flat tone said there would be no discussion of the topic.

"But I *did* keep it a secret," she said.

"Really?" the teenager said, looking at everyone around the table. "That true?"

Heads nodded, and he said, "How about that? That's a first for you, Aunt Juliet. Usually, you run your mouth until the motor burns out. You've got unexpected depths."

Juliet flushed at the insult, but said nothing. She needed the teenager, and he knew it.

*There's nothing more insufferable than a teenaged boy who's got the upper hand and knows it, she thought.*

"So," Lyle said, sitting down at the table and pulling a chicken leg from the platter without invitation, "did you remember my equipment?"

Juliet flushed again, this time in embarrassment. "No," she answered. "I couldn't come up with the money."

"I thought so," the boy said. "My lack of faith in you is reconfirmed, Aunt Juliet."

"Now, just wait a minute--" Juliet began.

Lyle wasn't listening. He kept plowing ahead by saying, "I brought my own. It's out in the car."

"You mean, you let me go out and beg for money when you knew you could bring your own system along?" she said.

The boy shrugged. "You never know, you might have gotten lucky or smart and brought me something useful. I decided to bring along some insurance, that's all. We'll pick up more stuff later from off the shelf. Shouldn't you be glad?"

"Aren't you taking a real chance coming here?" Juliet said. "The FBI is looking for you. They're not real happy with what you did to Agent Johnson."

The teenager smiled, wiping chicken grease from his lips with meticulous dabs of a napkin. "We seem to keep missing each other, don't we?"

"That's not funny, Lyle," Juliet said. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"They haven't caught me yet, have they?"

Juliet opened her mouth to speak, but Ev supplied the words for her. "They're professionals, boy, with years of training." he said. "You're not."

"No, I'm not, Uncle Ev, but I'm doing pretty well for an amateur, aren't I?"

Ev didn't have an answer for that any more than she did. It made her feel a little better about the whole situation.

Scooping mashed potatoes and peas onto his plate, Lyle poured gravy over all of it, then stirred it together and spooned it into his mouth. The boy was just being gross for their benefit, Juliet knew. She'd seen his table manners before, and they were meticulous for someone of his age.

"Where do I set up?" he asked in between slurps of food.

"You're going to stay here?" Juliet asked.

"Surprised?" Lyle said.

"Frankly, yes. The FBI will be back out here, I'm sure."

"That's okay, Aunt Juliet. The best place to hide is right under their noses, assuming," he said, waving his fork at everyone around the table, "that all these people can keep their mouths shut."

Juliet looked around. Matty seemed indifferent to the whole matter. Ev was positively angry with her; she could tell from the set of his jaw. Lorena seemed horrified by the prospect of being involved with the FBI. She was paler than usual and avoided looking at Lyle.

*I'd better say something quick before the situation falls apart,* Juliet thought.

"I wouldn't have done such a thing if Lyle wasn't absolutely vital to the success of the Gathering," she said. "We can't go forward without him."

"Why not?" Ev said. "I've got enough troubles. I don't want to cross the feds."

"I can't explain it right now," Juliet said. "It has to remain a secret in order for it to work."

"Convenient," her ex-husband said.

"You'll just have to trust me, Ev."

"That's what someone usually says right before they hand you your lunch," he replied.

"Well, you know me better than that, don't you?" she snapped back.

"Oh, I trust you, Juliet, except in the area of common sense. Has it ever occurred to you that Lyle, who's smarter than all of us put together, might have some other agenda besides yours? He doesn't strike me as the altruistic type."

Lyle smiled at this. Juliet was not sure if he was more pleased at the insult or the fact that his mere entrance into the room had created conflict.

"He doesn't have to be," she told Ev. "He's promised to do a job for me, that's all. It involves computers, and nobody knows them better than Lyle does."

"I won't argue that," her ex-husband said. "His problem is that he knows too damned much about them--enough to get him house arrest."

Juliet seethed. It was just like Ev not to see the big picture.

"There are more important things going on here than Lyle's background or even the FBI, can't you see that?" she said. "The Gathering. The Ascended Beings. Remember them--they're the reason we're here."

"The reason *you're* here," Ev corrected in his infuriatingly pedantic way. "Besides, jail is a lot more immediate to me than the Upper Levels or whatever they are."

"Higher Levels," Juliet said, correcting him in return.

"In your position, you'd better hope you reach the Ascended Beings before the law does," the Rock Woman said.

"Shut up!" Ev replied.

With a nastily wicked expression, Lyle said to Ev, "Child molestation--Uncle Ev, I had no idea!"

"You shut up as well," Ev said. "I don't molest children. How many times do I have to repeat it?"

"I don't know," the teenager said. "You read it in the news all the time--preachers, teachers, coaches, anybody who has a lot of contact with kids. They're the most likely suspects, aren't they?"

"That may be true," Ev said, "but it's not true in my case, Lyle."

"Still, suspicion lingers, doesn't it?" the boy said.

"Not from people who really know me. They'll tell you--"

Ev stopped and glared at Lyle. "We're getting off the subject, aren't we? I thought we were talking about you staying here."

The teenager smiled again. "That's right."

"Well, Juliet, I don't want him here," Ev said.

She hesitated, then asked the others, "Matty, Lorena, how do you feel about it?"

"It's fine with me," the Rock Woman said. "As you said, it's a higher cause. That's enough for me."

Juliet looked at Lorena who glanced nervously at Lyle, then dropped her eyes. "It's okay with me," she said.

*Lorena's attitude has no enthusiasm in it, but it's still a "Yes" vote,* Juliet thought with relief.

Turning to Ev, she said, "Looks like you're outvoted."

"Yes, it does," he conceded.

"Are you going to stay anyway?" she asked.

"Where am I going to go?" he asked.

"Fine," Juliet said. "Then it's all settled, and from now on, we can work together."

Juliet cleared the dishes and took them to the kitchen while the others helped Lyle unload his equipment. On his second trip to the car, Ev stopped and spoke to her.

"What is the matter with you, woman? Have you finally gone out of your mind?"

She sighed, knowing there was not much point in continuing the argument, so she simply reminded him, "I helped you back at the hospital, didn't I? I helped you escape Mary Fae, even though you won't admit it. And, from reading between the lines of everything she's said, I'd say I saved you from drinking yourself into oblivion. Now, doesn't that deserve a little help in return?"

Ev stood there like a big, slovenly boy, and Juliet knew she'd pressed the right button. He'd always been a stickler for fairness and meeting obligations.

"All right, all right," he said and disappeared.

Juliet was pleased with herself. Over twenty-five years of marriage, it was not often she got the better of Ev. She knew she wasn't as smart as he was, but, at times, her common sense had it all over his intelligence.

"And this," she said to the soap-bubbled air over the sink, "is definitely one of those times when common sense is called for."



## Chapter 48

### Solo

.His leg awakened him before dawn, and Ev, for once, was grateful for its message of pain. He lay for a moment listening to the call of a jay raucously riding the scent of pine into the open window, then rolled off the futon and used a chair to pull himself erect. Sitting on it, he flexed the bad leg carefully until it worked itself loose of the stiffness, then he pulled on his jeans and shirt and gingerly tied the laces of his old combat boots that Juliet had fortunately kept for him. He stood up and used the cane to test his steadiness. When he was satisfied, he headed for the kitchen where he made coffee and threw a couple of strawberry Pop-Tarts in the toaster. Juliet was not happy that he'd brought such "garbage" into the house.

*I could give a shit, he thought. It's my recovery, and I'm damned well going to eat what I want. What's the point of getting shot, harassed, and falsely accused if you can't eat junk food.*

When the coffee was ready, he sat at the table and sipped it with a grimace. Juliet didn't drink coffee and had no idea of what was good or not. This tasted like it had been brewed from crumbled asphalt--hot, sticky, steaming, and smelling of petrocarbons. After a few more sips, though, he had to admit the caffeine content was high. A jolt ran through his system as if someone had just attached electrodes to his brain. He felt fully awake and ready to tackle the day and more than happy to miss the interminable group breakfast meetings that Juliet had instituted to plan the Gathering. She'd even become mildly organized, starting each day with an agenda so the main points would be sure to be covered. Few of them did get covered, as far as he could tell.

*Every meeting seems to about agendas all right, but they're all hidden, he thought.*

A twinge ran through Ev's leg, reminding him of the need for aspirin. For once, Juliet had left his bottle on the table so he wouldn't have to go looking for it. She'd hid it from him and dosed him with herbs until he reminded her that aspirin was essentially an herb and a damned effective one at that. He swallowed two of the extended-relief caplets, figuring that should hold the pain within a reasonable range while he took part in a sacred activity he hadn't been able to indulge in for months.

A walk. By himself.

He wasn't worried about Juliet waking and trying to stop him. By now, she was used to him roaming at all hours of the night when the pain wouldn't let him sleep. And she'd been on the Web at three when he'd

opened his eyes briefly and looked out his bedroom door to see the glow of the monitor screen on her rapt face following Lyle's manipulation of the computer so he knew she wouldn't be up any time soon.

*I'm as worried about her as she is about me,* he thought.

She'd become feverish in her activities in the months since Lyle showed up. When she'd discovered that Ev was too weak to be of immediate help, she'd brought other people to the house. Except for Lorena, he didn't like any of them--especially Matty, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in his life and who trumped his dislike with a wellspring of hatred whose source he'd had yet to discover. And the only woman he did like hadn't said a word beyond "Good Morning" or "Give me the Celestial Seasonings, please" since his mistreatment of her in the hospital and her suspicion that the molestation charges were true.

In answer to their censure, Ev drank another cup of coffee. Then, he pulled a roll of summer sausage from the back of the refrigerator where Juliet made him keep it, cut thick slices of the lunch meat, and built himself a big sandwich with white bread, onions, and the only mustard Juliet kept on hand--hot Japanese. Once he had it in a plastic bag, he pulled his ancient backpack from behind the Hoover in the hall closet and put the sandwich in beside the large Cheetos bag and the giant-size Snickers bars. Going out the door into the pre-dawn coolness, he stood for a moment, checking carefully for signs of satellite dishes atop vans or the glint of camera lenses in the gray light or the flash of sunlight off FBI binoculars. Camping out down on the highway to monitor comings and goings, the media had gotten restless when they couldn't catch sight of him and had taken to trespassing, getting closer and closer to the house. Meals couldn't even be eaten out on the deck now without the whirring and clicks of cameras. Ev was all for getting a pack of Rottweilers on the job, but Juliet wouldn't have it.

*It probably has something to do,* he thought, *with the posturing in white robes when she casts her herbal incantations into the wind. For her, it's good publicity, pure and simple although she'd never admit it.*

When he was satisfied no reporters were present, he went out to the stable and into the tack room. He turned on the light and searched in the hay piled behind the feed wheelbarrow. In a moment, he had a six-pack of beer out of the small cooler and into the pack. Juliet's uncle had been an alcoholic.

*And her father, if he hadn't been so avidly interested in bilking people out of their money, would have been a splendid lush, in my opinion,* Ev thought.

As it was, John Moresdon had simply been a mean drunk when one of his development deals fell through and beaten the hell out of whoever was in sight. So, Juliet couldn't stand the sight of alcohol.

*Well, Ev thought, I'm not a drunk, and I've never beaten anyone, and I can't stand the sight of her, so that makes us even.*

Cracking open a can, he took a deep drink, then he let out a large and satisfying belch. A horse whinnied in response. Ev went out of the tack room and faced the bay gelding Juliet had bought for Lorena to ride.

"Shut up!" he told it. "What have you got to talk about, anyway?"

The gelding snorted at him and tossed its head.

"Sorry," Ev said. "And I think I've got problems. Here."

Pulling the cats' water dish from the hay loft, he dumped it out, and poured the rest of the beer in it. Then, he opened the stall door and put the dish down. As the gelding bent to sniff at it, he said, "Go for it, boy. Enjoy. Fuck the world."

Without waiting to see if the horse would drink the beer, Ev went out the back of the stable, limping through the corral toward the hills beyond the pasture.

The leg made it difficult, but he found that with frequent stops, he could get into a rhythm with the cane that carried him steadily toward his destination. It was the slope upward into the pines that made him pause for a moment. Lorena often took the gelding up the path in one of her frequent rides, but four legs had a distinct advantage over two when it came to fighting gravity, so Ev wasn't sure he could make it. He sat down for a moment and had another beer to summon some artificial courage, then got up and attacked the hill as a good infantryman would--one step at a time and don't think beyond that.

The tactic worked. Before he knew it, he was at the top of the ridge in a spot that allowed him to ignore the construction going on below while having a good view of the sun coming up over the Badlands far to the east. Its rays warmed him easily, reminding him that it would be a very hot day. He wasn't sure he was up to battling the hills and the heat, but he knew exactly where he wanted to go and could get there and back before the afternoon temperatures soared into the predicted 100s--down past the pole and the sparse encampment that had grown up on the grass to the Moresdon Canyon Overlook. It was a steep climb to the top, sweetly rewarded by a view so spectacularly wide and steep it had seemed like falling off the top of the world when Ev had ridden horses up there during the marriage.

Adjusting the pack, Ev set off toward the overlook. Twenty feet down the slope, a sound stopped him. A breeze, stirred by the dawn, blew the

sound away before he could identify it. He stood patiently until the noise came back, and then he knew what it was.

It was crying.

Someone was crying their heart out in the middle of the forest.

Ev sighed. He hoped it wasn't Matty Singlin. When she wasn't scoring points off him for being a child molester, Matty, the channel for Rojah, Ambassador for the Rocks of the Earth who were coming from the center of the world, was in an hysterical fit over the carving of Mount Rushmore into the mountains--an event that had taken place over 50 years ago. *To the rocks*, she'd said with incomprehensible logic as her green eyes bled tears, *it was like taking a person and removing his arms--it was very penetrating in its effect.*

And that was about as much sense as Matty had made, as far as Ev could tell.

He hesitated, looking down at the enormous wooden pole that continued to be sheathed in copper. A meager city of tents, campers, Airstreams, and sleeping bags had cropped up around the construction like gaily dressed, mutant toadstools. Smoke from open fires drifted into the air, and the sun-stirred wind brought the crisscrossed smell of burning wood, steeped tea, and frying tofu. Ev knew Juliet was disappointed with the small turnout so far, but she didn't seem to lack in faith that the Gathering would eventually grow into a size she had yet to specify. He'd talked to both her and Matty about potential control problems if a large crowd did assemble, but, behind their shining eyes, their brains were busily intoxicated with anticipated success, and they heard nothing he said.

"All the more reason for some peace and quiet," he said, deciding to stay on his path toward the overlook. Then, the crying reached his ears again.

"Shit," he muttered under his breath and turned toward the sound. He had to investigate because this crying had an honest edge to it that he'd never heard in Matty's voice--it was the sound of real grief.

He worked his way across the steep slope until he could see the source of the tears. A woman sat with her back against a pine, her hands clasped about drawn-up knees and her cheek resting on dirty jeans. Sobs convulsed the black sweatshirt and caused the brown curls to bounce on the hunched shoulders.

"Lorena," Ev said softly.

A sharp intake of breath stopped the crying. Lorena wiped a sleeve quickly across her cheeks and turned her face away from him.

"Are you all right?" Ev asked. "Are you hurt?"

"Yes."

Panic surged through his body. He wasn't capable of carrying anybody down a mountain, and it would take him a while to get help.

"My God! Did you break something? Where?"

"Don't be stupid," she said.

"You mean you're not hurt?"

"No."

"I'm confused," he said. "Should I go get someone?"

"No, it wouldn't do any good. Just go away and leave me alone."

"I can't do that, Lorena."

"Why not?" she asked. "Are you here to molest me now? Have you given up on children?"

Ev wanted to slap her head off as he did with everyone every time he heard the tedious, cutting references to sexual perversion, but from her tone, he realized that it was more of a reflex response to his presence. Lorena had other things on her mind.

"We've been all over that before," he said. "I don't molest children. It's not in my nature." Then, he added lightly, "I had to stop. It's bred into my bones. I can't do anything else. I hear a young woman crying in the woods, and I have to stop. It's the incipient hero in me, struggling to come forth."

"Very funny."

Ev sighed. "Could I sit down, please? My leg is killing me."

When she didn't say anything, Ev pulled the pack off and sat down on it.

"You want a beer?" he asked.

"What good would that do?" she asked through sniffles.

"You can cry in it. That's what beer is for."

"It's morning, and I don't drink beer. It makes me silly."

Ev swept an arm toward the forest. "Hell, there's nobody here to see you, except me. Get as silly as you want."

A smile ghosted across her face. Pulled two cans from the pack, Ev offered her one. She stood up, brushing pine needles from her jeans, and took it from him. As he watched her take a tentative sip and make a face, it struck him again how unusual her face was. Individually, none of the parts were attractive, but, put together, they made a woman of a kind of beauty unlike Matty's *Cosmo* features.

*It's more than a deep kind of beauty,* he thought, trying to avoid the usual clichés that described women. *It simply shines through her roughened skin and eyes like an internal source of heat.*

Ev shook himself and lifted the beer to his lips. He'd found himself wishing he was 20 years younger, and that was a train of thought he didn't care to pursue. At the moment, he didn't like women, even young and

pretty ones. He just wanted to be left alone, but a not-too-discreet beery hiccup from Lorena brought his attention back to her.

"I'm guessing here, but shouldn't we be starting a "Why are men such shits?" conversation?" Ev said.

She started, then gave him a sharp look. "Well, why are they?"

He shrugged. "Because they have the capacity for it, I suppose."

"And that excuses everything?"

"No. But women are shits too, you know. It's just a difference in style. Men are just more obvious shits, that's all."

"Women are not shits!" she said.

"Of course, they are."

"They don't rape, they don't kill, they don't wage war!"

"No, they don't," he agreed. "They have the luxury of not doing that. As far as I can tell, a woman has two roles in life."

"And what are those, pray tell?"

"One is to have children; the other is to be movie reviewers."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, staring at him.

"Well, you see, film critics can criticize all they want, but most of them couldn't make a movie to save their asses."

"You're not making any sense at all," she said, drawing at the beer again.

"Maybe not, but here's a question for you--if I'm right, then you're starring in one of those roles," he said. "Which one is it?"

She glared at him, then burst into fresh tears.

"You're pregnant, aren't you?" he said. "Isn't that a cause for celebration?"

"No," she said. "I don't want it."

"Why not? Isn't that one of the reasons why you got married?"

"Yes," Lorena said so quietly that Ev could barely hear her. "But it's a rape baby."

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to say," Ev said.

"Of course," she retorted. "You're a man."

When her face dared him to reply, he kept silent.

"A baby is important to him," she said. "His first two marriages were childless."

"Does he know?"

"No, and I don't want him to."

"Why not?" Ev asked.

"I already told you, it's a rape baby. I don't want it."

He stayed quiet as tears streaked the face.

"I want it, I mean," she said. "But I don't want it."

"Have you talked to anyone about it?"

"Juliet and Matty."

"What do they say?"

"Juliet hates Vern, but says have the baby because all life is sacred. Matty hates him too, but says have an abortion because men are.. Such shits, like you said."

"Big help, huh?" Ev said.

"What do you think?" she asked.

Ev shifted his bad leg to a more comfortable position and said uneasily, "You're asking the wrong person. It's your decision."

"But I don't want to make the decision!" she cried. "I don't know what to do! And I'm so scared! If I decide to terminate the pregnancy, what will Vern do? And how will I feel? Will I be able to live with myself? And if I do have the baby, what will I do? I can't go back to Vern. He'll kill me, eventually. The sheriff told me that, and I didn't want to believe him, but now I think he's right. When my husband gets angry, he loses all control-- he doesn't know what he's doing."

Not knowing what to say, Ev stared down at the ground. In his gut, he was sure that she was right. If provoked, Vern might be capable of murder.

*What's more*, he thought as a sudden chill ran through his body, *he might be capable of getting away with it.*

He looked up to find Lorena's eyes searching his face.

"I don't have any answers for you," he responded, "but why don't we talk about it some more? I was on my way up to great spot overlooking the canyon. You can see forever, and it's so steep it'll suck the breath right out of you."

"I don't know if I should be going near any cliffs right now," she said in a dull voice.

"You weren't thinking of jumping before, were you?" he asked in alarm.

"Yes, I was. I've been out here all night, tangling myself up in arguments, and suddenly it seemed like the simplest and easiest solution. Just jump, and it's all over."

She turned her head toward him. "And my mind's not made up yet, either. If I go with you, I might still do it."

"I'll tell you what," Ev said. "If you go with me and decide to jump, we'll do it together."

Lorena stared at him, startled. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Why not? I'm accused falsely of child molestation, and everyone is convinced I'm guilty. I owe the television station and the county more money than I could earn in three lifetimes. The sheriff's looking for a way to prove drug use. And the media won't leave me alone. They follow me around like some demented Greek chorus, not only

predicting doom, but demanding it. The way I see it, suicide may be the only way out. And they'll get the story they've wanted in the first place."

"You think the TV and radio people want you to kill yourself?" she said, clearly appalled.

"It's the only logical conclusion."

"But why?"

"What else could lead the news? Murder, rape, suicide or a combination of all three--you can't start the six and ten news without it. Of course, they'd prefer to have tape of our bodies falling into the canyon, but I suppose that's not possible. If you decide you want to stay alive and have the baby, though, you could film it and sell it to the highest bidder, so you'll have a nest egg for the kid."

"Are you crazy?" she said. "What kind of person do you think I am?"

"Live at five, dead at ten, that generates all kinds of good ratings and revenue stuff, and you might as well have a piece of it. No doubt about it, the bottom line is at the bottom of that canyon."

"Is this some kind of insane way of getting my mind off killing myself?" Lorena asked.

"It was when I started out," Ev admitted. "Now I'm not so sure. I think I may have talked myself into it."

"That's a helluva thing to say."

"It's a helluva a life," he said. "Well, there's no need to make a decision now. Shall we take that walk and find out what happens?"

"I suppose," Lorena said.

Ev emptied his beer and put the can back in his pack, then used his cane to get himself into a standing position. Working their way back to the trail, they set off slowly down the hill toward the encampment.

"What do you think of all this?" he said, gesturing toward the tents and campers. The heavy smell of herbs drifted by on the breeze, and he could hear the rattling of pots and pans as breakfasts were prepared amidst the snores and grunts of those still sleeping.

"It reminds me of those films of the Sixties I've seen," she answered. "A bunch of hippies gathering to camp out and waiting for the music to begin."

"It is a lot like that," Ev admitted.

"Were you at Woodstock?" Lorena asked. "The first one, I mean?"

"Yes, I was," he said. "At least, I think I was. To be honest, I don't remember much but mud."

"Well, from what you can remember, was I right--was it a lot like this?"

Thinking about it for a moment, he answered, "Yes and no. We were idealistic like the people you see down here today, but we didn't have the edge to us that they have."



"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Naive as we were, we were all about peace and love and harmony. These people, well, it's my way or the highway, if you know what I mean. When everybody's got the truth, who's right?"

"You're telling me that they're dangerous, and you weren't."

"Exactly. What happens when everybody who has the truth happens to be occupying the same spot at the same time?"

"Oh," Lorena said. "I hadn't thought of that. Do you suppose Juliet has?"

"Not a chance," Ev said. "After all, she's got the truth too and, like the rest of them, can't see beyond that."

She gave him a strange look. "I never thought of the truth as being something that blinded you."

"Truth is like the dodo--dead and gone."

"You don't believe in anything, do you?" she said.

"That's the same thing Juliet says."

"Isn't it hard to be so cynical?"

Ev shrugged. "It just takes time and practice."

"I hope I'm not like that when I get as old as you."

He kept his smile to himself and hoped she was like so many other teenagers--changeable as spring weather. Thoughts of suicide one moment, thoughts of the future in the next. It was a fine line between the two--that was his guess--and he hoped he could help her walk it. There was only one way to do that--keep her talking.

"When you're as old as I am, you'll have had six husbands, 12 kids, and 36 grandchildren," he said.

"Not a chance," she said. "You don't have any children?"

"No."

"Why not? Didn't Juliet want them?"

"She could never make up her mind."

Lorena giggled. "Indecision doesn't prevent the making of a baby, does it? You two must have gotten it on plenty."

"I don't know. It could have been indecision. Maybe it was me. Maybe it was her. I simply don't know."

"I'd think that you would have found out--had tests or something," she said.

"You would, wouldn't you? But we just seemed to drift through our marriage--that's about the plainest way I can put it. Then, when she got involved in all this silliness, we divorced, and I took up with Mary Fae, who makes decisions every minute of the day, and it was all over, just like that. That's what happens when you take things for granted, I guess. Marriage is not for the faint-of-heart."

Their conversation had taken them past the last tent and onto the trail to the overlook. The slope was even steeper than he imagined and, in a few moments, his breath labored hard to push his body forward.

"Are you all right?" Lorena asked.

"I just need to rest," Ev answered, leaning against a boulder. "I still haven't got all my strength back."

"You aren't going to have a heart attack or anything, are you?"

Ev chuckled at the look of alarm on her face. "Just because I'm over fifty, doesn't mean I'm going to keel over at any moment."

"You look pale."

"I'm beyond the pale," he said.

"What?"

"Never mind. It was a bad joke. English teachers are prone to them. I meant I'm beyond hope as in" beyond the pale"."

"You're right," she said. "It was a bad joke. In fact, it wasn't funny at all. How can you talk like that?"

"Must be the company," he answered lightly.

"I'm not that awful, am I? And if you don't like me, why I can--oh."

Lorena gave him a cross look. "You mean you're talking like I was talking, don't you?"

Ev nodded.

"Well, that's not funny, either," she said. "You're just playing with me. Men like to do that, don't they? It's some kind of sick game they play all the time."

He watched as she walked onto the canyon trail in a teenaged huff. She was soon out of sight. Panic straightened Ev up, and he used the cane to propel himself after her as quickly as possible. A half hour and five stops later, he came out of the pines, relieved to find her seated with her feet dangling over the rocky rim. The sound of his ragged breath turned her head toward him.

"You're in terrible shape," she said in a nasty tone.

"Thank you for the information my ancient body is already communicating to me in the clearest way possible."

"Can't you ever say anything in plain language?" she asked.

"No," he answered. "Like I said, I'm an English teacher--or was--and, by definition, I am prone to ornate flights of language."

"You always have a ready answer for everything, don't you?"

He was pleased to hear her petulant tone. It told him that she was angry at not being able to top him at least once, and that was a very good thing for her to have on her mind right now.

He rested on the cane until his breath was back, then limped to a spot beside her and threw his arms theatrically wide into the air.

"Ecco canyon!" he shouted.

Lorena looked at him quizzically. "What are you talking about? There's no echo here. The canyon is too big."

"I was just being funny, using the only Latin I know."

""Echo" is Latin?" she asked.

"E-c-c-o, not the other one," he answered. "It means 'behold' as in 'Ecco homo,' and that means 'behold the man' which you definitely shouldn't do in this case."

"You're so weird."

Ev chuckled. "You sound like one of my students."

"Well, I'm practically as young as one of them, aren't I?"

"You are," he said.

"Just because I'm young, doesn't mean I'm stupid."

"Did I say you were stupid?"

"Not in so many words," she answered. "But you say it loud enough, anyway."

Ev dropped the pack, and then, grunting, lowered himself to the ground, sticking his bad leg straight out over the canyon edge so the pain would remain minimal.

"This doesn't really have anything to do with you being stupid, does it?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You forget, I lived with the enemy for many years. I may be an obtuse man, but I know how a woman thinks."

"Oh, really?" she said. "And what is this woman thinking about?"

"How I treated you in the hospital."

"Oh, that," she said with a false air of lightness. "I'd forgotten all about it."

"Women don't forget those things. They nurse them for years, developing them into ammunition and using them only when the time is right. But, never mind that, you were trying to thank me, and I treated you badly. I don't have any excuse for it. My leg hurt something fierce, and I'd had too many things happen to me over a short period of time. I just couldn't recognize kindness when I saw it. I apologize. I'm sorry."

She swung her legs back and forth as she answered him. "I suppose you think it's that easy?"

"Believe me," he said. "I don't think anything is easy these days."

"That's--what's the word?" she asked.

"Glib?" he offered.

"It sounds right."

"No, I wasn't being glib. I'm offering you my heartfelt apologies and another beer. You can have either or both."

"I'll take the beer," she answered. "It's worth more."

Ev wrestled a can from the pack and handed it to Lorena. She took a short sip, then said, "I'm too young to drink, you know."

"And I'm too old to care. What are they going to do--throw me in jail?"

He watched her laugh in spite of herself. Beer dribbled down her chin. She wiped at it and said, "I suppose that would be far down on the list of charges against you."

"That's for sure," he agreed.

Her brown eyes looked at him directly for the first time that morning. "My troubles seem kind of petty compared to yours, don't they?"

"Not a chance," he said. "But, it doesn't matter, anyway, does it?"

He inched himself forward until both legs dangled alongside Lorena's.

"What do you mean?"

"ready to jump?" he asked. "This is a good spot. Or, I prefer the lower canyon myself. It's even prettier there. It's your choice. Anyway, in death, they say, all things are equal. "

She put the beer down and hugged herself.

"You want to take my hand?" Ev asked. "It'd probably be easier that way."

Lorena was silent as she searched his eyes.

"You're wondering if I'm serious?"

"Yes," she said.

"I am if you are."

"This is not a dare type of thing!" she said with a sudden frightened vehemence.

"Who said anything about a dare? We're just going to do it together, that's all. I'm not going to leave you alone no matter what you do. Heck," he added with a shrug, "if all you want to do is cry some more, I'll do that with you, too."

"Men aren't very good criers," she said.

"Everything comes with practice."

"You're such a...glib...bastard," Lorena said. In a moment, she had her head down on his knee and was crying violently out into the canyon.

*Sometimes, he thought as he stroked her hair, your victories are so small they take on an inordinate amount of meaning, and I'm not even sure I've achieved one.*

In her state of mind, she still might jump, but he could think of nothing more to do. Crying with her as he'd promised, the tears blurred the view he'd come up to see. To the north, smog rose above Rapid City. To the west, the Four Presidents bore ponderous witness to their shared weeping. And to the south, the great Sioux warrior, Crazy Horse, rose half-formed out of white rock shaped with the crude chisel of dynamite.

## Chapter 49 Somewhere

When Lorena woke from an anxious sleep, she lay at the base of a thick Ponderosa, and the decision had been made. A hot wind gusted through the trees, bringing with it the smell of overheated pine. The air and forest seemed curiously clear as if they'd been carved into her sight. Raising on her elbows, she looked around. She didn't know if she'd gotten away from the canyon edge by herself or if Ev had somehow managed to pull her into the forest. When she didn't see him, she was glad. She didn't want to die alone, but she didn't want anyone to see her, either. It was one of those odd considerations, she supposed, that raced through your mind before committing suicide. The small anticipating the large. She jeered at herself for having such grand thoughts.

*It takes death to make me think beyond clothes and hair and how to please Vern.*

Lorena got up and walked to the edge of the cliff to rid herself of the effort of thinking about anything, big or little. Scuffing dirt down into the canyon, she watched it drift on the wind. All of a sudden, it seemed a very fascinating thing, and she dug a toe into the ground again. This time, the dirt was caught in a downdraft and swirled gracefully toward the canyon floor. She knew she wouldn't fall that way. A sharp curiosity filled her mind, and she picked up a fist-sized rock and tossed it over the edge to get a better idea of how her body would look as it fell toward the earth. The stone clattered against the cliff side, then hit the ground and rattled down and bounced off a scrub oak. Lorena tensed her body to leap after it, then stopped at a sudden quick motion in the tree.

Two vultures perched on the dead branches of the oak, flapping their wings at the noise she'd made. They seemed to study the rock for a moment, then with efficient shifts of their necks turned their red heads up toward her. They had the patiently smiling faces of carrion-eaters. To Lorena, they looked like two ghastly turkeys glad to turn the tables on humans for once. Her body relaxed with a spasmodic jerk as she broke into a hysterical giggle.

*It was all too perfect, she thought. To die, and have vultures ready for me--how much more fitting could the details of my death be?*

They would feed on her flesh until--as, no doubt, Ev would say--Mindy shouldered them aside for an extreme close-up. Then, instead of Everett Pick, Lorena Sheldon Sarvis would lead the six and ten broadcasts.

She stopped her laughter at that thought. If she was going to die, she was damned well going to do it with dignity, not as news fodder for Mindy Rattigan. She leaned forward and gave the vultures both fingers.

An abrupt groan brought her attention around to an outcropping of mossy granite. In the shade of its upthrust shelf, Ev lay in a restless sleep.

"Just like a man," Lorena said with a sudden exhale of breath that she didn't realize she'd been holding in. "You damned near kill yourself to meet his needs, and it's still not enough."

A heavy sweat dotted his unshaven face, and she realized quickly that it had nothing to do with the day's heat. He moaned again, and his large, oddly delicate hand clawed spasmodically at the thigh of his bad leg as if it were trying to grab the pain inside and toss it into the canyon.

Lorena hesitated for a moment, then went to him, kneeling down beside the injured leg. Taking his hand, she held it while she massaged the thigh gently with light fingers. When the tension ran out of his arm, she placed it across his chest, then used both hands to work the muscles more deeply. Gradually, his groaning subsided, and his breathing slid off into an easy and regular pattern. She sat back and looked at his worn face, gray with stubble over a chin as deeply cleft as the wall of the canyon. The stay in the hospital seemed to have left more angles in his cheeks than one of the Picasso paintings she'd seen in her art class at school. Pine needles embroidered his tangled hair, gone silver at the edges just as her father's had been.

*Like Vern, Ev is old enough to be my father,* she thought with a start, then admitted to herself, *In fact, at the moment, I wish he were my father.*

They were such similar men. Her Dad had been nearly as large and was one of those infuriatingly exception-to-the-rule males like Ev who seemed to understand exactly how a woman thought. As young as she was, she was sure she knew that such men were too often the dangerous victors in the eternal battles fought between the sexes. They took a woman's weapons away from her and left her with nothing but love. And a woman with nothing but love in her life was as defenseless as her mother had been when Daddy died.

*It's a good thing,* she told herself, *that Ev is old enough to be my father. It guarantees that nothing will happen between us.*

"Besides," she said under her breath, "I'm pregnant, and men hate that if they're not the father."

She finished the massage and sat back to wait for Ev to wake up. She felt as exhausted as he looked, but her stomach was relaxed for the first time since she'd realized she had a baby inside her. She guessed it was a small victory in the face of things to come, but it was a victory nonetheless, and Ev had helped her achieve it.

*I don't know whether to thank him when he wakes up or beat him over the head with the nearest branch for making me go on,* she thought.

Lorena decided to thank him. The man was relentlessly helpful, and he didn't even know it. She wouldn't be able to knock any sense into his head.

Suddenly hungry, she rummaged through his backpack, found a beer and inspected the remaining contents.

"Good grief," she said in mock despair. "A summer sausage sandwich, Cheetos, and Snickers."

To herself, she admitted that Ev's food choice was strangely appropriate to the situation--bizarre. The man had a positive knack for doing the wrong things right. Of course, just like a man, he hadn't cut the sandwich in two, so she was forced to tear it in half as best she could. Taking a large bite, she chewed it with slow satisfaction until a burning sensation flamed up in her mouth as if someone had ignited gasoline on her tongue. She spit the sandwich out and drained half the beer.

"Gahh!" she said and got up, half-choking, half-coughing. She drank the rest of the beer and stood panting as the mustard refused to lose its sting. She pulled the last cans out of the backpack and drank them fast. When the burning finally subsided, Lorena realized she had to pee in the worst way. She ran into the trees and pulled her jeans down. A great sigh of satisfaction escaped her lips as the stream gushed onto the ground. Now, she understood what Vern's beer-guzzling buddies had been saying during their interminable poker games--there's nothing better than a good pee when you need one.

When she was finished, Lorena went back to Ev and found him stirring himself into a sitting position.

"What have you been doing?" he asked sleepily.

"I was not feeding the birds," she said.

"What?"

"Never mind," she said with a giggle, pleased to stump him once instead of having it the other way around.

"Then, hand me a beer, would you, please?" he said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because there isn't any more beer. I drank it all."

"All of it?" Ev asked.

"All of it," she confirmed. "Let's go home and get some more."

They set off back down the trail, but he was too slow, and she decided to amuse herself by dancing and singing the whole way back when she wasn't peeing.

"*We're off to see the whizzard,*" she sang. "*The wonderful whizzard of Us.*"

"That's not right," Ev corrected her. "It's *Oz*."

"Today, it's my damned song," she said fiercely. "And I'm going to sing it anyway I want!"

"Amen to that," she heard Ev say before she skipped down the path shooing away the munchkins thronging the woods. If they weren't careful, she'd end up peeing on their heads because she had to go again already. But she didn't mind. Peeing on all the little men in her life was a new experience.



## **Chapter 50**

### **A Lame Plan**

"She's drunk!" Juliet said, rattling a piece of paper at Ev. The elaborate border of runes around its edges told him it was the day's agenda. "She's pregnant, and you got her drunk! And in the morning yet!"

All four members of the breakfast meeting stared hard at Ev as he steered a giggling Lorena onto an open chair.

"I didn't get anybody drunk," he said. "She drank it herself."

"But you gave it to her, didn't you?" Juliet accused.

"I only gave her two over the space of a couple of hours. She drank the rest while I was sleeping."

"What were you doing taking her up there?"

The icy question came from Matty Singlin. Her agate-green eyes fixed on him in the usual manner--as if he were a species of particularly loathsome bug that needed vivisection in order to find the right pesticide to hasten its elimination.

"I didn't take her up there. Ask her if you don't believe me," Ev said, hating the defensive tone in his voice. "I heard somebody crying and went to see if I could help. That's all."

Matty shook her head as if finding it impossible to believe anything he said. Spiky red hair framed her face in an impeccably-styled hairdo of the disheveled kind that Ev found perplexing--why spend all that money to end up looking like you were wearing a crown of barbed wire, that was his question. Ev had mentioned this in a disjointed discussion of household members with Lorena on the way back. In a moment of drunken lucidity, she'd pointed out that his question was worse than useless--when you were beautiful, you could wear a garbage sack on your head and look good. "Beauty is its own law," she'd pronounced loftily in a merciless imitation of him at his admittedly pompous best before running off into the woods to pee yet again.

"Ask her, damn it!" Ev repeated.

"We can't ask her anything," Matty said. "She's passed out."

Lorena's head lolled back against the chair, and one arm hung loosely, swinging back and forth as her hand was licked by Juliet's newly acquired bull terrier. The brindled dog was big for its breed, weighing nearly 70 lbs and had the goofy, combined intelligence of a Three Stooges routine, as far as Ev was concerned--it couldn't go anywhere without running into a door or getting hit on the head by blunt objects when he wandered unsuspectingly into their paths. It was the perfect mascot for one of Juliet's

meetings, he'd decided. Or, maybe for him. There had been several sly remarks by the women that the dog seemed to have a peculiar affinity for his presence and wanted to follow him everywhere. A suspicion had entered his mind that Juliet had gotten the terrier because it gave her a more obedient version of her ex-husband.

"Well, I'll put her in bed, and you can ask her when she wakes up," he said.

"You won't go anywhere near her," Matty said. "We'll take her."

Ev watched as the Rock Woman roused Lorena and helped her down the hall, then poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table beside the one person he'd grown to detest as much as Matty.

"I didn't touch her," he said.

Raising a skeptical eyebrow, Lyle gave him a decidedly amused smile instead of saying anything. The gangly teenager draped his body over the chair with an automatic insolence designed to infuriate adults. In all his years of teaching, Ev had never struck a child, but Teesacker certainly raised an irrational desire in him to take the boy out of the house and woodshed him.

*The trouble is*, he admitted to himself, *the kid is ten times smarter than I'll ever be.* Somehow, Lyle managed to cause trouble and stay out of it at the same time, and, in Ev's experience, boys like him become CEOs or targets of Congressional ethics committees that somehow never managed to prove the charges brought before them. He suspected that Lyle would head in the direction of business because he embodied the only principle the free market economy worshiped--he produced results. Ev shook his head at the boy's brilliance. The boy had a dry, disturbing presence far out of place in a sixteen-year-old as if a deeply scheming adult had somehow shanghaied his body for purposes that could only be guessed at. With eyes as opaque and cold as cement in January, the teenager unnerved him. When in their presence, he had the feeling they were weighing every word he said to see what advantage it might give the boy.

He put that thought aside as Juliet stirred at the return of Matty.

"Will she be okay?" she asked.

"I don't think we'll find that out until she wakes up," Matty said. She smoothed her Yale sweatshirt free of wrinkles as she spoke, outlining the contours of a body that came as close to perfection as Ev could imagine. It was something she did deliberately in his presence, he suspected. She appeared to hate him enough to taunt him in any way possible. Fortunately for him, her tongue dipped itself in acid often enough to not only kill desire, but eradicate it from his mind. An added incentive was the thought that if he ever did find himself between her legs, he might emerge short of some vital equipment.

"Okay," Ev said, "I'm going to say this one last time. I found her in the woods, she was talking about suicide, and then we went for a walk where nothing happened except that she had too much beer to drink."

Juliet was alarmed. "Suicide? She talked about suicide?"

"Not in so many words, but the intent was clearly there," he answered.

"The man who understands everything about women," Matty said in a snide tone.

"I may not know much about women," Ev replied, "but I know when a young girl--"

"Woman," Matty corrected.

"I'm over 50, Ms. Singlin. She's a girl to me."

Matty didn't reply, but the upward flick of a delicate eyebrow told him that he had only succeeded in increasing her contempt for him.

"I know when a young *girl* is unhappy enough to think about jumping into the canyon," he continued. "I'm not totally obtuse."

A smirk worked its way onto Matty's beautiful lips. She had sat down next to Lyle, and they looked like a perfectly matched pair to him. He'd gotten two sneers for the price of one conversation.

Agitated, Juliet shook the agenda at him again. "Don't you ever do that again!"

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he shouted. "Do you think I go around trying to molest young girls first thing in the morning? Besides, if she'd wanted to," he said, tapping his leg with the cane, "she could have run up and down the mountain two times before I ever caught her, did you ever think of that?"

"She's vulnerable now," Juliet said. "You could have tricked her into it. Men are good at showing sympathy--when they want something."

"For Christ's sake, she's pregnant! And I'll let you in a little secret, Juliet," Ev said. "I like women even less than you like men, right now. The last thing I'd want to do is be near one!"

His ex-wife burst into tears and sat down hard.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Things are taking a toll on me, that's all."

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Ev said, "The Gathering is a big undertaking."

She nodded as she took a tissue from the sleeve of her blouse and dabbed at her eyes.

"But that's only part of it, Ev. "

"What do you mean?"

"Ver--Vern has Thor. He caught it after it bucked Lorena off."

"I thought you said that stallion was still lost."

"I did," she said, "but I had to tell you something!"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because Vern said he'd kill Thor if I didn't return the videotape. And he said I shouldn't tell anybody."

"What videotape?"

"In the hospital, Mindy caught him beating me and taped it. Vern tried to take it away from her, but I stole it just outside your room so I could take it straight to the sheriff."

"So, what's the problem?" Ev asked. "Give him the tape, and you have Thor back."

Juliet twisted the tissue in her hands. "I don't have it."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," she said. "I had it, then it was gone the night I--."

"The night you what?" he asked.

"Had my revelation. My stone Buddha protected me from a fall from the deck and told me to use my magic."

Ev looked around at the corner where Juliet kept her materials for spells and charms. Buddha regarded him benignly

"Is that what the Gathering is all about?" he asked. "Why didn't you tell us about this? You usually can't wait to give us an earful about the Ascended Beings."

"Yes," she said. "I didn't tell you because it was so...intensely personal...so wonderful...so--.!"

Ev waited impatiently for words that didn't come. An insufferable look of rapture had come onto her face. He decided to get practical before she had an orgasm on the spot.

"That statue protected you?" he asked. "How did he do that?"

"I told you--he broke my fall. He transported himself down onto the ground and was manifest when the railing broke, and I dropped off the deck."

"Juliet, you don't suppose there might have been somebody else there?" he said.

She shook her head. "A human being couldn't possibly be in two places at once. He was on the ground, and then he was up on the deck and said--I remember it so clearly--"Use your magic now, Juliet!"

"But the tape disappeared that night?"

"I think so," she said. "I'm not sure."

"Well, I suppose we could search the house again," Ev said.

"I've turned it upside down."

The smirk on Lyle's face increased perceptibly, irritating Ev.

"You find this funny, boy? You're so goddamned smart, why don't you try helping instead of just sitting on your ass?"

"Hey," Lyle said. "I didn't say anything, and I haven't seen any tape like that around here, either, and I've been through them all."

That was true enough, Ev knew. When the boy wasn't in front of the computer screen, he was watching cable or films he had others rent from the video store. Lyle might be a genius, but he still had the appalling taste of a teenage boy, all slasher films and 'justice' movies, in which revenge consisted of killing your enemies in the most violent and spectacular manner possible.

Ev turned back to Juliet. "I take it then that Vern doesn't know the tape is missing."

Juliet nodded. "At first, I thought he had somehow sneaked in and taken it, but, then, the next thing I know, he's on the phone demanding to know where it is."

"Strange," Ev said, "but then that fits in with everything else around here." As he made the remark, he directed it in Matty's direction just to make himself feel better. "Well, it seems we can one of three things--we can tell Vern it's gone and hope for the best; we can go straight to the sheriff; or--and this is my least favorite--we can get the horse ourselves."

Juliet shook her head again. "Vern wouldn't buy the story that it's gone. And the sheriff probably won't have any better luck than we have. But, I've looked at all the places I thought he might have hidden Thor, and all I've drawn is a blank, so I don't think we can find him, either."

"Well, if we all search, we have a better chance of discovering where the horse is," Ev said. "The way I see it, Vern had two choices--put the horse in the most remote location possible or hide it in plain sight. Which one do you think he would choose?"

"He'd go with the remote location, no doubt about that," Juliet said. "With so many acres, he's got lots of places to do the hiding. We could search for years and not find Thor."

"I'll ask the Rock People," Matty said. "They'll know where the horse is."

"We haven't got centuries, either," Ev replied.

He looked around the table for more realistic help. Everyone was silent, except for Lyle. An irritating hum escaped the smirk that seemed permanently etched into his face.

"Well, genius?" he asked. "You're the idea man. Come up with one, why don't you?"

The brown eyes flickered with amusement. "Okay," Lyle said.

"Do you want to let us in on it?" Ev asked when the boy didn't say anything more.

"Sure," the teenager said.

Ev rolled his eyes at the transparent attempt to draw things out. "Now would be a good time, don't you think?"

"The horse is on Vern's land."

"Brilliant," Vern said sarcastically.

"Stick with me here, okay?" Lyle said. "You're right, Aunt Juliet. He did choose a remote spot. Thor is up on Sarvis Mountain. I'm sure of it."

"And just how do you know that?" Ev asked.

The boy shrugged. "I deduced it from analyzing Vern's actions."

Ev knew that was the biggest bullshit story he'd ever heard. Lyle was brilliant, but he wasn't clairvoyant, either.

"Why didn't you tell us earlier?" Juliet cried. "You could have saved me so much worry!"

"I didn't figure it out until just now," Lyle said. "All the pieces suddenly came together. That's just how my mind works. I have to sit back and let it do its job."

Ev studied the boy, but, as usual, there wasn't a clue as to what was going on behind those impenetrable eyes. He decided to take the teenager at face value for now and find out later how he'd got the information. One thing he knew for sure--the story was far too pat.

"I haven't been up there in years," Ev said to Juliet. "Is there still a clear fire trail up there, do you know?"

"No," she answered. "According to Lorena, Vern hasn't been big on visitors the last few years, so I don't think anyone really knows. But, if he got Thor up there in a trailer, there must be a road."

"He could have ridden him up there," Ev said.

"I don't think so," she said. "I've seen him at the Hermosa Rodeo. He rides like a cork in waves--wallowing up and down all the time in the saddle. Thor wouldn't tolerate him. He'd buck Vern across the state."

"Somebody will have to go find out, then."

Juliet looked around the table and asked, "Who should go?"

"You're the only one not doing anything," Lyle said pointedly to Ev.

All eyes around the table swung toward him.

Ev had had that exact thought in mind, but was suspicious of the boy and asked for the sake of argument, "Why not you? It's your idea, and you're a lot younger than I am."

"No," Juliet said vehemently. "You can't send a boy to do a man's job."

Ev smiled as Lyle scowled at Juliet but didn't say anything. A point had finally been scored off the enigmatic teenager.

. He considered raising further objections, then thought better of it. He hadn't needed the boy's remark to know that he hadn't done anything during his recovery. Reconnoitering Vern's territory was a golden opportunity to escape the loony bin that Juliet's house had become, and eventual retrieval of the horse would be an action that would fully repay the debt he owed her for getting him out of the hospital.

"Why not?" he said. "It's not as if I could get into any more trouble. So, let's do it now. I'll scout the place. Then if I find a trail, we'll have to get a trailer and figure out how to get Thor back down the mountain without Vern discovering us. I'd drive up there tonight, but how am I going to get past the media?"

"Simple," Lyle said. "Spread confusion in their ranks."

"How do we do that?" Juliet asked.

"What do they want more than anything right now? An interview with Everett Pick, of course," Lyle said, answering his own question. "So, let's give them one--or the promise of one."

"But I won't be there, right?" Ev asked.

The teenager nodded.

"I don't know if they'll buy that," Ev said. "They'll want to know why I've suddenly decided to do it when I've been avoiding them like the plague since I got out of the hospital."

"Not when there's been mention of a terrible accident or suicide or murder or"--he said with a smirk--"whatever form of mayhem we choose. Hell, let's make it vague. Those TV people are like vampires, aren't they? When they smell blood, they don't think; they just act. So, let's give them some blood"

"Mindy Rattigan is always hot to be first," Ev said. "Get her to believe it, and the rest will follow."

In a matter of fact tone, Lyle said, "Every herd needs a leader to take it over the cliff,"

Ev glanced sharply at the teenager. The boy disturbed him, there was no doubt about that. It was not that Lyle thought of luridly nasty things to do to people--all teenagers did that at one time or another as they tried to work out the position of authority in their lives--but that he did so in such a coldly, rational manner. The boy seemed to have no passion for anything except his precious computer.

"So, what we do is position my Blazer close to the road ahead of time so Ev can get down to it. Then, when he sees the herd of reporters trampling all over each other to get up to the Gathering, he gets his tail out of there unseen."

"Why your Blazer?" Ev asked.

Lyle shrugged. "Why not? It's a used bomb my father was dumb enough to buy from Vern. It'll get you up there and back over rough terrain, but we won't have lost much if things go bad. It sounds like the logical thing to do to me."

Ev could do nothing but agree, but the teenager was too smooth for his tastes. He had an answer for everything.

*But then, he told himself, he's a genius, and geniuses have all the answers.*

"All right," he said.

Yawning Lyle checked around the table with the others. "Is this all settled then? I need some sleep before we do this."

"Sleep?" Ev said. "It's morning."

"I was up all night working," the boy said.

"On what?" Ev asked.

"On the solution," the teenager answered cryptically.

Did you do it?" Juliet stood and asked excitedly.

"In spades."

Ev looked to Matty for help, but it was obvious from her puzzled expression that she didn't know what Lyle was talking about either.

"What solution?" he asked again.

Juliet raised her arms and twirled about the kitchen, making her white robe flare out like an inverted orchid.

"The final one!" she cried. "Lyle's found the final solution."

Ev studied his ex-wife to see if there was any trace of awareness of what she'd just said, but there was only the beaming joy of happiness. Then, he turned his attention to Lyle, and a chill ran through his body.

The teenager was regarding Juliet with barely disguised contempt, and when he returned Ev's gaze, there was a very wide and very cold grin splitting the smooth face.



## Chapter 51

### Lorena Abandons the Porcelain God

*Oh, dear God, how many times have I staggered into the bathroom today? Lorena thought as she woke yet again into the middle of her hangover. Somebody's beating on my head with a sledgehammer after pouring a bucket of acid down my throat.*

Wiping the sweat from her face, she looked over at the door and wondered if she could beat the nausea to the toilet once again. The hall light fell mercifully short of where she lay, keeping the brightness out of eyes that had suddenly acquired centuries of rust in their sockets. Soft and indistinguishable voices spoke from the living room.

*Everyone is keeping quiet for my sake, she assumed. All of them have been in and out of her room to check on me. Except for Lyle, thank God. I appreciate their thoughtfulness, but I just wish the hangover would simply go away, or I can die and be rid of the whole thing.*

When neither happened, she swung her legs from beneath the sheet and sat up on the edge of the bed. She looked out the screened open window, hoping to find something to focus on while her head did its best impression of a Tilt-A-Whirl, but it was dark now. A warm, hard wind blew the curtains in, bringing with it the nauseating smell of pine from the trees and horse manure from the stable. A figure slipped by outside headed in the direction of the lower canyon as she gagged and struggled to her feet. It was Ev, she knew, by its size. He was probably out for another walk. She wished briefly that she could join him, but she had a date with the Porcelain God--a phrase she'd heard many times before from Vern and his buddies and despised. Now, she knew it was exactly the right terminology. It seemed like she'd been putting her arm around the stool's coolness all day long and praying to the white ceramic to make it all stop.

*The trouble is, she thought, it never seems to answer my prayers; it just demands that I sacrifice more of my stomach.*

Covering her eyes so the light wouldn't hurt them, Lorena felt her way hurriedly into the hall and into the bathroom. She dropped to her knees and vomited once into the toilet bowl, then tried again. Her stomach heaved and contracted and produced nothing. She remembered another term she'd heard used--the dry heaves. That was what she had. Her gut had nothing left, except involuntary muscular spasms. She collapsed back against the vanity, panting and feeling as low as one of Vern's friends.

She rested for a while, then felt hope creep in. She was still weak, but her head was clearing a bit. Getting up to the sink, she splashed cold water on her face, then risked a look in the mirror and immediately regretted it.

*I look a hundred--two hundred years--old, she saw in dismay. My skin is the color of a catfish's underbelly. A hog holding pond smells better than I do.*

Vomit stained her black School of Mines sweatshirt, making her look like a drunken bumblebee. There was no doubt about it--she needed a shower in the worst way. She checked the tub wistfully, wondering if she dared risk its slippery danger alone. Deciding against it, she pulled herself to the door to call for help.

A sudden, hysterical voice from the living room stopped her.

"Hello? Hello? You've got to help us!," she heard Juliet scream, apparently into the phone. "It's Ev, Everett Pick! He's going to kill himself."

A shock ran through Lorena's body, and she fought to keep the blackness from her head.

"Because you're the closest, that's why we called you, damn it!" Juliet shouted. "You gave us your number, remember? You've been sitting down there on the road for weeks now, looking for a story and never leaving us alone. Well, you've got one now, haven't you, Mindy?"

Where'd he go? I think he went to--"

Lorena didn't need to listen anymore. She knew where Ev had gone. Suddenly, her weakness vanished. She had no time for it now. Hurrying back into the bedroom, she unlatched the screen and pushed it open. She was outside and stumbling toward the trees before she could even think about what she was doing.

She tripped over a root and slammed into the ground. It was very dark under the pines and the wind roared in their tops. She raised her head and waited for her vision to adjust. Off to the east, a helicopter chopped the air above the forest as it crossed the bright moon that was over-ripening in the superheated air of the Badlands like a bad melon. She just had to keep going, and there would be light enough to see where Ev was. With his leg, he could not have gotten far, she knew that. Using the trunk of a pine as support to regain her footing, Lorena worked her way cautiously down the slope. Dry pine needles gossiped about her uncertain tread as she peered into the night, listening for the sound of Ev's cane, but sirens had wound themselves into a frenzy and wailed their way up from the main highway. Car lights sliced through the forest like lasers as vehicles raced up the road toward the Gathering. Lorena stopped to catch her breath and cursed them.

*Everyone's headed the wrong way, she raged at them in her mind. What's the matter with all of you? Ev will have time to jump from the overlook before you're anywhere near his vicinity.*

It was up to her, she knew, as she pushed herself into a run down the rocky hill.

The Badlands had collapsed the moon's melon shape into a husk by the time she broke out into the open ground and saw Ev limping ahead, his cane propelling him forward with a determined step.

"Stop!" she cried. "Ev, stop! Please stop!"

He started and turned around.

"Lorena? What the devil are you doing here?" he asked.

"Don't do it!" she said as she ran toward him.

"Why not?" he asked.

When she was close enough, she lunged toward him and knocked the cane from his hand. "Because I can't let you, that's why!" she said.

The moonlight made his face a jumble of concerned angles and planes as he stared at the fallen cane, then back at her. "But why not? I volunteered."

It was Lorena's turn to stare. "Volunteered?"

"Yeah, it seems that I'm the only one who's expendable right now."

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "Don't you hear all those sirens? Don't you see that helicopter? They're all looking for you!"

"That's right," Ev said. "I'm committing suicide for them. Or so they think, anyway."

She was angry now. "Stop all this nonsense, and tell me what's going on, please!"

"It's a trick, Lorena, that's all it is. I'm not really going to kill myself if that's what you think. Juliet wants Thor back, and Lyle says he knows approximately where the horse is. So, Lyle thought up this diversion so I could search for where the stallion is located. I'm taking his Blazer. It's parked over there beneath the trees."

Lorena took a deep breath, then said, "You bastards! You didn't let me in on it, and when I heard Juliet on the phone, I thought it was for real. Now, you've helped me make a big fool out of myself!"

"You weren't exactly in shape for our secret mission, were you?" Ev pointed out.

"Shut up!" she said. "That's embarrassing too."

They stood in silence together, the wind whipping their hair in wild directions. The crackle of loudspeakers from the Gathering momentarily drowned out the roar of the pines. Lorena felt the surge of adrenaline that had carried her to Ev drain away, and she suddenly felt very shaky.

"I'm sorry," she managed to apologize, "but I was worried about you."

"I appreciate it, believe me," he responded. "But you'd better get back up to the house. I have to get going before they discover the whole thing's fake."

Lorena looked back up the hill and shook her head. "I can't. I haven't got the strength now. Take me with you."

"I can't do that," Ev said. "Jesus, if Vern found you, you'd be right back in the soup."

"I don't care right now," she said, feeling thirst grab hold of her throat and demand lubrication. "I can't make it. I know I can't. Just take me along. I'll hide. All I want to do is rest. Please!"

Ev hesitated. "You're sure you can't make it back?"

"Positive! Now, please bring the Blazer over here before I collapse."

Retrieving his cane, Ev limped hurriedly toward the vehicle. In a moment, Lorena heard the engine crank into life and the truck come forward with its lights off. Ev pulled up next to her and helped her into the front seat, buckling the safety belt when she didn't have the strength to do it. He put the Blazer into gear and pointed it toward the highway. As they bumped and jolted across the clearing, the dehydration of the hangover demanded that Lorena do something about replenishing the liquids in her system.

"Have you got anything to drink?" she asked.

"I don't know," Ev said. "Lyle brought this thing down here earlier, not me. Let me see."

"Don't bother," she said. "He's not the thoughtful type."

"I'll look, anyway. He's always drinking that soft drink crap. He might have left some behind," he said and checked the back seat as he kept his eyes ahead. Lorena's hopes rose as she heard aluminum cans knock against each other. Ev pulled a six-pack down onto his lap and twisted one of the cans out of the plastic holder. He held it up to read the label, then looked over at Lorena.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well, it's not Surge, anyway."

"Let's not play any more games, shall we?" she said in exasperation and grabbed the cans away as she ignored his protests. "I don't care what it is."

Freeing one of the cans, she pulled the tab open, and drank deeply. Her stomach protested, and she pushed her head out of the window and heaved violently into the wind.

"You're a double bastard!" she said when she was finished.

"I tried to tell you."

"A triple bastard!"

"Hey, I didn't put the beer in here, so don't go blaming me!"

"Well, who did put it in here?" she demanded. "When I find them, I'm going to kill them!"

"I don't know," Ev said. "It's Lyle's car, maybe he put it there, but his murder will have to wait until we finish our job tonight.

"Fine," she said. "Just damned fine."

"You're the one who wanted to come along."

"Just stop pointing that out to me, okay? I couldn't feel any worse than I do right now."

"Well, then, rest as best you can while I get us up there."

Lorena tried, but the aggravating hum of the off-road tires on the asphalt only added to her headache. The moon had finally cleared the updrafts of the Badlands and assumed its normal shape, but now it seemed to Lorena that it had cast itself into the role of a cold and merciless judge of her stupidity. She groaned and closed her eyes again.

The sudden jolt of front tires brought them open. Lorena sat up to see where they were. The moon had been replaced by cloudy skies and the patter of a soft rain in the pines lining the road. Lightning sent jagged streaks across the mountains.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We're onto Vern's land now," Ev said. "You've been asleep."

"No, I haven't. I just closed my eyes for a minute, that's all."

"Well, thirty of those minutes have passed, believe me," he said. "In any case, I'm glad you're awake. Now's the time to be alert. I came here to see if the fire trail is still open, and there's only one way to find that out. Its beginning should be right beyond that clump of birch."

Lorena started to argue with Ev about the passage of time, then realized he was right as she shook off the sleepiness. She hung onto the door as the Blazer thumped its way through the ruts of the main road. The front end plunged into a deep hole, splashing muddy water up onto the windshield, then Ev had it around the birches and stopped at the vehicle at a gate that held a large NO TRESPASSING! Sign. Beyond the fence, a steep, rocky trail led up the mountain. Ev got out and opened the gate. When he had the Blazer through the fence, he gunned the motor up the grade, then braked violently. Lorena's head snapped forward, then back into the headrest.

"Oh, God!" she moaned. "Can't you be more careful?"

"Quiet!" Ev commanded.

Lorena sat straight up, fear draining the strength right out of her. "Is it Vern?"

"No," he said and pointed straight ahead.

A large shaggy head turned back toward them, and large brown eyes glowered in the headlights as the rank smell of wet, dirty fur intruded through the window. A contemptuous snort cut through the night air as the

buffalo whirled around with astonishing quickness and lowered its horns toward the Blazer.

"Damn!" Ev said. "It's an old bull that's been chased out the herd by the younger ones. Hang on!"

In horrified paralysis, Lorena watched as the huge male charged. It drove its bulk into the truck, and the breath right out of her. She heard Ev grunt as the seatbelt jerked tight around his middle. The bull shook its head, and the metal in the grille screeched horribly. Steam hissed upward, sending a geyser of antifreeze over the animal, coating its fur with green fluid.

"It's caught!" Ev said.

"What'll we do?" Lorena cried as the buffalo twisted its head, shaking the Blazer as if it were an annoying rival caught on one of its horns.

"Wait until it has to rest, then get the hell out of here!" he shouted.

She braced herself against the dash as the bull rammed the still-running truck back down the road in violent jerks. It had them almost back to the birches by the time its strength had momentarily played out.

"Now!" Ev shouted, and they both scrambled out of the Blazer and put the truck far between them and the buffalo. Their sudden flight seemed to enrage the animal further. It attacked the truck with renewed fury, pushing it toward the trees. The rear end of the truck dropped off the road, and Lorena heard the muffler crumple underneath the weight of the vehicle. A puff of smoke emerged from the tail pipe as the motor coughed and died, and she thought the Blazer had simply backfired, but the smoke blossomed into a huge orange and black fireball that exploded up above the pines. A second later, an enormous, deafening concussion knocked her to the ground. She rolled over and covered her head as pieces of metal rattled down onto the road like hard rain. One of them slammed into her leg and seared right through her jeans and onto her flesh. She screamed, sat up, and plucked it out of her leg. She looked at Ev and saw that he was in no better shape than she was. A shard of glass had penetrated his side. He tugged at it until it came loose, then threw it back at the blazing wreck. Lorena felt an irrational sympathy for the buffalo, then saw that it was not dead, but, like them, simply stunned.

It sat on its haunches in the middle of the road, the twisted and crumpled grill still on its horn. As the bull shook its head in confusion, the metal slipped off and clattered on the ground. Lorena motioned for Ev to keep still as the animal staggered to its feet and snorted at the destroyed truck. It seemed to be satisfied that it had defeated its rival and swung unsteadily around into the woods.

Rubbing at her burned leg, Lorena said the first thing that came to mind. "I thought that cars only blew up like that in the movies."

"Me too," Ev said. "It's a good thing we got out when we did."

The impact of the explosion on hearing made him sound like he was talking from a mile away, but Lorena could still hear the dazed bull crash against a tree before disappear into the dark.

Lorena let out a sigh of relief. "Thank God, he's gone. I was afraid--."

A sharp metallic click followed by a dull thud cut the words off. Flames shot upward in the pines, igniting the needles and sending cinders into the surrounding trees. Lorena was afraid the whole forest would catch, but the rain pattering down seemed to limit the spread of fire. Horrible squealing and bellowing rose out of the dark. Lorena clapped her hand over her mouth as bits of buffalo flesh spattered in the dirt around her. Her ears still rang from both explosions, but she could hear Ev's words of astonishment very clearly.

"Christ!" he said. "Vern's mined the Black Hills!"

"Not even Vern would do that," Lorena protested.

"Believe it. My God, but I know that sound well!" he answered. "Listen to that poor animal."

"Can't we do anything for it?" she asked.

"With what?" Ev asked. "Do you want to try walking into the woods to put it out of its misery?"

"No," she said, "but it still seems like we should do something."

"Get out of here, that's what we should do, Lorena. You can bet somebody's going to check up on all this racket. These mines are an effective early warning system."

"But how do we know we can get back without tripping one of those horrible things?" she asked.

"Stick to the middle of the road until we get past the gate. We made it this far, so we can make it back safely."

Lorena helped him to his feet, and they were nearly to the fence when another unearthly scream split the air.

"That poor animal," Ev said. "God, I hate hearing that sound."

"That wasn't the buffalo!" she said. "It was too far away, and I'd recognize that cry anywhere. It's a horse in pain."

"Thor?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean--I don't know. It has to be, doesn't it?"

"It doesn't have to," Ev responded. "It could be any horse for all we know, but we only have one way to find out, don't we? Do you want to risk going back up that road?"

"I don't want to," she answered, "but if he's hurt somehow, we can't just leave him there, can we?"

"No, but, supposing we do find Thor up there with Vern, what are we going to do about it?"

The distant *thunk* of a car door ended the debate. Lorena heard an engine kick into action and the rattle of a truck as it swung onto the road somewhere up on the mountain. Already, she could see lights bouncing off the tops of the lodgepole pines.

"Come on!" Ev shouted. "Let's get outside the fence and find some cover."

They only had time to duck behind the birches before the truck's lights came around a curve and speared the trees. Lorena listened as brakes squealed. When a door opened, she risked taking a look. Beyond the burning wreck, a figure stood with an alert dog at the end of the leash. A flashlight swept the area, then there was the sound of clattering metal. When she heard the man speak suddenly to the growling dog, Lorena gasped and ducked. She knew the voice, and she knew the figure that was now coming toward them.

It was her husband.



## Chapter 52

### A Good Dog Gone

The distant *ccrump-cccrump* of triggered mines mingled with the anguished howl of Maj's recently bought rottweiler sat Vern bolt upright in his bunk with a curse. Swinging his feet onto the floor, he swore again at the hangover banging against his temples like a wrecking ball.

*You can't relax security, but I have no intention of checking the road if I can help it*, he thought as he looked around the cabin to see if anyone was in any better shape than he was.

Even though the mine field was only partially completed, a white tail or a mountain sheep still managed to blunder into the area now and then and blow themselves into jerky. The only two-legged animal had been a crankhead who'd somehow found his way up on the canyon path and tripped a bounding mine. Vern swore that the far-gone ones could smell meth fifty miles away. After a brief, but pointed interrogation, it had been obvious his brain had melted to the point where he couldn't have been working with anyone, so he and Reno had left him legless in the pines as an example for any other amateur bozos who thought they could score some easy speed.

Maj was slumped over the card table, one arm over his MAC-10. A pint of Royal Canadian dripped its remaining contents on the other arm where the veins had disappeared beneath pasty flesh dimpled like goose flesh. Vern glanced down at Reno's boots. They still smoldered and stunk from the flames that had eaten at them. Maj had been far enough gone to try to drink some distilled water after he'd put the lye in the jug and then had set himself on fire after that without even realizing it. The sonuvabitch never seemed to learn that ether fumes are heavier than air. The rottweiler lifted its heavy muzzle toward Vern expectantly.

"In a moment, Sally" he told the bitch. Maj had named the dog after his last ex-wife. As he peered blearily at the rottweiler, Vern decided it was a perfect name. The dog looked better than Sally, but didn't have anything on Maj's ex for sheer meanness.

Snoring with the buzzsaw efficiency of the lush, Willie lay behind Reno curled on a sleeping bag like the maggot that he was, Vern was surprised he'd heard the mines through all the noise that was coming out of the man's constricted throat. The smell of piss rose up from his used car sales manager, nearly smothering the sickly sweet smell of freshly cooked crank, and he turned his attention to the far corner and his last hope. For a moment, he thought Blue was wide awake for a change, but he was as

dead drunk as Willie. The only reason he'd stayed erect in his chair was that he'd wrapped his arm around one of the rests and was sitting on his hand. The poker game had quit early since everyone was either wired out or tired from a day of tactical problems, so he estimated Blue had been in the chair for at least three hours.

*If he spends the rest of the night that way, Vern realized, Haller will have circulation problems, and I'll have another worthless shithead on my hands.*

He groaned, pulled on his pants and boots, and went over to Blue. Kicking the chair over with a grunt of satisfaction, he watched the shoeless Haller tumble to the floor without a murmur.

*He stinks as bad as Willie, Vern realized. In fact, the whole cabin stinks, so maybe getting outside isn't such a bad idea after all.*

Strapping on the Beretta, he found the dog's leash, attached it, then they went out the door into a pelting rain. Lightning streaked across the western sky.

"Shit, it figures," he said to no one in particular, then trudged past the ATVs and over to the Jimmy. He'd parked it by the corral, and the stallion stuck his head over the fence and whinnied at him as he opened the truck's door.

"Fuck you!" he snapped at the horse because it sounded like the stallion was laughing at him. His backside was still sore from trying to stay in the saddle. The warmblood was a handful, and he couldn't imagine how Juliet or Lorena or anyone else could ride it. He was about to get in the truck when Thor whinnied again. This time, Vern was sure the horse was rubbing it in. He pulled the Beretta from its holster and raised his pistol.

"Laugh again, you fancy bastard, and I'll give you one round at 1,080 feet per second. Your thick skull will be nothing more than a messy hole on four legs."

The stallion ignored him with a derisive nickering sound. Vern slid the safety off and took aim. Thor shook his mane, but didn't move.

"Damned stupid horse," Vern said, sliding the safety back on and holstering the sidearm. "You're just worth too damned much to me--for now. But you'll end up as Alpo, anyway, if I have anything to say about it. Sally here is the hungry sort."

The horse reared with a contemptuous snort as the rottweiler snarled and lunged against the end of the leash. Vern knew he couldn't lose face with the warmblood, so he went back into the stable and got a handful of sweet feed and a riding crop from the tack room. When he came back outside, Thor hadn't moved. He offered the horse the feed. The animal hesitated for a moment, then came forward and stuck his muzzle into his palm. As soon as the horse had its attention on the grain, Vern whipped the

crop around hard in an overhand swing and rapped the stallion hard across the nose. Thor screamed, reared and bolted across the corral, trying to shake the pain from its sensitive muzzle. While the dog barked the excitement of its bloodlust, Vern threw the crop at the stallion for good measure. It struck against the horse's flank, making it scream again. Vern stood in satisfaction until he remembered his business.

Pulling the dog into the Jimmy, he started the vehicle and got it moving down the fire trail. His ears had grown expert at detecting the location of the mines activated by the Hills wildlife, and he knew this one had been triggered near the bottom of the mountain, so he gunned the truck down the path until he saw what blocked the road near the clump of aspen that marked the beginning of the trail. He cut the lights and coasted to a stop. He pulled the Snakelight from the glove compartment, then got out with Sally on a tight leash. Staying carefully to the middle of the road, he walked the dog down to the smoking wreck. The vehicle was nearly gutted down to its frame, and the noxious smell of melted plastic rose from the dashboard area. He stood for a long moment, listening to the rottweiler snuffle the air while something nagged at his mind. When there was no action on the part of the dog, he switched on the flashlight and tried to identify the make of vehicle. It was obviously an off-road model, but he couldn't determine what it was until he tripped over something in the road. He shone the Snakelight downward and saw a bloody, misshapen grill with a Ford emblem in the middle of it.

*It has to be a Blazer, Vern thought, but that doesn't tell me who owned it.*

Kicking hard at the grill, he grinned as Sally skittered away from the rattling sound. It could have been bikers or serious Mexicans trying to cop his meth, but anyone with a purpose would have stuck to the fire trail. Another possibility was teenagers having a beer party by chance on his property.

The nagging in his mind crystallized into a realization, and he swung the flashlight across the road until he checked a red flag tacked to the top of a stake. Then he shone the light back up the trail on the other side. There was another flag, but it was 50 feet above the other. His team had laid mines down to the gate on the left side of the road, but the laying had stopped farther up the trail on the side where the wreck lay. There were no M16A1 anti-personnel or M21 anti-tank mines below that flag. Vern swung back to the wreck.

*The damned thing hadn't detonated anything in the minefield, he realized. It had blown up all by itself.*

Studying the damage more closely, he knew an exploding gas tank couldn't have done the type of damage he was seeing.

*An anti-tank mine sends a jet of superheated gas into the mass that trips the circuitry and has a very definite blast pattern with very specific effects, he remembered from his training. An ignited gas tank does a lot of damage, but not the total destruction I'm looking at now.*

There was only one conclusion he could come to.

Whoever was in the vehicle had been carrying a bomb with them.

It was not an answer he liked. Nobody but an amateur or a raving lunatic would drive around with an armed explosive device on rough--or smooth-- roads. He didn't like the next conclusion he arrived at, either.

The bomb was meant for him and his operation.

From the force of the detonation, it looked like someone was trying to blow him to hell and back.

*If it had exploded near the lab, it would have torn the devil himself a very new and very wide asshole, he realized with a chill.*

"Shit and double shit!" he muttered. The lab was backed up and running at maximum capacity with highest quality equipment turning out the highest quality meth. He'd be damned if he'd move everything again.

"Come!" he ordered Sally and cursed at her when she didn't obey. From her alert position, he realized she'd smelled something. A tense, low growl came from her jaws.

"What is it, girl?" he asked.

The rottweiler snarled, then strained against the leash with its nose pointed down the hill toward the gate.

"Somebody there, is there?" Vern drew his Beretta and thumbed off the safety. "Let's go see, shall we?"

The dog tugged them both quickly toward the clump of birches that flanked the outside of the gate. Vern stopped the rottweiler inside the fence.

"Come on out!" he shouted. "Now! I have a dog and a weapon."

He listened to the silence with impatience, then leveled the Beretta and squeezed off a shot. Birch bark splintered viciously as the report echoed off the mountain.

"Get your ass out here!" he ordered.

He heard frantic whispering, then a voice shouted, "Don't shoot! We're coming out."

Vern aimed the pistol again.

*If it's crankheads again, they'll have breezes blowing through their heads before they're fully erect, he vowed. If it's the Mexicans that fucked with Maj, they'll end up as vulture bait too after I find out who's behind the whole thing.*

He fired off another shot to keep them from thinking too hard. Immediately, raised hands appeared behind the tree, and a slender figure

stepped out onto the road beyond the fence. Vern's finger tightened on the trigger as he shone the light on the intruder's face.

"Jesus!" he said as he saw who it was and lowered the pistol. "Lorena?"

Lunging at the sight of its quarry, the rottweiler tore the leash out of Vern's grip. His wife screamed and ducked behind the trees again. Sally swerved off the road, instinctively taking the shortest route toward Lorena.

"No!" Vern shouted. "No, goddamn it, no! Heel!"

The dog ignored his command and gathered its haunches to leap the fence. Vern heard the dreaded click and dove toward the ground. The Beretta dropped to the ground as a hammer dropped on his head before he hit the muddy road. He lay stunned and unable to move, not sure what had been loudest--the explosion, the scream of the dog, or the ringing in his ears. When Lorena ran out from behind the birches with a concerned look on her face, he tried to still his swirling thoughts to tell her that he was grateful for her help, but a large figure limped out and prevented her from coming to his aid.

*It's Pick, EverettfuckingPick!* he thought and tried to will his body into action, but it wouldn't respond. He watched helplessly as the two came up to him, and Lorena kneeled in the road. She patted him briefly on the head, then stole the keys out of his pocket. He watched the two of them hurry up the hill toward the Jimmy. It was infuriating. He couldn't talk, and he couldn't move to pick up the pistol. Not yet, anyway. But he'd been shell shocked before. It wore off, and he could already feel the tingling in his fingers. If things worked out when they drove by, he'd be able to pick up the Beretta and lay a shot right between Pick's eyes. He strained his arm toward the pistol as the truck's engine started up, then his fingers had the trigger guard, and he was rolling himself into position when he realized he'd never be able to get a shot off. Lorena was not driving the pickup past him; she was headed *up* the road. Vern swore he could hear his blood reach the boiling point in his body.

*I know damned well what my soft-headed wife is after,* he raged in his mind. *She wants the horse and probably doesn't have a clue that the meth lab is on the mountain.*

Staggering to his feet, Vern started up the road, firing the Beretta into the air to alert the others. With each step, he cursed Lorena and Pick. It was an old motivational trick he'd learned in the military. Hatred keeps you going when you can't go anymore.

That thought kept him going up the road, then his mind cleared, and he stared down at the pistol and realized what he'd done by firing shots. His trigger-happy group was bound to respond violently. Vern began to run hard. There was only one thing more volatile than Willie or Blue or Maj with an automatic weapon.

Ether.

## **Chapter 53**

### **Clang**

"What's that godawful smell?" Ev asked as Lorena banged the Jimmy at speed up the road. Each jolt into a rut sent pain in search of a new adventure in his leg. "It's got a stink like starting fluid."

"I don't know," she answered, "but I smelled it once before over by Juliet's Gathering site."

"I think Vern has more up here than the horse, and I think we'd better be careful when we get up there. He wasn't firing those shots at us as far as I can tell. He was trying to warn somebody, and you can bet they're armed. These guys love their weaponry."

"What shall we do?" Lorena asked. "Sneak in or barge in?"

"Barge in, I guess, after we take a look at what we're facing. They can't see us beyond the headlights, so they won't know who it is. That's probably the easy part. The question is, how do we get Thor out of there? Even if they have a trailer, we wouldn't have time to hook it up."

"That's easy," she said. "We ride him out."

Ev clutched at his thigh. "I'm not getting on any damned horse. My leg couldn't handle it."

"I don't think you'll have much choice, Ev. We can't go back down the road. Besides, we're safer in the forest. They can't follow us there."

"Shit," Ev said, trying to think of less painful alternatives. When none came, he said, "All right, all right. Let's change drivers, though. I can't handle that horse, so I should be behind the wheel."

Lorena nodded and braked the truck. Her face was intensely alive in the glow from the dash, and Ev remembered that expression. He'd seen it before on buddies in combat, and they'd seen it on him, he supposed. There was nothing like the prospect of death to refine every sense to an excruciating degree that would imprint the experience permanently on every nerve in your body--if you survived it.

Getting out of the Jimmy, he changed positions with Lorena. Up in the sky, the moon was beginning to peek out from the passing clouds. He turned off the lights and waited until his eyes adjusted, then put the truck into gear.

"When we get there," he told Lorena, "head straight for where you think the horse is."

"What are you going to do, Ev?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Do whatever shock troops do, I guess. Make as much noise as possible and keep the lights in their eyes until we can get out of there. I just hope they don't have automatic weapons."

"Do you think they're experts?" Lorena asked.

"No, but the trouble with weapons on full auto is that you don't have to be good to use them, just lucky."

Lorena was silent at his news.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll have the lights. They'll be aiming at me, not you."

"That's not very funny," she said.

"It wasn't meant to be. Just being practical."

"How can you be so matter-of-fact about this? I find that really annoying," Lorena said.

"I've been there before," he answered. "Experience makes all the difference."

"You were in combat?"

"Yeah, in the worst theater of all."

"You were in Special Forces or something like that?" she asked.

"No. I taught seventh grade once."

She hit him hard in the shoulder. "That's not funny, either."

"I *was* in the Army," he said. "But nothing fancy like Vern. Just a grunt."

Another shot echoed behind them as a light showed suddenly through the trees lining the road. Ev stopped the Jimmy and killed the engine. He motioned for Lorena to stay silent while they waited for any motion to show itself. In a few minutes, the moon peeked out from the racing storm clouds, and he could make out an old log cabin with a small corral attached to it. The corrugated tin roof of a ramshackle stable gleamed dully in the night. The odor--like ether, he thought--was very strong and seemed to come from an outbuilding situated a good distance from the house.

"Where are they?" Lorena whispered

"Look to the left of the corral," Ev said. The glint of metal had shown itself in the moonlight.

"Oh, God, what do we do?"

"Like I said before--barge in. That's my part. I want you to get out here--quietly--and head toward the stable. When the noise starts, find the horse and get him out of here. I'll take my chances in the truck and head back down the road when I see you're gone."

"All right," she said and slipped out of the cab. Ev watched as she carefully pushed the door back without closing it and disappeared into the darkness of the trees. He gave her two minutes, then started the engine, flicked the lights on bright, and floored the accelerator. The truck's tires



spun briefly in the mud, then gripped and shot the Jimmy forward. Ev leaned on the horn as Lorena's door swung wide open, then slammed shut. He aimed the vehicle straight at the cabin door and hunched down behind the steering wheel just as the stutter of automatic weapons fire blew out the windshield. Splinters of glass stung his scalp and face, but he kept his foot down on the accelerator. When he was close enough, he hit the brakes and spun the steering wheel hard. The truck's rear end banged against the cabin, hung up briefly, then pulled free. Pointing the Jimmy toward the parked vehicles, Ev repeated his spin, slamming into an F-250 and bouncing into and off a Dodge Ram. His head snapped into the steering wheel, consciousness splintering for a second into a crazed pattern of colored lights. The dull thud of bullets stitching the truck's metal shook him back into awareness. He threw the Jimmy into reverse, but the tires spun futilely. He was hung up on the Ram's bumper. Keeping low, he worked the vehicle back and forth until it tore free with a nasty screeching of metal. Then, he gunned the Jimmy toward the corral and sideswiped the fence. The poles clattered to the ground, as Ev felt the weapons fire strike the tires. The Jimmy dug itself into the ground as he fought to get it going again. When there was a sudden motion by the window, he gave up the idea

"Pick, you're a dead motherfucker!" Vern said, pressing the barrel of the Beretta into his face.

The maniacal clatter of an automatic weapon startled them both. Metallic *thunks* sounded from the rear of the Jimmy.

"Goddamn it!" Sarvis shouted. "Cease fire, you idiots! Do you want to blow the whole fucking mountain up and us with it!"

Ev heard a distant voice that sounded like Maj Reno's say in a wondering tone, "Oh, shit."

"Yeah," Vern said with contempt into the dark. "'Oh, shit.'"

Sarvis turned his head back toward Ev. "And shit is what you're in, Pick, because I'm going to blow your head off after I find out what the hell you're doing up here, trying to kill me."

"Kill you?" Ev said. "We weren't trying to kill you."

"I suppose you didn't know you were carrying a bomb."

"What bomb?" Ev asked.

"Don't play stupid with me."

"A rogue buffalo charged us. That's when it blew up, Vern."

Sarvis' eyes rolled white in his dirt-streaked face. "Old bulls don't make trucks explode, idiot."

"Well, that's what happened. The explosion stunned the buffalo, then it wandered into the woods, where it got blown up. Christ, Vern, what have you got up here?"

Sarvis poked the pistol barrel hard into his cheek, then drew it back. "Pick, you're so goddamned stupid, I believe you. You wouldn't recognize a bomb if it blew up in your face. That means someone planted it. I want to know who. But, of course, you wouldn't know that either, would you?"

Ev shook his head.

"Too bad," Vern said and leveled the Beretta again. "That means you're dog meat."

Ev closed his eyes and opened them immediately at the sound of hooves thundering toward them. Vern jerked the pistol away from his head and twisted in the direction of the corral. He raised the Beretta, but a riding crop slashed across his face, and he fired wildly as he shrieked in pain. Ev pushed the door open hard and slammed into Sarvis, knocking him to the ground. He got out of the Jimmy as fast as his leg allowed and started to run for cover. Lorena's voice stopped him.

"Ev!" she hollered from Thor's rearing back. "Stay where you are."

Wheeling the horse around, she galloped back to his vehicle.

"Come on!" she said, offering him a hand.

Ev took it, but his weight was too much for her to haul him up. He fell back down and cried, "The hood!"

Lorena understood immediately and turned the horse next to the truck while Ev climbed up the bumper and onto the hood. He slid on behind Lorena and felt her urge the horse into a full gallop.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god, oohh god!" Ev moaned as they raced past the outbuilding toward the woods.

"What's the matter?" Lorena shouted back at him. "Are you wounded?"

"No," he yelled. "It's my leg. Oh, God!"

"Oh, that," she said. "We've got more important things to worry about."

"I can't help it. It hurts."

"It can hurt later. We haven't got time for that right now. Get your head down. We're coming to the tree line."

A branch whipped across the top of his head as he obeyed Lorena's orders. He held tight to her as they pounded down the slope. Bullets clipped branches around them like vicious grasshoppers. He could hear Vern's screaming behind them. His men had already forgotten their orders.

"They won't be able to follow us now!" he shouted.

Lorena didn't speak but shook her head and held a hand to her ear in the universal sign of "Listen!"

Ev did as he was told and heard the whine of a small engine cut through the sound of Thor's hooves as the warmblood raced toward the canyon, threading around the trees as if it were a slalom racer.

"Oh, shit! Hang on!" he heard Lorena shout. Ev felt Thor's muscles bunch underneath his legs, then they were airborne. For a moment, he was grateful he couldn't see where they were headed.

Then, the sky lit up behind them, and Ev, looking down, realized he had only one wish left in his life.

More than anything, he wanted a parachute.

## Chapter 54

### Bang

*Discipline*, Vern thought as he gunned the ATV motor into life so he'd be ready to go, then got off and went to gather Reno, *discipline is the one thing I've never been able to teach these idiots*.

He cut Maj's legs out from under him with a hard kick from the back. He ducked as the moron kept his finger on the MAC-10 trigger all the way down, neatly blowing away a chunk of his Tom Mix brim. Vern put the pistol into Reno's face until the widened eyes indicated that bar owner had come to his senses, then jerked him up and pointed at the Hondas.

"Get your ass on there!" he shouted. "They're headed toward the canyon. We've got to catch them before they get away."

As Maj nodded and ran toward the ATVs, weapons fire jerked Vern's attention back to the buildings. Blue Haller had gone nuts. Somehow, he'd uncrated a SAW and was running toward the woods, spraying the trees with the 5.56 x 45mm squad automatic weapon. Vern had no idea where Willie was, but decided it was time he got after Ev and Lorena before Blue cut him down along with the entire forest. Running back to the ATV, he motioned for Maj to mount his machine, then hit the throttle. He headed away from Haller, knowing there's nothing more dangerous in the world than a drunk with a gun, then pulled in behind the granite outcropping that flanked the edge of the clearing. He waited until Reno was safely behind its cover, then shouted at Haller.

"Blue! Blue, goddamnit! Stop firing!"

The SAW stopped its lethal chatter for a moment.

"What? What?" he heard Haller ask in confused suspicion.

"Stop firing, goddamn you!"

"What?" Blue asked, swinging his head from side to side.

"Fuck," Vern said. "The SAWs deafened him. He can't hear us."

"So, what do we do?" Maj asked. "I'm sure as shit not going out there."

"We'll just have to circle away from him," Vern replied. "We'll lose some time, but we're still faster than that horse with two people on it, and we know the terrain better."

As he prepared to re-mount the ATV, he saw a figure stagger through the wrecked door of the cabin and realized he'd been wrong earlier.

*There is one thing worse than a drunk with a gun, he thought in panic, and that's two drunks.*

Somehow, Willie had roused himself out of his stupor and grabbed an M16A2. Vern could tell because the silhouette told him it had the M203

grenade launcher mounted under the barrel. He was ready to shout a command when a three-round burst spit flame from the rifle and kicked dirt up around Blue Haller's bare feet.

"Jesus, duck!" Vern shouted at Reno as Blue jerked and swung his weapon around.

The SAW sent a stream of ammunition past Willie and toward the outbuilding. His used car manager stood frozen, evidently mesmerized by the deadly blaze of beauty erupting from the muzzle. Vern hugged the ground behind an outcropping as tightly as he'd ever held a woman.

The night shattered itself into an unnatural sun, and a deep, rolling boom shocked the granite by Vern's side, making it quiver as hard as his flesh. Flames roared up into the sky, and the light made it easy for him to see the destruction when he risked poking his head above the rock. As far as he could tell, Willie was so much vapor while Blue had caught a piece of tin roof squarely in the face. He was spread-eagled on the ground. The light machine gun lay across his arm, the barrel pointed at his head as if he'd just committed suicide on purpose instead of accidentally.

"Holy Christ on a crutch!" Maj said beside him. "It's all fucking gone."

"No shit," Vern said.

"No more crank," Reno said in a mournful tone.

"We got bigger problems on our hands right now," Vern said.

Rain hissed in anger as the dry pines exploded into flame, the fire leaping from treetop to treetop. The blaze spat out a low thunder, matching that in the sky.

"We better get our asses out of here!" Vern shouted to Reno.

He didn't have to wait for an answer. Maj scrambled on to his ATV and bounced away toward the woods. Vern jumped on his and hit the accelerator viciously. The Honda snapped forward, glancing off rocks and tree roots, nearly knocking him out of the saddle, but he hung on and sped by the terrified Reno who rode his ATV as if it were a runaway horse. Vern throttled down when he calmed enough to realize he might end up crashing before he reached Lorena and Ev. Guiding the machine carefully through the trees, he found the path, then pushed hard until he came to the edge of the canyon. He turned his engine off. When Maj came up along side, he told him to cut his engine and listen for the sound of the horse.

"I can't hear a damned thing," Maj said after a moment. "There's too much noise out here tonight."

"Shut up!" Vern ordered as he strained to hear hooves through the thunderclaps that not only seemed to roll over the mountains but wash up from the canyon floor. The rain suddenly poured down as if someone had kicked over a giant bucket in the sky. Behind them, the drops sizzled angrily in the flames.

"Shit, we can't do nothing in this storm!" Maj yelled at him.

"Fuck you!" Vern shouted and was about to go over to knock the bar owner on his ass when a bolt of lightning ran a broad fissure across the sky.

"There!" Vern said, pointing into the canyon.

"How the hell did they get down there without killing themselves?" Maj asked.

Vern didn't answer because he had no idea of how they'd done it. He only knew that the damned horse survived anything it came up against. *But*, he admonished himself, *that's only because I've underestimated him. No more.*

As the stallion galloped toward Juliet's land, Vern realized that the thunder he'd heard coming up from the canyon wasn't an echo of the noise in the sky. It was the sound made by dozens of hooves.

*The sound of buffalo in a full panic*, he realized with delight.

In the flashing dark, they moved like monstrous ants milling about a stirred nest. A sudden thought struck Vern, and he grinned.

"Come on!" he hollered at Maj. "We got some droving to do."

"What are you talking about?"

"We've got to get those buffalo headed in the right direction."

"What for?" Reno asked.

"Don't be stupid, Maj. We'll run them right over Ev and Lorena."

"I don't know," the bar owner said. "Those damned things are dangerous."

"Hell, they're nothing more than cattle in fur coats," Vern replied. "Dumb as the day is long."

"There's nothing more dangerous than a dumb animal," Reno said.

"Well, you'd know all about that, wouldn't you?"

"You're a real prick, you know that, Vern?"

"The biggest with the biggest. You with me or not?"

Maj looked over his shoulder at the fire and shrugged. "Can't go back, so might as well."

"Good," Vern said. "Follow me down. When we get to the bottom, you get behind the herd and chase them toward the other side of the canyon. I'll flank and keep them from breaking away. Got it?"

"I chase, you flank," Reno said.

"Good. Let's go."

Vern found the trail and sped along it quickly. It ran down a steep grade, looped back for a quarter of a mile, then sloped gradually to the canyon floor. As he paused to wait for Maj coming down like an old woman, he realized that Thor had somehow twisted about during his jump and landed on the upper part of the trail. It was the only explanation.

Horses could do some amazingly unexpected things, but the Warmblood was really something else, he had to admit that. The path had to be ten feet below the canyon rim and hugged the granite walls with a mere four or five feet of width. The damned horse had leaped right off the edge of a place he'd never been before and simply had faith that he'd make it. What was even more astonishing, as far as he was concerned, was that Pick had stayed on. Lorena, he was not surprised at, after all the lessons he'd paid for, but Ev was a big man and, from what he'd seen as the two galloped into the woods, rode as if his balls were being squashed by the horse. Vern certainly hoped that wasn't the case.

*If there was any nut-squeezing to be done, he wanted to be the one to do it, he thought.*

## Chapter 55 Scared Chuteless

"Oh God, oh God, oh God!" Ev said as the horse galloped through the lightning-split dark. Fat drops of rain splattered hard in his face, wet tribute to the stallion's speed.

"Will you stop that, for heaven's sake?" Lorena shouted back at him.

"It hurts!"

"You're nothing but a big baby. We're safe, aren't we?"

"Not a chance!" Ev shouted over a peal of thunder.

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing but trouble ahead and trouble behind."

Lorena glared hard at him over her shoulder. "Oh, for heaven's sake, you sound like some kind of..."

"Cassandra?"

"Whatever. You need to look on the bright side. You're alive, aren't you?"

"It's a matter of opinion. What's that sound?"

Lorena pointed to the sky above the far side of the canyon. Three blinding searchlights dueled with the lightning, and, to Ev, it sounded as if the air were being pureed by giant blades.

"Choppers," she said. "TV vultures looking for you."

"Not that sound," he shouted. "Listen, it's behind us."

"It's just more thunder," Lorena said. "The canyon plays tricks with your hearing."

Not convinced Ev listened closely, trying to sort the sound out from the clash of thunder and helicopter rotors. It grew steadily into a pounding rumble. He risked a look behind.

"Buffalo!" he yelled into Lorena's ear. "The storm has spooked them!"

She snapped the crop against Thor's flank, and the warmblood burst into a gallop that nearly tossed Ev onto the ground, but he hung on as they raced toward the trail up to the Gathering, keeping an eye on the shaggy heads that tossed behind them. Lightning flashed in the herd's eyes, making it look as if the buffalo were avidly interested in pounding all of them into flesh the thickness of an instant. But it would not happen, Ev realized in sudden relief. The horse was much faster than the panicked animals. They started to pull away.

"Go!" Ev yelled, pounding Lorena on the back. "Go, go, go! I can see the trail now. We're almost there."



In response, she wheeled the horse away from the canyon wall and ran parallel to it.

"What are you doing?" Ev screamed.

Lorena pointed. He looked, and there, above the bucking heads of the animals, he saw Vern herding the beasts between them and the trail with his ATV. They were trapped in a circle of buffalo, milling about with the crazed anger of fear. Lorena turned Thor about once, then twice as she seemed to try to decide what to do.

"Hang on!" she shouted. Ev heard clearly what she shouted into the horse's ear as she bent over its neck. "Now, show me what you can do, boy!"

Ev groaned and gripped Lorena's waist more tightly. The stallion had already accomplished the impossible as far as he was concerned, and he wasn't sure he really wanted to see what it could do once it put its mind to the task.

Thor reared and challenged the air with a deafening, sharp whinny. Ev felt his weight start to pull both of them off and had made up his mind to let go so Lorena could make it when the warmblood's forelegs struck the ground, and the horse charged straight toward Vern. The buffalo split around them. Ahead, Ev could see Sarvis kneeling behind the Honda, bracing his arm across the saddle as he leveled a pistol. One shot went by their heads, then another. With the third, the Warmblood gave a sudden, violent shudder, staggered to one side, then resumed its gallop with renewed energy. Ev held his breath as the horse leaped. He heard Vern scream as Thor's hooves clipped the ATV and Vern's head at the same time. Lorena's husband and the Honda tumbled into the mud. The horse landed hard, but Ev didn't mind at all this time. The buffalo still charged after them, running around Vern's vehicle, but the path was ahead, and the stallion was clearly faster than the panicked animals. Once they were up on the trail, they would be safe. The herd would mill about and head some other direction.

Ev whooped as Lorena pushed Thor past a tangled line of ponderosas, junipers, and chokecherry bushes, gave the horse a hard right rein, and urged him up the side of the canyon. For the first time since Thor had leaped blindly off the other side, Ev felt reasonably safe. The path was wide enough for five horses, so there was no chance of going off the trail. It was simply a matter of keeping the Warmblood in the center and getting to the top. Ev relaxed, then a thought occurred to him, and he whipped his head around to look behind, hoping to disprove its horrible truth. Unfortunately, the truth was only too plain to see.

A trail wide enough for five horses was wide enough for terrified buffalo that were following whatever was in front of them.

"Run!" he urged Thor. "Run!"

The horse perversely stumbled and slowed down at his command.

"What's he doing?" Ev screamed at Lorena. "Get him moving!"

"He's hurt," she shouted back. "He's doing the best he can."

A wave of sympathy for Thor welled up within Ev. Lorena was right. The horse had done everything it possibly could to get them safely away from Sarvis. There was nothing more they could ask of him. He risked losing his grip and patted the horse's flank as the only way he could think of to thank it for its effort. The Warmblood's flesh quivered, and Ev could feel Thor surge in response then horse staggered away from the canyon side of the trail. He knew immediately the animal would never make it to the top with the load he was carrying. The buffalo snorted near its hindquarters, and the smell of sodden fur rose behind them like a solid, onrushing wall of instinctual fear.

"Oh, god," he said as he realized what he had to do.

Ev waited until Thor stumbled again toward the edge of the trail, then he pushed off.

"Evvv!"

Lorena's fading cry pierced the onrushing wind as he fell through a night shattered with lightning.

For the second time that night, he desperately wished for a parachute.

## Chapter 56

### Vern Almost Finds Religion

Once the rush of buffalo was past him, Vern struggled to his knees, putting one hand on the damaged Honda for support and using the other to grab his shirt tail to mop at the blood on his scalp where the damned horse had opened a gash that felt as wide as the canyon. Like all head wounds, it gushed blood, making it hard to see through the dust still swirling in the air despite the heavy rain pelting down. He swore at his helplessness until a swirl of wind from the storm swept the dust away. Then the lightning strobed across the sky, and he could see the herd chasing the horse's ass up the Gathering side of the canyon as if the whole scene were out of an old, herky-jerky silent movie. Vern laughed, feeling better, but a sudden snort cut the mood short. Over the saddle of the ATV, he stared into the narrowed eyes of an enormous white bull pawing at the ground. The smell of its anger steamrolled his nose, but Vern was pissed himself.

*Nothing's going to stop me from getting to my wife and Pick, he decided, then suddenly remembered, A white buffalo is sacred for mud people, so it'll be a double pleasure to kill the beast.*

He searched on the ground for the Beretta while he kept an eye on the albino animal. When he found the pistol, he made sure the barrel and action were clear, then chambered a round and fired. The first bullet bounced off a horn when the bull moved its head. The second caught him in the eye, and the animal squealed in pain and charged. Vern put the third one into a leg and watched the buffalo lurch to the ground, still desperately pawing with its legs as it tried to get a futile purchase on the air. He put the next six rounds into the head for the sheer hell of it, then took out the clip and inserted another. He had the barrel in the bull's ear and was preparing to fire when Maj rode up on his Honda.

"Jesus!" Maj said, looking at him wide-eyed over the MAC-10 cradled across his lap. "You look like you got a furrow plowed right down the center of your head!"

"Well, you're a good-looking pile of shit too," Vern replied. Somehow, Reno had kept his hat on through the whole stampede, but it was covered with mud, twigs, and dirt, making him look more like a mushroom than ever.

"Fuck you and the horse that rode over you," Maj said.

"What are you so cheerful about?" Vern asked.

"Damn, I'm alive, aren't I? So are you. Who'd think we could survive all this shit?"

"Don't get too happy too soon," Vern said. "We're not finished yet."

A distinctly anxious look settled on Reno's face. "What do you mean?"

"We've still got to catch Lorena and Pick."

The bar owner waved a hand in the direction of the trail. "Fuck, man, the buffalo have got them by now. Didn't you see them chasing that horse up the side of the canyon?"

"That's not good enough. I want to see for myself. That damned horse has survived everything thrown at it so far, but I put a bullet into him, and I want to be there to see him go down hard."

"It's just a horse," Maj said.

"That may be, but it's got on my nerves, okay?"

Vern glared at Reno until the bar owner nodded, then said, "My ATV's not going anywhere. I want yours."

"What am I supposed to do?" Maj said.

"Stay here or ride double with me. Take your pick."

When Reno hesitated, Vern put the pistol to his nose. Maj scrambled off the Honda, then mounted behind. Vern got the ATV into motion and gunned it across the rough ground.

"Ouch, Jesus, take it easy, will you?" Maj shouted in his ear as the Honda caromed off the bumps. Vern responded by pushing the machine to its top speed. The engine whined and sent them hurtling past the pines and bushes, around a calf that had been trampled in the stampede, and up the trail. Vern ignored Reno's complaining about the damage being done to his family life and concentrated on weaving around more bodies from the herd.

Just as he came around a downed cow, he saw Thor stumble and veer toward the edge of the trail. He slowed and leveled the pistol at Pick's back, but before he could squeeze off a shot, Ev leaped off and disappeared into the canyon. His wife's scream cut through all the noise. Satisfaction welled up in Vern that Pick's nobility got him what nobility always got you--a sudden fall into reality. Then he realized that without Pick's weight, the Warmblood had picked up speed again. The stallion surged over the top of the canyon and was gone. Vern threw the ATV into top speed and followed. The Honda hit the end of the trail, went airborne for a moment, then spun and skidded in the mud. Vern fought it to a stop and cut the engine. As soon as he did, noise hit him with the force of a shaped charge.

Two media helicopters circled overhead, their blades chopping at the wild air with an erratic *thwap-thwap-THWAP-thwap* as the pilots tried to maintain control in the gusting winds while cameramen swung from harnesses out of the sides of the aircraft, trying to retain focus on the activity below. Vern was happy to see the SkyHigh 5 operator lose his

lunch and his camera at the same time. He was doubly pleased when the Betacam dropped end-over-end and felled Mindy Rattigan standing with a microphone and unruffled blonde hair in the midst of a knot of people whose hair flew in all directions in the chaotic thunderstorm winds. To his astonishment, the woman got up from the ground, kicked the camera aside, and continued her interview.

"Where the hell did all these people come from?" Maj shouted in his ear.

"How should I know?" Vern replied. "Juliet's probably got some harebrained scheme going, but we'd better get rid of the weapons."

"Why?" Maj said in a petulant tone as if he were a child asked to get rid of his favorite toy.

Vern pointed to the flashing red lights coming down through the trees at the far end of the meadow. Without waiting, he threw his Beretta into the canyon and waited to make sure that Reno did the same.

A sudden roar from the crowd drew Vern's attention away from the reporter and toward Juliet's giant pole. The glare from the lightning and searchlights prevented him from seeing what all the fuss was about, so he gunned the ATV forward through the panicked rabble and buffalo and parked behind the massive crane that had been used to erect the pole. He climbed off the Honda and up onto Jim DeHuis' Linkbelt until he had a clear view of what was happening.

Between the roar of the wind and the noise of the helicopters, Vern couldn't hear what was being said, but one thing was clear--Moses and a bunch of his followers had surrounded the pole, and Juliet was on the outside, trying to force her way in. She cried and shouted, carrying on like a silent movie actress. Vern got into the crane's cab, pleased to be able to get out of the rain and watch the show at the same time. He couldn't have asked for anything better as far as he was concerned. Moses and Juliet deserved each other. Then, to his amazement, it did get better.

He watched as Moses in his trademark blue suit directed his followers to handcuff him to the pole by putting his arms around the wood and pointing at his wrists. Two of them put down the banner they were struggling to hold in the wind. A gust immediately picked it up into the air and unfurled it briefly as it flew by the crane so Vern was able to read part of the message. The blood-red letters NEW AGE IS NOT CHRIST soared by him like a stern message out of a revised Bible.

Maj climbed into the cab with him, leaned against the window to catch his breath, then repeated his earlier question. "Where the hell did all these people come from?"

"I haven't got a clue," Vern answered, "but look at them all, would you?"

For the first time, he realized that many of the people there--if not most--were supporters of Temple America. They ran wildly about, tearing down tents and overturning campers. The buffalo seemed to be helping them, goring anything that got in their way. Several bodies were already on the ground as the herd seemed to double its panic from the chaotic effect of the thunder, lightning, and helicopters. Gusts of wind swirled banners and placards above heads as Juliet's followers struggled to rip the signs from the Temple America adherents. A common theme seemed to float over the clearing as several of the messages revealed themselves partially to Vern. They all talked about ABORTION KILLS in the same blood-red letters that he'd seen on the first banner. What this had to do with Juliet and the pole, he wasn't sure, and he didn't really care. He looked over at the far side of the canyon and swore. The meth lab still burned furiously despite the rain, and the fire was spreading outward. There was nothing he could do about it, so he turned his attention back to the crowd swirling below the crane.

*The fat fucker really knows how to draw a crowd*, he realized suddenly.

A the wail of a siren cut its way through the noise, and Vern saw a cruiser make its way slowly through the crowd, Lonny Gunderson hunched behind the wheel.

"Look down by the pole," Maj said. " Juliet seems to have bitten off more than she can chew."

Vern followed his pointing finger and saw that Moses' supporters had turned on her in a flash once they had chained and handcuffed the preacher to the pole. She struggled in the midst of flailing placards as the Temple Americans beat at her head.

"They're going to kill her," Reno said.

Vern didn't say anything, just smiled. Silently, he urged the crowd on although he wasn't sure a bunch of signs would get the job done for him, but his heart leaped when Juliet went to her knees and he saw one of the followers, nearly as fat as Moses, grab a shovel away from the crane.

"All right!" he said in barely restrained glee.

"Jesus, Vern!" Maj said.

"All right!" Vern said again as the shovel was raised high, then added an angry

"Fuck me!" as his hopes scattered in the next moment along with Moses' supporters.

Spurring Thor on with her heels, Lorena blew through the protesters and grabbed the shovel away from the follower, who stood staring stupidly up his empty hands as if the implement had been snatched from him by an angry God. His wife wheeled Thor about and about Juliet, neatly driving the Temple Americans away as if she were cutting cattle.

*She's an even better horsewoman than I thought*, Vern admitted to himself, but what astonished him was the horse. Pink foam bubbled from its mouth, and blood spurting from its chest as if a geyser had been struck. It sprayed the crowd his wife was keeping away and had soaked Juliet by the time she got to her feet. He had no idea how the stallion kept going, but it knew exactly what Lorena wanted, and with each turn, it leaped into the air like a Lippizaner stallion and kicked all four legs out, causing the Temple Americans to keep a safe distance from the iron-hard hooves. Even though all the noise and the cab glass, he could hear its grunting efforts. Each time the horse landed, Lorena swung the shovel like a broadax.

Maj said, "Your wife's hell on wheels tonight, ain't she?"

"I didn't know she had it in her," Vern acknowledged.

"You sure you want her back?" Maj asked.

At this sly dig, Vern shot him a glance. "Don't pull my chain, okay? I'm not in mood for it right now. What I am the mood for is to kick the shit out of somebody, and it might as well be you."

Reno turned his eyes away and changed the subject quickly. "What's Moses trying to prove?"

"I don't know," Vern answered. "A protest tactic, I suppose. I've seen them do it at abortion clinics on TV."

"It's a damned dumb thing to do anytime, but it's doubly stupid in this weather," Maj said.

"We're talking Moses here," Vern said. "He's so fat, there's no room left for brains."

"If he's so stupid, how come he's got so many followers? I don't understand that."

Vern shrugged. "Promise people absolute salvation, and they'll follow any vegetable. One thing's for sure--he's got a money-making racket going here, hasn't he? "

The bar owner chuckled, then pointed back down at Lorena. "That horse is finally getting tired."

"They both are," Vern said.

Thor leaped as they watched, then stumbled as he landed, nearly tossing Lorena off into the crowd. She swung the shovel weakly at a Temple American who snatched at the handle and pulled it away from her. Vern heard a muffled roar from the crowd as the follower brandished her prize high in the air.

Reno glanced over at him. "You going to help your wife?"

"What?" Vern asked, distracted because the shovel-wielding Temple American looked vaguely familiar.

"Lorena."

"Yeah. Nobody damages my property."

As he got up to exit the cab, the woman laid the edge of the implement into the hindquarters of the horse. Thor's scream cut straight through to the cabin, and the stallion reared high into the air as if it were calling for help from the boiling sky. Lorena clawed desperately at his neck, then slid off onto the ground and grabbed Juliet. They hugged each other as the crowd closed in. The horse screamed again when a second blow struck, and Vern froze as his eyes dissolved into a blinding sheet of white. Thunder cracked across the clearing as if an enormous hammer had just struck the ground. He covered his ears in a futile attempt to block the deafening sound, but it kept rolling undiminished back and forth across the canyon like waves trapped in a bay. When his vision cleared, he witnessed an astonishing sight.

Moses hung out perpendicular to Juliet's pole like a fat, blue flag in a stiff breeze. His eyes and mouth were nearly as wide as his body, and smoke wisped up into the rain from shoes that looked like they been chewed by a ferocious dog, but it was the handcuffs that caught Vern's attention. They looked as if they'd been fused to the preacher's wrists. It all happened in a split-second, Vern was sure of that, as Moses' body folded suddenly and crumpled back toward the pole.

Then the second bolt struck.

Blue suit aflame, Moses flew out of the explosion and up over Vern's head, arcing high into the night and disappearing over the rim of the canyon like a Roman candle sputtering toward the ground.

"Holy shit!" Maj said.

A smell like that of frying bacon drifted into the Linkbelt's cab.

"What a way to go!" Reno added.

Vern was impressed too, not by Moses' death, but by the amount of force that was required to blast 400-plus pounds of blubber off the pole as if it were no more than a horse flicking annoying flies off its hide. The thought of a horse made him turn back toward the clearing to see what had happened to Thor and Lorena.

This time it wasn't difficult to see what was going on. The whole area was lit up by Juliet's pole. It was a 100-foot torch, the blaze reaching high into the sky as if it were trying to extinguish the rain rather than the other way around. Vern opened the door and heard the crystal pieces cracking and falling off the wood from the intense heat. The storm blew the smell of melting copper into his nose. A sudden whine of a struggling engine shifted his attention to the sky beyond the pole. He watched as the Action 7 News chopper staggered up and down in the fierce, churning drafts generated by the fiery pole. The helicopter swung around viciously, and Vern saw the pilot fighting the controls. Suddenly, it lost lift and augered



into the ground, spilling two passengers before skidding and disappearing over the edge of the canyon.

Vern climbed out on the LinkBelt, shading his eyes to search for his wife. There were several bodies in blue around the base of the pole, but the horse was nowhere in sight. For a moment, he thought Lorena was gone as well, then closer to the crane, he spotted a fat body sprawled on the ground and next to it was Lorena. She struggled to sit up while flailing at the form bent over her

It was Mindy Rattigan.

The reporter staggered as she motioned for the operator to get in closer with the Betacam. Vern jumped down from the crane, feeling a bit of sympathy for Lorena. The last thing he'd want after all that had gone on was to have a camera poked in his face, but, he sensed as he strode across the clearing, there was an opportunity here. Somehow, the Action News 7 reporter and cameraman had survived the crash and were running toward Mindy and Lorena. By the time he reached the spot, he knew exactly what his opportunity was.

Waiting until he was sure the competitor's crew was filming, Vern grabbed Mindy, straightened her up and whirled her around. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" he shouted at her. "That's my wife. She's hurt. She's got a head injury. Can't you see that? Why don't you vultures go somewhere else to find your carrion?"

He could see that the blonde reporter was scared and bloody from where the camera had hit her, but she managed to hold her composure, stick the microphone near his lips as he picked up Lorena, and say the words he was sure he'd hear.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"How do you think I feel, you media bitch?" Vern yelled, holding Lorena tight to keep her from flailing about. "My wife's injured bad, and you're standing around trying to interview her! What are you going to do next? Interview some of the corpses we've got scattered around here? What is wrong with you people? Have you no shame?"

Mindy backed away from him, looked to her cameraman for support, then saw the Action News 7 team behind him. Vern watched as her fear instantly disappeared into hate.

"You!" she screamed at the competing reporter. "Get out of here! What do you think you're doing? You're not going to get away with this!"

As she ran toward her competitors with her microphone held high, Vern saw the Action News 7 reporter turn to her camera operator and scream, "Run! Get the tape back to the station any way you can!"

She barely had the words out before Mindy put a forearm shiver into her chin, and the two reporters dropped into the mud in a tangle of arms,

legs, and microphones. Shriill screams pierced the night from a fury of muck. Vern looked down at Lorena and grinned. In the dirt-smeared face, her eyes were wide in skin spattered with the horse's blood.

"Time to go, dear," he said.

"You son of a bitch! I don't want to go with you. You're crazy."

"You need care."

When she nearly struggled loose, he put her feet to the ground and delivered a swift, hard jab to the stomach. Lorena doubled over, vomited, and passed out. Picking her up again Vern walked away from the blazing pole. He was nearly free of its heat when a voice came out of the dark and stopped him.

"She okay?" the sheriff asked. Behind him, Arlo stood with his hands on his hips.

"She needs rest," Vern said. "I'm taking her home."

Lonny stepped closer to examine her. "Have her checked out, okay?"

"I'll do that," Vern said, trying to step around the sheriff.

Gunderson put a hand on his arm and stopped him. "We got paramedics coming. Why don't you wait here?"

"What's the matter, sheriff? You don't think I can take care of my own wife?"

"I hear how well you take care of her."

Vern tried to keep the anger out of his voice. "I treat her fine."

"Yeah, well, treating a woman fine doesn't mean knocking her around, Sarvis."

"You're worried about her, Sheriff, is that it?"

Lonny looked down at him and said, "Exactly."

"Well, I'll tell you what then. If you're so worried, let your deputy take us, how about that?"

"I need him for crowd control."

Vern laughed and jerked his head at the scene behind them. "There isn't any control in this crowd. Only thing you can do is let it run itself out."

The sheriff looked around at his deputy. "What do you think?"

Arlo shrugged. "I suppose he's right, and backup's on the way, but I hate to miss all the fun."

Lonny snorted. "Some fun."

"All right," he said to Vern. "Get her to Regional, but tell me one thing, Vern."

"What's that?"

"How come you got a fire on your side of the canyon?"

"Lightning, Sheriff, that should be obvious," Vern said.

"Maybe. You won't mind if I poke around there one of these days then, will you?" the sheriff asked.

"Be my guest."

"What are you doing over here?" Lonny asked.

Vern laughed. "How could I help but be here? Maj and I were having a beer over at my place when we saw the commotion. It's a little early for the Fourth of July, but damned if this doesn't beat any Fourth I've ever been to."

Lorena stirred in his arms and moaned. "We better get going," Vern said. "You go any more questions?"

The sheriff shook his head and stepped aside to let them make their way to the cruiser. Arlo opened the rear door of the cruiser and let Vern lay Lorena on the seat. Vern watched the scene as the deputy started the engine and swung around onto the dirt road that led back to the highway. The pole blazed even higher now because the rain had slackened to a drizzle, and the fire rose swiftly in the canyon as if someone had laid hot coals on its floor and was busily fanning the heat. Everyone wanted to get away from the flames and was working their way toward the far end of the meadow, but the panicked buffalo attacked anyone who dared to move too openly. Vern was sure no one was going anywhere when the sharp crack of a 30-ought-6 dropped a bull to its knees as it charged at the two reporters as they struggled for a single microphone. Vern turned his head to see Lonny drop the rifle from his shoulder, take a few steps forward, then fire again. Methodically, he put down one animal after another, creating an opening for escape. As Arlo drove up the slope, Vern saw that no one had any trouble finding the space that the sheriff had created. They scrambled away from the pole and the LinkBelt as if the devil himself were after them.

Arlo broke into his thoughts by asking, "Shit, man, what happened over there?"

Vern kept it simple. "The place blew. That stuff's just too damned dangerous."

"More trouble than it's worth," the deputy agreed.

"Yeah," Vern said, "I've already decided we're not going to do it anymore, Arlo."

"Fine by me, but what about the money?"

"We need to find us a safer way."

"No argument there."

"I need to think about it first," Vern said. "I'm tired."

Arlo looked over at him as he gunned the cruiser onto the road and headed in the direction of home. "You do look like crap. How do you feel?"

Vern laughed hard, causing the deputy to give him an appraising glance. He checked Lorena through the wire mesh cage that separated the front from the rear, then said, "Arlo, you'd never believe how I feel."

"Try me," the deputy said.

"Reborn," Vern said. "Except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I just realized who that woman was."

"What woman?"

"The one whacking the hell out of the Warmblood."

"Well?"

"Never mind. I need to think."

A very large question had popped into his mind, ruining the satisfaction of his realization.

*What the hell was Mary Fae doing in this spot, at this time, helping the Temple Americans?*

## Chapter 57

### The Tunnel at the End of the Light

Ev was pretty sure he was going to heaven because he was high up in the air, and there was a bright light rushing toward him. Although he'd heard it the other way around--he was supposed to be racing toward the light--he wasn't about to quibble.

*In heaven, there'll be peace and quiet and no one to bother me, he thought with contentment, and I'll never, ever have to ride a horse again.*

As the light arced downward, it brought a smell that startled him because he'd never thought of paradise as having odors, much less smelling like breakfast sausage or bacon. There was a sound too, which, at first, he'd taken to be the wind pushing him up to heaven, but, like the light, it came toward him, sounding more and more like the whistling shriek of an artillery shell. Flinching at that thought, he tried to duck away from the growing noise and discovered that he was nowhere near heaven.

When he'd leaped from the horse, he'd landed in a pine.

Disappointed, he kept an eye on the light which had grown itself into a screaming meteor, flaming down past the edge of the canyon toward the pine tops where he lay cradled in the branches. Although he wasn't going to heaven, God was coming to get him, all right.

*I should have known, he thought bitterly. Why should it be any different in heaven than on earth for me?"*

Closing his eyes, he waited calmly for the impact, taking comfort in the fact that--heaven or hell--it would all be over in an instant, and nobody would be able to mess with him anymore.

A second later, the meteor impacted in a screeching protest of snapping tree branches. Ev felt himself slingshot up into the air along with flaming pine needles. For a brief instant, he was wonderfully weightless, then he opened his eyes and began his own screaming descent toward the ground. A ponderosa rushed up to skewer him, but he twisted around to miss its top and crashed into the upper branches. The tree, seemingly disgusted at its failure to spear him like shiskabob, flipped him off onto the lower junipers. The evergreens didn't seem any happier at the ponderosa's leftovers and let Ev tumble hard into the chokecherries. Stunned, he lay still until an insidious crackle whispered into his ear. He turned his head to determine its source.

The chokecherry bush was on fire.

Ev panicked, trying to gain purchase on branches that didn't seem to have anything better to do than stab every part of his flesh, but the bush

wouldn't let him go. Rolling back and forth until he had momentum going away from the chokecherry, he wrenched free. As if delivering its low opinion of him, a branch rapped him across the face as he fell. His hip struck the ground first, sending sharp pain through his back and leg, then the side of his head hit, bringing an equation for impact velocity out of nowhere in his head along with a thousand rushing, colorful stars that cheerfully announced the arrival of nausea. Ev vomited, waited for a minute to make sure his stomach was through, then sat up carefully to keep the dizziness in check. Checking his surroundings to take his mind off his pain, he didn't like what he saw. Behind him, fire swelled along the line of chokecherries and pines. From Vern's side of the canyon, the blaze surged forward. Updrafts swirled flames and sparks high into the clouded sky. Trees exploded in cannon shots of pine resin, and brush crackled like skirmishing infantry fire. As he struggled to his feet, Ev thought, *At least, I don't have to wait to go to hell. It's here right now.* Anger at the unfairness of it all flooded his body, and he did the only thing he could do at the moment.

"Goddamn you, goddamn you to hell!" he shouted at the fire "Go back where you belong!"

He gave the blaze the finger and continued to cuss it out as he staggered away from the burning chokecherry bush. Suddenly, an anguished voice cried up from the ground before him.

"Oh, God, where is thy mercy?" it implored. "I am your servant! Why do you condemn me? My will is weak, but my faith is strong."

Ev limped forward until he could see who was making all the noise.

It was Moses Brubaker, his blue suit smoking as heavily as the fire around them. His fingertips and the toes of his shoes were black and charred. To Ev, he looked like a hot dog that'd been held too close to the fire--burnt on the outside, raw on the inside.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Ev asked.

"I've seen the Light!" the preacher said fervently, raising his arms skyward.

"Yeah, well, so's a moth," Ev said.

"It's you, Lord, isn't?" Moses said.

Ev moved closer to the preacher to get a better look at him. He had no idea of what had happened to the man, but Moses' eyes were wide and staring with some sort of ecstatic shock. It was clear that the preacher didn't know where he was.

"No, it's not the Lord," Ev said. "It's Everett Pick."

The voice faltered for the first time. "It's not Him?"

"Not a chance."

"But I saw the burning bush. I saw him come out of it."

"You saw me, Moses, that's all. Get off your knees. We've got to get out of here."

The preacher's jowls quivered as his head turned questioningly from side to side. "Where is here?" he asked.

"We're down in the canyon, and the whole place is on fire. If we don't get out of here, we're going to be burnt offerings, and you, of all people, don't want to go out pagan-style, do you?"

"No, no, of course not!" Moses said. "Help me up."

Ev heaved the preacher to his feet, feeling something pull in his back in the process.

"Goddamn, Moses!" he swore. "Lose some weight, will you?"

"I can't help it," the preacher said, puffing as he propelled his bulk forward. "It's in my genes. My whole family is--"

"Yeah, well, we can argue the theology of weight gain if we make it out of here," Ev interrupted. "Come on."

"I'm afraid you'll have to lead me," Moses said. "Things aren't too clear, right now."

"All right," Ev said. "We have to get to the trail that leads back up to Juliet's land. Can you run?"

"I'm not very good at it."

Checking the progress of the fire, Ev said, "Well, there's a lot of flame coming our way. You'd better get your fat butt into motion."

Moses broke into a ponderous gait, letting Ev lead him by the hand.

"You're too damned slow!" he shouted at the preacher. "Can't you feel the heat?"

"Oh, God, I'm trying, I'm trying!"

Ev had heard of forest fires being described as ravenous beasts and knew it was an insult to animals. Behind them, the blaze roared like a crowd sensing blood. It was an eerily human sound as if souls inhabited the flames and would not tolerate a refusal to join their ranks. For a moment, Ev entertained the notion that the earth had somehow cracked open and all the legions of hell had poured out to catch vulnerable sinners. He dismissed that idea immediately with the giddily hysterical thought that the devil no more knew where South Dakota was than did the rest of the nation and, therefore, was not likely to show up. It was a forest fire, pure and simple.

*Pure and simple terror*, he said to himself as he found the foot of the trail and pulled Moses up onto it. The preacher stumbled and slowed as they made their way up the grade. His breathing grew more and more labored until he stopped.

"I--I need to rest!" he said, gasped as he leaned against the canyon wall.

Ev jerked at his arm. "There isn't time! We're going to fry if you don't get going."

"Don't leave me!" Moses said in a sudden, gasping panic.

"I will, goddamn it, if you don't move!"

"Don't leave me!"

A gust of wind whipped heat against Ev's face, and he felt as he'd just been seared with a brand. His lungs burned as they drew in the cinder-laden air.

"There's no time left!" he shouted at the preacher. "Come on!"

He jerked at Moses, but the man refused to go anywhere until another blast of superheated air touched him. The preacher screamed and waddled into a ferociously determined gait. Ev strode ahead of him, keeping hold of Moses' hand so he didn't stray off the path. He kept one eye on the distance to the rim and one on the fire below.

They were halfway up the trail when he knew they weren't going to make it.

Moses clutched at his chest and slowed down, and Ev discovered he had little strength left himself. Stopping to catch his breath, he considered his options. It didn't take long.

There were none.

*Except one*, he told himself. He could cheat the fire.

"It's got us!" he hollered at the preacher. "The rim is too far away."

"I don't want to die!" Moses said again.

Ev shook his head. "We can die slow or quick. That's all there is."

"What do you mean?" the preacher asked in a panicked voice.

Ev pointed down into the canyon. "We can burn, or we can jump."

"I don't want to do, either!"

"I'll take jumping myself," Ev said. "You want to do it together?"

"No, no!" Moses said and backed away.

"Suit yourself."

Ev walked to the edge of the trail and looked down, making sure there was nothing but rock to end his descent. He didn't want any trees breaking his fall this time. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and bent to leap, wishing that his last sight of life had been anything but the roaring blaze consuming the canyon.

Something slammed hard into his body, trying to help him over the edge, but he instinctively grabbed in the direction of the impact. A second later, he realized he wasn't falling and opened his eyes.

He swung on a giant hook, his hands were wrapped around a thick steel cable. Ev blinked in confusion as he swayed back and forth, feeling like bait trying to entice the flames higher. A shout drew his attention upward. Lonny Gunderson stood on the canyon rim, directing the operator of Jim



De Huis' crane with waves of one arm while he pointed downward at the other.

"Moses!" he yelled down to Ev. "Get Moses!"

Ev saw the plan and tried to aid the swing of the cable with a shift of his weight.

"Moses, come on!" he yelled at the preacher as he swung closer. "We can make it now."

The sobbing preacher had buried his face against the rock and couldn't hear him.

"Moses!" he screamed as he swung away.

When there was no response, he waited until the momentum carried him in again, then picked the broadest target he could find and kicked the preacher in the ass. The force knocked his head into the wall with an impact that sickened Ev, but it had the desired effect. Moses turned a blood-covered face toward him.

Ev waved at him as he swung away. "Come on! Catch the cable and climb on!"

With amazing agility, the preacher got to his feet and greedily grabbed the cable on the next pass, nearly knocking Ev off, but he hung on and they swept out over the canyon as the pines below them ignited like torches. Moses screamed as the flames shot past them as they arced back in over the trail.

"The wall!" Ev shouted.

He stuck his feet out to absorb the impact, and it was his turn to scream when his bad leg hit first. Unprepared, the preacher slammed into the rock, and Ev had to grab him around the neck to keep him from falling off. The hook swung out again, but this time he could feel it rising steadily upward. The air grew perceptibly cooler as the cable was winched in. In a few minutes, they were up to the rim where the sheriff and several Temple Americans grabbed the cable and swung them over to safety. Ev let go of the preacher, and Moses toppled to the ground. Stepping off the hook, Ev sat down hard himself when his leg gave way. He stared up at a stern-faced Lonny Gunderson.

"You okay?" the sheriff asked.

Ev nodded. "Thanks," he said after several unsuccessful attempts to get his seared throat to work.

"We're not out of this yet," the sheriff said. "That fire's still coming. Can you walk?"

"Give me a hand up."

Lonny helped him to his feet and pushed him across the clearing toward a cruiser. Ev let the sheriff place him in the front seat, then lay his head back and passed out.

The slamming of the cruiser doors brought him into a groggy state of awareness. Lonny slid in behind the wheel, swung the car around quickly and sent it up the road behind a long line of cars and med rescue trucks. He said, "Juliet's in the back seat. It's time to move our asses out of here. It's raining harder, but the fire hasn't given up yet. I hope we got everybody."

"Thanks for your help, Sheriff. I appreciate it," Ev said.

"Don't appreciate it too much, Pick. I want to see you tomorrow."

"I'll bet you do," Ev said. "You won't believe what's been going on tonight. We were--"

The sheriff interrupted. "There's another reason, Pick, besides this fiasco tonight."

"What?" Ev asked.

Lonny gave him a cold look as he navigated the cruiser down the road. "I received a request for extradition today from Minnesota. Child molestation charges."

Ev studied the stony face and knew there was nothing he could say except, "I'll be there." As waves of exhaustion swept over his body, he turned to check on Juliet. Eyes closed, she was stretched out on the back seat, bruises swelling on her forehead. A moment of sympathy rose in Ev, but it dissolved quickly into a chill that jackbooted its way up and down his spine. He turned away from the most terrifying sight he'd seen throughout the entire evening.

Juliet was smiling in her sleep.

## Chapter 58

### Homecoming

Vern jerked Lorena out of the cruiser and slapped her hard across the face. She pretended to be unconscious, even though the blow was sharp.

*It isn't that hard since he's had so much practice at it before, she thought with bitterness. But I'm not sure who I hate more at the moment-- Vern or Arlo, a deputy who simply stands by while my husband beats me.*

"Useless bitch!" she heard her husband say, then felt him stand her up and hold her by the neck with one hand while he whipped her head back with the open palm of the other. She moaned as her flesh burned with the force of the strike. Only the coolness of the pouring rain soothed the pain.

"Take it easy," she heard Arlo finally mutter. She was relieved at the words of concern until she heard the deputy say, "We got more important things to worry about than your woman. Think it through. You injure or kill her, and you'll have a shitload more of trouble to mess up things."

There was a brief silence, and Lorena tensed for another smack, but Vern's hand loosened on her neck, and she dropped hard to the ground. He said, "You're right. I need to cool down."

"What do you want to do about the project?" the deputy asked. From his emphasis on the word "project," Lorena knew he was talking about the destroyed buildings and the minefield and had discovered something even more appalling.

The sheriff's own deputy was involved in whatever it was Vern was planning.

"Lonny'll want to investigate," Arlo said.

Vern gave a nasty laugh. "Let him."

"He's not stupid, Vern. He's not just going to walk into one of those minefields."

Her husband was quiet for a moment, then another nasty chuckle disturbed the night. "Oh, yes, he is."

"What are you talking about?"

"Get hold of Marv. We've got more stuff. Lay a few M21s in a strategic spots, across the road. Mark them so they can be see from the top of the hill, but not from the bottom. That way, when and if he decides to investigate, he's shredded along with his investigation."

"Jesus! Those mines are tank-killers," Arlo said.

"So he won't be driving a tank. We need to make sure, don't we?"

"I suppose," the deputy said. "It just seems like overkill, that's all."

"You want him to find out about you?"

"I don't like being threatened, Vern."

"I'm not threatening you, you idiot. He finds the mines, the mines lead to us. Is that simple enough for you?"

"All right, all right," Arlo said. "I'll get my part of the job done, but remember what I said about your wife."

"Don't worry," Vern said. "I might teach her a lesson, but if I do, the bruises won't show."

A low laugh came from the deputy. "You're a brutal fuck, you know that?"

"Leaders usually are. That's what gets the job done."

Lorena heard the car door slam and the engine start. As the noise receded down the driveway, her husband lifted Lorena from the ground and took her inside the house to their bedroom. She risked opening her eyes after he laid her on their bed, but all she could see was the punishment hook in the ceiling that he'd hung her from so many times before. She shuddered as she heard him pull the telephone cord out of the wall and closed her eyes again quickly.

"I don't know if you're out or not," he said, "but don't even think of going anywhere."

His footsteps receded across the carpet, and the door slammed. She listened as he locked the door, then got up immediately and checked the windows. The first one was stuck, but the second slid open easily. She raised the screen as quietly as possible, then squirmed her way out feet first. She started to bolt into the woods, but a sudden, searing pain across her buttocks stopped her. She screamed as her husband's voice came out of the dark.

"Get your ass in there, or I'll give you another taste of this riding crop! Now!" he ordered.

He hit her again, and Lorena scrambled back in through the window.

"Get in bed," he said. "And don't move until I tell you to."

She walked around the room, rubbing her behind and feeling the anger burn away the tears trying to form in her eyes. A sudden hammering sound made her jerk and turn toward the windows. Vern was outside, driving nails into the sash and bending them upward so she wouldn't be able to escape. She held her breath when the hammering stopped, then searched in the closet for anything that she could use to defend herself against her husband. The best she could do was throw one of Vern's heavy combat boots. When he unlocked the door a few minutes later and came through, she threw one boot at him. It sailed by as he ducked, but she caught him square in the face with the other. As he wiped at the blood coming from his nose, she saw that he'd exchanged the riding crop for a section of garden hose. Her heart sank because now she knew he'd gone beyond his

usual anger. Vernon Sarvis would never willingly cut up a good piece of equipment.

"Turn around," he ordered as he took handcuffs from his belt.

"No!"

He backhanded her, dropping her to the floor. Through the pain, she could feel him jerk her arms forward and put the cuffs on, then raise her hands to the hook in the ceiling. The first blow fell across her legs with the dull slap of rubber. It was not so bad, and she thought she might be able to stand it, but when he started to work up toward her belly, she had more at stake than her own safety.

"Stop it, stop!" she cried.

Vern had worked himself into a fury, and she wasn't even sure he was hearing her.

"Stop!"

"Not a chance!" he said finally, between grunts.

"You have to! I'm pregnant!"

The beating stopped.

"You're a lying bitch!"

"No, I'm not, I'm not! You can check with the doctor, if you want to."

Vern stuck his face close to hers.

"You're lying!" he repeated, but she saw that there was hope because the redness in his face was crossed with confusion and hope. "You don't want to get what's coming to you, so you're lying!"

"No, I am pregnant. Honest."

"Why didn't you tell me, then?"

When she was silent, he cuffed her across the cheek. "Answer me."

"Because it's a rape baby!"

A short, nasty laugh came from her husband. "You're my wife. I can't rape you."

"That's exactly what it was."

"Making love to your wife isn't rape!"

"The way you do it, it is," she said.

He slapped her again. "If you weren't such a frigid bitch, there wouldn't be any problem."

"Fuck you!" she screamed. "Go on, keep hitting me, but I'll tell you what--if you do keep beating me, I'm make sure that baby never lives."

Vern stopped his raised hand. Hatred blazed for a second in his eyes, then, as had happened so many times before, he got ridiculous. He grabbed her and held her close as he cried and blubbered about how he didn't know why he did it, and he'd never do it again.

*Not until next time*, she thought wearily. The pattern never changed.

Wiping away tears, he lowered her from the hook and took off the cuffs.

"Are you hungry?" he asked in an absurd, boyish fashion.

"I'm tired. I want to sleep."

"Are you sure? I can bring you something."

"Go away."

But Vern wouldn't go away until the phone rang in the living room. He went out and returned immediately with the portable held to his ear.

"Who?" he asked. "Teesacker? What the hell do you want?"

Her husband waved her into bed. When he'd turned out the light and locked the door, then she began to cry hard for the baby, for herself, and especially for the dead Everett Pick.

## Chapter 59

### Legally Tender

"What the hell am I going to do with you two?" Lonny asked.

He glared across his desk at Juliet and Moses. Both glared back at him from soot-surrounded eyes.

"You both look like raccoons," the sheriff said, noting that the preacher's suit hung on him in tatters as if someone had run an extremely careless iron over the fabric.

*Juliet's not in much better shape, the sheriff thought, but at least rolls of fat aren't showing through and her belly button isn't winking at me like Moses" is.*

Lonny rubbed at his eyes, still irritated by the smoke, lack of sleep, and the bullet hole a drunken cowboy had laid into the window last night while everyone was busy with the mess up at Juliet's place. Luckily, the office had been empty, but he suspected the duct tape a deputy had placed over the damage wasn't providing a tight seal. The room was warm despite the laboring efforts of the air conditioner.

"I don't where to start, so I'll start with you, Moses," he said. "You were double lucky last night. First, you survived lightning--and not just one but two bolts, for God's sake--and then Pick was there to pull your fat out of the fire--literally."

The sheriff stopped, daring the preacher to respond. Moses only returned an imperious look, so Lonny continued. "I'll be talking to him later today, by the way, but you're the one who brought the trouble on yourself. You trespass on Moresdon property, and you cause a full-scale riot. People get hurt. At least, Juliet says you're trespassing, and I'm inclined to believe her right now since there's no denying your presence on the property, and I highly doubt she would have invited you."

Lonny interrupted Juliet's smile of triumph before it could spread fully across her sooty face.

"And you," he said to her, "why in the world did you erect that pole up there? It's the biggest lightning rod in the Hills right now, not to mention a potential hazard to aircraft. Your neighbors aren't happy with you, and that means I'm not happy with you."

Juliet's expression assumed the same lofty position that had settled on the preacher's face.

"It's a power rod, not a pole, Lonny, she said. It's designed to help us achieve the levels of the Ascended Beings. Lightning attraction is just an unfortunate side effect."

Moses snorted in contempt. "Designed to attract feather-brained idiots and frauds like yourself, you mean."

"Shut up!" the sheriff ordered. "Both of you. Now, nobody's brought charges against you yet, Moses, but I sure as hell will if we don't get this thing settled right here in this office. The way I see it, preacher, you owe Juliet one pole."

"Power rod," she corrected.

"Whatever it is," Lonny continued. "Moses owes you the money it cost to construct and raise that thing."

"I don't owe her a penny!" the preacher said.

"You owe her the full amount," Lonny said. "Unless you want to spend some quality time in our jail. Considering the charges, I can arrange it easily enough." He glanced meaningfully down at the protruding belly and added, "The food's not real good."

The preacher colored and said, "I can do without food if it's that awful."

"I suppose you can, Moses, but think of the publicity when this thing goes to court. All the details. How Pick saved your butt when you were too scared to do it yourself."

The preacher's jowls quivered with anger.

"That's not true, Lonny!"

"I was there, remember?" the sheriff said. "I saw it. Other people saw it."

Moses shifted his eyes away and remained silent.

*Like dealing with some damned child*, Lonny thought.

"Well," Lonny asked. "Are you going to pay Juliet or not?"

Moses nodded, and the sheriff turned to Juliet.

"I want you to give Moses an itemized list of materials and costs. Do it within the week. He'll pay you within thirty days of receipt of the bill."

Lonny shifted his gaze back to the preacher. "Won't you, Moses? Otherwise, word gets out on your actions of last night."

As Juliet smiled in triumph, the sheriff told her, "Before you get too happy, I want you to do something as well. I want you to take his money and put it to use on anything but that pole."

"Like what?" she asked.

"I don't know, just don't put up another one."

"You can't stop me from doing that," Juliet said.

"Probably not, although I haven't researched the legal part of it yet," Lonny said, "but I'm asking you to do it as a gesture of good faith."

"Faith is what the power rod is all about," she said. "I have to rebuild it. That's what the Gathering is all about."

"New Age nonsense!" the preacher said. "Christ is Lord, not some so-called Ascended Being."



"At least, I'm not lining my pockets and growing fat off the sheep in my fold!" Juliet countered.

For a moment, Lonny thought they'd come out of their chairs and end up rolling on the floor in a vicious fight.

*If only*, he thought indulging in the pleasant thought. *It would be a delight to watch.*

But the two ended up simply glaring their hatred at each other.

"That's enough," he said. "Juliet, I'll ask you one more time--will you forgo putting up another pole?"

"No!" she said.

"Okay," Lonny said with a sigh. "Moses, that's the best I can do for you right now, but since Juliet's not willing to compromise, I promise you that I'll ask the county attorney look into all possible legal avenues to prohibit the raising of another pole."

"I hope you'll pursue this with more effort than you've expended in catching other criminals," the preacher said, seemingly forming his words from the bile in his stomach.

"Don't push me, Moses!" Lonny warned. "I'm tired and hungry, and I've got a very short fuse right now since I didn't get any sleep last night thanks to you two. I suggest you both go home, get some rest, then think about what you're doing to stir up the county. Most people can get along with each other. What does it look like when our religious folk are trying to do each other in? Some pillars of the community you people are."

When not a trace of shame crossed either face, Lonny said, "All right, get out of here. One at a time. Juliet, you first. When I hear that you're in your car and gone, then, Moses, you can go. I don't want any further trouble from either of you, and I'm probably saving you some public embarrassment at the same time."

When they were both gone, his deputy stuck his head in the door with a questioning look.

"How'd it go?" Arlo asked.

"About the way I expected," Lonny said.

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah," the sheriff said, then voiced the question that had been nagging at the back of his mind. "Where the hell did you go last night?"

The deputy came in and sat in a chair. "You must be tired this morning. Remember, I told you I took Vern back home when things started to settle down."

"No, I don't remember," Lonny said. "But what was so important about getting Sarvis home? I told him to take her to Regional for a checkup."

"You forget that Doc Henderson is on the way to Vern's place," Arlo replied. "We stopped there, and he gave her a clean bill of health. Just exhaustion, which is understandable after last night's circus."

"What the hell was Vern doing there in the first place--did he tell you that?"

"He said he was out checking on some horses when the fire from the lightning attracted to Juliet's contraption cut him off, and he only had one place to head--Juliet's property."

Lonny considered the possibility. "Probably, but that's a pretty far leap across the canyon to Vern's land. The wind wasn't blowing from that direction either."

Arlo shrugged. "You know storms in the Hills. The wind can come from any direction. Maybe it was another bolt from the storm."

"We'll probably never know," Lonny said, then added. "Your decision to get Vern and Lorena off Juliet's land was probably a good one. Just get yourself back faster, next time. You know as well as I do that backup is important in a situation like that. I had my hands full."

"I'll do that," the deputy said. "Sorry, I didn't get back sooner. I don't think I've ever been in a situation quite like that one before."

"Who has?" the sheriff said. "You know, I almost regret the days when dumb tourists from the East would stop to make sure they wouldn't be attacked by Indians while they were crossing the state."

Arlo laughed. "I don't think we've run out of them yet."

"If this were a movie, you know what I'd say right now?" Lonny said.

"What?"

"I have a very bad feeling about all this."

"What makes you say that, Lonny?"

"I don't know," the sheriff answered. "It's a bad mix, that's all. There's nothing more vicious than a religious war."

"A religious war? Is that what you think we've got here?"

"Basically," Lonny said. "Juliet's convinced she's on some kind of messianic mission, and Moses is equally convinced she's conjuring up the devil. Their thinking is black and white. No room for compromise."

"Well, I've always thought that some things were worth not compromising, if you want to know the truth," Arlo said.

"There are times when you do need to take a stand," the sheriff said. "But when two airheads are leading the charge, you're more likely to get led over a cliff."

"Ain't it the truth?" the deputy said. "Anything else you need, sheriff? I've got rosters to work on."

"No," Lonny said and waved Arlo toward the door. He drummed his fingers on the desk as he thought the situation through.

*Common sense is all that's needed*, he thought, mentally chastising the preacher and Juliet for their idiocies, *but you put fanatics in the picture, and it all goes out the window.*

The thought of a window made him stand to examine the bullet hole more closely.

"Fanatics," he said as he pulled at the duct tape. "Is that the word I'm looking for?"

He was pretty sure that "fanatic" was too grand a word for what Juliet and Moses were up to. They didn't seem smart enough to earn that title--what had happened up at the Moresdon place was pure chance as far as he could determine, the kind of thing that occurred when you had people bumbling around, not really knowing what they were doing.

"Sure enough," Lonny said as a small jet of hot air blew in through the hole and over the carelessly placed tape. It was enough to make his office hot despite the air conditioning. He stripped the tape from the glass and was preparing to reposition it when he stopped and sniffed at the breeze blowing in through the hole. The air had a smell to it. It was an odor he never expected to smell on the streets of Rapid, a wonderful scent cutting through the grease of fast food franchises. Lonny inhaled deeply.

It was the smell of garlic.

*And not overpowering and obnoxious as so many people misuse the bulb*, he thought, *but subtle and tempting.*

It was a first in town--somebody who knew how to cook with garlic--and it could only mean one thing--the new restaurant was open.

"By God, there's hope for this place yet!" Lonny said. He retaped the hole, grabbed his hat, hollered he was going to lunch, and was out the door before anyone could stop him with their usual questions and demands. It was time for some culinary action.

He strode down the street, acknowledging in a perfunctory manner the waves of the retailers he passed. In five minutes, he was in front of the restaurant. He grinned again at the name above the door in a fancy but rustic script--green letters on a gold background. The owners might be from San Francisco, but were no dummies when it came to conservative high plains cities. "Authentically American" was the name they'd chosen for their new venture. From the wonderful odors drifting out the door, Lonny was sure the food was more European than American, but it never hurt to wave the flag if you wanted to attract business. Taking one deep, appreciative breath, he stepped inside.

The interior was a blend of traditional and contemporary designs. The pebbled earth-toned walls hinted at the American Southwest while the starched white tablecloths and the dark green chairs neatly ranked on the checked tile floor said Paris or Rome.

"Hell, this place ain't nothing like home," he said appreciatively under his breath.

"Sheriff!" a young voice hailed him.

It was Jamie Watermeyer. The young gay man approached with a delighted smile on his face. Tall and thin and with close-cropped hair, the teenager hurried across the room toward Lonny. In his outfit of black bowtie, white shirt, and black pants, Jamie looked the very picture of a European waiter.

The sheriff shook hands with the boy and asked, "So, Jamie, open at last. How's it going?"

The waiter responded with his characteristic exuberance. "Wonderful, Sheriff! I can't say enough about the place or about Lauren and Christie. They know food. Oh my, how they know food!"

Lonny smiled at the energy Jamie put out.

*It's my guess he's a born waiter, he thought. He's enthusiastic, and, I'm willing to bet, attentive to a diner's every need.*

"Beats the heck out of shop class, doesn't it?" he told Jamie.

A pained look crossed the waiter's face momentarily, then Jamie flicked his hand in the air as if tossing old memories aside.

"It certainly does," the boy said. "It was a terrible time, but that's all behind me now. I've graduated from school and into a new life. Isn't it just great?"

"I'm glad," the sheriff said and meant it.

"Please be seated," Jamie said. "I'll get you a menu."

As he sat, Lonny wondered what perverse act of nature had landed the gay teenager in the middle of cowboy country. Answering a disturbance call at the school a year ago, he'd pulled Jamie out from under a pile of determinedly heterosexual bodies. Lonny was ambivalent about gays, as most men were in these parts, but he knew one thing--five against one was not a fair fight no matter what your sexual orientation. He watched Jamie return with the menu. The only visible sign of the beating was a scar from a ring on the boy's left cheek.

*Unfortunately, for Jamie, that scar acts like a beauty mark, the sheriff thought as he received the menu from the teenager. It makes him too pretty, makes him stand out from the straights as much as if he had black skin. Talk about being marked.*

Lonny scanned the menu quickly, noting that many of the dishes were obviously not "authentically American," but there was a note of explanation at the top: *Although our menu contains many influences from many countries, all ingredients are locally grown. Whenever possible, the menu is 100% South Dakotan.*

"We have some items that are not on the menu, today, Sheriff," the water said. "I know you'll want to try at least one of them."

"I'll bet I will," Lonny said. "Tell me what they are."

He listened to the boy, increasingly pleased with the selected offerings as they were described with gusto by Jamie who obviously had been practicing the gourmet litany.

"Medallions of beef in a light brown garlic sauce," the waiter said, "accompanied by new potatoes and sugar snap peas. Or if you're in a lighter mood, Sheriff, there is a wonderful salad of the day with everything fresh from local gardens."

"Sounds great," Lonny said. "What else do you have?"

"My favorite for lunch!"

Lonny suppressed a chuckle as the boy leaned to whisper the choice as if it were a secret between the two of them. Jamie learned waiter's tricks extremely fast, that was clear.

"It's chicken--free-range, mind you--lightly grilled in a garlic and lemon sauce, accompanied by fresh green beans, carrots, and wild rice--that's not from South Dakota, of course, but from Minnesota, our next-door neighbor, but I'm sure you'll agree it complements poultry quite well."

"It does. You've talked me into the chicken, Jamie."

The waiter raised an impish eyebrow. "Wine, Sheriff?"

"You know I'm on duty, Jamie. How is the coffee?"

"We have a French roast selection today," the waiter said. "Roasted and ground right here, as a matter of fact. Lauren--she's the tall one; Christie's the cook--wants everyone to know that. It's dark, rich, and guaranteed to keep you alert for hours!"

"Then, it's good law enforcement coffee," Lonny said. "I'll take a cup."

As Jamie left, the sheriff refused offers from the mayor and several businessmen to join them, pleading he needed some time to recover from lack of sleep. They all wanted to know about the Gathering fracas last night, but he had no interest in answering their questions at the moment. Instead, he simply wanted to sit and smell the wonderful odors coming out of the kitchen. He picked them out one by one and examined them with his nose as if they were visible presences lain in his hands--the garlic he'd smelled before; the sizzle of trout in olive oil and butter; pasta in a cream sauce; and, mercifully, the smell of beef not burned but cooked to an exquisite tenderness..

"Your coffee," Jamie said, snapping Lonny out of his reverie. He looked around in embarrassment, hoping no one had noticed. A sheriff with fine taste in food didn't fit the mold around Rapid, so he kept quiet about it. Some of the fine citizens thought he ate raw meat for breakfast

which was fine with him--perceptions of him as a tough lawman helped keep the violence down.

*And truth to tell, the sheriff told himself, you've cracked a few heads in your day. But only as a last resort.*

He didn't like getting physical with people. It meant he wasn't mentally sharp at that particular moment in time. He took great pride in outwitting criminals because most of them weren't smart enough to consider intelligence a weapon. When he had to bash a head, he felt like he'd come down to their level.

Lonny shook his head free of thoughts about work. He'd come to enjoy the food, and he meant to do it. While he waited, he checked out the owners of the restaurant. The hostess moving among the tables was obviously the Lauren that Jamie had mentioned.

Hard to miss, she was an angular woman well over six feet with close-cropped black hair. Wearing no make-up, she looked severe until she smiled at a comment Mayor Hinkins was making. It lit up her face like a beacon. Lonny found the effect extraordinary. It was like the woman had a remarkably obvious private face and equally obvious public one, and all she had to do was push some internal button to switch between the two in an instant transition. She was dressed in black blouse and black slacks over blocky shoes.

*Maybe it's because I don't know how I feel about Lesbians, but she makes me feel like I'm attending a cheerful funeral, Ev thought, not a great quality in a hostess. Maybe it's just nervousness at launching a new business.*

Disconcerted by Lauren's effect, Lonny turned his attention to the kitchen where the co-owner, Christie, directed the efforts of another cook and the dishwasher with the efficiency of a drill sergeant. The sheriff was pleased. As far as he was concerned, the one place where tyranny was good was in the kitchen. Christie was not pleased at the moment, that was clear, and most of her wrath seemed directed at the burly Mexican dishwasher who seemed to fill up most of the small space by himself. As Lonny watched, the man growled back at the co-owner, who didn't back down an inch. In her own way, he saw that, although much shorter, Christie was the physical equal of the dishwasher. She was blocky and wide under her apron and v-necked t-shirt, and her arm when she shook a spatula at the Mexican showed all muscle and no fat. A pony-tail was pulled through the rear of Christie's Twins hat. It swung back and forth like a whip as she lectured the dishwasher on some point. The exchange ended suddenly as the Mexican waved a hand in disgust at the woman and turned back to his dishes.

*Hope it doesn't affect her cooking*, Lonny thought. He'd run into temperamental chefs before, and the unprofessional ones weren't above taking out their spite on a diner.

His fears proved unfounded when Jamie brought his lunch. The chicken was delicious, cooked to a delicate tenderness, and the vegetables were as fresh as the waiter had promised with all their flavors intact. The wild rice was done in such a way as to bring out its fully nut-like taste. Lonny closed his eyes and sighed with pleasure when he was finished with the meal. As far as he was concerned, the sign of an excellent cook was a person who could take ordinary vegetables and coax extraordinary taste out of them. It was the Zen of cooking--find the complex in the simple and reveal it.

"Sheriff, how was your lunch?" a voice asked.

He opened his eyes to Lauren.

"Bless you," he said.

Startled, the woman said, "I beg your pardon?"

"Bless you for coming to Rapid," Lonny said. "Tell me it's all going to be this wonderful."

Lauren's smile broke across her face. "You liked it, then?"

"Perfect," he answered. "Please tell your partner that she's one hell of a cook, and I hope to eat many a meal here."

"Thank you," the woman said, hesitantly looking down at him, then around the room. "I'm glad to hear it. Some of our customers seem to think the portions are too small and the prices too high."

"Welcome to South Dakota," Lonny said. "They'll bitch and complain, but they'll come back."

"I hope so," Lauren said, betraying the first sign of nervousness with a quick trip of the fingers to her cheek from her side then back down again. "It's been our dream--Christie's and mine--and we've invested everything we've got into it."

"Well, I'll do my best to spread the word," Lonny said.

The angular woman hesitated, then said, "I was hoping you'd do more than that,"

"What do you mean?"

"We've received some telephone threats," Lauren said. "The usual. We can handle that--we're used to that kind of crap--but that fat man who came by earlier in such a state--"

"Moses Brubaker," Lonny said, supplying the name.

"That's him. Is he all right? I mean, mentally?" she asked. "He looked like he'd been in a fire or something. I thought he might be unbalanced when he started to shout at my customers and threatening to picket the

restaurant because of--"She hesitated as if having second thoughts about what she wanted to say, then finished with --"our sexual orientation."

"A helluva thing to have happen on your first day of business," Lonny said.

Lauren seemed relieved when he didn't comment on her sexual preference, then scanned the room anxiously. "Do you think he'll come back? I mean, isn't he supposed to be under care or something like that?"

The sheriff suppressed a grin at the thought. "Not a bad idea, but I'm afraid he's one of our local preachers--Moses Brubaker."

The woman was surprised. "He is?"

"It's a long story," Lonny said, "but I'm afraid he's sane. There was a fire up in the Hills last night, and he isn't exactly proud of his conduct--or shouldn't be, anyway."

"Oh God," Lauren said, "then it's probably even worse than I thought. He hates gays and Lesbians, doesn't he?"

"He does."

"Damn, that could kill our business before it gets off the ground."

*Shit, Lonny thought. Shit and double shit. She's right. That preacher's going too far when he interferes with a legitimate business--especially the one of my dreams.*

"I'll talk to him," he told Lauren. "He blusters a lot, but he'll back down if I press him hard to stay within the law."

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head. "He seemed pretty serious to me."

"He's got a lot to be serious with," Lonny said.

Lauren laughed. "My God, how much does he weigh, anyway?"

"I don't know exactly, but it would take a meat scale to measure it, I'm sure," the sheriff said.

The woman giggled at the thought, then said, "Thank you, Sheriff. I don't mind telling you I've been very nervous about returning to the Hills."

"You're a native?" Lonny said as he sipped the delicious coffee.

Lauren nodded. "Belle Fouché, born and bred. Unfortunately, I felt out of place, as you might guess, so I left for San Francisco as soon as I was eighteen."

The sheriff nodded. "I understand, but what brought you back?"

"Money, it's as simple as that. Christie--my partner--and I explored a lot of options, and this was the only place we were sure we could afford."

"California's loss is my gain," Lonny said, raising the cup in salute to her, then couldn't resist the question the cop inside him insisted on asking. "What about the dishwasher? Did he come with you?"

"Esteban? No, he just showed up last week, saying he was tapped out and needed work."



"From what I saw earlier, he seems to have a problem with your partner," Lonny said.

Lauren made a sour face. "The man is sloppy, not interested in what he's doing. We have to keep after him all the time. He's just interested in a paycheck, so I don't think he's going to last too long. I just hope he lasts out the week so we don't get caught short and end up irritating our customers."

"Well, if he does take off on you, talk to Jamie," the sheriff said. "He'll know someone that's responsible and will do a good job."

"He's nice, isn't he?" the woman said. "With a little more training, he'll be the complete professional."

Lonny nodded in agreement. "A competent waiter is almost as hard to find as a competent cook. Congratulations on having both."

"Thank you," Lauren said, putting a hand on his, then saying, "I've got customers waiting. Please stop in again."

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll be back often."

*As a matter of fact, he thought as he watched her go, I'll make it a point of getting in here as often as possible. It's a good way to keep an eye on Moses and the Temple Americans.*

His eyes shifted to the kitchen to the burly form of the dishwasher.

*And the big Mexican, he thought, adding a note to his mental file as he paid the bill and went to meet Everett Pick at his office.*

## Chapter 60

### The Christian Cowboy

Bill T. Harkins didn't feel good. He'd just pulled his face out of a buffalo pie that had begun steaming in late morning heat still tinged with the smoke of last night's fire and now there was blood--lots of it--on his last, untorn shirt. He tried brushing it off the title Amy Swift Bird had sewn over his breast pocket in fancy new red letters before she threw him out of her double-wide in Black Hawk. He hoped it hadn't covered the larger letters that she'd ironed on the back. "The Christian Cowboy" was his calling card and got him a lot of free drinks once a rodeo was over.

Through his aching head and churning stomach, he remembered he should be concerned about the source of the blood. Rolling over in the dry grass, he checked his body and came up with nothing. He felt awful, but not any different than any other day with a hangover. There was no denying the fact, however, that there was a tremendous quantity of blood on his shirt and jeans. He found this tremendously confusing.

*Was I in a fight last night?* he wondered. *I don't remember one, but, hell, there's a lot thing I don't remember, anymore.*

A sudden huge drop of red splatted on his silver World Champion Bronc Rider belt and ended the confusion. Shading his eyes against the sun, the Christian Cowboy looked upward.

A horse stared down as if expecting him to do something about the bullet hole in its chest.

*Not just a horse,* Bill amended. *This one is royalty.*

He'd been around horses since his daddy could fit him in the saddle, and he knew them better than any of his five ex-wives.

*This is one of those fancy European breeds you'd never catch slumming in a rodeo,* he knew immediately. *This is the kind of horse you ride as if you were a duke or a lord or someone who could afford to be useless in life. It won't tolerate anything less.*

Bill felt distinctly humbled in its presence. He'd been drunk as a lord, but he sure wasn't anywhere within reaching distance of nobility. All he knew was that he wanted to ride the animal in the worst way. It'd be like handling a Ferrari after all those years of riding mean-assed nags in arenas. The trouble was, the horse was in no shape to be ridden. Some sonuvabitch had shot it. All of a sudden, Bill had anger added to his hangover. Shooting a defenseless animal was a sin to him anytime, but for someone to lay a bullet into this creature was like desecrating a monument.

"Hey, boy," he said softly and unaccountably was embarrassed at his greeting. *You'd no more call this horse "boy" than you'd say "Hey, you" to Billy Graham*, he admonished himself.

"What's your name?" Bill asked as he struggled to his feet and waited for the world to stop spinning like a bronc with its balls in a sling.

The stallion simply snorted and shook its dark mane, so Bill bent to examine the wound while he talked to it.

"How about I call you "Lord"?" he asked. "A stud like you needs some kind of title, that's for sure."

The Christian Cowboy had doctored hundreds of horses over his 20 years on the circuit, even the ones that had been unkind enough to break his bones, so he knew when he felt the stallion's wound that there was some good news. The bullet was close to the surface, and he could get it out, if he had to, but the best thing he could do was to trailer it to a vet. He looked around for his pickup and fifth-wheeler.

The Ford was still there, but the trailer was gone. Bill puzzled over the matter for a moment, then remembered he'd roared away from Amy's place when she came after him with the Ginsu. He'd left the fifth-wheeler there along with two good cutting horses he planned to sell in Rapid.

"Shit," he said. He was disgusted not because Amy would have sold the whole lot by the time he got back to make up for the money he owed her--that was only fair--but because he didn't have any way of getting Lord out of this spot.

Bill looked around, blinking in the bright sun filtering through the dusty air. He had no idea where he was, but guessed it was at the mouth of Moresdon Canyon from the looks of the place. He'd been on his way for his second visit to the Temple America when the bottle had gotten the better of him again, he did know that much. It always seemed to, no matter how many times he'd been saved by the best preachers in the land. Smoke rolled in from the mountains to the west, and he knew that he was lucky he hadn't passed out in the middle of a forest fire. There was always something to be thankful for--that was the thought he tried to keep in mind, no matter how far he was into the booze.

*The best thing I can do is get a halter out of the pickup, tie Lord to a tree, then fetch a vet as fast as possible*, he decided.

Patting the stallion's flank to reassure it, he started toward the truck, then stopped and looked down as a sharp pain struck his heel. His feet weren't inside their boots or socks and were brown with buffalo shit. He pulled a cockleburr out of the heel, then looked around to see if the boots were anywhere in sight as a rich stink rose from the ground.

"Damn!" he said when his search was fruitless. Boots didn't come off unless there was a helluva good reason for it, so he assumed Amy had

taken those as well. He didn't begrudge her the spoils, but it was inconvenient. Deciding not to worry about it, he picked his way toward the Ford. There was a price for sharing her bed, and he knew that as well as any of the other rodeo cowboys. Anybody down on their luck could always find a bunk in her trailer.

*You leave poorer than when you came, Bill thought, but you leave happier, and as far as I'm concerned, you couldn't ask for much more out of life.*

When he got to the pickup, he discovered that the smoke in air wasn't all from the blaze in the Hills. Somehow, he and a white tail had met up in the night. The deer's body lay crushed behind the truck. He'd run right over it, that was obvious, and immediately felt terrible about it. He was no liberal, animal-ass-kissing Easterner, but he didn't like to see animals unnecessarily hurt, either. He reached up to tip his hat in respect to the white tail and found that it was gone too.

"Double damn!" he said, wondering what the hell he'd done to Amy this time to make her clean him out so. She was normally fairer about the whole thing, only taking what seemed equal to the services rendered. It puzzled him because they'd seemed to have a better time than they'd ever had before. The woman had been so bright-eyed eager to hop into bed, she'd damned near sharpened his Ticonderoga into nothing but painful shavings, and then asked for more like there was no satisfying her. When he'd begged off, she'd told him in a real nasty fashion that he was turning into an old faggot who'd soon be screwing nothing but young boys. He'd hit her then, and he'd never smacked a woman in his life.

*My momma raised me better than that, he chastised himself, but, damn, the woman had pressed the wrong button!*

He still felt bad about it because he'd knocked her all the way across the double-wide into the velvet wall hanging, and she'd grabbed on to it for support and torn the fabric right across Mr. Presley's pelvis. That was when she went to kitchen and came back with the knife, looking like a woman about to carve a tough Sunday roast.

*Maybe that was the reason for her taking all my stuff, Bill guessed. People can be pretty serious about their Elvis.*

He decided not to think about it any more and gave the animal a respectful nod, then walked around to the front of the truck to inspect the damage. As he checked the mangled grill, he found it was about what he expected. The radiator was gone. Antifreeze pooled in the buffalo grass between the wheels, and smoke still seeped from beneath the hood where the fluid had splattered on the hot engine, causing the whole area to smell like burnt oil. He wasn't going anywhere, that was for sure, but the

crackling from inside the cab told him that he'd at least be able to call for help on the radio.

"But you're first," he told the horse.

Going back to the truck bed, he cleared away his two saddles and the bridles until he could open the lid of his lockbox. Pulling a bottle out from his stash of whiskey, he took a long drink, then found his Buck knife, iodine, styptic gauze, and a roll of bandages, figuring that what was good enough for him was good enough for the horse.

*Bruises, bumps, contusions, concussions and fractured ribs--they were all on a first-name basis with the Christian Cowboy, Bill thought in a momentary flash of pride, the only cowboy in the history of rodeo who rode with one hand in the rawhide and a Bible in the other in order to thump the devil out of the horse.*

Even though he was a chronic backslider and the younger riders laughed at him, he was sure that prayer had kept him in the game longer than any other competitor known in this century. His bones had been broken so many times, he figured his skeleton had been all the way around the saddle horn and was now back where it had started from. Not many riders could say that.

Taking off his shirt, he wrapped the first-aid materials in it and headed back toward the stallion. He was pretty certain the horse wouldn't let him do anything, but he just couldn't sit around and do nothing. Even a pure bred had only so much blood, and that leak needed to be stopped somehow.

Dropping everything to the ground, Bill held the knife up where the stallion could see it. He thought about using some horseshit Hollywood stuff like "Easy, easy!," but he wasn't no actor and the horse didn't seem willing to put up with much nonsense anyway. Instead, he simply said, "You want it out, then here I come."

To his amazement when he stepped forward, the stallion stayed still. He stroked its chest, and the flesh didn't even quiver as happened with a normal horse. Bill ran his hand near the wound until he found the bullet, then held his breath and prepared to get out of the way as he dug the tip of the knife into the flesh. When he hesitated, the horse rapped him against the side of his head with its muzzle as if impatient for him to get the job over with. It didn't help his headache any, so the Christian Cowboy slid the knife in until it was around the end of the slug, then used the tip and his hand on the outside of the skin to work the bullet up and out of the wound. He examined the round and decided from its size that it was from a pistol.

*What kind of animal would shoot a horse with a handgun?* He asked himself as he dropped the bullet and applied antiseptic to the wound. *Some damned psychopathic kid, probably.*

Quickly, he applied the gauze then applied a strip of adhesive bandage that ran all the way around the stallion's leg and back to the site of the hole. Bill stepped back, looked up at the horse, and said, "It's not much, but that's all I can do for you for you right now."

The stallion dropped its head as if checking out his handiwork, then whinnied derisively.

*At least*, Bill said to himself, *that's the way it sounds to me.*

"So I'm not a vet," he told the horse. "You better rest while I get on the radio and find you some help."

He rubbed the stallion's muzzle to encourage it, then picked up his make-shift first aid kit and walked back to the truck. Dropping the materials back into the lockbox, he took another drink, then closed the lid and locked it and jumped out of the pickup. A sudden whack across his rear end slammed his head into the truck's metal.

"Goddamn!" he turned to shout at the horse. "What do you think you're doing?"

The stallion answered by turning its side toward him.

"What the devil? For a horse, you're as much trouble as a woman. What is it you want me to do?"

Bill felt foolish talking like that because he knew there wasn't a horse in the world even as smart as a dog, but the stallion just seemed to have the knack of pulling that kind of stuff out of him. When he didn't move, the horse pressed its flank against him. Bill had no desire to be crushed against the Ford and let instinct take over. Grabbing the mane, he pulled himself up onto the stallion, fully intending to drop off on the other side, but before he could get that accomplished, the horse was in a full gallop toward the smoking hills as if it knew full well where it was going and wasn't going to let any wound slow it down. So, the Christian Cowboy did what he'd always done when he got a bronc that was trouble.

He hung on for dear life.

## Chapter 61

### Media Exposure

"Where were you last night?" Ev asked Lyle over late morning coffee. Heat rolled in from an open window over the kitchen sink, accompanied by the smell of burned pine and grass. The sound of steady digging came along with the warmed air. He could see Juliet using Mary Fae's shovel to spade up more herbs for her spells. Underneath the straw gardening hat, she sweated heavily.

*Not heavily enough*, Ev thought sourly as he glanced back expectantly at the teenager.

Lyle looked up from a computer manual with an irritated expression. "Right here where I was supposed to be."

"Doing what?"

"What I told you," Lyle said in a tone that said he wasn't sure to what depth Ev's stupidity could sink. "Monitoring communications, creating a diversion."

"You did that all right. Everything burned, I almost got killed, and Juliet damned near got beaten to death. You have a knack for that kind of shit, you know that, Lyle?"

"I know," the teenager said, nodding toward the TV. "Look, we made *Good Morning, America*."

Ev checked the portable television. Footage had made it out of the fire and the storm, that much was clear. A narrator's voice droned over film of the fiery pole with buffalo stampeding around it and people fleeing in all directions. In the middle of the melee, a shovel dropped toward Juliet until Lorena rode into the frame and ripped it away from the Temple American. His heart skipped several beats when the tape cut to Lorena tumbling to the ground as a bloody, pink froth erupted from Thor's chest.

Then, there was the sight of the sheriff directing the crane. A second, later Ev appeared, holding onto the fat preacher. In the darkness of the night, the cable was invisible, making it appear as if they had levitated themselves out of the canyon and onto safe ground. A second later, the breathless host came on camera, announcing that her program had secured exclusive rights to an interview with Juliet Moresdon--founder of the Gathering, a New Age happening--and Everett Pick.

"I'm particularly excited," she said, "that I'll be talking with Mr. Pick. As you may already know, he's been accused of various crimes, ranging from child abuse to destruction of property, but, as you could tell from last night's action, it would appear that he's redeemed himself by rescuing the

preacher, Moses Brubaker, who suffered the additional tragedy--unknown to him at the time--of having his self-styled Temple America burn down after a lightning strike from the unusually vicious storm that rocked the Black Hills of South Dakota. Tune in tomorrow, and we'll give you more of the details of this fascinating story. But, right now, it's time for a word from our sponsor."

Ev swung toward the teenager as ABC cut to a Maalox commercial.

"You didn't," he said.

Lyle nodded.

"You fucking, little idiot. I didn't say I'd do an interview with anybody, and I'm not about to. Don't you ever presume--"

"Hey!" the teenager cut in, holding a hand up, "I just did what Juliet asked me to do, okay? It was her idea, you know what I'm saying?"

"How come it's always somebody else's idea?" Ev said.

Lyle shrugged. "I'm just a teenager. What do I know?"

"A helluva lot more than you're letting on, that's for sure."

"She got me up in the middle of the night after you and the sheriff brought her home and asked me to contact the networks. What'd you want me to do?"

"And they listened to you?"

"ABC did."

"Nobody listens to teenagers."

"They do when you can tap into their computers," Lyle said with a grin.

"You're a devious little shit, you know that?"

The teenager nodded, pleased.

"Call them back."

"Too late," Lyle said, jerking his head toward the open window. "They're already here."

A growing buzz of activity came through the window. Ev got up for a better look. NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, NHK, other foreign networks--they all spilled into the driveway, aiming their dishes skyward and jockeying for a position closest to the door. A sudden thumping drew his attention to the living room. He looked around the corner and saw a ladder crashing through the deck's splintered railing. A second later, a microphone poked its way into view, then the black hair of a Japanese reporter popped up. The man grinned at him and beckoned for him to come out. Ev hurried over, locked the sliding doors and pulled the curtains shut.

Back in the kitchen, he asked the teenager, "How did they get here so fast?"

Lyle gave his annoying shrug. "Amazing, isn't it? If our government worked that fast, we wouldn't have a problem in the world, would we?"

"They're on private property, don't they know that?"



"I don't think that's much of a concern for them."

"No shit," Ev said as he pulled the curtains shut over the kitchen windows. "But we've got to get rid of them. I can't breathe."

"Why not?" Juliet's excited voice asked from the doorway as Lyle disappeared into his room. She propped the spade against the house, so she could smooth the bib overalls she was wearing. A camera lens poked over one shoulder, and a microphone over another.

"Oh, Christ!" Ev said. "Get them out!"

"Nonsense," Juliet said and stood aside to let the TV crew through the door.

"Hi, Ev," Mindy said with a happy expression on her face that quickly turned sour as she saw the footage on the television.

"Turn that off!" she commanded.

Before Juliet hit the switch and turned the screen to black, Ev had a brief glimpse of Mindy beating another reporter over the head with a microphone.

"Juliet, are you crazy!" he said.

"How do you feel?" Mindy said, moving close to him.

"How do I feel?" A better question is, "How do you feel?" You look like shit, Mindy."

Her blonde hair resembled cracked cement with weeds growing out of it, and her makeup was smeared as if some one had taken a putty knife to several layers of wet paint. The blue eyes seemed to be drawing a bead on him from out of a Van Gogh painting. All she had on was a tattered gray sweatshirt and sweatpants.

"I should," she said. "I've been waiting all night for this interview. Besides, Jack here, can edit the whole thing for us."

Studying the squat cameraman, Ev asked, "You can edit anything out, Jack?"

"Damned near."

"Well, edit this, then!" Ev said. An image had popped unexpectedly into his mind from basic training, an image of Drill Sergeant Hagedorn, a tall, muscular man whose command of profanity bordered on religious devotion. "Fuck, I feel fucking bad, that's what I fucking feel. Why fucking why? Because I'm fucking standing fucking here talking to a fucking bimbo whose fucking brain is a fucking microphone and who fucking goes to fucking sleep every fucking night ramming a fucking camera lens up her fucking pussy because she can't fucking go to sleep unless she's got her fucking head up her fucking ass so she can fucking interview the only fucking person in the entire motherfucking world who interests her--her own fucking self!"

As Ev stopped to catch his breath, Mindy asked Jack, "Can you edit that?"

The cameraman shook his head.

"Never mind," she said and asked Ev, "How do you feel?"

"I'm just fucking getting warmed up, that's how I fucking--"

The reporter interrupted him. "You can do this all day long, Pick, but I will get a story from you and don't you ever doubt it!. This is the hottest item in the nation right now, and the people have a right to know, and I'm going to get it no matter what it takes."

Ev was silent for a moment until a triumphant smile began to cross Mindy's face, then he said to the cameraman, "Jack, fucking Jack, do you fucking love your fucking camera?"

"Oh, shit," Jack said and began to back away as he filmed. Ev caught him halfway down the hall, pulled him up by the belt and frog-marched him into the living room. Using one hand, he pulled open the curtains and unlocked the doors. Then he ripped the camera away and tossed it out over the deck without looking. A shrill scream erupted, and he saw the Betacam tangled up with the Japanese reporter and the cameraman behind him on the ladder as they fell with increasing speed back toward the ground. Ev heard a sudden "Ooof!" as the two bodies hit. He went out onto the deck and looked down. The two men lay stunned underneath the ladder, but they were moving and trying to get up.

"Goddamn it!" Jack said from behind Ev. "That was my best camera. You're going to pay for this one too, you know."

"Oh, shut up!" Ev said and grabbed the cameraman by the neck of his shirt. Jerking the man up onto his toes, he danced him across the living room to the front hallway. A shout of anticipation went up from the crowd as he opened the door, picked up Jack and tossed him into the nearest camera crew, which went down in a tumbling clatter of microphones and sound equipment. Ev closed the door and looked for Mindy. He found her behind the couch, dragged her across the carpet, opened the door again and threw her on top of Jack. A phalanx of microphones poked themselves downward, and Ev heard a rolling, urgent chorus of "How do you feels?" before he shut the noise behind his back.

Juliet glared at him from the kitchen entrance. "What's the matter with you, Everett Pick?"

"I don't like vultures," he said.

"They're not vultures, and I invited them here--did you forget that?"

"You're crazy."

"I'm not crazy. I had another vision, that's all."

"A vision of hell."

"No," she said, "a vision of the future."

"Your whole site burned down--that's a vision of the future?"

"The site wasn't going anywhere, Everett Pick, but now it can. I have what everyone in America needs today to get anything done--media exposure. The Gathering will be greater than ever now--because I got the word out through the networks and cable. They're already bidding for the interviews, they want the story that badly, and once we get paid, we can use that as seed money to spread the good news about the most singular event in the history of the world!"

His ex-wife's eyes blazed as she spoke, and Ev felt his fears deepen. Juliet was a woman who would not let a thing go unless a hard dose of reality intervened and, even then, she usually just caromed on to the next fruitless endeavor.

"Seed money?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, pacing back and forth and obviously caught up in her vision. "Can't you see it? An Ascended Masters central clearinghouse to handle any spiritual needs. A 900 number for a psychic hotline. Another for etheric healing. Spirit guide readings. Body therapy. Magic transformation and re-connection with dreams. Maybe a cable spot for channeling or connecting with your dream angel. Or what if you want to share in the comprehensive growth process of awakening your light body?"

"Juliet, what are you talking about?" Ev asked, trying to interrupt, but she didn't hear him.

"And, of course, we put the pole back up again and select sites for fire walking and stone carrying--Matty will handle that. Personalized tarot reading tents. Neuro-associative reconditioning is another possibility--we do have to make room for everyone, you know. That means we have to think about assisting people in healing their physical mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges and how to use light with energy techniques to buy real estate."

"Real estate?" Ev asked.

"For sure. And, as long as we're re-building the site, we can put in a psychic bed and breakfast."

"You want to house psychics?"

"Don't be stupid. People can come and stay and get readings at lower cost while witnessing the Gathering events."

"Juliet, will you shut up?" Ev asked.

She closed her mouth and looked at him with pity. "You just don't have any vision at all, do you, Ev?" she asked after a moment.

"Not a bit."

"A pity," she said. "I've offered to share all this with you. I pulled you out of a tight spot back in Minnesota, and all you can do is be a naysayer."

"I tried to get the horse back for you--"

"And he's not here, is he?" Juliet said.

"I can't stand any more of this, and I need to get out of here, anyway.

The sheriff wants to question me about last night. I can't keep him waiting."

"Fine," she said. "Go wherever you want, but I'm letting the media stay here."

"At least, give me a chance to escape without them seeing me."

"Oh, all right," Juliet said. "I'll hold a press conference out front while you sneak out the back. Will that work?"

"It's better than nothing," Ev answered. "But I need a vehicle. How am I going to get one?"

"I don't know," Juliet answered. "I'll get you out of the house. That's the best I can do.

Give me a couple of minutes to get ready, then when I go out the door, you go out the back."

"All right," he said. "All right."

Fidgeting, he waited for Juliet. When she finally came out of the bedroom, she had the white robe on again.

"You look ridiculous," he said.

"That's only your opinion," she replied without heat.

*She's excited about the press conference, Ev thought. So excited, she doesn't have time for my petty comments.*

Checking her hair in the hall mirror, Juliet went to the door and asked, "ready?"

Ev nodded and ran to the deck doors. He could see two men waiting in the backyard, a camera man and a reporter, but when an uproar broke out from the front of the house, they ran toward the corner of the house. Sliding open the doors, Ev limped out onto the deck, worked his bad leg over the railing, then slid down the support beam to the ground. He did a quick check for more media, then got into the woods as quickly as he could manage it. Staying away from the drive, he cut a straight path down toward the highway. In a half-hour, he was by the side of the road, his thumb in the air. He hoped someone would pick him up soon. He was in trouble enough with the law.

It wouldn't do to be late.

## Chapter 62

### The Sheriff Questions Pick

Lonny settled into his chair and tried to get in the mood for an interrogation, even though it was difficult with the restaurant's meal sitting pleasantly in his stomach. A big man like himself, Pick sat opposite, slouched in his seat, rubbing at the bags under his eyes. A faint odor of burnt hair hung around the man, and he was sweating hard. The sheriff admitted to himself that he was glad that Pick hadn't been on time. It gave him one more thing to dislike about the man, and that always made the questioning more effective.

"You're late, Pick," he said.

"Sorry, Sheriff. I had to hitchhike in here."

"Vehicle on the fritz?"

"No," Pick said, "Juliet's got the media up at her place, and it was the only way I could escape."

"Tough," Lonny said without sympathy and got directly to the point.

"What went on out at Juliet and Vern's places last night?"

"Does it matter?" Ev said.

"Damned right, it does. I want to get to the bottom of this. I've talked to Moses and Juliet. Now I want to hear your version."

Pick digested this information with a dismissive flicker of his eyelids.

"Don't you care what happens to you?" Lonny said, cursing himself for letting anger show in his voice.

A knowing smile crossed Ev's lips and disappeared as he said, "No, not really."

"Why not?"

"Because, Sheriff, you're not going to believe anything I say, anyway, are you?"

"Try me, Pick."

"A snow job if I ever heard one," Ev said. "You said last night that you received an extradition request. I'm accused of child molestation. Nobody believes a man with that charge hanging over his head."

"Have it your way, then," Lonny said. "But I still want to hear your side of the story. Who knows? Maybe you'll convince me."

Ev answered with a quick, "Fat chance of that."

"Tell me," the sheriff ordered. "Or you'll stay here until you do."

Lonny listened as the words came out of Ev's mouth like they were being dispensed by some machine separate from the man himself.

"Lorena and I went up to Vern's place on the canyon to try to get Juliet's horse back."

"What horse?" the sheriff asked.

"Thor," Ev said. "A big Dutch warmblood stallion like you've never seen in your life."

"Oh, I've seen him all right," Lonny said ruefully, remembering his smashed cruiser. "Helluva horse."

"Yeah, well, somehow Sarvis got hold of it and wouldn't return it, so we through we'd try to get the stallion back ourselves."

"So you took Lorena along to help you do the job? Pretty dangerous for her and not too bright of you, Pick."

"I didn't have much choice in the matter, Sheriff."

When Ev didn't seem to want to elaborate on the matter, Lonny said, "All right. Go on."

"Before we found the Warmblood, we ran into Vern and land mines."

Lonny sat erect in his chair. "Mines? Are you bullshitting me now, Pick?"

"Do you want my version or not?" Ev asked.

"But, Jesus, mines?"

"Sheriff, I saw a dog, a buffalo and our vehicle blown to pieces. It's a little hard to mistake mines for anything else." Ev shuddered, then continued, "That godawful click you hear the moment before it explodes, and you know what's going to happen, and there's nothing you can do about it. I treated a lot of men in Nam with one or both legs gone."

"Okay, okay," Lonny said. "Let's leave that for a moment. If all this happened, how did you get past Sarvis?"

"We didn't, not at first," Ev said. "But when he set the dog on us, it tripped a mine. The blast stunned Vern, and we ran up the road to find Thor."

"How'd you know the stallion was there in the first place?" Lonny asked.

"We guessed, Sheriff. It was a likely spot, remote and hard to get to for most people. And, once up the road, we didn't have any trouble finding the place either. The smell led us right to it."

"What smell?" Lonny asked.

"It smelled like car starter fluid or whatever's in it."

"Like ether?"

"Yeah, that's it," Ev confirmed.

Lonny stared at the man. "You're telling me Vernon Sarvis is manufacturing crank on his property?"

"I don't know," Ev answered. "We grabbed the horse, they started shooting, then everything blew up just after we got into the canyon. That's how the fire got started."

The sheriff thought back to the dishwasher in the cafe and asked, "did you see any Mexicans out there?"

"Sheriff, it was black out there, we couldn't see much of anything. Why, is it something important?"

"Never mind," Lonny said. "Just trying to confirm a hunch. What happened after you and Lorena hit the canyon?"

"The story just gets wilder, you sure you want to hear it?"

"Pick, just tell me, okay?"

"We got in among a bunch of buffalo and, the next thing we know, Vern is right in front of us. He shot the horse."

"Not too badly, obviously," Lonny said. "The stallion got you up the other side."

The sheriff was surprised when Ev shook his head and replied, "Sheriff, he nailed Thor dead center in the chest. I could feel the bullet rip into him. It staggered the horse, but it didn't stop him."

"Amazing," Lonny said to Pick while privately he reserved judgment. People saw the damndest things in the midst of a crisis and believed them to be absolutely true even when events occurred quite differently.

"Even more astonishing, Sheriff, is that Thor carried me half way up the trail before I jumped."

Lonny stared at Pick. "Jumped? You're saying you jumped off the horse? Why?"

"Because he wasn't going to make it, that's why," Ev said. "I'm a heavy man, and we weren't going to get to the top if I stayed on."

"Pretty self-sacrificing," Lonny said in a neutral tone.

"There wasn't anything self-sacrificing about it," Pick replied. "I just acted on impulse, that's all, and jumped."

"Back onto the trail?" the sheriff asked. "Risky. I've been on that trail. You could have gone over the side."

Pick colored in embarrassment. "I did go over the side."

Lonny sat up and said in disbelief, "And yet here you are sitting right in front of me. You had to have fallen at least a hundred, two hundred feet, and yet you don't seem to have much more than a few scratches."

Pick spread his hands out in a gesture of helplessness. "I was lucky, Sheriff. I hit several trees before I hit the ground."

Lonny gave the man a sour look.

"It's worse than that," Pick continued. "Moses did the same thing."

"What are you talking about?"

Ev shrugged. "All I can tell you is that I saw him come flying over the edge of the canyon like a flaming meteor, hit the trees and land in one piece."

Lonny rubbed at his temples to ease a growing headache. *I have to say something before all of this explodes inside me*, he thought.

"Pick," he said. "If I hadn't talked to Moses and Juliet already and hadn't been there myself for part of fiasco last night, I wouldn't believe a word you're saying. I'd say you were trying to cook up some cock-and-bull story to divert attention away from your other troubles. But I was there and I did talk to those people, so I'll have to accept your tall tale for now."

"For now?" Pick asked.

"Damned right, "for now,"" the sheriff said, pulling a paper from the stack on his desk. "This is the request from the state of Minnesota for extradition. You were right--the word of a child molester doesn't carry much weight with me."

"I'm not a molester, Sheriff," Pick said in a face that had frozen into immobility. "I don't harm children. I never have. I never will."

"Maybe," Lonny said. "But the judge will decide that when the case comes to court for a hearing."

"When will that be?"

"I don't know, Pick. With the case load backed up the way Judge Hurd says it is, it may be several months. However long it takes, get yourself a lawyer, I'd advise that."

"I suppose so," Pick said without enthusiasm.

"There's no 'suppose' about it," Lonny said. "Without a lawyer, you're dead meat in a case like this."

"Because it's child molestation charges?" Pick said.

"That and because, if they're true, I'll be on your ass so fast you'll be back in Minnesota before you have time to blink."

"Are we through, then?" Pick asked.

"Yes."

Lonny watched the man as he stood, favoring a gimpy leg, trying to figure out if he was guilty or not. Most times, he could tell, but child molesters were a remarkably devious lot, expert at appearing normal and harmless.

"Sheriff," Pick said. "You'll find me out at Juliet's place. I'm not going anywhere."

"You're damned right about *that*, Pick."

When the office door closed behind Everett Pick, Lonny pulled a bottle of aspirin from the desk drawer and swallowed four to take care of the increasing ache in his head. Leaning back, he admitted to himself, *Pick's not the only one giving me a headache. This town is suddenly loaded with*



*fruitcakes. What did I do to deserve all this? And Vern, for Christ's sake, what was he doing up there? First, Pick showed up with that damned sniper rifle and a story about weapons crates, and now methamphetamine? It had to be crank--that was the only thing that matched the smell Pick described and the explosion that followed. Ether is one of the few substances that volatile unless Sarvis was storing munitions up there.*

"Or," he said as a chill ran up his back like an icy zipper exposing his spine, "both of them."

## Chapter 63

### My Horse for a Kingdom

Vern drove his Jimmy up the long, switchback road to Temple America, a road he hadn't been on since he'd delivered a Deville to Moses the previous year.

*It sure looks different now*, he thought as he studied the terrain.

Beneath a hot afternoon sky cleared of storm clouds, the air smelled of smoke and burnt pine because there was nothing but ash and blackened trees on either side for as far as he could see, and he knew he was lucky the wind had been blowing away from his house or he wouldn't have had a place to keep Lorena safe and away from the sheriff or Everett Pick. Pick! He couldn't believe the sonuvabitch had survived the fall, but he'd turned on CNN first thing in the morning, and there Ev was, not only alive, but a hero for saving the fat preacher's ass. Pick was incredibly stupid, but unbelievably lucky. The man survived everything, despite his best attempts to kill himself.

*Still*, Vern decided, *I have to make the best of a bad situation, and the news isn't all bad. I have Lorena back and I haven't heard anything in the media about the stallion. Hopefully, it's lying dead somewhere on Juliet's place. Plus, Moses has a few buttons I can easily push, especially since his place burned down, and that'll make it simple to push the preacher in the direction I want him to go. And I can find out what Mary Fae is up to.*

Vern rammed the Jimmy over a charred log blocking his way, past the scorched white Temple America sign with only one part of the message still partially visible--*itors Welcome*. The rest of the road up the mountain was clear of debris until he cleared the crest where he stopped the vehicle and sat looking at the damage.

Nothing was left of Temple America's four dormitories, its dining hall, or--worst of all for Moses, Vern knew--the church itself. In fact, he was pretty sure the lightning had struck that building first with its 200-foot crystal spire topped with a gilt cross. The golden symbol had been made of copper, he remembered that, and intended as a ground against lightning strikes because of the church's high position above the canyon, but last night's storm hadn't paid much attention to the rules governing enormous bursts of electricity. A bolt--or several--had probably ignored the cross and struck the church's timbers and glass directly. Moses' Temple was nothing but a pile of wind-stirred ashes and jumbled beams now. Only one building had somehow managed to remain standing, even though it was blackened with smoke, and that was the stable.

Vern drew his attention away from the mess when he saw sooty blue suits sitting in the dry grass in front of the destroyed church. Getting out of his vehicle, he went straight to Moses, who sat weeping in front of a hundred or more followers who followed his lead and cried as heavily as the rainstorm on the previous night. The whole mob sickened Vern and heartened him at the same time. As a lifelong salesman, he knew when his customers were in a buying mood.

"Moses," he said, "I'm truly sorry to see all this. You must be feeling quite a loss."

The preacher, his face still streaked with smeared ashes, looked up at him and gave a blubbing nod. His suit was shredded and torn, and the white shirt beneath it had lost a button, splitting the fabric around Moses' enormous hairy stomach. It made it hard for Vern to concentrate on what he was saying with the navel winking at him from folds of fat every time the preacher moved, but he tried to keep his eyes focused on the quivering jowls and command the man's attention.

"It's a damned shame," he said.

Moses nodded again.

"I saw the TV this morning, so it's a double damned shame."

"What do you mean?" the preacher asked.

"You haven't seen the news?"

"No."

"Pick's a hero."

"Him," Moses said in a tone of dismissal. "So what?"

"He comes off looking great. You, on the other hand, didn't look so good."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, every television screen in America is playing over and over again the tape showing the lightning striking Juliet's pole and shooting you into the canyon like some kind of unguided missile. But that's not the worst of it."

Vern squatted in the grass, close to the preacher, and whispered, "I don't want your disciples to hear this, but the media makes you look like some sort of cowardly religious nut who panicked when God failed you and had to rely on Everett Pick and the sheriff to get you out of the fire."

"That's not true!"

Moses said it with such ferocity, Vern knew it had to be fact. He smiled inwardly.

"I know it's not," he replied in soothing tones, "but you know the media--anything for a story, even if the truth has to go out the window."

"Amen to that," the preacher said, then frowned. "The story's out nationally, you say?"

"Internationally," Vern said. "And, press is all down at Juliet's place right now, broadcasting live, trying to interview the "hero." I wouldn't be surprised if some of them weren't on their way up here as well."

The preacher muttered under his breath. "You mean, her house didn't burn down?"

"No," Vern said. "The wind changed direction, and it came close but swept by without doing any damage, as far as I could tell from the television pictures."

Moses muttered again.

"I know. It's not fair, is it, Moses?"

"No," the preacher said with force. "We got rid of that unChristian pole and all that surrounded it. It only seems right that the center of all that iniquity should have burned as well."

Vern got out of his squat and sat down next to Moses with his back to the disciples.

"Instead, I've lost everything," Moses said. "My entire compound and my reputation. I had dreams, God's dreams, for this place, Vern. It'd be a place where any Christian--other than humanists--could come for prayer and meditation. And, eventually, they'd be able to come and enjoy the company of other Christians while horseback riding or hay riding or playing a round on our golf course."

"Really?" Vern said when the preacher stopped to wipe his nose on a dirty sleeve. "Where did you plan to put the course?"

"Over there," Moses said, pointing to the grassy flat down between the walls of the canyon. "I've already had plans drawn up for it and the club house, but I guess that's all down the tubes now."

"Yeah. It's tough," Vern said. "Well, as I see it, that just takes money and is a problem for the future. Of more immediate concern, I'd say, is your reputation--without that, you can't raise money."

"I told you, I wasn't a coward last night!"

"I know, I know," Vern said, "but we're talking perceptions here, not reality, aren't we?"

"I suppose."

"No supposing about it, Moses. The media will twist this anyway they can, and you know that's true because it's controlled by liberals, and liberals don't have any time for God or Christ or the servants of Christ, do they?"

"Amen," the preacher said.

"Well, I'm no expert at this kind of thing, but I am a salesman and proud of it," Vern said.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"A lot," Vern said. "I deal with perceptions all the time, and what you need to do is meet the media head-on and change their perception of you."

"I don't want them anywhere near close to me!"

"You have to. You have to deal with Ev Pick, as well."

"I want him even farther away."

"It isn't going to happen, Moses, so just listen to me, will you?"

Vern waited until he was sure the preacher was half-listening out of his sulk, then said, "The best way to handle the liberal media is to admit everything."

"What--tell them that I was a coward?"

Vern nodded.

"Are you crazy?" Moses asked.

"Not a bit. Tell them you were terrified, even if it wasn't true."

"It wasn't!"

"Just take it easy and listen to me, will you?" Vern said. "Like I said, it doesn't matter if it was true or not--it's all perception and, right now, the media's convinced you're a coward."

"What am I supposed to do about this perception?" the preacher asked in a grudging tone.

"Again--admit it, but in a Christian way."

"Explain."

"Tell them that you were stunned by the lightning strikes and truly terrified; that in the face of the flames, you fell prey to the very human weakness of fear of fire--anyone will understand that one--but that God had the power to give Pick the presence of mind to get you both into a position where you could be rescued."

"I can't do that!"

"Think!" Vern said, wishing he didn't have to work so hard to convince the preacher, but telling himself to be patient since he'd learned a long time ago that Moses and intelligence sometimes ran on parallel tracks that had a hard time meeting. "Pat Robertson. Jimmy Swaggert. Oral Roberts himself. All the great ones. They've all gone in front of the cameras at one time or another and admitted their weakness and their sin. Tell me, what happened to them?"

A dim dawn broke in the preacher's eyes, then finally a full sunrise of knowledge and understanding.

"They went on to bigger and better things!" Moses said.

"That's right!"

"They increased their flock, their contributions, their television time--they increased everything."

A sudden doubt clouded the preacher's eyes. "Except for Jimmy Swaggert."

"That was different," Vern said, moving in quickly to quash any indecision. "That was a prostitute--an entirely different situation."

Clear-eyed for the first time since their talk had begun, Moses said, 'definitely a different situation, Vern. I like your idea, I really do, but how do we go about it?'

"What I said--tell the world how weak you were and how, given the glory of God, how great Pick was, and how he's renewed your faith in Christ the Son and God the Father and caused you to re-double your efforts to bring the Word to a world that badly needs it and to re-build the center for Christians, the Temple America. When the media gets here, give them a tour of the destruction, but point out where the new buildings will go and especially let them know that you're going to re-name the whole complex in honor of Everett Pick."

Moses recoiled as if Vern had just hit him with a hammer. "That's out of the question. This is a Christian place. Pick is a liberal at best and a humanist at worst. Christ would have nothing to do with him."

"Then, just name a building after him. Any offer of generosity, of Christian spirit, that's what's important."

The preacher grumbled under his breath again, but said, "I suppose." Then he looked full at Vern.

"Why are you giving me all this free advice? You weren't so friendly when I brought that Cadillac back for the transmission repair."

"That was just business, Moses. This is bigger than you or me, and that means I want to help you."

"No offense, Vern, but I never thought of you as the Christian sort."

"None taken. To tell you the truth, I'm somewhat in awe of you now."

"Me?" the preacher said. "Why?"

"Everybody else is paying attention to Ev and what he did. I'm looking at a man who survived not one, but *two* lightning strikes and is still walking around to talk about it in complete sentences. Somebody like that has got to have some kind of special grace inside them, that's my thought, and that means he's somebody worth knowing because he's probably closer to God now than anybody I've ever seen or am likely to meet--is this all making sense?"

"Oh, yes, I think it is," Moses said.

*It's a wonder I never liked fishing, Vern thought, because I sure am good at setting the hook.*

"But, I don't know," the preacher added with sudden indecision. "You don't exactly have a reputation as a philanthropist, Vern."

"Guilty as charged, Moses, but I do have a heart somewhere, and I see no harm in advancing your cause and mine at the same time. That's what the American system is all about, after all."

"What do you mean?" the preacher asked.

Vern swept his hand around the compound area. "Do you have the money to re-build all this?"

"No," Moses admitted after a moment. "My eyes are on heaven. I'm not very good with finances."

"Well, I'm not always that great myself," Vern said, "but I do know how to promote and advertise, and I think I have someone who can help us do it for very little cash."

"Who's that?"

"Lyle Teesacker. Do you know him?"

A surprised expression hit the preacher's face. "Of course, I know him. I got a call from him last night."

Vern hid his own surprise and asked, "What about?"

"Well, I think it was him, anyway," Moses said. "The voice sounded familiar. He's the one who told me Juliet had some pagan gathering planned around that accursed pole of hers."

"You're sure it was Teesacker?" Vern asked.

The preacher said, "No, not for sure. He wouldn't identify himself." Moses got a sour expression on his face which, Vern thought, made it look like two lemons sucking on a third.

"Lyle was a member of the Temple, but he fell away into a life of crime. Now nobody can find him."

Suppressing the uneasiness he felt at the information Moses had provided, Vern returned to his buttering up of the preacher. "Not surprising that he fell away. He's just too damned smart. His brain won't stop working. I swear it goes 25 hours a day. His kind are just too cynical for their own good when it comes to matters of faith."

"I don't trust anybody who thinks that much," the preacher said. "Anyway, what's he got to do with all this?"

"Last night, I received a call from him too, a rather surprising one," Vern answered. "He gave me some information I think you'll like."

"I doubt it," the preacher said. "Why is he talking to you and not to me?"

"Lyle said he was too embarrassed to talk to you directly, so he thought he'd tell someone he could trust to deliver his message."

"You?" Moses asked in a skeptical tone.

"Hey, it was as big a surprise to me as it is to you," Vern said. "All I can do is tell you what he told me--he saw the Temple go up in flames last night on TV, and he wants to make amends by helping you raise money to rebuild. Neither of us would understand the particulars, but I can tell you in general what the boy has planned, though. I think you'll--"

A shout sprang up from behind them, interrupting Vern as he started to explain. He hid his frustration at being able to set the hook deeper and turned to see what was happening.

Temple Americans pointed in the direction of the canyon, but Vern couldn't see anything from his seated position, so he got up and helped the grunting preacher to his feet.

"What are you hollering about?" Vern asked them as Moses struggled to catch his breath.

"A horse and rider!" one of them yelled in a high, squeaky voice. He was a girlish-looking boy of about 10 years of age and was well on his way to matching Moses for fat.

"What's so exciting about that?" Vern said.

"I don't think he's riding the horse," the heavy boy said. "It's more like the other way around."

"I can't see them," Vern said as an uneasy feeling ran through his body. "Where are they?"

"They just went out of sight, but they should be up here soon, Mr. Sarvis. That horse is really--heeeeey!"

Vern whirled around into the shadow suddenly blocking out the sun and saw the horse's belly arching over his head.

"God damn it!" he shouted as he twisted about to see the stallion land hard and send the rider tumbling over its tail. He winced as the man landed on his head, then bounced over into a sitting position. The horse gave a brief backward glance as if checking on his handiwork, then looked Vern full in the face before trotting over to the stable. As the stallion chewed on the undamaged end of a bale outside the building, Vern saw blood drip between its legs from a bandage that had torn loose.

"That horse!" he said.

"What about him?" Moses asked.

"Last night, I--he was injured in the fire, and I was sure he was dead."

"It would have been a shame," the preacher said. "He's some kind of horse. It looks like somebody's been taking care of him, though. He's got a bandage on his chest."

They both looked down at the rider, who was slumped over with his face between his legs. Vern walked over and then straightened the man up so he could check his condition.

"Bill Harkins!" the preacher said.

"Who's he?"

"You haven't heard of him, Vern? Look at the back of his shirt."

"The Christian Cowboy?"

"The most famous cowboy that ever rode in a rodeo. He rides broncs with a Bible in his free hand."



"Well, he must carry a quart in the other one," Vern said. "He smells like a distillery."

"He does have a problem with the bottle," Moses said, "but it's only once or twice a year and he's always shattered when he does it. He's probably come back to get Jesus back into his life again."

At the mention of Jesus, the cowboy lifted a grizzled beard toward them and raised a Bible.

"Blahlawhalahoolabanrancanheptodwanver!" he said in a loud sing-song voice that seemed to be pronouncing something entirely understandable in an excessively foreign language.

The preacher's eyes got wide.

"What's the matter?" Vern asked.

"He's speaking in tongues!"

Vern snorted. "He's talking shit, that's what he's talking. He just got his bell rung, that's all." He reached down and slapped the cowboy hard. "Hey, Bill! Do you know where you are?"

The blow seemed to focus Harkins' blood-shot eyes. "The Lord has come unto you!" he said.

Moses looked embarrassed. "He gets a little blasphemous when he's drunk."

Bill Harkins shook his head violently. "No, no, this time I mean it--the Lord has come unto you."

"Sure, Bill, sure," Vern said. "Just take it easy and sleep it off. Go on over to the stable. It's the only place left standing."

"Okay," the cowboy said with a shaky brightness as he struggled to his feet. "I can't think of a better place, especially when there's no room at the inn."

Vern rolled his eyes as the cowboy set his bow legs in motion as if he had a giant and very painful hemorrhoid up his ass.

"Speaking in tongues," Moses muttered. "Direct contact with the Lord."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Vern said. "If anyone has had direct contact with God around here, it's you. Like I said, how many men survive not one, but two lightning strikes?"

He'd just meant to play up the preacher's ego, but Moses turned to him with an annoyingly earnest expression on his fat face.

"But don't you see--that's what I mean. Lightning strikes and I'm alive. God speaking in a clear voice through a sinner like Bill who expresses it the only way he can. And now you're here to help re-build. What clearer case could be made for the manifestation of his presence?"

"Sure, sure," Vern said to simply go along with Moses, but he admitted to himself that things were better than he'd thought earlier in the day. He already had Lorena, and now, without even trying, he had the horse back.

All he needed was the answer to one more question, and his day was complete.

"Where's Mary Fae?" he asked the preacher.

Moses looked at him with a puzzled expression. "Why do you ask me that?"

"She was at Juliet's Gathering last night, but she was helping out your side."

Moses shrugged. "I had no idea she was there."

Vern frowned. Mary Fae was like him; she'd make her presence felt immediately, so it was likely that the preacher would have known about her by now if she'd joined Temple America's ranks. He felt irked. Every time he had a question, he never got an answer; just another question to ask himself.

*What the hell is she up to?* he asked himself.

"Well, if you don't want to talk about it, that's fine with me," the preacher said. "But I do want to hear more about this plan that you and Lyle have. Our phoenix will rise out of the ashes yet. Let's find us a place to have some coffee and talk about the future of Temple America."

"Fine," Vern said, then gestured toward the stable. "Those two be okay by themselves?"

"Of course. Bill is closer to a horse than a human being most times. I swear he thinks like them."

"He sure smells like one," Vern said. "But, I don't know. That horse has a mind of its own."

"I'll tell members of my congregation to keep an eye on both of them, okay?"

Vern nodded and said, "That should work. Let's go."

As they walked back to his vehicle, Vern kept a calm face for the preacher, but on the inside, his mind worked furiously at the questions bedeviling him.

*Mary Fae. Teesacker. What the devil are they up to?*

## Chapter 64

### Satisfaction

The boy worked fast, despite the fact that he allowed communication only through the computer. In less than two weeks after the fire, Lyle delivered just as he'd promised. In fact, he'd delivered much more than was promised. Vern was impressed.

He turned to Moses to see if he had the same reaction. The preacher's mouth hung open in hungry surprise. For once, his appetite was for something other than food.

"Do it again!" Moses urged.

Vern chuckled and put his attention back on the wall screen TV he'd had installed in his living room. Rapidly, he thumbed the remote, blessing the moment he'd decided to follow Lyle's advice and let him install a direct broadcast service. Far above the earth, the satellite system was beaming back Temple America's message.

On 250 channels.

Across the world.

*Hell, across the universe for all I knew, Vern thought. That boy knows his stuff.*

"It's wonderful," Moses said, "but how did he do it?"

"I don't know, but who cares?" Vern said. "It was a master stroke, though. Nobody's favorite programs get interrupted. The message only comes on during commercials."

"Oh, yes!" the preacher agreed. "No one will be mad at us for making them miss *Oprah* or *Geraldo* or *One Life to Live* or any program whatsoever."

With grudging respect, Moses added, "The little shit has a flair for this stuff, doesn't he?"

"He does," Vern agreed. "But then he has a flair for damned near everything he does. He says we'll have 500 channels once he gets the bugs worked out of the system. No wonder the Teesackers didn't know what to do with him."

*And I'm not sure I do, at times, he admitted to himself. But if I had a son, he'd be the one I'd want. Hell on wheels, even though the boy doesn't play a single sport as far as I know and wouldn't last a moment in a military service.*

He flicked the channel to ABC, and then there was the simple red-white-and-blue teaser on the screen with a dove flying across the large American flag rippling in the background::

*TEMPLE AMERICA*

Revival of America's Faith!

June 22nd

BLACK HILLS, SOUTH DAKOTA

USA

"He has follow-up ads to this, I assume," the preacher said.

"Of course. With my ad agency's help, he's timed it out like a pro.

"Well, the campaign looks great," Moses said, "but why June 22<sup>nd</sup>? I don't know if we can be ready by that time."

Vern shrugged. "I thought it was a day you'd chosen."

"No, I hadn't even settled on a date yet," the preacher said. "I wasn't sure how long the rebuilding would take."

"Well, then, Teesacker's done us a favor, hasn't he? We've got a deadline to work against. It shouldn't be so bad. Hell, you're the expert in these revival meetings, aren't you?" Vern said.

"I've never done one this big," the preacher replied.

"This is your chance to outshine Billy Graham, then, Moses. You can be the first American preacher to not stand in his shadow in 50 years. Your name can be bigger than his."

Vern watched with amusement as Moses fell into an immodest silence. He could practically hear the gears of need grinding away within the preacher's large, blonde head. The man had an appetite for recognition that was larger than his lust for food, which was saying something.

A frown crossed the preacher's face, interrupting the blissful smile on his lips. "Money's still the thing. Buildings, a church, an amphitheater, more media facilities, a cross--how'll we pay for all those things?"

"Be patient," Vern advised him. "Once we've got the public's interest piqued via television, then it's contribution time. We'll start low and when interest builds, we'll begin asking more."

"I don't know if the local people can handle all this construction, at least in that short a time," the preacher said.

"Moses, stop fretting, for God's sake. I've got bids out already. In today's economy, there's sure to be someone hungry enough--especially when we promise them unlimited exposure all over the world. There isn't a company in America that would pass up that opportunity, believe me. A lot of sharks swim in the free market economy."

"I wouldn't know about that," the preacher said with a sniff.

Vern let it pass. Like a car buyer, Moses had illusions that not only needed to remain intact, but also required encouragement. The preacher saw himself as a man completely of God with a destiny to fulfill, instead of the fat buffoon he really was. That kind of self-deception was a handy tool for a man who cherished no illusions and knew himself thoroughly.

Sometimes, though, he could barely restrain himself from pulling out a pin and sticking it into the preacher, so he could watch him fart around the room like a punctured balloon.

The chime of the door bell broke through his thoughts.

"That'll be the installers. They're here to put the lines in for the phone banks. Take care of them, will you, Moses? I've got to go out to the stable to see to the horse."

Vern greeted the technician at the door, turned him over to Moses, then went out to the stable. A violent thumping of stall boards greeted him as he came inside and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light.

"Happy to be home, boy?" he said. "A lot better than Moses" place, hey?"

Thor answered him with another vicious kicking of the planks.

"Neither one of you is going anywhere, so you might as well forget getting loose again."

Quick as a snake, the stallion stuck its head over the door and tried to bite him.

When the Warmblood missed, Vern laughed and slapped it hard across the muzzle, then walked back to the steps that led up to the hired-hand's loft. Pulling the key from the ring, he unlocked the door and walked in.

It was warm and close, smelling of the hay below and the horse. Lorena lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. A fine sheen of sweat covered her face. She'd been crying as usual. It made her more attractive than ever, but he'd learned long ago that a woman's tears were as potent a weapon as he'd ever handled in the Berets, so he ignored the feelings they provoked.

"It's not that bad, is it?" he asked, pulling up a chair to sit beside the bed.

"Let me out of here, Vern."

"It's not going to happen. You know about Arlo, and I want to make sure the baby is born."

"I don't want it."

"Who gives a fuck what you want?" he said. "It's my child as much as it is yours, and I want it. You'll stay here, or anywhere else I put you until it's born."

"People will ask questions."

"People always ask questions, Lorena. But questions don't have to be answered."

"Someone will come looking for me," she said.

"They already have, but you're on your way to an expensive resort in Hawaii, did you know that?"

"No one's going to buy it, Vern. Rapid's still a small enough town that they know everyone who flies in and out of the area."

"You're driving to Denver to visit some relatives first."

"I don't have any relatives in Colorado."

"You do now," Vern said.

His wife sat up, her eyes flashing in anger. "Well, I may be gone, but they're surely after you for Ev's murder."

Vern sat very still for a moment, struggling to make sure that his surprise was under control. *She didn't know that Pick was alive!* When he was confident he wouldn't betray himself, he said, "Pick fell off that damned horse you were riding. I didn't have a thing to do with it."

"If you hadn't been trying to kill us, it wouldn't have happened, Vernon Sarvis, and you know it!"

"A man can't ride a horse, that's his problem," he answered.

"You killed him!"

"You're the only one who thinks so, Lorena. Most people think he simply got what he deserved after all the stuff he's pulled."

"He didn't pull anything!" she shouted at him. "He just wanted to get along, that's all."

"Well, he's getting along now."

"That's not funny," Lorena said. "Did you know he kept me from killing myself?"

*Another surprise!* Vern thought. *And not one I particularly like.*

"Why would you want to commit suicide?" he asked. "You're young. There's no reason for you to--"

"Because I hate living with you, that's why. It'd be obvious to anyone but you. Why should I want to have a husband who beats me and would probably do the same to the baby once it's older?"

Now Vern was angry. "I don't beat kids!"

"How do you know? You beat the mother. What's to stop you if the child crosses you in some way?"

"I don't beat kids!" he repeated.

"Are you sure?" she taunted him. "Look at you right now. Your face looks as if it's about to catch fire. If that riding crop was in your hand at this moment, you'd be using it on me!"

Vern took a deep breath to calm himself in the face of her insolence. "I'm sure, Lorena. Damned sure. Because it'll be the first child I've ever had. If it's a boy, you can be doubly sure, I won't hurt him."

"You're medieval, that's what you are," his wife said.

"I want a son," he said. "I can't help that."

"And if it's a girl, what are you going to do--leave her naked on a mountaintop?"

"Don't be absurd."

"You're absurd! An absurd murderer!"

As he stood, his hand shot out in spite of himself. The slap echoed loud in the stuffy, confines of the loft and drove his wife up against the wall.

"Now, whose face is red?" he demanded. "You want to provoke me again?"

When she didn't answer, he said, "Well?"

Sobbing, she shook her head.

"By God, then, don't do that again!"

He sat back down and waited until her crying subsided.

"Before all these dramatics, I was going to tell you that I'm putting in air conditioning up here, so it won't be so hot," he said.

"You're going to keep me here until the baby is born?"

"After what you've told me, of course. Do you think I'll let you sneak off and have an abortion or something? Or have you told them about Arlo and Pick?"

"What if there are complications?" she asked. "Aren't you going to let me see a doctor for check-ups to make sure?"

"Women have been having babies for centuries without help. You're just the latest in the long line."

"Many of them died in child birth," she pointed out.

"Then, it was meant to be, wasn't it?"

She searched his eyes for a minute as if looking for something she couldn't find there, then looked down.

"Don't be so disappointed," he said. "Despite what you think, I do have a heart."

"It's every small," she whispered.

"Produce a son, and you'll see how big a heart I have."

"I'm not a factory!" she said vehemently. "I can't make a child to order. What happens if I don't give you a boy, Vern, what then?"

"Then, it'll be time for another try, won't it?"

His wife lay down again and said dully, "Yes."

Vern stood up. "I'll bring up a refrigerator and a microwave, so you can make your own food when you want."

"What about a TV or a radio?" she asked. "It's boring up here."

"No, but I'll bring you some books. You can improve your mind. Hanging around Pick, you probably got some literary ideas, anyway."

"Why can't I have a TV?"

"Why? Because it's something *you* want, and I want it clearly understood that it's what I want that matters. Once you have that clear in your mind, I'll consider a television."

"You're not a man at all, you know that?" she said.

"Shut up!"

"A husband who beats his wife and locks her up is not a man at all," she insisted. "He's a coward and a bully."

Vern sighed. It seemed his wife was a very slow learner. He stepped forward and beat her again, taking care to avoid the swelling belly.

After he left the room and locked the door, a very satisfying sound followed him down the stairs.



## **Chapter 65**

### **Real Channeling**

"Two hundred and fifty channels!" Juliet said from the couch, breathing the words as if she were speaking of the occurrence of a divine miracle.

"That's right," Lyle said as he searched the carpet for the remote in a pile of cheese puff bags, Surge cans, and dirty, unwashed socks. "When I've worked out the bugs, you'll have 500 total."

In the kitchen, Ev sipped at his coffee, worried about the boy's actions. Usually, Lyle was abnormally fastidious for a teenager. The mess on the floor meant something was up. He looked at the unholy pair through the steam rising from his cup, wishing they would disappear as easily as the vapor. This morning, he wished the whole world would disappear because it had far too great an interest in him and seemed have none in the well-being of Lorena. He'd told several reporters over the phone that he'd do interviews if they would investigate Vernon Sarvis and find out where his wife was. They'd all agreed with such greedy eagerness that he'd refused the interviews because it was obvious they had no intention of honoring his request. They were still only interested in the man who'd rescued the preacher from the fire in Moresdon Canyon. One of them had been honest enough to say, "It makes good picture. Domestic disputes don't."

The "good picture" was on the big screen Sony Lyle had requested and received from Juliet earlier in the week. Ev wondered if he was condemned to a television purgatory, eternally swinging back and forth on the crane cable with a desperate Moses clinging to him as the flames ate the darkness away underneath them.

"There it is," Lyle said, retrieving the remote from beneath one of the socks while grabbing one of the bags of snacks at the same time.

The teenager settled his back against the couch and told Juliet through a mouthful of cheese puffs as he thumbed up the volume on the remote, "Now I want you to see this. Wait until they go to commercial."

Ev watched apprehensively. The boy's genius was undisputed, and genius that was undisputed, as far as he was concerned, was headed for trouble, especially when it resided in a 16-year-old boy whose hormones achieved meltdown every moment of the day.

Local news was on. Mindy finished her gleeful report on "The Incident at Moresdon Canyon" for the fifth time that morning. Her crisp, authoritative delivery said "network-bound" with every syllable. Ev had to admit she was at the top of her game. The tone was so urgent he found himself wanting to know more about what had happened even though he

was the focus of the report. Mindy was so good that when Jeff Kleck, the anchor, appeared on the screen, Ev was annoyed at the interruption. Rattigan was so far beyond his former high school classmate, the contrast was painful. Like most Hills news announcers, he sat ill at ease in front of the camera as if he were afraid it were going to attack him like a rabid dog. Today, Kleck seemed more nervous than most and read his copy as if he were going on over speed bumps.

"We'll have MORE on the MOREsdon Canyon Incident in a MOMent," he said, then said it was time for a commercial.

The screen went black, and, at first, Ev thought the usual ineptitude of the local technicians had botched the switch, but then the soft sounds of drums emerged through the stereo speakers, joined a moment later by the soaring sound of an oboe.

Juliet clapped her hands in delight. "It's Paul Winter--the Canyon Suite."

"There's more," the teenager said. "Watch this."

The black of the screen dissolved into an intense blue that was split by a bald eagle circling in majestic flight. The bird's head cocked downward, and suddenly the camera became the raptor's eye and rushed dizzily down toward a black smudge staining the ground near the edge of a canyon. Wind shrieked from the speakers as the eagle dove until it became clear that the dark spot was the remains of Juliet's pole and the entire Gathering site.

"You couldn't possibly have gotten film that fast," Ev said.

Lyle shushed him, then said, "Computer-generated."

Abruptly, the view changed from the eagle's eye to a long shot of the devastated Gathering spot. Soot stirred in the wind around the charred pole and formed into dust devils that danced over gutted vehicles and off into the canyon and up into the mountains. The eagle dove into sight at the top of the picture, then turned into a bright streak of light that flashed into the ground like a bolt of lightning. A blinding light flared on the screen, then tiny, blue particles danced randomly on the white background to swelling music before forming into dramatic letters Ev could read with ease from the kitchen.

From out of the ashes...

...THE GATHERING...  
...THE TRUE DAWN OF THE NEW AGE...

Summer Equinox, June 22

Join us!

BLACK HILLS, USA

The music cut, and the anchor's nervous face was back on the screen. His eyes slid off-camera, desperately looking for help. To Ev, the man's relief was almost comic when he was handed a piece of paper. He hadn't changed since high school English when Kleck's idea of extemporaneous speech had been a belch. Jeff reviewed the paper, and then peered into the camera with an earnestness that looked as if it had been learned from a mail correspondence school for anchor people.

"As--" Kleck said, then dropped his eyes to the copy again.

"Go for it, Jeff," Ev said. He'd just won a bet with himself that Kleck couldn't get past the first word without stumbling.

The anchor began again, reading the words as if they were snakes waiting to strike at him from off the page. "As--as many of you have already noticed, an unusual commercial has been appearing on our station this morning. There appears to be some sort of trouble between our station and the network, so that the same commercial keeps appearing over and over again. It's not interfering with any of our regular programming, we want to assure you of that--"

"More's the pity," Ev said over his cup of coffee.

--and we want you to know that we'll have the situation resolved rapidly--"

Lyle snickered.

--some of you have called and asked what this Gathering is," the anchor continued. "We don't know exactly what it is, to be honest--"

"But you will soon!" Juliet shouted.

--we're in the dark as much as you are, in many respects, but we'll have a special report from our own Mindy Rattigan later this morning, so please stay tuned. Now for the farm market reports."

At this last phrase, Kleck's uneasiness dissolved into a contentment like that of the animals he was reporting on. At another time, Ev would have been thoroughly amused by Jeff's incompetence, but, once again, Lyle was

demonstrating an unnerving ability to manipulate anything that came within his grasp.

"Very impressive," Ev said to Lyle as he brought his coffee into the living room and sat on the couch with Juliet. "Anybody who can gain control of a local station that easily is a force to be reckoned with."

The teenager gave him an enigmatic look but said nothing.

"There are going to be some very unhappy people at those stations, Lyle."

Ev looked over at Juliet for support, then gave up the effort before even trying to enlist her help. Her eyes were still fixed avidly on the television as if the Gathering commercial were still on the screen.

He tried with Lyle again. "They're going to come looking for you that much harder now."

"Of course, they're going to come looking for me," the boy said scornfully.

"But how will they know it's you?" Juliet asked.

"His signature is all over it," Ev said.

When Juliet looked puzzled, Lyle said, "He means they know no one else could have done the job. I'm the only one capable of it. The FBI will run a check, and my name will be the one that pops up."

"You sound proud of it," Juliet said.

The teenager shrugged. "It has nothing to do with pride. It's a simple matter of deduction. I'm the best; therefore, they'll come looking for me."

"You timed this all wrong, son," Ev said. "You can mess with people's lives, you can mess with entitlements, you can even mess with the constitution, but you don't ever mess with American business. You make them lose money, and they get really pissed."

"I know. That's why I'm leaving," the teenager said.

"Leaving?" Juliet cried, sitting bolt up right on the couch. "You can't leave now. You just got everything set up. What will we do without you?"

"Relax," Lyle said. "I just said I was leaving--I didn't say I was going permanently, did I? I'm going into hiding, that's all."

"Where?" Juliet asked.

The teenager rolled his eyes at her. "You don't suppose I'm going to tell you, do you? You'd blab it the first chance you got."

He looked directly at Ev. "I'm not telling anyone, including you, Pick. You're right. They'll come after me, and when they do, they'll do it hard, so it's best that no one know where I am." The teenager paused, smirked and added, "Not that anyone will miss me."

"So, how do we keep going with the ad campaign and all the other organizational details?" Juliet asked.

"The way everyone communicates these days--via E-mail," Lyle said with the extravagant impatience of a 16-year-old.

"Won't they be able to trace you?" Ev asked.

"Fuh!" the teenager said with contempt. "Those amateurs? They couldn't find snow in a blizzard."

"I don't think the FBI will be a bunch of incompetents," Ev said.

Lyle gave him a cryptic smile. "You'd be surprised."

"You've already been involved with them?"

"We've had some very polite conversations," the boy said. "Lectures, actually."

"Obviously, they didn't have any effect," Ev said.

"Within their limitations, the FBI is very effective, but, unfortunately for them, I'm outside of those boundaries. There are certain advantages to being young, you know."

Ev nodded and said, "I can imagine."

Lyle stood up and tossed the remote to Juliet while failing to brush the yellow crumbs from his black t-shirt. "I'm going right now."

"Do you have to? They won't catch on that fast, will they?" a distraught Juliet asked.

"No, they won't," the boy said, "but I need time to disassemble all the equipment and get it back on line without the feds breathing down my neck. Help me get it together."

Juliet looked to Ev for help. He shrugged and said, "There's nothing I can do about it."

They followed Lyle into his room. The teenager directed them as to which items to take--doing very little of the hauling himself, Ev noted, permitting himself a small smile.

*The boy might be a genius, he thought, but he has a teenager's unerring instinct for avoiding work that could be better done by adults.*

They worked for the better part of an hour, carrying the equipment out to the car. When the vehicle was loaded, Juliet brought out a lunch and a face creased with worry.

"You're sure you're not just going to disappear on me?" she asked.

"I *am* going to disappear," the boy said, "but, don't worry, I'll be in touch. After all, I've got business to finish."

They watched the teenager squeal the tires and head down the driveway. The smell of burnt rubber hung in the air.

"I hope we don't have too much trouble without him being here," Juliet said.

"That boy is trouble wherever he is," Ev responded.

His ex-wife fixed him with a frown. "After all he's done, that's no way to talk about him."

"After all he's done, I'm almost too terrified to talk about him at all," Ev said.

"There you go again, looking on the dark side," Juliet admonished. "Can't you ever see the sunshine in anything?"

"That's how you see things," he answered. "Just remember--if you look at the sun too long, you go blind."

"Profound," she said. "Profoundly cynical. What is it with you--something genetic?"

"Very probably," Ev answered. "I just can't help myself."

"Well, you have nothing to be cynical about," Juliet said. "Many bad things have happened to you recently, that's true, but you know what--you're still here, aren't you? You're all in one piece, and, to some people, you're a hero to boot. There aren't many Americans who would be complaining about that state of things."

"I'm not most Americans, Juliet."

"And a good thing, too," she retorted. "If we were all like you, this nation would be aswim in cynicism and get nothing done whatsoever. The US didn't get to be the greatest nation on earth by sneering at everything that had to be done. We're a practical people like the British with the ambition they so sorely lack. That's why we're number one."

"You're starting to sound like Vern," Ev said. "That's the kind of--" The slap forced him to swallow the last half of his sentence.

"Don't you ever say anything like that to me again!" his ex-wife hissed at him.

Ev rubbed his stinging cheek with one hand while he threw up the other in case Juliet had a mind to land another good one. "All right, all right! Forget Vern."

"Just because we're both practical people doesn't mean we're the same, Everett Pick!"

"I said, forget him, didn't I? Let's talk about what you're going to do now that Lyle has split."

"That's better," Juliet said. "We have to plan out the future, that's what we have to do."

"I'm all for that," Ev said, thinking he was all for anything that didn't get his bell rung again. His ex-wife had a surprising strength worthy of Mary Fae. "What's the first step?"

She started toward the house, waving at him to come along.

"The tarot cards," she said, "that's the first step."

*God almighty*, Ev thought in despair. *Again?*

"Are you coming?" Juliet said as she reached the door.

"Yes," Ev answered absently as he thought about the enigmatic smile the boy had offered him earlier while thinking to himself, *What's he up to that he's not telling us about? That's what I'd like to know.*

Following Juliet into the house, he was not at all happy with the situation.

## Chapter 66

### A Familiar Refrain

"You fucking come near me with that thing, and I'll take it away from you and shove it up your fat Indian ass!" Vern said to the Lakota bouncer.

Joe Black Dog simply creased a smile across his face and tapped the thunderstick meaningfully in a huge palm. Vern decided he didn't have to time to mess with the Indian and edged his way past until he had free passage to the bar where Maj sat adjusting his hearing aid and nursing a drink while his head served as a pedestal for his outsized Tom Mix hat. As he sat down, Vern gestured toward the bouncer and toward Reno and said, "He's an idiot, and you're an idiot. You're both idiots."

The bar owner looked out from beneath the shadow of the hat brim and said mildly, "Fuck you, too."

"Give me a beer," Vern told the bartender. He waited until the woman was at the opposite end of the bar, then asked Maj, "did you get rid of it all?"

"Of course."

"None of that shit is left?"

"I just told you that, didn't I?" Reno said.

Vern bent close and whispered. "Look, you love that stuff. It's written all over you. If you're holding some back on me, I'm going pump you full of ether and shove a match up your ass. We'll have our Fourth of July fireworks early this year."

"Hey, back off, man!" the bar owner said. "It's gone, okay? It's all gone. Nothing left. Zip. Nada. I put out the word that we're out of the business. The Mexicans were happy to hear about it. Now, they can snuff each other instead of trying to do us in."

"Good man," Vern said. "Temple America's going to be a much easier way of making a living. You can buy all the crank you want without the threat of having some maniac shoving blued steel in your mouth."

"Sounds damned good to me," Reno said.

While they waited, Vern glanced over at the blank big screen, rear-projection television up against the wall behind the pool tables.

"What do you think of the ads for Temple America?" he asked Maj. "Something else, huh?"

"They sure are. Who did them?"

"Teesacker. The kid came up with the idea and did the work."

"That boy's got too many goddamn brains, don't he?" the bar owner said. "What I don't understand, though, is why you let him help Juliet out."



Vern froze. "What are you talking about?"

"She's got an ad on too for something called "The Gathering." Looks kind of like what Lyle did for you."

"I haven't seen anything like that."

"Wait a while. You'll see it."

Vern waited while Maj grabbed the remote and flicked the television on. After a few minutes, the local station broke for commercial: that's when a bald eagle dove toward what was obviously the remains of Juliet's pole. The eagle turned into a brilliant streak of light, then struck at the ground as if it were a lightning bolt. Music swelled as letters formed on the screen. They read:

From out of the ashes...

...THE GATHERING...

...THE TRUE DAWN OF THE NEW AGE...

Summer Equinox, June 22

Join us!

BLACK HILLS, USA

"The little shit!" Vern stood up and shouted.

"What?" Maj asked. "What?"

"He made sure Juliet's signal didn't get into my place. He's probably done the same at her place. I'll kill the little bastard, I swear it!"

"Jesus, settle down, Vern!"

"He thinks he's so fucking smart he can play both sides of the fence at once. Well, I'll deliver some good news up his skinny rear end that'll wake him up to the fact that he's not playing computer games now! "

Vern fumed, ready to charge out the door, but a suspicion was trying to make its way through his anger and, long ago, he'd learned to pay attention to one when it surfaced in his mind. It was a good survival tactic. There was only one thing to trust in the world, and that was your gut instinct. Ordering another beer, he drained the first one while ignoring Reno's questions. In a few moments, an unpleasant fact surfaced.

He knew for sure now who had the videotape of him giving Juliet what she deserved in the hospital.

The little shit.

The teenager had been at the meeting when the tape disappeared.

There was no doubt as to why the videotape hadn't come to light yet. Unlike Juliet, Lyle would know exactly what to do because Vern himself would take the same course--hold onto it until the time came for maximum leverage.

And his leverage extended worldwide.

A nasty suspicion suddenly entered Vern's mind, and he grabbed the remote away from Maj and changed the channel to CNN. In a few minutes, his ad appeared, followed immediately by Juliet's.

He slammed the bottle on the bar and swore violently.

"Jesus, Vern!" Maj said. "What's eating at you?"

"I got a bug up my ass, and I plan to get rid of it, that's all," Vern said and headed toward the door. On the way, he grabbed a pool cue away from one of the players, smashed it over the table, then grabbed the thick end and waved it at the bouncer.

"You want me, you fat fucker, come and get me any way you want, but you try to brain me with that thing again and I'll stick this cue in one of your ears and pin you to the wall!"

Joe Black Dog looked at Vern as he looked at everyone--with no interest whatsoever. This pissed Vern off, and he was about to take the bouncer on when the Sioux's eyes shifted toward the bar. Vern looked back and saw Maj waving a twenty in the air. When he turned, the Indian lowered his thunderstick and sat motionless. Vern walked by him and out the door.

Gunning the Cadillac through town and onto the highway, he cut his time to the house by a third by the time he parked in the driveway and went up to Lorena's room in the stable. When he was finished with her and that drunken idiot of a cowboy, he left for the house, still angry.

"That little fucker!" he shouted as he burst into the dining room. "I want him!"

Moses looked up from the head of the table where he was seated and surrounded by Temple American boys stuffing mailers.

"Vern, watch your language!" the preacher warned.

"Oh, shut up!" Vern. "I want Teesacker!"

"You know as well as I do nobody knows where he is," Moses said. "So, just settle down. What's he done now?"

"What's he done? What's he done? I'll tell you what he's fucking done!"

"Watch your language!" the preacher admonished again, gesturing toward his followers.

"Oh, fuck you and the cross you rode in on!"

"Let's go outside," Moses said hurriedly. "You can cool down out there." He waved the Temple Americans back to the envelopes. "Boys, keep working while I minister to Mr. Sarvis."

Vern let the preacher pull him out onto the patio. He paced up and down on the flagstone while Moses lectured him on the dire effects of profanity. When he'd had enough, he snapped, "Shut the fuck up, will you? This is important."

Offense spread across the preacher's face like a marching rash.

"Trivializing the cross that Jesus died for is not important? I'm going to have to ask you to apologize to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, and to members of the church--"

"I said, 'Shut up!'" Vern shouted. "I'm trying to tell you that punk, Teesacker, has been working with Juliet."

"What do you mean?"

"She's got a commercial on TV for that damned Gathering of hers. It's a lot like ours. It's even on the same date as our. He's been playing both sides of the fence."

"But we haven't seen anything like that on our sets," the preacher said.

"We got only what he wanted us to see. The same is probably true for Juliet."

Moses looked back into the house through the sliding doors. "That probably explains some of the peculiar e-mails and faxes we've been getting. They mentioned the Gathering. I thought they were just confusing our revival with Juliet's New Age aberration."

Vern smiled grimly. "Teesacker's idea of a joke. He probably thought it was funny to schedule them at the same time."

The preacher frowned. "We don't need anyone competing with us for the public, especially someone like Juliet."

"Two different crowds, Moses," Vern said as he felt reason began to push the anger out of his mind. "Besides, the boy may have done us a favor, even though he didn't intend it that way."

"What do you mean?"

"Everybody needs a dragon to slay, right? Make the Gathering your dragon. Give your people something to fight for. The Righteous against the Godless Heathen, that kind of thing."

"I'm not sure I like your tone of cynicism about the whole thing," Moses said, "but there is some truth in what you say."

"Life hands you a lemon, make lemonade, right?"

"Right," the preacher said, and Vern could see that he was already working himself up into enthusiasm for the project. Moses was living proof that, without an enemy, a man couldn't define himself.

*In the meantime, Vern thought, I need to put some energy into finding that little bastard, but first things first.*

"I've got a meeting to go to," he told Moses. "We'll talk about this tomorrow."

"At this time of night?" the preacher asked.

"I'm meeting with my salespeople late to get across the point that they need to increase their sales," Vern lied. "Sometimes, the only way you can get their attention is by pulling them away from their beers."

"Whatever," Moses said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

As he left the house, Vern thought, *I plan to get somebody's attention all right. It just won't be my salespeople's. It's time to hold the meeting I planned before Pick stumbled onto the cabin.*

## Chapter 67

### Warmblood

It was unnerving for the Christian Cowboy.

First, Sarvis had come out of his wife's room, cutting off the woman's awful, pitiful crying with a slam of the door and closing of the lock. Unable to contain himself, Bill had called the man on his brutal treatment of his wife. Vern's answer was to shove that damned Italian pistol in his face and warn him to stay off the booze and away from his wife unless he wanted his head blown off. Then, he'd called in his men to ransack the stable for Bill's stash, and every fifth of booze was gone. The Christian Cowboy knew. They'd even found the bottle he'd hidden under the sweet feed in the cart in the tack room.

Now, this.

He'd been thirsty and wanted to take his mind off it, even if it meant to talking to a horse. So, he'd decided to tell his troubles to Thor, but when he came to the stall, the words stuck in his throat.

The horse stood hoof deep in its own blood.

As if that wasn't bad enough, the stallion didn't seem bothered by it at all. It calmly looked Bill over and went back to bleeding. The smell of warm, wet hay rose in the air like an overwhelming perfume.

The Cowboy didn't know what to do. He loved horses. They'd thrown him, pounded him into the dirt, bit him, kicked him, drooled on him, farted like sputtering balloons in his face, stomped on his feet, and he still loved them.

But he'd never had one that bled on him.

*Correction*, he told himself, *I've never had one that wouldn't stop bleeding, that bled buckets of blood and never looked the worse for wear.*

That wasn't entirely true, he knew as he grabbed one shaking hand with the other to keep it from moving. Thor didn't look as strong as he had before the wound, but, even at half-speed, the Warmblood was more than a match for every horse in William T. Harkins' life all rolled together with room to spare for a dozen more.

It was frightening.

*Damned near paralyzing*, he admitted to himself. *I haven't been so scared since I had to ride that widowmaker of a stallion up in Billings and he tried to stomp me into three kinds of jelly.*

The Christian gave a hopeful look at the rest of the stable, then acknowledged finally that he wouldn't find a drink unless he went off

Temple America grounds to find it, and that wouldn't be easy. Sarvis had the place sewed up tighter than his mean-ass attitude.

"But, Billy Boy," he said to the air, "you've got to do something or go nuts."

His eyes drifted up to the ceiling. If he couldn't drink, he could at least talk to somebody and have them confirm what he was seeing. It was important because the Christian Cowboy wasn't at all sure he wasn't suffering from the DTs. He'd had the shakes before with the nightmare creatures--spiders, snakes, maggots--that had almost become old friends by now, but he'd never been able to dip his finger into a pool of blood and taste it--actually taste it! He was sure, absolutely sure, it was real, but doubt still niggled in the back of his mind and that was something he had to get rid of.

Trembling, Bill walked to the stairs. He hesitated at the bottom, remembering Sarvis' warning, but when Bill looked back at Thor's stable and saw blood seeping out under the boards and onto the concrete, he knew he needed someone to confirm what he was seeing or his mind would be shattered as surely as if a bullet had been put into it.

He put a foot on the first step, then remembered the lock. Rummaging in the tack room, the only thing he could come up with was a bolt cutter. He cursed because he wouldn't be able to replace the lock if he used the tool, and Sarvis would be all over him like shit on a shoe, but there was no other choice. When he came out of the room, the blood flowed faster over the concrete.

"Oh God!" he moaned and hurried up the stairs. He was afraid if he waited any longer, the whole stable would float away on the stallion's blood, and William T. Harkins would die twice over, drowned *and* crazy, never knowing if the whole thing was real or not.

The tool was made of much better stuff than the lock and snapped it easily. Bill dropped the cutters, removed the lock and swung the door open into the darkened room. He stepped through and waited for his eyes to adjust.

"Mrs. Sarvis?" he asked quietly. "Are you awake?"

There was no answer.

"Mrs. Sarvis," Bill said, "it's Bill Harkins. Please talk to me!"

A blanket rustled in the far corner, a light snapped on, and a puffy, bruised face rose from the pillow.

"Who?" Lorena Sarvis asked in a listless tone.

"Bill Harkins. You know, the Christian Cowboy?"

The young woman lay down again. "No."

"I need to talk to you."

"I don't want to talk to anyone."

"Please!" Bill said. "Please! I really need to before I go crazy!"

Vern's wife sat up slowly and rested her back against the wall. Blackened eyes regarded him from a great distance. "Why should I help anybody who helps Vern?"

"I don't want to help him," the Christian Cowboy said, "but he threatened to kill me."

The woman nodded her head. "That sounds like Vern."

"I take care of the stable and the horse for him and Moses."

"The horse?"

"You know, the Warmblood."

Bill saw the first flicker of life enter Lorena Sarvis' eyes. "Thor?" she asked. "I thought I'd heard him below."

"Yes, that's why I came up here."

"Is something wrong with him? Is that why you're up here now?"

"He's bleeding. I tried to patch him up, but he won't stop bleeding."

"Why don't you bring the vet out?" she asked.

"Mr. Sarvis won't allow it."

"That bastard!" the woman said. "He's going to let it bleed to death?"

"Yes, ma'am," the Christian Cowboy said, "but that's the problem. It won't stop bleeding."

"What do you mean? How long has the wound been open?"

"A long time," Bill said. "So long, in fact, it's up to its fetlocks in blood."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lorena Sarvis said. "This is no time to exaggerate."

Bill ran across the room, fell on his knees, and grabbed her hand before she could pull it away.

"Oh, Sweet Jesus, I hope I'm exaggerating, Mrs. Sarvis! I truly and sincerely hope I am. I hope I've got the worst DTs ever, and this is all just my brain rotting away in booze, but I need someone to go down there and tell me that it's all a delusion. Would you do that for me? Please!"

"Help me up," she said.

Bill rose to his feet and pulled on her offered arm.

"You're pregnant!" he said.

Lorena Sarvis smoothed a flowered dress over her swelling stomach. "Yes."

"What kind of man would hit a pregnant woman?" he cried.

Vern's wife swayed and caught his shoulder to steady herself. "We can stand here and talk about my husband's vicious hobbies, or we can go down and see Thor. I think we should go down."

The Christian Cowboy nodded. He took hold of her hand and elbow and guided her out of the room and down the stairs. To Bill, it seemed to take forever to get to the stallion's stall.

"My God!" Lorena Sarvis said as she peered down at Thor's hooves. "You're right, there's blood there, far too much of it. No horse could bleed that much and stay standing."

Bill let a deep sign escape. "Then, you're seeing it? You're really seeing it?"

"Yes, yes! We've got to get him out of there and to a vet."

"Your husband wouldn't like that," the Cowboy said. Now that he was sure he didn't have the DT's, he wasn't too sure he wanted to get any further on Sarvis' bad side.

"Who cares what he likes? Thor will die if we leave him there."

"That's what Vern wants."

"All the more reason to slide that door open, Bill."

"He said he'd kill me if I let the horse go."

"You stick around here, and he's likely to kill you anyway," Mrs. Sarvis said. "He's not a tolerant man."

"You mean, I should ride Thor out of here?"

"Not just you, Bill. Us."

The Christian Cowboy wasn't afraid to admit he was thunderstruck by the notion. "But you're pregnant! Pregnant women shouldn't ride horses. It could cause...damage."

Mrs. Sarvis pointed at her face. "What do you think this is? I stay here, and it's only going to get worse."

"Okay, okay!" Bill said.

He lifted the latch and slid the door aside. Lorena Sarvis took a lead rope off a hook and handed it to him. He stepped gingerly into the blood and attached it to Thor's halter. To Bill's surprise, the stallion accepted it without protest. He led the horse out of the stall and toward the entrance, looking down with horrified fascination at the bloody footprints he was leaving on the concrete. A sharp snort from Thor brought his head up quickly.

Sarvis stood in the doorway, holding a fifth of Bill's liquor. Two men with cradled assault rifles flanked him.

"Put him back," Vern said, nodding toward the stall.

His wife burst past Bill and shouted, "He's bleeding to death!"

"No loss," her husband said.

"Bring a vet here, Vern!"

"You're worried about him losing blood. I'll shoot him down right here and now if you don't put him back. Then it won't be a problem anymore, will it?"



"You bastard!" Lorena Sarvis said. "You can take it out on me, but you can't take it out on a defenseless animal."

"I can do both," Vern assured her. "I *am* doing both. Back."

Mrs. Sarvis swung an arm back toward the stall. "Do you see how much blood is in there? Don't you think people are going to notice?"

"I'll put a drain in," her husband said.

The Christian Cowboy froze at this remark. He'd met some cold-blooded people in his life, but Sarvis outdid them all. It was time for an old rodeo man to speak up.

"This horse goes out, Sarvis," he said. "I swear I never seen a man like you before. You'd as soon let a horse--or a man, for that matter--bleed to death before you'd help them."

"You got that right," Vern said. "Now stop mouthing off, you old drunk, and put Thor back where he belongs."

"No."

One of the men brought his weapon to the ready.

"Easy," Sarvis said. "I got an easier way to do it."

He held the fifth up and offered it to Bill. "You get the whiskey if we get the horse," he said.

The Christian Cowboy raised his hand automatically, then looked at the finger stained red from dipping it in the stallion's blood. A shiver began at his toes and worked its way like a whirlwind up through his body until it felt as if it burst through the top of his head and straight through the stable's roof.

"You want the bottle or not?" Sarvis asked impatiently.

The Cowboy looked at him. "I don't need it."

Vern waggled the fifth. "Sure you do."

"I'm cured."

The three men burst into sneering laughter, and Sarvis muttered, "Jeezus, what is it about this place? Everybody's into saving souls, even the goddamned horse."

"Whatever," Sarvis said. "Saved or cured or just another brain-dead cowboy hung up on self-made miracles, put the horse back in the stall. Let him bleed some more. Hell, tell Moses what you told me, and he'll probably want to bottle the stuff. There's always a market for religious trash and trinkets."

The Christian Cowboy was horrified. "I won't tell him a thing!"

"Goddamn right, you won't!" Vern said. "You're not going to say a thing about any of this to anyone!"

Bill looked at the men with rifles. "You're going to kill me?"

Vern laughed. "Nothing so crude. Something much more effective and much less hassle."

He stepped forward and backhanded his wife into the wall. Blood trickled from her mouth.

"That's the last time I'll do that if you keep your mouth shut and take care of the stable."

"You won't touch her again?" the Cowboy said. Mrs. Sarvis was pale and shakier than he'd been from the drink.

"I'm a man who keeps his word," Vern said. "Put Thor back in the stall and my wife up in her room, and I won't raise a hand to her."

"Or anything else?" Bill asked. When Sarvis nodded, he said, "All right."

He turned the stallion about and put him in the stall. Then, as Sarvis and the others watched, he helped Lorena up the stair and into her bed. From below, he heard Vern order, "Get another lock."

The Christian Cowboy pulled a blanket up to the young woman's swollen jaw and whispered, "I'll bring some ice for that."

"Thank you," she said.

"Get your ass down here!" Sarvis ordered from the bottom of the stairs. Bill hurried out of the room. Vern brought him up short on the bottom step.

"Remember, every time you fuck up, my wife pays for it. Have you got that straight?"

Bill nodded.

"It'll be on your head if anything happens to her, understand?"

"Yes."

"My man will be back with a new lock in a moment. Put it on. Here's your bottle."

Sarvis turned away and beckoned the other man to follow him. "Fucking idiot!" was the last thing he said before he disappeared out the stable.

The Christian Cowboy sat down on the steps to wait for the lock. When the sobbing from upstairs cut through the open door, he unscrewed the cap and drank noisily to drown out the sound.

## Chapter 68

### The Meeting

"Okay, this is our target," Vern said, picking up his pointer and smacking the slide screen with it. The image of the Crazy Horse monument wavered under the blow. "This is what I wanted to tell you at the last meeting we held but couldn't because of the break-in."

He looked out over his audience to assess the impact of his statement. A sweating, wild-eyed Maj Reno sat in the front row, along with Arlo, Marv Pirnie the ranger and three others. Behind them sat 20 men with occupations ranging from Milt Willner, owner of the big and tall men's store, to Jug Kidder, the former barber who wore a pistol while cutting hair until it drove away too many of his customers. Most of them were nodding with the exception of the burly cattle rancher, Denny Plett.

"You're crazier than the damned Indian that monument's being built for," Plett said, tipping his feed cap back on his head, uncovering the leathery face of a long-time high plains cattleman.

A mutter of uncertainty ran through the Temple's meeting room at this remark. Maj half-rose in his seat, ready to go after Plett. Vern cursed and shoved him back into his seat. Even on crank, Reno was no match for the rancher; Denny outweighed him by 100 pounds and was half-a-head higher.

"Speak your piece, Denny."

"Well, just look at the thing! What kind of damage are we going to do to at statue that's nearly 600 feet high? And even if we could find the explosives we needed, how would we get them up there without anyone seeing us? It's crazy. What's the point?"

All eyes swung back to Vern as the blunt rancher finished his piece with a gesture of disgust. Vern stayed silent for a moment to build suspense, then said, "Denny's got some good points." He tapped the screen again. "This thing *is* big, no doubt about it. And it would be difficult to get charges up there without being seen. In fact, this whole operation couldn't be done without the knowledge of someone who knows what he's doing."

"You, I suppose," Plett said.

"Damned right."

"So what?" the cattleman asked. "I'll ask the question again--What's the point? If we're going to blow something up, why not a place that's easier and has more symbolism?"

"Like the Federal Courthouse!" Jug Kidder said. "Or the jail."

Arlo turned and stared at the barber. "Because we're going to need the jail, you blockhead."

"Hey!" Jug said. "Watch your mouth!"

The two men rose and faced each other, their hands straying toward the pistols in their holsters.

"Hold it down, goddamn it!" Vern shouted. "Let me finish, will you? Arlo, Jug, put your asses back in those seats!"

He waited to make sure their tempers had cooled, then said, "Look, this is America, right?"

"Damned right!" Maj agreed, pulling his hat off his head and holding it over his heart. A tan line ran straight across his forehead. Without the Stetson on, it looked like the top half of his head had been drained of blood.

"I'm talking about the America we don't like," Vern said. "The U.S. of mud people, too much government, and the constant erosion of our liberties."

"Cut to the chase, Sarvis," Plett said.

"Here's my point, then, Denny. America has the attention span of a gnat. It always wants something new. Courthouses have been done before. How about federal buildings? Anyone here remember Oklahoma City? Or the World Trade Center in New York?"

Any disagreement with that news, Denny?"

"None," the rancher said. "But let's get practical. The most I've ever done with explosives is dynamite a few stumps, but even I know you need a huge amount of firepower to move tons of granite. We don't have those kind of resources."

Vern smiled. "You'd be surprised. And you're right--you don't know much about explosives. It's not how much power you've got; it's where you place it, that's important. Every target has its weak points. You find them and exploit them."

Plett shrugged. "I say again, so what? Why Crazy Horse? Hell, this is flyover land, remember? Most of America doesn't know South Dakota even exists. We blow up this monument, and all we'll probably get is a collective nationwide yawn."

"Normally, you'd be right," Vern said. "But, you forget, we have access to communications around the globe thanks to Teesacker. We--"

"Have we found the little shit yet?" Jug interrupted.

"No, we haven't," Vern confessed. "We have no idea where he is, but he's remained in contact via e-mail. It's a pain, I admit it, but whatever we ask, he does."

"So far," the rancher said.

"So far. But he's helped us launch a campaign to publicize Crazy Horse. The monument is going to be on every television set in the world. Straight-out tourist stuff, Indian history programs, you name it--Crazy Horse will be on everyone's lips. When monument crumbles, we'll let the world know that all the mud people--niggers, Jews, slant-eyes--all of them will crumble the same way unless America changes its course."

"Okay, okay, I'll buy the idea that you actually can destroy the monument, Vern," the rancher said, "but what about afterwards--what do we do then? Go into hiding?"

"Not this time, Denny. We seize the courthouse, the sheriff's office and the police station, and, most important, the communications outlets--meaning television and radio stations."

Plett looked around the room. "Have we got the manpower to do that job?"

"There are more of us," Vern assured him.

"Fine by me, then," the rancher said. "I hate the present government as much as anyone here, but you know as well as I do that they're going to overwhelm us sooner or later. We might be a match for the local National Guard, but when they deploy professionals, we're dead meat."

"They weren't so professional at Ruby Ridge, now, were they?" Maj said.

"And what about Waco?" Arlo added. "Remember Waco."

"Hey, I hate what they did there too," Plett said, "but the feds learned from those experiences, didn't they? They're not stupid, you know."

"Sheer numbers will get us in the end, there's no doubt about that," Vern agreed. "But every cause needs people willing to sacrifice in order to advance it. That's us. I've been in contact with the other militia groups, not telling them specifically what we're doing, but letting them know something big is coming. They've promised their support. They'll be here when the time comes."

"We're forgetting Ellsworth, aren't we?" a voice shouted from the audience. "I mean, we're talking B2s and helicopter gunships. We can't stand up to that kind of power."

Vern smiled at the lack of military and political knowledge. "You think they're going to bomb their friends and neighbors indiscriminately?"

"Men with that kind of destructive power always seem to want to use it," Plett pointed out.

"So what?" Vern said, losing patience. "I hope they are dumb enough to level Rapid. It's the best thing that could happen. It would make us heroes and martyrs and expose the Feds for what they really are--a secret Zionist Occupation Government, bent on world domination and eventual extermination of the white race."

That brought a silence over the group. Vern let it hang for a moment, then jumped on the opportunity. "But you're so fucking negative, you haven't thought off one other possibility--we could win!"

"Against that kind of firepower?" the feeder said. "Not likely."

"You're forgetting 1776," Vern accused. "You're forgetting Washington crossing the Delaware. The odds weren't exactly in our favor then, were they? Besides, we'll have some firepower you don't know about. I've got a special shipment coming."

The silence in the room became so thick Vern could have cut it up and served it in slices.

Plett found his voice first. "Shipment of what?"

"There have been too many leaks, lately," Vern answered, "So I'm not going to tell you what it is."

"Then it probably means you're lying through your teeth about the shipment," Plett accused.

"Not a chance, motherfucker."

"Bullshit walks," the feeder reminded him.

Tired of the man's challenges, Vern walked up to him and thrust a finger in his face. "You want to see it when it comes? You really want to see it?"

"Damned right," Plett said. "And, whatever it is you've got, I want to know how you plan to use it and if you've got anybody who knows how to handle it. If I'm going to commit, I want to be sure you know what you're doing."

Vern ignored him and spoke directly to the audience. "First things first. Anybody else here need proof?"

Several hands rose hesitantly.

"All right, then, you'll see the shipment. But, for security reasons, I don't want too many people along. Let Plett be your representative--you'll believe what he says he sees, right?"

Heads nodded, and he said, "When it arrives, I'll set up a time, then."

Vern set the business of the rest of the meeting into motion, but his thoughts were already on the weapons he'd procured.

*At this wonderful moment, he thought, I've never felt better in my life.*

## **Chapter 69**

### **Extradition is Just an Official Way of Saying, "We Miss You. Come Home"**

Like a termite, the telephone bored a hole into Ev's sleep. He ignored the ring, preferring to let the computer answer for him. He drifted off, then jerked awake again when he heard the sheriff's voice come out of the speakers.

"Pick," Gunderson said. "Since the court hasn't heard from you yet, I can only assume you don't check your mail. I suggest you do so immediately. It seems the State of Minnesota would like to try you on charges of child molestation. You have a choice--you can go back voluntarily to face the charges, or you can request an extradition hearing. In either case, contact my office *now*! I'm not a patient man in these cases, and neither is Judge Hurd."

Ev heard the click of the phone, then the computer voice said, "End of message!"

Scrambled out of bed, he punched the sheriff's number into the phone.

"Sheriff's department," a crisply professional and objective voice answered.

"This is Everett Pick. I'm returning Sheriff Gunderson's call."

The receptionist's voice froze into a tone of disgust at the mention of his name. "One moment, please."

A second later, he heard the sheriff say, "Pick?"

"Yes, Sheriff. What's this about charges?"

"Like I said on your answering machine," Lonny answered, "Don't you read your mail?"

Ev said, "I didn't receive any notice."

"It was mailed. I did it myself," the sheriff said. His tone was barely warmer than that of the receptionist.

"But, I didn't get it!" Ev said, then hesitated. "At least, I don't think I did. Juliet handles the mail."

The sheriff made an exasperated *sssssst* sound. "There's your problem, Pick."

"It's her house," Ev said.

"An excuse," the sheriff replied. "It doesn't cut any slack with the court--or with me, for that matter. These are damned serious charges."

"Hell, don't you think I know that?" Ev said. "I'm the one whose life is being ruined."

"Call the courthouse, Pick. ASAP. Give them your excuse. They won't believe it, but have them call me, and I'll confirm it."

"You believe me about the mail, then?" Ev asked.

"With Juliet, I'd believe anything," the sheriff replied. "Find out the date for the hearing and be there, or you'll have twice the trouble you have now."

"Thanks, Lonny."

"Don't mention it. Find a lawyer," the sheriff said once he hung up.

Ev took a deep breath, then called the courthouse. After 15 minutes of bureaucratic lecturing about the importance of respecting judicial notices, he had the court date and went to find Juliet. He found her gathering herbs from the garden. Despite the lowered track of the autumn sun, heat rolled down from the Hills in petulant gusts that tugged at his ex-wife's robe. Juliet wiped sweat and smiled at him as she rose with a handful of tarragon. A sweet licorice smell rose on the breeze.

"I have to go to court," he said.

"Really?" she said.

"Child molestation charges, Juliet."

She dismissed the idea with a wave of the tarragon. "Oh, that. You can beat those easily."

"Juliet, they sent me a notice of an extradition hearing. I didn't get it. Did you see it in the mail?"

"I don't remember any official-looking envelope," his ex-wife said after a moment's thought. "Of course, I've been busy planning the Gathering, so it might have slipped through."

Ev lost his temper. "Goddamn it! My life is slipping through my fingers right now because you can't take the time and effort to give me my mail. What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Oh, don't worry about it, Ev. You're innocent, I know you are, and the court will find that out, too."

"That's not the fucking point, Juliet!"

"Don't you use that word with me!" she said, shaking the herb at him.

He knocked the tarragon out of her hand and stepped close to her. "I repeat--that's not the fucking point. You're going to get me locked up with your irresponsible behavior. Don't you ever think anything through?"

She glared at him. "I think everything through in terms of the Ascended Beings and the Gathering. I'm focused on that right now. I don't have time for minor legal matters."

"Minor!" Ev shouted. For a moment, he thought he was going to strike a woman for the first time in his life. Instead, he kicked violently at the earth and said, "From now on, I check all mail that comes into the house



before anyone else. Leave it be until I've had a chance to go through it. Understood?"

"Oh, all right," Juliet said. "Have it your way."

Ev spun around and walked away before another urge to hit his ex-wife struck him. He headed toward the house, then changed direction for the Hills afraid of what he might do if Juliet followed him inside.

*A man my size can do some serious damage*, he lectured himself, still shook at the thought he'd almost slugged his ex-wife. *I haven't hit anyone in civilian life since I was 15 years old. The Army, now that was a different matter.*

He stopped as muzzle flashes ripped into his mind, and the NVA regular charged out of the night again, a silent, grim and lethal professional. The enemy soldier had cut down the company commander, and Radke, the platoon leader, before he got to Ev.

*Two pieces of luck saved me*, he reminded himself. *Otherwise, I would have gone home in a body bag as well.*

First, the NVA tripped over Radke's body and sprawled to the ground on his back. Ev had his chance then, but he'd laid his piece down to apply a compress to Waltham, who'd caught a round in his chest.

*I was so scared*, Ev thought, *all I could think of to do was grab for whatever was around.*

In a frantic scabble in the mud and dirt, he'd come up with Waltham's entrenching tool. Then, with the enemy rolling into position to fire his weapon, Ev had swung and split the NVA's neck open with the edge of the shovel. A harsh black fluid spurted out into the flare-lit night as if the regular's veins had been filled with ink instead of blood. A convulsive finger pulled the AK-47's trigger and sent a burst by Ev's ear, and he laid the shovel into the soldier again and again as if he were using an axe instead of the entrenching tool.

*I was so scared*, he thought again. *Scared shitless and spitless, so scared I couldn't stop.*

A familiar reminder surfaced in his mind. *And what happened because you couldn't stop, PFC Pick?*

The answer, as always, burned through his brain. *I severed his head almost all the way through. It hung by muscle and cartilage when I was done. His body pointed north, but his head faced south.*

"He was such a little man" he said into the muggy air because that was the first, insane thought that had entered his mind as he lowered the shovel. "Barely over five feet tall."

*But when he was pointing that AK at me, he looked like a giant. I killed him out of pure terror.*

The question he hated so much rose out of the murk of his thinking. *And what did you feel after that?*

He could only be honest with himself. *I felt pure exhilaration. I was the one alive for the moment. I was the one who would keep on breathing and have a chance to escape the night.*

Ev let out a sudden yell to drive the images away, but they returned as soon as the echoes died off the rocks he was climbing. Guilt wormed its way out of some dark corner and slithered along the surface of his brain.

*Why was I the lucky one? Shit, it was the biggest target there. Why not Radke or Waltham?*

He kicked at a pine cone and wondered why after all his reading about survivor's guilt--*You're alive because you're alive. It's nobody's fault, just the luck of the draw*--he couldn't get rid of the images. Breaking into a limping run, he labored up the side of the hill, letting the physical exertion overpower the horror of the memory for at least a few moments. By the time he reached the crest, his lungs breathed fire and his thigh ached as if it had been freshly shot, and it all felt good to him. He thumped down on the ground and stretched his bad leg out while he caught his breath.

As the thought of the coming court proceedings poked into his mind, he put on a wry smile as he thought, *I'd have given anything to have been extradited out of that moment in 1968.*

A sudden exhaustion overtook his body. His eyes drooped. He jerked awake once when the distant Hills seemed to waver and convulse in the September heat, then fell asleep, secure in the knowledge that, unlike everything else in his life, the mountains would always be there.

## Chapter 70

### Trial and Terror

"On this day of all days, it should be dark and cloudy," Ev muttered as he looked out the car window at the snow frosting the Badlands like a badly layered cake. Much to his disgust, the sun shone brightly. Delays had pushed his hearing into January.

*And still no word of Lorena*, he remembered, adding to his gloom.

"Oh, for goodness' sake," Juliet said as she drove on 79 north toward Rapid in her usual style--half her attention on the conversation in the car, half on the one in her head, and none on the road. "Just relax, will you?"

"I don't know about the judge," he answered. "She's not giving anything away with that stone face of hers, is she?"

"Judges are supposed to have stone faces, Ev. They're not supposed to show bias one way or another."

He waited to reply until the driver of an oncoming logging truck quit leaning on his horn at his ex-wife's erratic driving style. When she swerved back onto the right side of the yellow line, he said, "Women don't like child molesters."

"Nobody likes child molesters, Ev!"

"Yeah, but especially a woman. You told me she has five kids."

"She does," Juliet said. "But that doesn't mean she's not weighing the evidence properly."

"Mmmm, maybe," Ev said. "Alvin Hardemann went into the Twin Cities and got himself a slick lawyer, though, didn't he?"

Juliet laughed. "Too slick by far."

"What do you mean?"

"We're rural folks out here. Smooth lawyers don't sit well with us."

"That's a thought," Ev said as he listened to the wind whistle through a gap in his door's insulation. A cold breeze blew against the side of his head. "With the mountain of evidence he's supposed to have, I'll sure as hell look guilty."

Juliet's white sleeve fluttered at him as she waved a hand to dismiss that possibility. "Ev, you're no more a child molester than you are a brain surgeon. Everyone can see that."

"If everyone saw that, Juliet, I wouldn't be attending this extradition hearing."

She waved her hand in another dismissal. "There are always people who love to stir up trouble. They live for it. Judge Hurd knows the type well. I'll bet she's got their number. She's been on the bench for 15 years."

"I appreciate your confidence," Ev said, holding his hand up to block the breeze from the window top. "God knows, I don't want my life ruined any more than it's already been ruined. If she declares against extradition, I'll be the happiest man on this planet, except for one thing."

"What's that?" Juliet asked.

"If I'm, in effect, declared innocent by the judge, will the public find me not guilty as well?"

Juliet thought for a moment, then said, "One thing at a time, okay? Besides, I've got my crystals with me, and I've consulted the stars, and everything points to non-extradition."

"The stars haven't got anything to do with it. Sarvis and Moses, they--damn it, Juliet, stay in your lane, will you!" Ev said.

His ex-wife yanked the wheel to the right and pulled the car out of the path of a gravel truck. "Stop worrying, will you?" she said.

"Just keep your attention on the road," he replied. "I don't want to be dead before I hear the decision. You're still the worst driver in three states."

"I am not!" she said and lapsed into an uncharacteristic silence.

They drove into town that way until Juliet turned onto St. Joe and neared the court house. The sudden roar of a crowd replaced the breeze coming through the window. Media cameras swung their way amidst signs jabbing their messages into the clouded sky--PERVERT!...DEVIANT!...MOLESTER!...NOT IN OUR TOWN!"

"Swing around the back," Ev told Juliet. "Hurry."

His ex-wife sped past the crowd as it spilled out onto the street and chased after them. Blue t-shirts led the way. Ev caught a sight of Moses' massive bulk quivering itself into motion behind the placards. Juliet swerved into the parking lot, clipped the lot rules sign, overcompensated and banged up against a police cruiser before straightening the wheels out and accelerating to the back of the building. An officer swung open the door as soon as Ev was out of the car. He hurried inside and watched Juliet drove out the other end of the lot and out of sight. Ten minutes later, when the crowd had resumed its place in front of the courthouse, she joined him. They went up the back steps to the entrance to the main corridor. Ev took a deep breath, and they stepped through.

Flash attachments and video camera lights stabbed at them as if they were enemy aircraft assaulting the courthouse. Two guards stepped in front and escorted them through the crowd toward the courtroom. To Ev, it felt as if he were moving through mud. Voices shrieked and shouted questions and melded together into an incomprehensible drone.

*There's no doubt about the intent, though, he thought. "How do you do such a thing, child molester?" Even the reporters think I'm guilty.*

Towing Juliet behind, he was almost to the door when he saw a slim body slither through the legs of a tall NBC correspondent. It rose up with a sudden elbow to the man's groin, batted aside the other microphones, and stuck its own microphone hard against Ev's teeth.

"How does it feel?" asked Mindy Rattigan. "How does it feel, Everett Pick?"

Ev ripped the microphone from her hand and threw it hard against the opposite wall, then put his hand to his bleeding mouth and pushed through the courtroom door.

A snigger of satisfaction ran through the packed gallery. Already, the preacher was in the audience. He anchored one side of the room while a fat Sioux in a blue t-shirt and jeans the size of two counties held down the other. In between sat Vernon Sarvis and Temple Americans scattered among the ordinary folk of Rapid. A guard handed him a handkerchief, and Ev nodded his thanks as he staunched the flow of blood from his mouth and went down the aisle to the table reserved for the defendant. The editor, Alvin Hardemann, glared at him all the way to his seat.

*I'm not a defendant, he reminded himself, this is an extradition hearing, not a trial.* Turning to look back at Vern's vicious little grin and the other hostile faces in the gallery, he added, *It sure feels like one, though.* Juliet was the only one who seemed to be sympathetic. He nodded at her, then turned back as his lawyer sat down.

"How's it looking?" Ev asked.

Schroeder lifted his bony shoulders up and down once. Ev had gotten to know the man well enough that he recognized it as "Don't know." For a lawyer, Del Schroeder was a man of few words.

*I just he speaks a few more in my defense, he thought.*

"All rise!" echoed in the room, and Ev stood nervously as the judge entered the room from her chambers. As far as he was concerned, she was the most formidable-looking woman he'd ever seen. Heavy-set and with black hair drawn tightly into a bun, she carried her weight as if she were 50 pounds lighter. In judge's robes, she looked to his eyes as if she were the law itself mounting the steps to the chair and desk flanked by the U.S. flag on one side and the South Dakota state flag on the other. She sat and, before granting permission to sit, scanned the courtroom with dark, brown eyes that did not appear to like what they saw. She frowned momentarily, then said, "Be seated."

When all the rustling and murmuring stopped, Judge Hurd snapped out her words precisely and clearly. "Some of you in the courtroom audience have apparently decided to convict Mr. Pick before I've rendered my decision on extradition to the state of Minnesota. This is an open hearing, but I'm here today to remind you that the court--and the court alone--has

that authority. I expect those of you who are leaders--if, indeed, there are any leaders--to act responsibly and not to allow violence of any kind--is that understood?"

Mutterings ran through the crowd, but no one stood to oppose the judge. Satisfied, she turned to the paper on her desk, reviewed it briefly, then said to Hardemann's lawyer, "Mr. Orwell, it's the contention of the state of Minnesota that Everett C. Pick engaged in illegal sexual activities with children--is that correct?"

"Correct, your honor," Orwell said. He was a tall man with a regal silver-haired bearing. Ev envied his fine wool suit and shoes that shone brightly in the winter light coming through the windows.

"And, for this reason, the state of Minnesota wishes to extradite Mr. Pick in order for him to stand trial for the listed offenses?"

"Correct again, your honor," Orwell confirmed.

Judge Hurd turned to Ev. "Mr. Pick, through your counsel, you applied for a writ of habeas corpus, and it was granted, which is why we're here today. Do you fully understand these charges brought against you?"

"Yes, your honor."

"And you continue to insist that you are innocent of the charges?"

Ev's heart sank at the apparent implication that the judge thought him guilty, but he answered, "The charges are false, your honor. I have never harmed a child in any way inside or outside of the classroom in all my years of teaching."

"Hmm," the judge said, looking him directly in the eyes and then down to the desk. She picked up the piece of paper and said, "This is my decision, then. Everett C. Pick is *not* to be extra--"

The courtroom erupted with catcalls, boos, and shouted threats. Judge Hurd banged the gavel on the desk until the noise died down. "Any more outbreaks of that kind," she warned, "and I'll bring in extra marshals to clear this courtroom faster than you can turn around."

She waited for a moment, then continued, "Everett C. Pick is not to be extradited from the state of South Dakota to the state of Minnesota for the following reasons: One, the evidence presented to me is highly circumstantial and appears to be composed mainly of hearsay with the exception of one minor."

The judge paused for a moment as if what she was looking at on the paper was making her increasingly angry. "And even this minor's story is inconsistent from one time to the next."

She put the paper down and looked at Sorenson. "Frankly, Mr. Orwell, I'm surprised that you are serious in attempting to bring this evidence to eventual trial, let alone an extradition hearing. It would appear to me that the State has not done its work. In fact, some of the documentation

supplied to this court appears to be the work of so-called "common law" courts which have no judicial standing in this state or any other state, for that matter. If this, in fact, is true, then you may be facing charges of your own. You are free to appeal my decision, of course, but I warn you not to show up with this kind of flimsy documentation. I'm not in the habit of extraditing innocent people to undergo the rigors of a trial, especially in a case like this which has the potential---." The judge stopped to look over the crowded seats, then continued--"or, in this case, the virtual certainty, it would appear, to ruin a man's reputation. If you do appeal with this same level of proof, I'll be forced to report your conduct to the bar association in your state. Case dismissed."

The courtroom erupted again as Ev went limp in his chair. Something swiped against the back of his head and knocked him to floor. He looked up to see a furious Temple American lift her purse for another swing. An officer subdued the woman as Ev struggled up on one knee. Through all the shouting, Vern's voice penetrated.

"Justice--a common law court, that's what we need justice for! We're not finished with you yet, Pick!"

A hand helped him Ev up and through the door into the judge's chambers. He sat heavily into a chair.

"Thanks," he said and looked up to see the judge sitting behind her desk, breathing hard. "Your honor," he added when he saw who it was.

Judge Hurd waited for a moment until she'd caught her breath, then said, "Mr. Pick, why are people always so angry with you?"

Ev listened to the shouting still going on out in the courtroom, then said. "I don't know. I just don't seem to live my life the way they all want me to."

The judge nodded. "That would seem to be the problem with average people today in this country. We don't seem to measure up to anyone's expectations, do we?"

"Especially me," Ev replied.

Judge Hurd offered a rueful smile. "You do seem to have the ability to concentrate people's attention on you. I can't open the *Journal* or watch the local stations without your name appearing."

"Job had nothing on me, if you want to know the truth," he said.

"Yet, like Job, you seem to survive, Mr. Pick."

"Simple self-preservation, your Honor."

The judge raised an eyebrow. "I reviewed your history since you arrived out here in the Hills. Any man who survives being shot, flying out of a second-story hospital room on a mattress, being mauled by a bear and, God knows what else, has something going for him. Call it determination, luck, or what you will, the fact is--you're still here."

Ev jerked his head at the continuing commotion beyond the door. "But for how long?"

Judge Hurd shrugged. "I don't know, but I'm sure at the end of it all--whatever--happens, you'll still be standing."

Struggling to keep back unexpected tears, Ev looked at the judge for a long time, then said, "That's the best thing anybody's said to me in a long time."

"It's the truth as I see it, Mr. Pick. In my opinion, you could survive a nuclear blast. You're indestructible, as far as I can tell."

Ev smiled. "Nobody's indestructible, Your Honor."

"You come as close to it as anyone I've seen," she said.

Ev cocked his head toward the door. The noise had died down. "Do you think it's safe for me to go now?" he asked.

"I'll get some deputies to escort you to your car and away from the building," she answered, reaching for her phone.

"Oh, God, please, no!" Ev said.

A puzzled look came across the judge's face. "What's the problem?"

"Arlo Ascher."

"The deputy--what's the problem with him?"

Ev hesitated. "He's...involved with Vern Sarvis' militia group."

Judge Hurd was not impressed. "There's no law against belonging to a militia, Mr. Pick. From what I've seen of them, most of them are farmers close to bankruptcy or incompetent at some other aspect of life. The Montana Militia is proof of that."

"That's true," Ev admitted, "but that description doesn't exactly fit Sarvis with his military background, does it?"

"No," she said. "It doesn't, but I haven't heard any reports of serious militia activity around here."

"If Deputy Ascher was involved, then it's not likely you would hear about it," Ev pointed out.

"But I would hear about it from Sheriff Gunderson," the judge countered. "I think you're being a bit paranoid, aren't you?"

"Judge, the one thing I've discovered in the last few months is that everyone *is* out to get me."

Stifling a laugh, the judge said, "I might just have to agree with that."

Ev continued, "Anyway, for a peace officer, Lonny is a trusting sort. I wouldn't have him any other way, but he's looking past his deputy--he just couldn't believe that someone in his department would betray his trust."

"It would be hard for me to believe that of someone in my office," Judge Hurd said.

"But it's the same for this situation as it just was out in the courtroom--you have to have proof of illegal activity. Have you got that?"



"No, I don't," Ev said. "But something is coming, believe me."

The judge tapped the desk with a long red fingernail. "Proof, Mr. Pick, proof."

"I know, I know," he said. "I don't have it, but please keep one thing in mind."

"And what's that?"

"Did you hear what Vern yelled out there in the courtroom?" he asked.

"No, there was too much commotion."

"He shouted something about justice in a common law court."

Judge Hurd's face darkened. "People taking the law into their own hands when they don't get the verdicts they like. You get proof of that, Mr. Pick, and you really will have something. I don't tolerate kangaroo courts in my jurisdiction, no matter how fancy a name is applied to them."

"To be honest, Judge," Ev said. "I don't want to get proof of a common law court. I just want to stay out of one. Vernon Sarvis and I don't see eye to eye."

"Why not?" she asked.

"I helped his wife out. He's a wife beater, and I helped her get free of him--for a while."

"Lorena Sarvis? She's still missing, isn't she?" Judge Hurd asked.

Ev nodded. "Sarvis claims she's on vacation in Hawaii, but no one's been able to locate her there. He's got her here somewhere, I know it."

"Sounds like you have more than a passing interest in her," Judge Hurd suggested.

Ev's temper threatened to flare as it did anytime someone suggested he had a romantic interest in Lorena, but he held it in check. "She's young and pregnant, Judge, and I believe she's in the hands of a man who likes to use his fists--that's my only interest in her. Good god, she's a child compared to me."

"That hasn't stopped other men," she pointed out.

"Well, I'm not like those other men."

"Okay, okay," the judge said, holding her hands up to placate him. "I can see why you'd like to stay free of Sarvis. Look, I can't do anything without proof, and that has to come from law enforcement. Have you talked to Lonny about it yet?"

"When push comes to shove, who do you think he's going to believe--me, a suspected child molester, or his deputy?" Lonny asked.

"Point taken," Judge Hurd said, "but I've always found him to open-minded even after years of dealing with the local criminals."

"Maybe," Ev said. "I'll think about it. I hope you'll keep an open mind as well. Right now, I need to get out of town. Listen to that."

A growing chant penetrated the window of the judge's office.

"What are they saying?" she asked.

Ev said, "I already heard what they said on the way into the courthouse, so I know what they're saying--shoot...hang...castration--things like that."

For the first time, Ev saw alarm register on Judge Hurd's face. "We *do* have to get you somewhere safe, don't we?" she said, walking over to the window. Ev joined her, being careful to keep out of sight while he observed the swirling crowd below. The blue suits of the Temple Americans surged among the sheriff and his deputies, shoving and wielding their signs like clubs. An ominous roar surged through the glass into the room.

"My God, look at all the people!" Ev said. "They've spilled off the sidewalk and out into the street."

"Child molesters are not popular," Judge Hurd said.

"But I'm not a child molester!"

The judge gave him a sympathetic look. "In today's climate, innocence makes no difference. Once you're accused of molestation, you're guilty as far as the public is concerned. It's the perfect way to ruin a man, if you're so inclined. And, evidently, you're that editor, Hardemann, is very much inclined that way."

Ev nodded wearily.

"What's your wife doing out there?" the judge asked.

"Ex-wife," Ev corrected automatically. "Where?"

"Across the street. She's holding something up in the air."

Ev followed her pointing finger and saw Juliet. She held a red stone high in the air over her head and appeared to chanting something.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," Ev said. "It's one of her damned crystals."

"What's she doing with it?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Promoting peace and love or something like that. I think it's red jasper she's holding."

The sun refracted through the stone, flashing rays of scarlet light over the crowd.

The judge looked at Ev. "She's a little strange, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is that, indeed," Ev said.

"Well, never mind her for now, Mr. Pick. The sheriff is down there, trying to get things under control. I'll call down and have the guards tell him you need an escort," she suggested.

"Are you kidding?" Ev said, amazed at the judge's naiveté. "I'm not going out into the mob with a sheriff's escort or the Marines, for that matter. They'd be all over me in a matter of seconds."

"You can stay here," she said.

"Thank you," Ev said, then started as a shot rang out below. He looked down as he saw a billowing of white smoke. A second later, the acrid

smell of tear gas seeped into the room. He waited for the mob to disperse. Instead, it surged up the steps toward the courthouse door. The crowd disappeared from Ev's view, and he thought they'd broken through the cordon of officers, but a second later, they stumbled back, pushed by batons. Urged on by Moses, the protesters re-grouped and ran forward again in a coughing and gagging cry muted by the glass in the judge's office. This time, several of the Temple Americans went down hard, and Ev saw Lonny Gunderson leading a phalanx of officers down the steps. The crowd dispersed into the street and milled aimlessly. Ev had hopes it was all over, then Moses moved his bulk into a run and charged toward the sheriff. The two men met like bulls colliding, the preacher throwing his belly's weight into Lonny, and the sheriff cracking the leader of Temple America over the head with his baton. Ev saw Lonny go down hard while Moses staggered back from the blow and then charged forward again. As the Temple Americans followed in the preacher's wake, he knew the cordon had been broken and ran from the room. Taking the back stairs several at a time, he swore as pain shot through his bad leg. Then, he was out the door, across the parking lot and St. Pat, pumping hard for the freight that was gathering speed on the tracks as he heard the blood lust of the crowd burst into full song upon spotting him. Angling toward the train, Ev stumbled down into the ditch and back up again, catching the open door of a cattle car. He ignored the agony of his entire weight on one arm and threw his good leg up on to the filthy floor of the car, then used his free hand to lift his gimpy leg clear of the ground.

Ev shivered as he watched the crowd recede. The January wind whipped through the open slats of the cattle car and down his shirt. He hadn't had time to think about a coat. There was nothing to do now, but grit it out until he was clear of town. Pulling himself erect, Ev found a corner of the car that held a pitiful mound of straw. He sat down in it and pulled it about his body, hoping to retain some warmth. Then, he set his mind firmly on a place he thought he'd never care to think of again--Vietnam.

*God, it had been hot there, he thought with perverse fondness. Sweat rolled down your neck every minute of the day and night. It was like a permanent steam bath. Everybody stunk. Everybody sweated.*

A rueful grin spread across his face as the train rolled on across the frozen prairie. *Bad memories keeping you warm--who would have thought it?*

## **Chapter 71**

### **The Mountain Moves**

Ev jumped off the slow-moving freight and tumbled down into the snow, escaping the cold wind that'd blown through drafty car. He brushed himself off and checked the surroundings while the train receded toward the south. To the west, the Hills formed a distant crenellated horizon. He couldn't hear the buzz of traffic from that direction, and the temperature was too low to take chances on an unknown destination, so he turned to the east and scanned the terrain. The fringes of the Badlands spread out before him.

"Shit!" he said. "That way is even worse."

Then he caught sight of smoke drifting up into the bright sky, and the scent of burning pine rode the breeze into his nose. He set off immediately toward shelter. Half an hour later, he discovered a tiny, weather-beaten trailer. It was a Scamp, designed to be hauled by a light truck or automobile. It stood in the middle of grassy flat land, surrounded by several cannibalized vehicles. Next to the trailer, a sturdy, shaggy-coated pony stood in a weather-beaten driftwood corral, pushing its nose into the snow after the sparse grass. As he strode down the hill, dogs yapped and set out on a dead run toward him. He waited until they got close, then stood still while they barked and investigated his scent. After a moment, they settled down, and he continued slowly toward the trailer. A door swung open as he entered the yard.

A skinny Lakota peered out at him. From the leathery skin, Ev estimated the man had to be in his seventies or else had done some hard living in his lifetime. Salt and pepper hair divided itself into two braids that drooped over hunched shoulders covered with a well-used, but clean cowboy shirt. Around the waist, a leather belt with extra holes punched into it held up blue jeans that had been rolled to a high altitude over worn running shoes.

"A visitor," the man said after a moment's study.

"I'm Everett Pick," Ev said. "I'm cold. Could I come in for a moment and warm up?"

"I'm Ray Iron Eagle," the Lakota said. "How the hell did a white man get all the way out on the rez?"

"I jumped off a freight."

A derisive snort escaped Iron Eagle's mouth. "A Little Short On Brains, that should be your name, shouldn't it? Riding the rails in January? Unless, of course, it wasn't by choice."

Ev said "It wasn't, " then changed the subject, "Your name sounds familiar. Do I know you?"

"No," the Lakota said, "but your ex does. She wearing any clothes yet?"

"Juliet?" Ev asked in puzzlement, then realization struck him. "You're the one who sold her all that--"

"Crap?" Iron Eagle suggested.

"Yes. The sweat lodge and--"

"That's me," the Lakota interrupted.

The admission was so bald-faced that all Ev could say was, "And you're proud of conning her out all of that money?"

Iron Eagle was amused and swept a hand back at his trailer. "Do I look like I went out and bought a mansion with what she paid me?"

"That's still no excuse--"Ev began.

"If it hadn't been me, " the Lakota interrupted, "it would have been somebody else. Indian wannabes are a prime sucker market these days. At least, this way, the money was put to good use."

"What kind of use?" Ev asked.

"You'll see," Ray Iron Eagle said, then switched to another subject and said, "I don't have a television, but I do have a radio--the judge said you were innocent of child molestation charges. The crowd didn't like it?"

"Now, there's an understatement," Ev replied.

"You were lucky," Ray said.

"Lucky? How so?"

The Lakota answered, "You got a good judge. Strict, but fair. Come in."

"You know her?"

"We've met," Iron Eagle said and explained no further. The Lakota shouted a command at the dogs, and they backed off from Ev, content to snuffle at his heels as he entered through the door and nearly filled the interior. Ray Iron Eagle lowered his body into a patched green recliner and gestured for Ev to sit on a neatly made cot. Their knees nearly touched while the dogs wriggled their way into whatever room was left. The smell of wet fur filled the overheated air. Ev went from shivering to sweating as he glanced at a makeshift wood burning stove made out of a 50-gallon oil drum.

"I like it hot," the Lakota said, following Ev's gaze. "I'm getting old. My joints ache."

"No problem," Ev said politely, noting that the old man had the habit of some Indians of dropping his g's off the end of words. To his ear, it had the effect of a foreigner speaking perfectly idiomatic English. "It feels good. I appreciate your letting me come in. Could I use your phone? I can call someone and get out of your way."

"Haven't got one," Iron Eagle said. "No need for one and couldn't afford it if I did have a need for one."

"I see," Ev said. "Could I catch a ride from you, then?"

"Haven't got a working car," the Lakota answered. "I've got a pony, but I don't think he's in any kind of shape to carry the likes of your weight. You get on him, and his belly scrapes the ground."

"Well, then, can I warm up for a while before I start walking again?" Ev asked.

"I said the pony couldn't carry *your* weight," Iron Eagle said. "I didn't say anything about mine."

"I can't ask you to ride out in this weather," Ev protested.

The Lakota shrugged. "Been doing it for 50 years on the rez."

"All by yourself?" Ev asked.

Iron Eagle shook his head. "Been through two wives, several children."

Iron Eagle pulled a down jacket off a hook next to his recliner and put it on. It was white except for a large coffee stain down the front. Then, he patted a sheepskin hat onto his hat, tying the flaps under his chin with the rawhide strings.

"I guess I don't have to tell you to stay here," Iron Eagle said. "It's a good idea. Nobody knows you're out here, I expect, and they shouldn't."

"No one in town saw exactly where I went," Ev said.

"I wasn't only talking about white people," the old Lakota said. "The Tribal Police aren't exactly friends of mine."

"You've committed a crime?" Ev asked.

Iron Eagle smiled. "In a manner of speaking. Wrong bloodlines."

Ev had heard that tribal politics made Congress look like amateur-time, but didn't voice the thought. He simply said, "Oh."

"I should be back this evening," the Lakota said. "Unless the pony has a mind otherwise."

"It's stubborn?"

Iron Eagle answered, "It's part Shetland, part mule, and all the rest is sonuvabitch. That's how we get along so well together."

The old man squeezed by Ev as he pulled on gloves and gestured toward a portable camp stove. "I got some gas left in that thing. Warm up some stew. I'll be back."

Ev watched from the door as Iron Eagle and the dogs made their way to the corral. The Lakota dropped a fence pole to the ground and went to the pony, mounting with arthritic motion. When he dug his heels into the flanks, the pony slow-motioned itself into a walk out of the corral and turned toward the east without any urging from its passenger as if the same journey had been made many times before. In a few minutes, the pair disappeared over the hill, the dogs frolicking about the pony's hooves. Ev

shut the door feeling guilty that he'd caused the old man to go out in the cold.

Rummaging through a wall-mounted cabinet, he found matches and lit the stove, adjusting the burner until the flame was an even blue. A cast iron pot contained Iron Eagle's stew. Ev sniffed at it, catching the scent of congealed beef fat. The stew looked suspiciously as if it had been reheated time and again. He was about to leave it untouched when hunger flared in his stomach, and he realized he hadn't eaten anything since breakfast.

*As a matter of fact*, he reminded himself, *I didn't have any breakfast at all. I was too nervous.*

Deciding to risk the stew, he placed the pot on the flames. It was slow to heat, but when it was ready, Ev took a spoonful out and poked at a carrot with his finger. It dissolved into mush at his touch. He tasted the stew anyway and found it edible. A search turned up no plate or bowl, so he ate it straight from the pot, his stomach rumbling as the grease slid down into it.

*Actually, high fat content is what I need in this weather*, he rationalized as he ate.

Soon, the stew and the heat made him sleepy, but he remembered to turn the flame off before lying down on the cot.

Heartburn woke him first, then the sound of a vehicle laboring down the hill toward the trailer. Panicked, Ev sat up, ready to run outside, then sat back down, feeling foolish.

*Where are you going to run to, you idiot?* he asked himself.

Car doors slammed, and footsteps crunched through the frozen grass. A second later, the door opened, and two ski-masked men stood facing Ev, their breath frosting the air as heat escaped from the trailer. Both wore side arms. Ev stared at them, then asked, 'did Ray Iron Eagle send you?'

The taller of the two said, "Yes."

"Why the masks then and the pistols? Ev asked. "How do I know you're not really with Vernon Sarvis?"

They didn't look like Sarvis' men, but he wasn't about to deliver himself willingly into Vern's hands if that was the case.

The two men laughed.

"We're about the furthest thing from that as you can get," the shorter one said.

"The masks are for our protection and yours. The less you know about us, the better.

Come on. Some one wants to see you."

"Who?" Ev asked, still suspicious.

"You can't really be that stupid," the taller man said. "When we want you to know, you'll know. Let's go."

Doing as he was told, Ev got into the back seat of an ancient Cadillac. The driver put the vehicle into motion and steered onto a rutted trail. The shocks were gone, and the vehicle bounced across the terrain like a ship encountering heavy chop. An hour later, they pulled up behind a pole building. Iron Eagle's pony nuzzled the ground near the back door. When they were inside, Ev saw that the building housed a machine shop. An engine hoist was mounted overhead. An arc welder occupied one corner while, on the opposite side, metal shelving held plastic trays filled with parts. The smell of oil and gasoline mixed with the odor of a propane space heater hissing near a group of men. They all wore ski masks, except for Iron Eagle and the largest man Ev had ever seen outside of the preacher, Moses. He recognized immediately that he'd seen the man in the courtroom.

Mounds of flesh terraced their way under a flannel shirt into a belly that hung over the bench like a boulder poised on the edge of a mountain. The impassive Lakota face and the respectful way the others stood around the man alerted Ev to his importance, but he couldn't help demanding, "Why aren't you wearing a mask?"

"Do I look like I could hide behind a mask?" the man asked in a tone that hinted at Ev's stupidity.

Ev ignored the insult and pressed on. "Who are you?"

"Joe Black Dog."

"So?" Ev said. "What's this all about?"

"Vernon Sarvis," the Lakota said.

Ev scowled at the two men who'd brought him to the shop. "I thought you said you weren't Sarvis' men."

"Listen," Black Dog commanded. "They're not Sarvis' people. I'm not. You should know by now that he has no time for Indians."

"He doesn't," Ev said, "but that wouldn't prevent him from using them for his purposes."

"True enough," the huge Lakota admitted, "but not in this case. Sarvis is our mutual problem."

"Mutual?" Ev said. "How so?"

Joe Black Dog said, "As for your side of the coin, well, he's tried to kill you once already, hasn't he? We know that for sure. He won't stop, either, will he? He's got a bug up his ass about you, just like he's got one up his rear about "mud people."

"That's right," Ev said. "Now what about your side of the coin, besides being hated by him for racist reasons?"

Joe Black Dog smiled. It was like a crack opening in a solid rock cliff. "I don't think you really want to know that much about us, Pick. It would



involve several federal and state violations, and you're already in trouble up to your armpits with the authorities."

"I haven't done anything wrong," Ev said. "Not much, anyway."

"It doesn't really matter if you're innocent or guilty these days," the big Lakota said. "Perception is everything--isn't that what they say?--and you don't want to add to that perception."

Forced to agree, Ev nodded, then asked, "Why am I here then?"

"Chance has brought us together, and I act on good fortune," Joe Black Dog answered, then paused for a moment as if considering what to say before continuing, "For all his military background, Vern Sarvis is not particularly careful about the people he chooses to have around him. I suppose he has to work with what he has. In any case, it's been easy to gather information on his activities."

"Why do you need me then?" Ev asked.

"There is one place I can't reach. That's where you come in."

Ev didn't really want an answer, but he asked the question anyway, "What place is that?"

"Wind Cave," Joe Black Dog replied.

"What in the world is he doing there?"

"What better place to store weapons?" the Lakota said. "A constant, cool temperature--it's about the safest place in the Hills to put an arsenal."

"But it's a tourist spot," Ev pointed out. "Isn't he running the risk of exposure?"

Black Dog shook his head. "They say 90% of the cave system isn't explored. When you have a secretive ranger with Marv Pirnie's knowledge, it's a safe bet you could hide Rushmore in there without anyone finding it."

"So?" Ev asked. "Why can't one of your people go in the cave?"

"Let's just say it would compromise our intelligence source."

"You're talking in military terms," Ev said. "This isn't a war."

The Lakota laughed, shaking mounds of fat into jiggling motion. "Oh, but it is very much so. More than you're aware of, most likely. He's got something big in there, Pick, and we'd like to know what it is and what he plans to do with it."

"He's plotting something against your people?" Ev asked.

"We think he's planning something against *all* of us," Black Dog answered. "He makes no secret of his hatred for big government. You know better than most that he'll use violence to accomplish his ends."

"No doubt about that," Ev said. "But I'm a gimpy ex-school teacher. Do I seem the type to reconnoiter a cave? I'm too big for that kind of work."

Joe Black Dog grinned and patted his enormous belly. "That doesn't cut any ice with me, Pick. I'm a big man, and I get the job done."

"Does it include crawling through Wind Cave?" Ev asked.

The Lakota laughed again. "No, I would truly be a disaster in that situation, wouldn't I? But we all serve our part in the cause as best we can."

"What cause?"

"As I said before, Pick, it's best you know as little as possible. Let me assure you though. I do some dangerous things as well, despite my lack of mobility."

Several of the men muttered their agreement while the others nodded their heads.

"I'll take your word for it," Ev said. "I still don't want to do it."

Joe Black Dog replied quickly. "I can understand that. I have no love of confined places myself, but this is not a one-way street. You help us; we'll help you."

"How?" Ev asked.

"Lorena Sarvis. We'll help you get her back."

"You know where she is?"

"We have a very good idea."

Ev glared at the Lakota. "You know exactly where she is, if your sources are as good as you say."

"You'll find out when you get back from the cave," Joe Black Dog answered. "We'll trade information then."

"You sonuvabitch!"

The giant Lakota sighed. "Everett Pick, this thing may well be bigger than one woman. A man like Vern Sarvis doesn't know limits. That means we have to adopt a measure of his ruthlessness, but we also keep our promises so I'll repeat what I said before--if you find out what we need to know, we'll do everything we can to help you find your woman."

"She's not my woman!" Ev said. "She's just a kid that needs help."

"Whatever," Joe Black Dog said with a shrug of boulder-sized shoulders. "Any woman who'd marry Sarvis definitely needs help."

Ev let out a sigh of resigned exasperation and asked, "How am I supposed to find Vern in that cave?"

"We don't know," the Lakota said. "But we can find out when Vern or one of his men is going in. The rest is up to you."

"All right, all right," Ev said.

"Good," Joe Black Dog said. "You need a ride home. Where do you want to go?"

"You seem to know everything else, so I suppose you know where that is," Ev said.

A smirk crossed the Lakota's lips. "The Gathering will take place there, I understand. Your wife is in touch with the Ascended Beings."

"Ex-wife," Ev said.

"She's familiar to us, Pick. She's a wannabe Indian, or so she thinks. Sweat lodges. Vision quests."

"Juliet annoys you too?" Ev asked.

"She is more persistent or more deluded than most wannabes," Black Dog confirmed. "We've thrown her off the rez more than once. Ray Iron Eagle deals with her. She's been a good source of cash for us."

Ev started to apologize for Juliet's past behavior, then swore at himself for wanting to say he was sorry for acts he had nothing to do with. Instead, he said, "You can reach me at her place.

"We'll call," Joe Black Dog said, then told the others, "Take him home."

Ev followed the two men who'd brought him to the shop out the back door. The moon glittered hard in the cold sky, and the howl of a distant coyote drifted across the icily silent prairie. He shivered as he got in the back seat of the Cadillac, but it was more than just the frigid temperature, he realized.

*In the Badlands, you can see forever, he thought as they bounced across the frozen ground, but in a cave, you can't see a thing.*

In Vietnam, he'd watched the tunnel rats wriggle down into the VC hideouts and shuddered at their insane bravery. Nightmares of being speared underground by a punji trap had haunted him for years.

*I'm not claustrophobic, he admonished himself. Not really. Not much, anyway. I can handle it.*

When he was dropped off in Juliet's driveway two hours later, he was still trying to convince himself.

## Chapter 72

### Weather or Not

The wind drove an ice pick straight into the middle of Ev's forehead. At least, that's what it felt like to him when he left the car to follow Arlo's tracks. Snow was already drifting them over, so he hurried on before he lost the trail altogether. He cursed his lack of preparation. No gloves, no hat, no boots, and night coming on soon--it was not a good way to survive an Alberta clipper--but the urgent call had come from Black Dog's man, and he'd rushed out to make sure he caught up with the deputy. *Besides*, he thought, *it's not as though I don't know where he's headed. There will be shelter for me.*

Although it was the dead of winter and the park was closed, there was no doubt Arlo was headed into Wind Cave. The heavy flashlight the deputy carried proved that. Ev wondered briefly how the man would get into the cavern, then dismissed it as a useless thought. Arlo and Vern seemed to be able to go wherever they wanted whenever they pleased. He concentrated on pulling his jacket up over his head to prevent his ears from freezing. The temperature had been 25 degrees above when he left to trail the deputy; now it felt like 25 below. Ev was certain if it wasn't there yet, it soon would be. The wind cut through his jeans as if the fabric simply wasn't present. He stomped his feet trying to get circulation moving through them as he worked his way toward the main entrance to the cave. Scrambling behind a pine, he peered around its trunk to see make sure Arlo was inside. He was relieved when there was no sight of the deputy, but then he looked again.

"Where the hell is he going?" he said in shock. The deputy's footprints hadn't gone anywhere near the main entrance. Instead, they led off to the right, past the wind-rattled sign that read "Cave Expansion and Improvement Underway", and up a draw.

Ev ran to the entrance to get out of the wind while he thought. He wouldn't do Lorena or anybody any good if he froze to death. On the other hand, this might be his only chance to catch the deputy with proof--of what, he didn't know. Blowing on his hands, he stomped his feet again, then made his decision. He ran out from the sheltering cave mouth and up the draw Arlo had taken.

Struggling through the knee-high drifts, Ev worked his way through the trees and reached the top of the hill. He stopped to catch his breath and felt the sweat on his back freeze immediately. A gust of wind blew snow up into the air, and, for a moment, he didn't know if he was right side up as

the world turned a pure howling white. At the first reappearance of the forest, Ev plunged down the slope after the footprints, hoping that Arlo hadn't gone far. There was no turning back now, he knew that. He had to find shelter, or he'd end up as frozen as the windfall logs scattered down the hill.

A hidden branch tripped Ev, and he tumbled into a draw, cracking his head against a boulder. He gasped, not so much at the blow, but at the fact he couldn't really feel any pain. He lifted a hand to his scalp, and it came away covered with blood that refused to drip to the ground. Instead, it rolled halfway down his palm, and then froze. Panic drove him to his feet, and he started running back up the draw until he realized he had no idea now of which way Arlo had gone. The wind was covering foot prints as fast as they were made. Ev stood still for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts and cursing his loss of composure. He had only two choices now—take a chance and go ahead or try to make it back to his car. The feeling in his feet was disappearing quickly, and only the warmth of his armpits was keeping his hands from going the same way. Hesitating for a moment, he decided to at least get to the top of the draw to see if he could catch sight of the deputy. If not, he would go back.

Snow had drifted up to his waist, but Ev plowed through it until he reached the slope and started upward. Treacherous footing drove him to his hands and knees, and he crawled up until he came to a lone pine at the top of the ridge. He grabbed the rough bark, pulled himself up, and peered down the hill into the stinging snow.

There was nothing.

No sight of Arlo. No footprints. Just the wind whipping sheets of white through the conifers.

Ev fought back the disappointment.

*This is no time to wallow in emotion*, he reminded himself. *You have to get back, or there won't be any emotion to indulge in.*

He turned about to hurry back down the draw, but a gust struck him with cold so hard it felt as if he'd been hit with a solid block of ice. Losing his footing, he fell into the snow and rolled down the hill away from the safety of his car. Ev tried to fight the fall, but his limbs were numb, and somehow, he couldn't find the energy to move them. He decided there was nothing to do but relax and conserve his strength to get himself up and going when he hit the bottom of the slope. He grunted when a rock struck his back, but he sailed over it and continued tumbling into the draw. A glimpse told him another boulder was likely to stop his descent. Between two wind-fallen pines, there was a black protrusion from the snow. Again, he tried to summon the strength to at least change his direction, but it was no use. He rolled on until he struck a hidden object that tossed him into

the air and straight for the boulder. Gritting his teeth, Ev prepared for the impact.

It never came.

Instead, he kept falling until the earth drove a massive fist into his brain.

When he woke, the world had lost its light. Lying on his stomach, Ev looked into a blackness so thick it sat on him like an invisible sumo warrior, pressing his body into solid rock that seemed to be pushing upward equally hard. He jerked his head up in terror, straining to find any kind of light at all. There wasn't any, and, for a moment, he thought he'd fallen through the earth and straight into the blackest pit of Hell. He could imagine no horror greater than being condemned to eternity in a lightless Hades.

Then, his ears caught a peculiar sound, and Ev locked his remaining senses onto it with the greediness of a man gone without food for a week. The noise--a howling "HoooOOoohoo!"--came from over his head and sounded like some demented soul blowing into an enormous bottle. Afraid of what he might see, he raised his head, anyway, then let his held breath explode gratefully out of clutched lungs. White gusted across his vision and drifted down onto his head. It was snow, coming down into a cave. It swirled around in the weak shaft of light, and something twisted and turned with it as the breeze probed fitfully at the darkness. Above him, the wind made the unnerving noise as it blew with erratic force over the hole he fallen through.

Ev sighed and lay back, even though he now noticed a headache pounding in his head as if it were driving pilings for a bridge of infinite pain. While he stared gratefully at the white hole, he tried to will the hurt away. When it insisted on grabbing his whole attention, he risked sitting up. He moaned at the pain, and the moan echoed away into the darkness.

*Concentrate on something else, he told himself fiercely, like the fact that you're still alive.*

He shivered at the thought of being frozen to death and never found.

That made him even colder for a moment, then hope surged as a realization struck him. He was half-frozen, maybe on the verge of hypothermia, but it wasn't cold in the cave--at least, not compared to the outside. Wind Cave had a constant year-round temperature--around 50 degrees if he remembered correctly. That meant he had a chance.

Something rapped against a cave wall, startling him. At first, he thought someone was close, then the rap came again with a purposeless noise that said it was an inanimate object. Keeping the lighted hole in sight, Ev worked his way carefully across the rocky floor toward the sound. For a moment, the noise quit, then something swung out of

darkness and caught him in the face. He screamed and stumbled backward, then felt instantly foolish as a nylon rope swayed through the light and back into the blackness. He grabbed it when the wind drove it into sight again and gave it a hug more grateful and passionate than he'd ever given Juliet or Mary Fae.

*I have a way out of this godawful darkness!* he rejoiced.

Ignoring his throbbing head, Ev hoisted himself on the rope, determined to get out of the cave as quickly as possible. Hand over hand, he pulled his body up until he had half the distance covered, then, as the panic subsided, he stopped, let go, and dropped down onto the cavern floor.

*What the hell's the matter with you?* he reprimanded himself. *If you go outside now, you'll freeze to death. Besides, this had to be where Arlo came.*

That thought snapped him into a crouch as if the deputy were aiming a pistol at his head. When nothing happened, he calmed down again and tried to think the situation through by asking himself how he was going to find Arlo without a source of light. *I was in Wind Cave many times as a kid, and I know exactly how dark it gets when the ranger turns out the only source of light to thrill the tourists.*

It wasn't just a passive blackness, just lying there.

It was an active dark, like a black hole in space that had somehow managed to find a mooring beneath the Hills without swallowing the planet whole. It didn't simply deny light; it ate it. Ev still had nightmares of the first time his father had taken him into the cave. It had been like facing the great, dark heart of a beast who communicated terror with the heaviest silence in the world.

"Stop it!" he said out loud to prevent such thoughts from whirling him down in a pit of terror. "Think! Just think! That's all you need to do."

Willing his breathing into a regular pattern, he concentrated on the in-and-out of his lungs until a moment of equilibrium surfaced in his mind. He latched onto that piece of serenity and simply sat and listened while he considered possible options.

One thing he knew he had in his favor--Arlo had come down here, so there had to be a way to penetrate the inner rooms of the cavern. But he'd been carrying a flashlight too, so the deputy didn't have worry about wandering into the unexplored portion of Wind Cave and getting lost forever.

*A prudent man wouldn't rely solely on batteries, though,* Ev told himself. *If there's one immutable law of batteries it's that they fail on you when you most need them.*

"Kind of like the law around here," he said into the silence. It was gallows humor, but it cheered him up enough to rise from his crouch and explore the cavern, looking for the deputy's exit while keeping the light from above in sight as a comforting orientation.

An interminable time later, he'd found three possible exits, but there was no sign of which one led to Arlo.

*But then you were more than a little afraid of getting out of sight of the light, weren't you?* he admonished himself. His eyes jerked involuntarily upward toward the hole as if they were operating independently of his wish to be courageous and craved only the comfort of daylight.

The light was still there, but it was dimmer as a panicked thought drove itself into his brain. *It's getting dark!*

Soon, he wouldn't be able to see a damned thing--not even the end of his nose.

He let out a ragged breath as two very clear choices formed in his mind. *I can stay where I am until Arlo comes back--if he comes back--and wait for dawn. With the cave's constant temperature, he wouldn't freeze to death. Or, I can take a stab at finding the deputy's path.*

The thought of spending the night in blackness--so absolute it sat on your shoulders like an enormous press--sped him into another search. This time he risked getting out of sight of the hole. He came out of the first two exits in a horrified shortness of breath. He hurried to the third path. It had seemed less promising than the other ones because you had to duck into a squat to get into it.

*Or because you didn't want to risk getting your fat butt stuck in it,* he told himself in a fit of honesty he wished had found another time to express itself.

He looked back longingly on the weakening light from the cavern roof, then forced himself forward.

It was a tight squeeze, and for a terrible moment, he thought he was stuck forever or until Arlo found him--it didn't matter since he'd be dead either way. In terror, he pressed forward and tumbled hard onto the cave floor, scraping the shin of his bad leg against a stalagmite. At least, that's what he assumed it was since it broke and fell to the ground with the force of an alarm actively trying to alert Arlo of the presence of an intruder. Ev tried simultaneously to hold his breath and force his lungs into a less agitated state as his brain fought to decide which panicked state it wanted to be in--fear of discovery by the deputy or horror that'd he was lost forever by choosing the wrong way. He whimpered as his brain began to lock up. There was nothing he could do now, but sit and wait and hope as the cave pressed it dark might down upon him. He began to cry, and it went on for a long time before the tears dried. He wiped at his eyes,



thoroughly ashamed of himself for such weakness and now for the fact that his vision was beginning to play tricks as it searched for any source of light. If it didn't find any, he knew, his brain would invent a source because it needed a reference for sanity. Little dots of red and green and white sparkled in his illumination-starved eyes, threatening to form into shapes he didn't particularly care to see.

*Maybe that's what ghosts and goblins and nightmares are for, Ev thought in a moment of rational horror. They're a peculiar frame of reference, a means by which we hold on to our sanity by indulging in the insane.*

"Whatever it is," he said into the cave to hear the comfort of his own voice. "I wish it would all go away."

It was the voice of a child, wishing for its mother, but Ev didn't care what he sounded like right now. He was past caring.

He was more scared than he'd ever been in his life.

The colors in his eyes grew more intense, exploding like bizarre fireworks into forms and shapes he couldn't quite get a hold of.

He whimpered again and scrambled into a crouch, ready to run no matter where he ended up. Action was better than no action at all.

Then, a second of lucidity flashed into his mind and forced him to stay where he was.

One color *did* have a pattern.

The green.

It was faint and gave off a fluorescent glow.

Ev closed his eyes and took a long moment before he opened them again because he was terrified the color would not be there.

It was, and it had assumed a solid shape.

Ev scrambled forward and put a finger on it.

The green didn't go away because it *wasn't* a figment of his runaway imagination.

It was a paint marker.

Ev walked past it and peered into the darkness to make sure.

There was another one, glowing weakly in the distance.

Ev sat down and cried hard again in relief, then he picked himself up and set off through the cave, greeting each marker with prayers worthy of every saint he'd never believed in. He had no idea of how long he'd been walking before he heard the telltale hum of a generator bouncing off the rock. As he came around a corner, a distant light joined the hum. Ev wanted to rush toward the light and embrace it with every cell of his being, but instead, he slowed his pace and worked his way forward until he could see clearly into a cavern so large he had no idea of how high the roof was.

Across the cave was the generator. It fed power to a series of floodlights stationed at militarily exact points around the room. In the center stood Vern, Arlo, and five armed men. All had flashlights similar to the deputy's or wore headlamps. Behind them, boxes of weapons were piled high. That was frightening enough, but the deputy and the others were paying special attention to something on the other side of the cave. Ev moved cautiously forward and risked a look around the corner.

Apparently extremely pleased with himself, Vern stood on top of an M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tank, his arm draped over the 120 mm smoothbore main gun.

And, behind that one, stood two others towering over the armored personnel carriers and the Bradley fighting vehicles.

## Chapter 73

### Weak in the Knees

Ev slid down to the ground, his heart pounding. The thought of Vernon Sarvis armed with tanks had simply taken his strength away.

*There's no doubt Vern has the will to do use them, Ev thought, but where did he steal such huge weapons?*

Ev knew it was a foolish question. There were plenty of military auctions out there and, presumably, a few Army men who agreed with Vern about the pathetic state of the union. They could have slipped some 'decommissioned' tanks into a sale. Or, maybe it was a simple matter of greed. For arms merchants, dollars spoke more loudly than ideology. He was sure that Sarvis had been willing to deal either way as long as it achieved his objectives.

He continued turning the situation over in his mind until he realized he was doing his best to avoid the question at hand--what was he, Everett Pick, going to do about it?

*Not get caught* was the answer that popped immediately into his mind. He was no match for seven men--armed or unarmed. He had to find a way out to alert authorities. Back the way he came would be the fastest way, but then he'd have to deal with the blizzard in the dark.

Peering around the corner, he realized that there had to be another way in. There was no way Vern and his men could have gotten all that ordnance into Wind Cave through the hole he'd fallen through unless they'd been willing to break it down and bring it in piece by piece. They could have brought it in only one way--through the front entrance.

*No, he realized immediately. Not unless they were incredibly patient and had all the time in the world. The main entrance isn't that big, and, even in the wintertime, it would attract attention because Hills people are very curious about what their neighbors are doing--all that gossip shortens a long winter. They had to have someone who knew Wind Cave inside out and who could help them dig their own entrance.*

He surveyed the group of men more closely, and, sure enough, he recognized the khaki uniform of a Park Ranger.

*It must be Marv Pirnie, the one Joe Black Dog described as secretive,* he decided. *Who better to trust with a weapons cache? And who better to hide it?*

*Those are two excellent rhetorical questions, Ev thought, but you're still stalling. What are you going to do next?*

The first rule of recon popped into his head exactly as the army had drilled it into his head thirty years ago--avoid detection at all costs.

The second rule was a corollary of the first--get the intel and report it as quickly as possible. Ev had always added a third, unspoken rule--save your ass. Right now, he really liked the last rule because, if he obeyed it, it meant the first two would be carried out. Saving his ass meant one simple thing--wait and don't make any noise.

He checked his surroundings as best he could and satisfied himself that he could stay safely out of Vern's way when he returned. Then, he studied the layout of the cave, memorizing the location of the tanks, the lights and the arms materiel. Once he was satisfied, he backed away from the entrance and tucked himself behind a ragged row of stalactites and stalagmites that reminded him uncomfortably of a set of jaws. As he settled in, he supposed he should try to overhear what the men were saying, but he didn't trust his bulk in the darkness. One stone knocked over would reverberate like a cannon shot off the granite walls of the cave.

Drowsiness stole over him as he waited, listening to the scraping of crates and clatter of arms being removed from them. He shook his head to keep it clear. One unconscious word muttered in his sleep--even his regular heavy breathing--and Arlo couldn't help but pick up on his presence. There was nothing to do but stay motionless and work at being alert.

A burst of excited laughter fed heavy voltage into his heart, and Ev started, ashamed that he'd fallen asleep so easily and petrified that he'd been discovered. He looked wildly about, ready to run, but the laughter came from the large cavern and was not at his expense. Slumping back down, he hoped his heart would soon stop trying to kick its way out of his chest. He had no idea of how long he'd been asleep, but he knew his head hurt, and shivering racked his whole body. He hugged his sides, trying to conserve warmth while he waited--*this time fully alert*, he promised himself.

Ev was sure he'd counted down the seconds of at least three centuries before he heard lights snapping off. When the generator's whine tailed down into the darkness, lights criss-crossed the cave entrance, and a few shouted instructions ended the meeting. Ev held his breath as footsteps came his way. In the darkness of the cave, they sounded like the feet of giants. A light swung through the entrance, and the deputy followed behind. Arlo swung about, and the beam flashed across Ev. He tensed, ready to attack the man, but the light continued its swing back into the cavern. He watched as the deputy swung the beam back and forth, doing a last-minute check. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, the deputy

turned about, laying the beam across Ev again, then strode off with the confidence of a man who'd been in the tunnel many times before.

Ev held himself tense until all human noise had receded into the oppressive silence of the cavern. The only sound was the conspiratorial soughing of the wind as the cave equalized pressure with the outside world. Irrationally, he wished for Arlo and the others to come back so he'd know he wasn't alone. Shaking off the thought, he felt his way to the entrance of the arms cache. To his relief, it was easier than he expected because residual heat from the lights and generator through the opening.

Ev stepped through carefully and groped to his left until he found the first light stand. Then, with one hand on the dripping wall, he counted the steps to another stand. The lights had been placed so exactly he was sure the distance between each was the same. The next try proved his theory correct, and he moved confidently around the cave until his hand found the warm metal of the generator. Instant love for the machine filled his mind. His hands explored the generator until, by trial and error, he found a way to start it up

The lights flickered on at last, and Ev's hope rose with the flood of light.

*I'm never going to leave this place, never,* he promised, knowing at the same instant that it was a false and foolish promise, but it gave him enough courage to explore for escape routes.

A forklift on the far side of the arms cache led him to the secret exit. In all the times Ev had been into Wind Cave as a kid, he'd never seen anything approaching the size of this tunnel. He inspected its sides and found the familiar pattern of jackhammer chiseling. Large rectangles of green fluorescent paint split the tunnel floor, providing a clear path for the tanks and other vehicles. Ev was tempted to go that way to avoid any more contact with small, dark spaces, but he knew it wouldn't bring him out anywhere near his vehicle, so he continued the search until he found paint that marked another, smaller tunnel that had to lead to the main entrance. He was about to step into it when he realized he had a more important task at hand--gathering proof of the cache and disabling it as much as possible.

*The tanks I can do nothing about,* he decided. *I don't know much about them, and Vern will have them locked up tight, anyway.*

Instead, he grabbed a pry bar and headed for the weapons crates. As he bent to inspect likely targets, a faint gleam of light triggered a warning that had been hot-wired into his brain in Nam.

*Booby trap!*

Ev pulled the pry bar back and squatted down carefully until he had the fine wire in sight. It led down to the floor and under a pile of boards. The

dull glint of gray plastic told him what it most likely was that he'd almost tripped.

An anti-personnel mine.

A toe popper.

The blast effect would take him out without doing any damage to the crates, and he'd bleed to death without being able to warn anyone about the weapon. It was as simple and effective as that.

It was a device that had Vern's name written all over it.

Ev shuddered and, hanging on to the pry bar as the only weapon he had, headed for the main entrance. This time, he wanted nothing more to get out into fresh air, no matter how cold it was, and he charged along the painted lines, crouching so that he wouldn't run into an overhang and knock himself silly. When his feet touched carved steps, he knew he was near the entrance. Cold air blew down them, and nothing had ever felt so good to him before. As far as he was concerned, it was better to freeze your ass off than die in alone in a grave so vast it was unlikely anyone would ever know about his death. He ran out into the fading light. Snow blew through a mesh-wire gate, and a thick padlock secured it across the opening. Ev set to work with the pry bar and, after working up a heavy sweat, succeeded in snapping the lock free. He pulled the gate back far enough to squeeze through, then bolted out of the cave. The wind shrieked across the entrance, kicking snow up. For a second, Ev was blinded, but another gust kicked the world back into his vision, and suddenly he could see all too clearly.

Arlo had his pistol leveled at him.

The deputy shook his head and said, "You know, it's not guns that kill you, Pick. It's the simple things."

After a second, Ev found his voice. "What are you talking about?"

Arlo jerked his head to his right. Ev followed the motion, but saw nothing.

"What?" he asked.

"Something missing, Pick?"

Ev thought, then said, "Fuck."

He'd been in such a hurry to catch up with the deputy, he'd parked his car in plain sight.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"Gone," the deputy said. "You won't need it anymore, anyway."

"The simple things," Arlo repeated. "Simple people make those kind of mistakes."

He motioned Ev toward his vehicle. "You got a choice, Pick. Come with me, or you can freeze to death."

"I'll freeze," Ev said.

"Without your clothes, you'll do that real fast," the deputy said. "People do that, you know, when they're close to freezing to death. They think they're too warm. That's the theory, anyway. Care to test it out?"

Ev submitted to handcuffs and got into the vehicle.

*How much longer can this day get?* he wondered as Arlo put the vehicle back on the road.

## **Chapter 74**

### **What We All Have in Common**

Someone tore the blindfold off Ev's face, and he blinked violently at the sudden impact of the harsh light. He had no idea of how long Arlo had kept him in captivity. After conferring via the police radio, he'd blindfolded Ev and driven him dizzy in the Hills before depositing him hog-tied in a cold cabin. The wait had been agonizing.

Voices buzzed inside and outside his head before his vision cleared. When it did, he saw a room lit with fluorescent lighting. In the far corner, one of the tubes flickered and hummed with an annoying irregularity. Immediately to his right, Temple Americans and a number of Vern's armed men sat on plastic chairs regarding him with the intense, pitiless interest of hawks regarding prey. Several of them appeared drunk. Pain seared across his forehead as he peered at them, a reminder that Arlo had belted him several times, apparently just for the hell of it. He ignored the headache as he tried to figure out what was so familiar about the group. After a moment, he realized what it was. There were twelve people sitting to the side.

Like a jury.

Ev looked quickly for an exit, but there was only one door, and Maj Reno and another man stood guard on either side. Each cradled an M-16 in their arms. Ev shivered from fear, but beads of sweat rolled down Reno's nervous face and dripped to the floor with faint, but audible smacks on the tile. The man's eyes were far too bright around pupils that had contracted close to invisibility. Ev shifted his gaze away from the face that had greeted him in his hospital room and saw that everyone's eyes were far too bright. It was obvious Reno was on crank and very nervous about something, but the rest of them had generated their own natural, but far more dangerous, drug--bloodlust--and he had no doubt about whose blood they were after.

A sudden moan drew his attention to the left. It was the young FBI Agent, Johnson. Handcuffed to a chair, the man was bloodied about the head and mouth and looked smaller and older in a torn and stained suit. Johnson groaned again when the blindfold was removed and tried to raise his head, but his chin dropped down onto the filthy tie. Ev winced as he saw the self-tightening handcuffs cut into the agent's wrists as he slumped forward. The man's hands were already swollen. He hoped he could remember to stay still so he wouldn't experience the same pain with his



restraints, then he looked down and realized there were no restraints on his arms. His hands rested freely in his lap.

"That's right," Vernon Sarvis said. "No cuffs on you, Pick. We only use those on people who pose a real danger to the Republic. Johnson got on to our trail somehow, and ended up in the shit, just like you."

Snickers ran through the jury members and rippled through the room behind his chair. Ev turned and saw an audience with the same greed in their eyes as in the twelve men sitting to his right. Some of the ranchers had come straight from the pastures. Brown caked their boots, and the smell of manure mixed with cigarette smoke curling toward the ceiling. His heart turned with anguish as he saw Lorena seated at the back of the room. Bruises covered her face and the arms folded protectively around the swelling belly underneath the loose blouse. Her eyes were wide with astonished pleasure as they locked onto his.

An impatient clearing of a throat brought Ev's head back to the front. Vern sat on a folding metal chair behind an old oaken school desk, scarred with students' names. Although the man was sitting ramrod straight with his palms down on the desktop and there was a glint of satisfaction in his eyes, Ev was glad to see the gauntness in his cheeks. Even Vernon Sarvis had to feel pressure sometime.

"Welcome to the Common Citizens Court, Everett Pick," Vern said, "and a jury of your peers."

Ev managed a sardonic smile, but said nothing because he knew there was nothing he could say that would change whatever outcome they'd already decided upon. Instead, he said, "Take the cuffs off Johnson, will you? He's not going anywhere, and his hands look like they're losing circulation already."

Vern nodded at one of the men and watched while the cuffs were taken off. Then, he asked Ev, "Are you familiar with this court?"

"Sure," Ev said. "It's a kangaroo court."

"Bad guess," Vern said. "We're the court that takes up where any court at or above the local level fails to do its duty." Vern paused, then added, "In your case, they've certainly failed to do that."

"Amens" were shouted throughout the room.

Lorena's husband stood up and paced back and forth with his arms behind his back as if he were back in the Berets lecturing His troops. "Destruction of property, breaking and entering and flight from arrest for child molestation."

Shouts erupted from the jury. Vern came around the desk and sat on its top while he waited for the noise to subside. Everyone sat down, except for one man whose beer belly shook as he brandished an M-16 and yelled, "Do him, do him good!"

"Shut up and sit down, Tommy," Sarvis commanded. The man immediately flopped back into his chair.

Vern continued, "Now, the liberal courts may want to coddle perverts, but we don't. We don't have time for that kind of abomination. That judge couldn't see the plain truth because she's blind to what goes on in this nation every day of the year."

"I've never harmed a child in my life," Ev said.

"That's not what we hear, and we've got proof," Sarvis said, then nodded toward the door. Maj Reno opened it and beckoned someone forward.

Alvin Hardemann stepped into the room.

The editor fixed his eyes on Ev, then offered a grim smile before beckoning imperiously over his shoulder. A second later, Lamarr Hardemann stood behind his father. Ev almost didn't recognize him at first, not because of the camos, but because the boy had grown six inches while remaining so thin it looked as if the cells in his body were having a hard time holding everything together. With his crew cut, Lamarr was well on to his way to resembling his father, except that the light in the eyes that couldn't seem to find a place to settle was considerably dimmer. The boy had an unnerving, blank expression accompanied by a constant sniffing as if Lamarr had a bad cold.

Vernon nodded toward the two, then said, "Why don't you take the witness stand, Mr. Hardemann? As I understand it, this whole affair got started with you and your boy back in Minnesota. Is that right?"

"Too damned right!" the editor said as he motioned his boy toward an empty chair before striding to his own seat.

"Why don't you swear on that Bible, then tell us the truth of the matter?" Vern said.

Al Hardemann swore on the book offered him, then sat down.

"In your own words," Vern prompted.

Al worked his jaw as if he were chewing on the suggestion, then said, "For the editor of a newspaper, if you can believe it, I'm a man of few words."

Laughter ran through the room, chilling Ev further. It wasn't really laughter at all. It was a form of solidarity.

Hardemann continued when there was quiet again. "But, this man here--Everett Pick--has provoked more than a few words from me and everyone else in our small community. He taught in our town, and we trusted him as you should be able to trust any teacher, trusted him to teach the basics of reading and writing and good American English. But what we didn't know was that he had a secret life. He wasn't after educating our children--he was after the children themselves."

As if a giant rattler had coiled itself inside the room, a hiss ran through the crowd.

The editor reached down and patted the briefcase he'd placed beside the chair. "Right here, I have the affidavits of 18 children who've sworn that Everett Pick abused them in the classroom, in his home, in his car and right out in public! Documents that that liberal judge false rejected!"

"I want to see those papers!" Ev shouted over the din.

"In good time," Hardemann said. "You'll see them in good time. Now, as you can imagine, none of these people particularly wanted to face in public the man who'd molested them. The whole experience was humiliating enough without adding this trauma to it. But, I brought my boy along. I'll be blunt with you. He's not the brightest son in the world, but there is one thing he is--and that's honest. He tells the truth. And he's brave. He's willing to face the perpetrator and tell the truth!"

Cheers rang out, and eyes turned toward Lamarr Hardemann. The remainder of Lamar's face turned nearly as red as his nose, and, for a moment, Ev hoped that the boy would tell the truth, the real truth, then he saw the dull light in the eyes change into a glitter of excitement, and his heart sank. Lamarr had what he'd always desperately wanted--attention. Not the vicious kind paid to him on the playground, but unadulterated, approving attention. He was the star of the moment, and he was not about to ruin it.

"I shot him," Lamarr said in a voice made thick from clogged sinuses. "I shot him because he tried to touch me."

"Too bad you missed a head shot!" Tommy shouted from the jury.

Several people took up a chant. "Head shot! Head shot!"

"Let him talk," Vern commanded, cutting through the ugly noise.

"I shot him," the boy said, "because I didn't want him to keep doing it."

"To you?" Vern prompted. "Or to the others?"

"Both," Lamarr said. "There were others. Lots of them."

"Are you prepared to name names, young man?"

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"Yes," the boy repeated.

"And there were many?" Vern prompted.

Lamarr sniffled, wiping at his nose, and nodded. "Eighteen, like my Dad said. That I know of. There might have been more."

Hissing ran through the room again.

"We don't need to go into details about what Pick did, but tell me this--was sodomy involved?"

The boy blushed convincingly and nodded while he looked down at the floor.

"And that wasn't all, either," he said.

"What do you mean?" Vern asked.

"There were candles and a design that he drew on the floor."

"A pentagram?" Vern suggested.

"A what?"

"A five-pointed star?"

"Yes," Lamarr confirmed with an eagerness that made Ev's heart sink.

"That's what it was, all right."

Vern turned back toward Ev and fixed him with a disgusted stare. "Satanism, Pick? I grew up with you, and I never suspected. How devious can a man be?"

"He's lying," Ev said.

"Children don't lie about these kinds of things," Vern said.

"I'm not a Satanist, and I've never molested Lamarr or any other child, for that matter." It was a pro forma response and Ev knew it, but his life was on the line so he felt compelled to make it.

"Then, why would the boy make these charges?" Vern asked. "You heard his father. He's not very bright and wouldn't have the imagination to dream up anything so disgusting."

"You just answered the question yourself," Ev responded. "Lamar's a good kid, but he's very impressionable because he's not that smart. His father filled his head with this nonsense."

"And why would a father do this to his own son?" Vern asked.

Ev was terrified, but anger about the whole situation propelled the words out of his mouth like contemptuous spit. "Why? Because he's a coward at heart. Because--"

A violent roar cut off his words. Vern spent the next couple of minutes quieting the mob down. When he had them under control, he said, "He's got a right to speak his mind. After all, he's got a lot at stake here."

"Yeah, the stake we're going to burn him at!" a voice from the jury said, prompting an outburst of vicious laughter.

"Goddamn it, Tommy!" Vern said. "I told you to shut your drunken mouth, didn't I? And stop waving that weapon around, will you? Someone take it away from him before he ends up shooting one of us."

"Hey, I'll put it on the floor, okay?" Tommy said.

"Do it, then, for Christ's sake!" Vern ordered.

The M-16 clattered onto the floor, and Vern turned back to Ev. "Say your piece."

"He's a coward and a bigot," Ev continued. "He wanted to censor the books read in my class, and I wouldn't let him do it."

"Why not?" Vern asked. "It seems to me there should be some books our children don't need to read."

"Amen" sounded in the room again.

"Because it wouldn't have ended with a few books," Ev said. "Men like Alvin don't stop at *Catch-22*. They want to control everything their way."

Ev paused for a moment, then couldn't help himself. "Exactly like you, Vern. Someone who needs it so badly he's willing to use military weapons like tanks to achieve that control."

Sarvis' face contorted for a moment as the crowd murmured at this news, then smoothed out as he spoke sarcastically, "Yeah, right. I've got a whole battalion of tanks stockpiled beneath a mountain, and I'm ready to use them at any time."

When the snickering died down, Vern looked over at Alvin Hardemann and asked, "Let's get back to the subject. Is that true? You wanted to censor some books?"

"Definitely," the editor answered.

"Why?"

"Only because they were pornographic," Alvin answered. "Children don't need to read pornography. Nobody needs to read pornography."

"If you need further proof," he continued as he reached into his briefcase, "we found these in his apartment after he fled."

He brandished several *Hustlers* in the air and said, "In private, he was practicing what he said in public he wasn't doing. And he was hooked up onto the Internet. We suspect he might have been involved in one of the nationwide pedophile rings that you've all been hearing about lately. We'll know for sure once we get a password from him."

"It's *Pick15*," Ev said. "Log on, and you won't find a thing."

The editor scowled. "Anything to buy time, hey, Pick?" as he reached back into the briefcase and pulled out more papers. "Well, the proof is right here. Sworn affidavits of children you raped and sodomized. Evidence of devil worship and pagan rituals. And, most damning of all, photographs of your victims. Look at this!"

He strode over to Ev and thrust a picture into his face. Ev looked and said, "It's a photograph of a naked boy, but I don't see myself anywhere in the picture. And I'll bet I don't appear in any of the others, either."

"That's the ingenious part about it," Alvin said. "You *don't* appear in any of them. You made sure of that, didn't you? But we found those photographs in your apartment. If you didn't take them, who did?"

"Because you never found them in my apartment, Alvin," Ev shouted. "I don't know where you got them, but, you know what, I think you take entirely too much interest in them. I know I've never shot any such pictures, but I'd like to ask you a question--where did you get them? Could it be a man who's had many years of photographic experience for his paper might have taken them?"

The editor slapped Ev hard across the jaw, then addressed the audience. "Do you see how low this man has sunk? He tries to turn an abominable accusation around onto the innocent party!"

A low and dangerous ssssssssss spread throughout the room.

"It's classic, isn't it?" Hardemann said. "Try to obscure the truth by misdirecting your attention. You're too smart to fall for that, aren't you? But don't rely on my word--read these affidavits, that's all I ask of you. Read them, then come to a decision."

He looked to Vern, who nodded and said, "Take turns reading the documents, then let us know what you decide."

Ev laughed. "Why bother? Their minds are already made up."

"Because we give due process, that's why," Vern answered.

Ev shook his head and said, "Sarvis, you are one sadistic and deluded sonuvabitch."

"Due process," Vern repeated, then told the editor to hand out the affidavits. While the jury read the papers with eagerness, Ev looked back at Lorena. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and her eyes had become so clear with pain that he thought he could see right to the bottom of her soul. He tried to give her an encouraging smile and failed miserably. Instead, he turned to the FBI agent who'd begun moaning again and said, "How're you doing, Johnson?"

"Whuh?" the agent said.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like shit, Pick."

"That's good, Ev said.

"What?"

"At least, you're feeling something. I thought maybe you were going to be out of it permanently."

"My head hurts like nobody's business," Johnson said.

"Yeah, well, I think we're both in a world of hurt here," Ev responded.

"I have to get back to the office," the agent said. "I've got a lot of goddamned paperwork to get done."

Ev looked sharply at the man. The rambling meant a bad concussion for sure. When Johnson got up to leave, Ev put a hand on his shoulder and gently pushed him down. "I think the paperwork will have to wait," he said. "Why don't you just rest for a while?"

"My head hurts," the agent repeated.

Ev sat in silence while the affidavits were exchanged in a rattling of papers that unnervingly sounded to him like gunfire. It was almost a relief when Vern called the jury to order.

"All right," he said. "I'm going to poll the members of the jury. You've reviewed the evidence, now each of you give me your verdict."

Twelve times "guilty" sounded in the air like a perverse funeral bell. When the last man sat down after delivering his verdict, Vern turned to Ev and said, "You're guilty as charged, Pick."

"No big surprise there," Ev said.

Sarvis ignored the comment and said, "The only thing that remains is the manner of execution. Any suggestions?"

"A bullet to the brain!" someone shouted.

"The stake!" Tommy suggested again. "He's a Satanist. Burn him like a witch!"

"Hang him!" someone else said. "Hang him and put him out in public as a warning to perverts!"

"Castrate him!" another voice said. "Tie him to a tree, castrate him, and let the bastard bleed to death!"

Vern quieted the shouting, then said, "We're not animals. We're not going to burn or castrate anyone as tempting as that might be. We'll give Pick a choice. Death by firing squad, or we can give him one last chance to redeem himself."

"No!" several people shouted.

"Hear me out!" Vern shouted. "We can put him in the other room with a pistol, and we'll find out if he has any manhood left. What do you say, Pick? Are you a man or do we have to do the job for you?"

"I'll take the firing squad," Ev said.

Vern nodded with contempt. "Somehow, I knew you'd give that answer."

Ev continued, "I'll take the firing squad because none of you drunken assholes could hit the broad side of the universe, so I'm bound to go free."

A loud rap on the door cut through the angry uproar. Ev thought it had startled him, but it whirled Maj Reno in an instant. Leveling his weapon at waist level, the bar owner wiped wildly at the sweat pouring into his eyes and shouted, "What?"

Ev couldn't make out the words being said on the other side of the door, but Reno yelled, "We're busy, goddamn it. There's no time for that shit!"

"What is it?" Vern asked.

"Something about that little shit, Teesacker. I think they've found him."

"What? Open the door, Maj." Vern looked back at Ev and said, "This is rich, isn't it, Pick? I got me a twofer."

Ev watched as Maj Reno dropped his weapon to turn the knob. A look of terror replaced a scowl as the barrel of an AK-47 poked itself into his face. The assault rifle was followed by a huge belly, then a body that looked like bowling ball gone bad.

Ev didn't know who the man was, but he was obviously Mexican.

Ev's hopes for escape rose until he saw the intruder's eyes. They had a cold pig-eyed stare aimed directly at Maj Reno. Ev knew then the man was not on a rescue mission from some law enforcement agency. There was too much cool calculation in his face. Round after round was chambered throughout the room. At the sound, the Mexican's dark gaze flicked over the room with contempt, his free hand fingering a combat knife strapped to his leg.

"Drop the weapon, Reno," he ordered.

When Reno obeyed, the Mexican said, "I tol' you, man." To Ev, it sounded like someone had lined the biker's throat with abrasives.

"Din't I tell you?" the man continued. "But you din't lissen. You thought you could fuck with Esteban. Nobody fucks with me."

Esteban poked the barrel hard against Reno's nose, then wrinkled a crooked nose nearly as broad as his body. He grinned, showing teeth huddled apart at odd angles as if afraid to come close to each other. "Scared the shit out of you, eh, man? Lissen to your body, Reno. It's tellin' you somethin'. It's tellin' you if I don' get the money for the shipment, I'm goin' blow your ass off, and then you won' have any hole to shit out of. Where is it? Now!"

"You shoot him, and you go down too," Vern said, holding a Beretta in his hand. "Everyone in this room is armed."

"As' me if I fuckin' care," the Mexican said. "I got business with him, not the rest of you pussies."

"A good point," Vern said. "We don't need any attention here right now. Why not just take him with you, and we'll get back to our meeting?"

"Vern!" Reno cried as he turned so white Ev thought he thought the man would dissolve right into the air.

"I told you to leave that shit alone, didn't I?" Vern said. "I told you to shut down the lab, but you made the mistake of thinking you had brains between your ears, and now it looks to me as if you've got exactly what's coming to you."

Reno moaned as Vern continued, "Just one question, Mexican--how'd you know about Teesacker?"

"Around," Esteban replied.

"Are you working for that little shit?" Sarvis demanded. "Do you know where he is?"

"I ain' workin' for nobody, and I could care less about Teesacker."

Vern nodded. "Probably, you heard it from Maj, then. He talks a lot when he's on the stuff. All the more reason for you to take him."

"But the biker knows about this meeting now, Vern," one of the men said.

"So? He knows what he's up against if he talks to someone," Vern said.



"Yeah, pussies," the Mexican said.

Vern corrected him with a cold smile. "Armed pussies. You take care of Maj anyway you want, but if you talk about this meeting, we'll come after you with enough armament to blow even your fat ass away."

The Mexican scowled. "We're talking territory here, man. We want our territory."

"The crank is all yours," Vern said. "I'll leave it to boneheads like you and Reno. Go kill your fucking selves off and do us all a favor."

A grin split Esteban's beard. "Business done the way I like it, man."

The Mexican shoved the barrel hard into Reno's face, opening a cut on his cheek. "Come on, man. I'm getting' the money, or your head is getting' aired out."

As Maj shot a desperate, pleading glance over his shoulder, Ev sucked in his breath. There was no mistaking the look on the face of a man with nothing left to lose. As Reno slapped at the barrel of the weapon, Ev grabbed Johnson's chair, tipped the agent toward the desk, then jerked him forward until they were both up against back panel. A burst came first from the AK-47, then the entire room erupted into gunfire. Automatic weapons stitched the wood of the desk into splinters and shotguns boomed while, on the other side of the desk, a pistol cracked with a deliberateness that told Ev Vern was doing the firing. The smell of cordite rolled into the air with smoke from the barrels of the weapons. Ev resisted the urge to dig a hole right through the tiled floor. Instead, he heaved his back up against the desk and upended it. His heart leapt up at Vern's sudden shout of pain, and he got up to jump over the furniture and take out the man out. Just as he did so, there was another burst of fire, and the overhead fluorescents shattered the room into darkness. The only light came from the open door. Muzzle blasts split the darkness with thunderous explosions, making it seem as if a small and unusually violent storm had somehow entered the room. Ev abandoned his plan to kill Vern.

*At the rate things are going, he thought in a panic, no one in the room will be alive if the shooting continues.*

Instead, he grabbed Johnson by the collar, stood him up and ran for the door. They stumbled over the groaning Mexican and out into the hallway. Ev snatched at the Mexican's assault rifle, but Esteban rolled away, clutching at a neck geysering blood into the air. Ev settled for the man's knife. As he slid it from its sheath, he was astonished to hear Reno whimper. Maj was huddled in the corner, the Tom Mix down over his head and his hands over the hat. The brim of the hat shook violently.

Ev got the FBI agent to his feet again and headed for the stairs. They went up to a front door streaked with cold rain.

*As always, he thought, different weather in different part of the Hills.*

A ponchoed guard whirled around as they burst out, but Ev had the knife point up against his throat before he could say a thing. The man drew a hand away from his sidearm and raised his arms high in the air.

"Your car," Ev said. "Give me the keys and tell me where it is."

The guard shook his head, so Ev pressed the knife in harder until the man fumbled keys from his front pocket.

"Which one is it?" Ev asked.

"The Cherokee. Over there."

"Get in the building," Ev ordered. "Join the fun. Get your ass blown off."

The guard gave him a strange look, but obeyed. Ev got an arm around Johnson and helped him through the patches of melting snow into the vehicle. Then, he hurried around and into the driver's seat and started the engine. He was out of the parking lot and onto the wet, slick road before the first shots peppered the side of the Jeep with metallic *thunks*.

Ev put the pedal to the floor. The Jeep's engine responded instantly, and the Cherokee roared swaying around a curve. He concentrated on keeping the vehicle on the road while he tried to figure out where they were. A sign around the next curve told him--*Custer State Park, 15 miles*.

"Shit!" he shouted in frustration. He needed to get to a place where there were lots of people. At this time of night, it would be hard to find anyone up and about in the park. He decided to make the best of a bad situation and head for the State Game Lodge. There might still be a few tourists in their rooms, even at this time of year, and that meant the front desk had to be manned.

By the time he sped by the silent entrance to the park, lights had appeared in the rear-view mirror. It looked like a caravan on the road behind, and it was cutting the distance between the Cherokee and the lead vehicle fast. Ev pushed the Jeep as hard as he dared up the last grade, then down past the old zoo and the Wildlife Loop Trail road, but before he was around the curve and had the Game Lodge in sight, the first vehicle, a Taurus, was on his tail. Muzzle blasts flared from the sides of the car as the driver came on hard. The shots went wide, but Ev had no intention of letting them get lucky. He stomped hard on the brakes. With a blaring of the horn, the driver swerved the Taurus, but Ev saw he'd reacted too late. The vehicle slammed into the back of the Jeep, careened off the road and turned turtle before crashing into a pine with a sickening screech of metal.

Ev caught control of the fishtailing Cherokee and tried to ignore the gunfire whistling into and around his vehicle as he steered the Jeep off the road and toward the Game Lodge. The Cherokee bottomed out in the ditch, rose in the air, and slammed down into a field. He had a clear shot at the lodge until two vehicles swept by him and spun to a stop, blocking the

path with undisciplined bursts of automatic weapons fire. Ev swerved the Jeep back up onto the road, slamming into a pickup and knocking it aside and into following vehicles. He'd bought time but the impact had thrown the Cherokee's front end into a lunatic, grinding shimmy, and he knew that a tire was gone. He nursed the limping vehicle past the Game Lodge and jerked it off the road again, plowing down the road to the small park church until he was at the entrance to Lover's Leap Trail. He slid the knife through his belt, kicked open the door, went around and pulled Johnson from his seat. Supporting the agent, he steered him toward the trail. He knew it well from his childhood, and he couldn't think of any place better to go at the moment.

*I just knew that if we remain in the open, we're dead* was the thought that kept running through his mind.

Squealing tires and brakes, silenced engines, and sudden angry shouts that seemed to slam car doors open and shut drove Ev quickly up the steep slope, helping Johnson along as best he could. He thought about striking off into the woods, but dismissed it immediately. The ground was rocky and treacherous, and if they didn't pitch off a cliff, they might trip and run into one of the broken pine branches that stuck out like punji stakes all around this area. Ev wished desperately for Thor or Lorena, but even the weather seemed to be on Sarvis' side, slowing them down at every turn and turning their escape into a near impossibility. The rain had disappeared only to be replaced by a sharp wind gusting snowflakes from the northwest, and the temperature was dropping so fast the pines were groaning and cracking from the stress. The FBI agent tried to help Ev when he tripped over a root and slammed against the ground, but he outweighed the man by 100 pounds.

"I'm okay," he tried to assure the shivering Johnson as he caught his breath. "Let me rest a minute, then we'll keep going."

The FBI man slumped down onto the path. In the dim light from the racing clouds, the blood on his head still visibly dripped from his ear and onto his shoulders.

"I don't feel so good. I'm dizzy," Johnson said again.

he'd said it so many times since they escaped in the Jeep that Ev knew he had to get help soon or the agent might suffer irreparable damage--if Vern didn't kill them, or they didn't die from exposure first.

"Hang on," Ev told him. "I've been on this trail many times. It's steep as hell at the beginning, but levels out for the rest of the way. It loops around and comes out near the Lodge."

"So what?" Johnson said. "Sarvis knows it too, I'll bet. He's probably posted men at the other end already. They'll just drive us that way like rabbits until we're flushed out."

"No doubt," Ev said, "but we're not dead yet, are we? I never thought I'd hear an FBI Agent talk that way."

Johnson's were dark in the night, making it look as if two holes had been punched into his face by the events of the past few days. "This agent doesn't feel real special, right now. In fact, he feels damned sick."

The FBI man backed his statement up by vomiting into the mud.

Ev started to comfort him, but beams of light flashed through the trees like assassins trying to stab them to the ground.

"Get up!" he ordered Johnson. "Get up now, or you won't have any time left to be sick. We're not going to let that sonuvabitch get the best of us, are we?"

"I don't care," the agent said.

"Then you're a gutless wuss, Johnson," Ev said as he pulled the agent to his feet. "You're a total loss to the country you've sworn to protect from internal enemies. In fact, you're a fucking disaster area, and probably the only way you got hired was because you wore a dress just like J. Edgar's."

"Fuck you!" the FBI man said and pulled away from Ev to surge up the trail.

Their feet seemed to hit every loose rock on the trail, making the ascent twice as hard as it needed to be, but in a few minutes, they were up on the crest of the ridge. Swaying, Johnson collapsed against the stump of a pine while Ev sat down hard, trying to get his breathing back to normal.

After a moment, the FBI agent said, "I never wore a dress."

Ev laughed, despite himself.

"You'd never make it in the FBI, Pick," Johnson said. "No discipline."

"I won't argue with you on that one," Ev said.

The agent said, "You have to stay cool and calm in all situations."

"Panic seems perfectly appropriate to me, right now," Ev said, listening to the shouts below them.

"On that basis alone, you'd wash out in the first weeks of training, and you never would have gotten get to wear J. Edgar's dress," Johnson said. "Shit, you're probably not even aware of the beggars beyond those trees."

"Beggars? Ev said, sitting up and peering into the gathering darkness.

Johnson cackled with self-satisfied glee. "See, I told you. There are beggars in the lobby and in the trees. They're always there."

Ev realized that although he'd initially seemed to be making sense, the agent's mind was rummaging through mental closets and throwing out whatever it happened to find.

"Yeah, well, it's time we get up and get away from those beggars, don't you think?" he prompted Johnson.

"Damned straight," the man said and got to his feet with what Ev was sure was a concussion-induced certainty. "If you're not alert enough to see

them, you'll need me along. They want your money. They always want your money."

"You protect me from them, then, okay?" Ev said as he pushed the agent up the path. "And why don't we keep quiet? That way it'll be harder for them to find us."

"Okay," Johnson said with the sudden simple acquiescence of a child.

Shots rang out, and voices rose up. Ev ignored the clamor since it was obvious the bullets had come nowhere near them. Someone had gotten excited and fired off a few rounds at shadows or a deer. He worked hard to put distance between them and the pursuers while the confusion was straightened out below. He had no doubt as to who was doing the straightening, and once Vern had the mob organized, things would get much more dangerous. The thought plagued him until he pulled the FBI agent up onto the crest of the ridge and stopped to think things through while he caught his breath. The confused ramblings of Johnson poked an idea into his head.

*Confusion is the key, he told himself. It is a mob, and mobs are just that--a group of undisciplined men with nothing more in mind than blood lust. It's like a simple organism that can do nothing more than react blindly to stimulus.*

"That's what we need to do," he said to the agent. "Stimulate them before Vern gets them under control."

"Just give them the beggars the money," Johnson said, the concussion speaking for him. "They'll go away, then. It's easy."

"I wish," Ev said. He looked overhead. The cold wind still drove the flurries, but now and then a moon cold as Vern's heart appeared through the tattered clouds. It was not a good sign. Clear skies meant much colder temperatures. He had to act now, then keep Johnson moving.

Feeling around on the path, he gathered rocks and heaped them up them as quietly as he could. A distant flashlight shot its beam over the pile, showing a preponderance of quartz. Ev waited until the light was pointed elsewhere, then stood up and threw a rock as high and far down the slope as his arm would allow. He heard it brush through the pines, then a clatter down the rocky ground. The lights swung in that direction, followed by a burst of automatic weapons fire. Waiting until the noise dropped down into a scattered popping of rifles, he tossed several more rocks into the middle of the lights.

Someone gave a startled yell, and the weapons opened up again. A scream of "Jesus!" tore through the cold air, and through the pandemonium of noise, Ev could hear Vern screaming, "Cease fire, goddamnit! Cease fire!"

Ev listened in satisfaction as the men either ignored Vern's command or couldn't hear it through all the spraying of bullets through the forest, then he stuffed rocks in his pockets, got Johnson up again and forced him into a run along the top of the ridge. He'd bought time, he knew, but he had to prevent Vern from deciding to do the job all by himself. One trained man was far more dangerous than a ragged mob of would-be soldiers. Ev hoped that the man's pride in his leadership would forestall that option. With Johnson on his hands, he was no match for a Green Beret.

*Hell, even without the FBI agent, I'm not a match for Vern's combat abilities,* he reminded himself.

He stumbled forward with Johnson until they hit a sharp slope running up toward the darkening sky. The agent groaned as he swayed against Ev.

"It's okay," Ev said. "That's Lover's Leap up there. Once we're past it, it's a downhill run."

"Never mind them," Johnson said. "It's the beggars we have to watch out for."

He punctuated his warning by vomiting again. Ev got a shoulder under the man's arm and pulled him up the hill while giving reassurances that the phantom beggars wouldn't be a problem. At the top, they both collapsed against one of the boulders that formed the tumbled promontory of Lover's Leap, a point that overlooked a steep drop into a valley still scarred with the fires of years ago. While Ev caught breath that was becoming increasingly ragged, he listened to the ominous quiet that meant Vern had the mob under control for the moment. The only noise was of heavy-breathing men purposefully marching up the trail and calling out to keep contact with each other. He looked up at Lover's Leap and thought about dragging the FBI agent up there and hiding him among the boulders while he led the pursuers away, but he knew he had no more strength for going up. It had to be down the path that led into the shallow valley. First, he took removed the shoestrings from his running shoes, his fingers fumbling in the cold. He tied the strings together in a knot, then searched along the trail until he found two trees close enough. He stretched the two strings together then stretched the line tightly across the trail at ankle height. Going back for Johnson, he helped the agent across the tripwire and they stumbled down the trail together, Ev's shoes flopping about his feet.

When Johnson needed to rest again, Ev removed his suit coat before setting him down, assuring the agent that it would help keep the beggars away. Then, he felt his way carefully into the woods and draped the coat on a sapling swaying in the hard breeze. He sat with Johnson until a startled shout and sudden burst of fire from down the trail alerted him that his shoestrings had done their job. He helped the agent up, grabbed him by the hand and pulled him along behind as they felt their way down the steep

part of the trail that led into the valley split by the frozen creek. Ev cursed the impossibility of staying silent on the loose rock strewn along the path. Their shoes sent out betraying crunches at every step. When they both fell and slid halfway down the path in a clatter of pebbles and rocks, he knew a decision had to be made.

"Take your shoes off!" he told Johnson.

"Are you crazy?" the FBI agent said. "The beggars are around."

"Get them off!" Ev ordered.

"No," the agent said. The petulant tone told Ev that it was the refusal of Johnson's suddenly childish brain.

"It'll keep the beggars away," he tried.

Johnson was silent for a moment, then said, "Promise?"

"Promise."

"Okay."

Ev took the offered shoes and stripped the strings out of them as he'd done with his boots. Then, he decided he need take things one step further if he wanted to continue slowing down the pursuing mob. Taking off his socks, he pulled rocks from his pockets and stuffed them into the toes and knotted them in tightly before helping Johnson to his feet and setting off down the trail with his shoes in hand.

The cold, sharp rocks hurt his feet terribly, but the FBI agent's vocal protestations about the pain kept him busy trying to keep Johnson quiet. Behind them, voices rose eagerly at the noise generated by the federal agent. Ev cursed the mountainous terrain. With granite boulders strewn all about them, sound carried to the pursuers as easily as if they'd been standing next to each other instead of hundreds of yards apart.

*At least I hope it's hundreds of yards,* Ev thought as he pulled the complaining Johnson down the path. *There's no way to tell.*

When they came around an outcropping, Ev knew he had his next trap. An oak sapling grew on the left side of the trail above the creek, next to a toppled pine. On the opposite side was a willow bush. He tied one of the weighted socks to the sapling with Johnson's shoestrings, then bent the oak taut and ran the shoe string under an exposed root and across the path to the bush. He judged the field of vision from the outcropping as best he could, selected a high patch of sumac, and placed his shoes where they could easily be seen. Hopefully, the sight of them would distract the pursuers from their vigilance about his booby traps. Then, he picked up rocks from the trail and threw them back in the direction of the mob, using the noise as a lure to goad the men into unthinking action.

A cry rose up again at the clatter of rocks in the forest, and Ev permitted himself a smile of satisfaction. He had no illusions about

escaping the mob, but it was always sweet to prove your enemy a fool--it made dying that much more palatable.

"More beggars?" Johnson cried.

"About as a good a description as I can think of at the moment," Ev said. "Come on. Let's keep going."

"My feet hurt!" the FBI agent said.

"Mine too," Ev said. "Let's get home as fast as we can, so we can give them a rest, okay?"

"I want to go home," Johnson said.

"Then, keep to the trail and run!" Ev ordered.

The young agent obeyed, charging noisily down the snow-spotted trail and out of sight. Ev checked the progress of Vern's mob, then followed Johnson, checking the trail for ambush opportunities as deliberately as he could under the circumstances. He didn't find any until a sudden splash up ahead jogged his memory. He hurried forward and found the agent sitting in the middle of the swift waters of the icy stream. The FBI man had missed the thick wooden plank that served as a foot bridge across the water.

"It's cold," Johnson complained.

"I'll bet," Ev said, helping the agent up. "Come on, get on the other side and keep moving. You don't want to freeze now, do you?"

"Oh, no!" Johnson said with the exaggerated horror produced by his stunned brain. He turned about, waded through the creek, and ran into the darkness through a thick patch of brush that bounded the trail.

Using the remaining weighted sock, Ev tied it to a sapling in plain sight as a decoy, then worked two rocks free from the stream bed and put one on each side of the water. He balanced the plank off-center on the rocks, broke off willow branches, and camouflaged each end of the plank, trusting the darkness to hide his handiwork.

A grunt of pain and a shout of "Jesus Christ!" amidst more gunfire told him the mob had sprung his last booby trap, but he didn't wait to savor his success. He waded the stream and ran after the FBI agent. The scalding numbness of his feet told him that Johnson hadn't been joking about the temperature of the water. The only good thing about it, as far as he was concerned, was that it dulled the pain inflicted by the sharp rocks on the path.

A flash of light, followed by a burst of gun fire, caught him before he could disappear into the night. He dove to the ground amidst sumac and low-crawled frantically for the pines as the automatic weapons swept the forest with their indiscriminate, but deadly fire. When it died down, he got up and sprinted for the nearest tree. Bullets blew apart the bark as he ducked behind the trunk, cursing lodgepole pines for having such narrow



trunks. He didn't wait for the next burst. He ran low through the trees and back onto the path behind the cover of chokecherry bushes. The hue and cry behind him dissolved into a whoop of surprise, followed by a sudden, heavy splashing of water. A nasty, hollow *thunk* told him someone had caught his head on a rock. A scream of rage bounced off the granite sides of the valley, prompting another wild burst of gunfire. None of it came near Ev, and he was congratulating himself on his tactics when a single *craack* from up ahead froze him into place. Unlike the random bursts from the creek, this shot had purpose behind it.

*Far too much purpose*, Ev thought, then he cursed himself silently. Vern knew the trail every bit as well as he did. He hadn't even been worrying about keeping the rabble in order. They were amateurs, and he knew they couldn't find their asses with both hands. Instead, he'd used them as a diversion, keeping Ev busy while he got into ambush position.

Ev slapped himself again mentally and thought, *Of course, Vern would want to make the kill alone. His pride wouldn't let someone else do the job for him.* He felt sweat break out in spite of the cold. He had a good idea of what had just happened to Johnson, but he couldn't leave the man alone on the trail in case he was still in one piece. The trouble was, Vern would be expecting him to do just that.

*There's nothing I can do for Johnson right now*, he thought.

Ev pushed down the panic threatening to overwhelm him. He looked about in the darkness, trying to collect his thoughts. He couldn't go straight down the trail, that much was obvious. But, it was damned near impossible to stay quiet off the path. Old-growth forest, windfall, and the sound-reflecting rocks made the valley a giant echo chamber.

*And*, he thought ruefully, *I'm a big man, about as quiet as an elephant.*

He considered climbing into a tree and waiting for the mob to sweep by, but dismissed that immediately. With high canopies and bare trunks, lodgepole pines offered no cover.

*I might as well put a "Shoot me!" sign on my back*, he thought.

There was no chance of digging into the ground, either. The floor of the valley was all rock, covered by a thin layer of half-frozen soil.

He'd need a jackhammer to dig a hole.

Random shots and the whining of bullets through the valley made his decision for him. He had to go back toward the mob. It was his only chance.

He had to figure out how to stay hidden and fast.

## Chapter 75

### Cold

Ev scrambled into the trail, pulled the knife free, looked down at the blade and made a quick decision.

He'd planned to use it to defend himself against the mob, but an important question had popped into his mind--what use was a knife against automatic weapons?

*Maybe in the hands of a trained killer, he told himself, which I'm definitely not.*

Instead, he hurried back down the path and placed the weapon where the blade could easily reflect light. Then, he came back and dived across a small snow drift to avoid leaving telltale footprints and rolled under the trunk of a downed scrub oak. He stilled his breathing and waited.

Seconds later, the tramping of boots burst around the rocks, then stopped as the men flashed their lights about the area.

"Where the fuck is he? That's what I want to know," one man said. "The man's big as a moose."

"Well, one thing I know, Tommy," a rough voice answered. It was Arlo. "He sure as shit isn't wet."

Tommy's angry shout cut the snickering short. "Oh, he's going to be wet when I catch him, only it won't be from water."

"Talk, talk, talk," Arlo said. "We're just talking while he's making idiots out of us. And he's got a wounded man with him, for Christ's sake."

"Maybe not any more," some one said. "You heard that shot up ahead, didn't you?"

"Let's check it out," Arlo said. "But cover the ground between here and there carefully. We don't want him to slip in behind us."

"Shit, what's he going to do?" Tommy asked. "All he's got is a knife, that's what Sarvis said."

"Exactly, you idiot," Arlo said.

"Exactly what?" Tommy demanded.

"Exactly that you're getting sloppy already just because you've got a rifle and he's only got a knife. The man's had combat experience, remember?"

"He was a medic, for God's sake," Tommy said. "He's not Medal of Honor material, now, is he?"

Arlo said, "How much combat have you seen?"

Silence greeted this question, and the deputy continued, "You'll be lucky if you don't find that Mexican's blade giving you a second smile."

"I don't think so," Tommy said, a smug note of triumph in his voice. "Look at that!"

"What, damnit?" Arlo said.

"He dropped the knife. I see it up ahead. Now, he doesn't have any weapons at all," Tommy said. "I don't guess I have to worry about that smile now, do I, Deputy?"

"All right, all right," Arlo said. "The valley narrows ahead. Spread out, but make sure you're in touch with each other and watch the rocks as well as the ground. If Pick decides to land on you hard, you're history."

Ev let out a breath as the men obeyed the deputy's command. Then, he froze as Arlo spoke again.

"Tommy, you stay here in case he's somehow managed to hide himself better than we think he can."

"Aw, shit, man, I don't wanna do that," Tommy complained in a slurred voice that came from above a swinging gas lantern.

"You're too fucking drunk to be of any help, anyway," Arlo said. "We're in more danger from your M-16 than Pick is."

"I didn't mean to," the man said in a sheepish tone. "I didn't know the safety was off."

"Exactly," Arlo said. "That's why you're staying here. You can shoot Pick if he shows up or you can blow your own fool head off. The only thing you're not going to do is shoot one of us."

Ev listened as the men headed away in a snap of twigs and crunching of rocks and was congratulating himself on his luck when the drunken guard lurched down onto the ground with the lantern, struck the rifle butt on the ground, and triggered a 3-round burst that tore over Ev's head and whined off the rocks on the other side of the valley. Ev flattened his body against the ground, his silent curses matching those accompanying the footsteps hurrying back down the trail.

"Did you see him?" Arlo asked.

There was a moment of silence, then Tommy said, "Yeah, yeah, I did."

"Where?"

"Over there, by those windfall trees."

"You actually saw him?" Arlo demanded.

"For sure," Tommy answered. "I might have even wounded him. Look for blood."

"Blood, my ass," the deputy said. "I think you fucked up again and got lucky that you didn't shoot yourself in the foot."

Sweat broke out anew on Ev as he listened to Tommy say, "Well, shit, if you don't believe me, go have a look for yourself."

The deputy gave a deep sigh of exasperation at Bud's answer. "You're one lying motherfucker, and we both know it, but we better check it out."

"You'll see," Tommy insisted.

"You'll see first, Arlo. Get your ass up and out in front of us."

"Why?"

"So you don't shoot any of us, you moron. Now, get going, or I'll take that weapon away and leave you here for Pick."

Ev listened as Tommy grunted and struggled to his feet, then complained, "I don't want to."

The deputy said, "Tough titty, man. Move."

Panic rose up in Ev as the drunken man stumbled off the trail and straight toward him, swinging his lantern rapidly back and forth as if terrified something would spring out of the dark at any moment.

*Two choices*, Ev told himself. *Stay put or run like hell.*

He decided to run, but when he put his palms to the ground to lift his body into motion, one hand came down on top of a sharp rock. Without thinking, he made a third choice. Getting quietly to his knees, he picked up the rock and when the lantern swung away, he threw the rock as hard as he could at the drunk. Tommy screamed when the stone caught his chest, dropped the lantern, and fired wildly into the dark. The reaction reminded Ev of a pack of dogs--when one barks, they all bark. Muzzle blasts lit up the night like heat lightning. A terrified scream of pain cut through all the noise and caused the firing to stop, allowing Arlo to curse the mob into silence.

"Did we get him?" someone asked.

"We probably shot a lot of fucking trees, you idiots. Now, give me a goddamn light," Arlo demanded.

A lantern swung up the ground and was handed to the deputy. The light moved around the area until it came to a point ten feet directly in front of Ev.

"Oh, we got him all right," Arlo said.

"We did?" a voice asked eagerly.

"Come here and look, shitheads," the deputy ordered.

After a second of silence, some one said, "Jesus!"

"That's right," Arlo said. "You didn't kill Pick, you killed Tommy--not that he didn't have it coming. Have you got the point now? Don't shoot unless you're sure you've got Pick in your sights--unless you enjoy killing each other more."

A strained silence was broken by a question. "Do you think he really saw something?"

Ev willed the deputy to give the answer he wanted.

"The only thing he saw was nothing," Arlo answered. "Even if Pick had been here, he's gone now. Grab Tommy's weapon and keep looking."

Ev let out a slow, silent breath and waited until the sound of boots on the trail faded into the distance, then he waited some more to make sure Arlo hadn't set up an ambush for him. A burst of gunfire far out into the darkness finally told him he was safe for the moment. He scrambled up from the ground and stopped by Tommy's body to see if any weapons had been missed. Patting down the clothing, he worked his way up to the man's head and checked him as he'd done so many times in Vietnam in case Arlo was wrong and Tommy was still alive. There were no weapons, and the drunk was definitely not alive. Even in the dark, it was clear that a single shot had deliberately been fired into the back of the head. Ev felt a small hole above the neck where the bullet had entered, then smashed through the brain to blow a large part of Bud's forehead away. A chill ran down Ev's spine as he considered the ruthless cool of the deputy, who, in the midst of chaos, had stepped forward and executed a man he considered an impediment to his mission. It was a thought that drove him onto the path and back toward the trail entrance.

Running hard until he came to the long downward slope that led to where the vehicles were parked, Ev stopped to take a rest until his breathing returned to normal

*Every sign I've seen so far indicates that Vern is a cautious and methodical hunter, he thought. It's a certainty he's posted at least one guard at the trail head.*

Ignoring his freezing feet, Ev went down the path as quietly as he could, listening intently for the telltale signs of a weapon rattling. He crept down to the last few feet of trees without hearing any sound and knelt behind a clump of ragweed to survey the erratically parked vehicles. There was a guard, with a rifle slung over his shoulder. The man paced back and forth blowing on his cold hands. He stopped now and then to look longingly back at a lighted Chevy pickup that apparently had its engine running to provide heat for the lone occupant. Ev started as the figure moved in the passenger seat as if it were trying to get more comfortable. Even in the dim light, it was obvious who the passenger was.

Lorena.

*Of course, Ev thought, Vern wasn't about to leave her behind in case she tried to escape, and he knew damned well she'd try even in her condition. Not to mention that he'd want her to see me executed.*

Ev swore under his breath.

He'd hoped to simply sneak away until he was clear of the guard, but there was no way he could leave Lorena behind. He decided he had to take out the guard by working his way to the west and then coming in from the opposite direction. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was the only one he could think of at the moment.

Rising silently to put it into action, he turned and smashed his nose into the cold metal of a barrel with a bore so big he thought he could put his head into it.

## **Chapter 76**

### **Big Game**

Ev rose slowly as the man shoved the weapon up under his nose. The shape was somehow familiar. Talking fast, he tried to figure out who it was.

"What is that thing?" he asked, pointing at the barrel. "It's like a damned cannon."

"Something bigger than you, that's for sure," the man said.

The single parking lot pole gave just enough light that Ev could see he was thin and apparently not strong enough to hold the powerful rifle level for any amount of time. He kept shifting it into a more comfortable position.

"For shooting what, for God's sake?" Ev asked.

"Elephants."

"Elephants? We're a little short of them around here, aren't we?" Ev said.

"Just one," Vern's man said. "I'm looking at him right now. Come on, get your ass over to the truck."

Ev obeyed as the rifle poked hard into his belly. He walked down the trail and out of the trees toward Lorena. She started when she saw him and rolled down the window quickly.

"Are you all right?" she called.

"I don't know about that," he replied, nodding toward the holder of elephant gun, "but I'm still alive."

Lorena said, "Lamarr, for God's sake, do you have to carry that monster around? I'm afraid you'll kill us all with that thing."

Ev turned in shock. "Lamar? What are you doing here? You shouldn't be out with these men."

The teenager scowled at him. "They didn't want me along, so they posted me back here to take care of Lorena and act as a backup sentry in case you got through--which you did and right back into our hands, I'll add."

"But, an elephant gun?" Ev asked.

Lamarr looked sheepish for a moment, then said belligerently, "It's all they had left, and they said I needed something big enough to hit the broad side of a barn." He grinned briefly and added, "I'd say I could take out the side of the whole county if I had a mind to."

"And do you have a mind to?" Ev asked.

"If you put me hard up against it," the teenager said. "Now, cut the conversation and let me talk to Vern. Lorena, hand me the microphone."

Ev knew that he couldn't let the message through. He didn't have enough strength to survive another chase. He waited until Lamarr planted the butt of the rifle against his hip while the boy reached for the microphone offered to him, then he took a chance and kicked the boy hard in the stomach. The teenager's finger reflexively pulled the trigger. An explosion erupted from the barrel as if it had been packed with dynamite instead of a shell. The echoing "BOOOOOOOOM!" deafened Ev, but the recoil blew Lamarr off his feet and onto the ground. Ev had no idea if an elephant gun could fire more than a single round, but he had no intention of finding out. Ripping the weapon out of the stunned boy's hands, he prepared to deliver a hard punch to the teenager's chin, then saw the blood. Above the elbow, most of Lamar's left arm was gone.

Ev placed the rifle cautiously in the back of the pickup, then picked up Lamarr and put him next to the weapon, making sure the boy's head wouldn't bang against the pile of pipes and fence posts littering the metal floor. Then, he tore off his shirt and wrapped a tourniquet high on the teenager's arm.

Getting into the cab, he gave Lorena a swift hug before looking down at the ignition in astonishment.

"Lamarr is so stupid he left the keys in it, and you didn't try to escape?" he asked.

"No," she answered. It was dark around her eyes, darker than the bruises that covered her neck and arms. She rubbed her hands reflexively over her swollen stomach, and Ev could see a splint on one of her little fingers.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"I don't feel very well," she said. "I'm bleeding, and I'm weak. I didn't have the strength to go anywhere. I'm tired, so very tired."

"The baby?" Ev asked.

"I think so," Lorena answered. "Something's wrong."

Ev slapped the Chevy into gear and stepped on the accelerator as he said, "Then, it's time for the hospital."

He ignored the crackling inquiry of "Lamarr?" from the radio and goosed the pickup off the dirt road and back onto the highway. It was 25 miles to Rapid Regional.

As a sudden pain crackled through his numbed toes, Ev hoped there was enough time.

For both Lorena and Lamar.



## Chapter 77

### Gone

Rain and sleet pelted down on the back of the FBI agent's head, sticking in the gore dripping from his blonde hair and puddling on the frozen ground. Vern looked down at the body, not really satisfied with the kill. The best part of getting some was the thrill of being alive to celebrate your superior combat skills, but young Johnson hadn't been a match for him even when he was in his right mind.

*So, I did the honorable thing, Vern thought. Dispatched him with one bullet. He never knew what hit him.*

He thought about disposing of the body, but left it for the coyotes when wild automatic weapons fire erupted down the trail. Cursing the blundering trigger-happy fools he had to work with, he forced himself not to run on the slippery ground, but kept at a hard, fast-walking pace that allowed him maximum speed and footing.

*Besides, he told himself, either they've got him or not. If they've got him, no problem. If not, you'll face a whole set of new problems, and you'll need a clear head to solve them.*

The lights and angry voices made it easy to locate the men. Vern burst into the midst of an insane argument as to who was at fault and slugged the first man he came to. The drop of his body onto his ground brought an instant silence.

"Goddamn!" Vern told the group, "You wouldn't have lasted two minutes in Nam. Haven't you people ever heard of quiet?"

When they fell silent, he said, "Let me guess. You don't have Pick."

"Yeah, well, what about the FBI man. Where is he?" an embarrassed voice demanded from the dark.

Vern shone the light and discovered it was the editor doing the talking. "Where do you think he is, Hardemann?" Vern asked, then answered quickly to quell any more insubordination. "He's on the ground back there with a bullet in his head. Can you say the same about Pick?"

A chagrined hush answered him.

"Fuck!" he said. "Double fuck!"

*Who would have guessed it? he thought. The FBI man goes down, and Pick escapes. Luck is truly a bitch.*

"What do we do?" Arlo asked.

Damping the current of fear running under his thoughts, Vern said, "We have two choices. Find Pick, and there's a slim chance of that with you morons on the job. Or we act fast and move the arsenal."

"Again?" someone said with a groan.

"Pick knows the location now, idiot," the deputy said. "You can bet he's going to holler long and hard into Lonny and the FBI's ear."

"Where do we move it then?" Maj Reno asked.

"Right into plain sight," Vern answered. "Take it to the Temple America."

Maj said, "What are you going to tell Moses?"

"Nothing. We won't tell him a thing unless he asks. If he does ask, we'll tell him it's building supplies to finish off the remainder of the building project. He'll buy it because he's so full of shit about making the Temple a national presence. Believe me, he'll never even--"

A huge *BOOOOOOM* echoed up the trail.

"Jesus, what was that?" someone said. "A cannon?"

"No," Vern said. "But it's a very large caliber piece."

"It's Lamarr!" the editor said. "My boy's got him."

"That would be sweet justice now, wouldn't it?" Vern said while thinking, *Not bloody likely. Pick is gone for sure.* "Let's get down there and make sure. Move."

Vern held Arlo back while the others trampled down the path. The deputy stopped immediately, understanding.

"Don't worry, Vern," he said as they kept a safe distance from the mob. "I don't want to get myself shot by my own side. I've seen enough of that tonight." He nodded toward the side of the trail when they came to a pair of feet sticking out of the brush. "Tommy got himself nailed by the mob already."

Shining his flashlight on the body, Vern saw the blood from a single shot in the head. There was only one man in the group who could aim that well in the midst of chaos, but he merely said, "Well, at least one of our people can shoot."

Arlo's quick jerk of a smile showed in the light. "Shall we catch up with them?"

"Yeah, deputy, we'll do that, but let's take our time. If that idiot boy caught Pick, I'll pay the federal debt off myself."

It was no harder finding the group the second time. Shouts, curses, and the sound of grunts as feet slipped and bodies hit the ground led Vern and Arlo down the path and back to the vehicles.

"Well?" he asked as they stepped out from the trees and onto the ice-coated grass.

"He's gone," the editor said. "They're all gone."

"Who, besides Pick?" Vern said in sudden alarm.

"Lamarr, your wife, him, they're all gone. See, your truck isn't here, anymore."

"Damn!" Vern swore. He'd forgotten all about Lorena.

"Oh, man, the shit's hit the fan now," Arlo said. "We stood a chance with Pick because nobody would believe him, but if your wife backs him up and Lamarr spills the beans, we're up the fucking creek."

"Shut up!" Vern said. "Nothing's changed. We do just as I said. Get the munitions out of the cave and over to the Temple America."

"Vern," the deputy said. "I can't go back to town now. They'll talk to Lonny, and he'll know for sure now."

There was a note of desperation in Arlo's voice as if he suddenly realized how deep he was into the whole thing. Annoyed, Vern said, 'sure you can. Bluff it out with Lonny until I give you the word. You made a commitment. Honor it now.'

"But, man, I don't--"

"It moves the timetable up, that's all," Vern interrupted to keep the deputy from thinking too hard about his situation. "You knew this moment was coming. It's just coming sooner, that's all. This is the good part, deputy, the exciting part--I know I've been there before."

"Well, I haven't," Arlo said.

"Shit, you've faced down criminals before, haven't you?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Now you're facing down the biggest criminal of all," Vern said. "The state and federal governments who cut the Jews and mud people too much slack and sheriffs who don't realize they should be the highest local authority. This *is* the cause you're fighting for, isn't it?"

"All right, all right," the deputy said. "I'm committed. You don't have to keep on talking. But what about you? You're in the same boat."

"Ain't it the truth?" Vern said, feeling a rush of excitement.

*My blood is up, there's no doubt about that, he thought. This is what it's all about, this is what's beneath all the rhetoric of any political belief you'd care to name--blood is the common bond, blood and who gets to spill it first.*

"Drop me off at the Temple so I can handle Moses, then just keep on with your regular patrol. If Pick asks questions, stonewall him. Keep the seeds of doubt in his mind."

"How are you going to move those tanks?" Arlo asked.

"The simplest way," Vern replied. "Cross-country. We haven't got time to put them on carriers. Our drivers are well-trained enough now to move them."

Vern instructed the men on what to do with the munitions, then jumped into the cruiser with Arlo. As they drove out onto the road, he asked Arlo to adjust the radio frequency, then took the microphone as the deputy sped toward the Temple.

"Pick," he said into the mike, "you've got my wife. I want Lorena back. Now. Otherwise, matters will get out of hand, and you wouldn't want that, would you?"

The radio crackled, but there was no response. It didn't matter. Vern didn't expect any.

"Pick, Lorena," he said again, "I know you're headed toward town. I will be too, soon. I'll see you there, but I don't think you'll enjoy my visit."

When there was still no response, Vern put the microphone back in its holder.

"Will you really going back into town?" Arlo asked. "Or were you just trying to jack them up?"

"Both," Vern answered.

"You're crazy. You can't go back there."

"Arlo, it'll be a piece of cake. As a matter of fact, it'll be a piece of cake and a surprise party, all in one."

"But what if you're caught?" the deputy said. "That blows the whole plan."

"A Special Forces man doesn't get caught," Vern answered. "He does the catching."

Funny and heartbreaking, American Job is the story of Everett Pick, a common man afflicted by all the ills of modern America. Like Job, he endures everything while remaining committed to the ideals of fairness, justice, and simple love.

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