

A photograph of a white and teal helicopter flying over a lush green valley with steep, rocky mountains in the background. The helicopter is in the center of the frame, flying towards the left. The background shows a deep valley with green vegetation and brown rock formations under a clear blue sky.

MICHAEL GIERE

*Justice on
the Mountain*

White River Series Book Two

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Cover: Karen Fuller

For Robert & Melanie, Lauren & Ian, & Katherine; you bring inexpressible joy to my life.

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Chapter 1

Tyler Martin was running as fast as his nine year old body could go. His lungs ached and beads of sweat trickled off his nose and down his cheeks from their headwaters in his buzz-cut blonde hair. It seemed to him that with nearly every stride he took he could feel the sharp stab of rock or the hard nub of a root probing the bottom of his sneakers. It didn't matter. He couldn't stop until he was where he was told to be.

His rail thin body was tilted forward trying to avoid the over-growth on what was a rutted dirt-brown strip of deer path, sloping inward like a spoon and only several feet wide. Just ahead, he saw where the path intersected into the much wider dirt and gravel strip of a seldom used, unmarked trail.

Turning onto the trail he saw he was close now.

Tyler didn't know it and he wouldn't care if he had, but the old trails like this one had been cut out by the prospectors and miners who came to the Western Slope of the Colorado Rockies beginning in the 1850's. The trails were the vital veins that carried both the hope and energy of a long forgotten army of men who searched for nuggets of gold and seams of silver in the unforgiving mountains. More often than not, they left by the same trails that had sustained them, leaving their dreams behind. Down through the cascading decades many of the old mining trails were largely reclaimed by nature and the weather and, like this one, only saw an occasional hunter or hiker who had wandered deep into the wilderness area bordering the White River National Forest.

Tyler saw his spot. He stopped, heaving and panting with his hands on his knees trying to grab hold of enough oxygen in the high altitude to calm his racing heart. The only notice to his arrival was a brief chorus of squawks from a number of angry blackbirds in a nearby pine tree, followed by a deathly stillness. Not a whisper of wind, not a flutter of a wing, not a rummaging squirrel. Nothing. It was as though everything in nature was conspiring together in secret.

Locating the exact spot he needed to be, he collapsed on his bottom near the edge of the trail and rubbed his hand over the bare smooth skin on his chest and stomach, wiping away the perspiration in the unusually hot mid-summer temperatures. His throat ached for a cool drink of water, but he'd slipped out of the seat of the Kawasaki all-terrain-vehicle just as soon as it stopped. All he could concentrate on was running down the deer path as fast as he could to be where he needed to be, as soon as he could get there.



Deputy Sheriff Sharon Toro shifted in the seat of her four wheel drive Tahoe, adjusting to the rattling and banging of the SUV as it made its way over the rutted and rock strewn trail. She was going as fast as she could with the conditions, while trying to keep a lookout at the same time. Should be pretty close she judged.

Sharon hadn't felt right about this call when the dispatcher assigned her, but after twenty years as a Deputy with the Garfield County Sheriff's Department she knew that

she didn't get to choose the calls she did or didn't feel good about. But that didn't mean she had to like it. Sharon simply couldn't shake the feeling that something felt odd about this one. It all seemed almost too coincidental.

Sharon picked up the radio mic and tried again to reach the dispatcher at the Sheriff's Department headquarters in Glenwood Springs, but wasn't surprised to find there was no reception so far into the mountains. Pulling her cell phone off her duty belt, she was even less surprised to see that it had no signal either.

The veteran Deputy only wanted to hear the dispatcher tell her again *exactly* what the caller had reported in the 911 call and go over the details once more in case she had missed something. She glanced at her scribbling on a note pad:

Hunter called from pay phone off Route 108, close to Wild Spruce Creek service rd. Saw white male child - looks lost - walking alone up the unmarked trail - splits from Wild Spruce at the 1 1/2 mile mark. Child didn't respond - kept walking up the trail - shorts and shoes - nothing else with him. Hunter didn't want to get involved.

Flipping the note pad shut she mused out loud, "Hmm, it just doesn't seem to square somehow."

Sharon lived with her husband, Floyd Marshall, at the Miner's Trail hunting camp southwest of Carbondale, in a remote far corner of Garfield County, and would often work areas south of Glenwood Springs and Carbondale, so it wasn't unusual that she would get assigned a call because there was no other deputy close. In hindsight, however, she wished that she had asked the dispatcher to contact the closest available deputy for backup. *But it's a little late for that now.* The Deputy frowned at her slip up.

Glancing at the trip odometer, Sharon was just over one mile in on the unmarked trail which was leading her higher and deeper into a very isolated finger of the county. Before long she'd cross over the boundary into the White River National Forest's southwestern end, knowing that the further she went, the more difficult the old trail would become.

She was thinking about how far a kid could walk if he had stayed on the trail when she saw a blond headed boy sitting alone on the edge of the trail. Any nagging concern for her own safety was overcome by her sense of responsibility and a mother's alarm for this young boy sitting in the middle of nowhere wearing only a pair of shorts and sneakers.

The boy didn't move as Sharon pulled up within ten feet of him. She left the Tahoe running and stepped out of the truck, and carefully looked around in both directions. Moving clear of the open door she asked in casual voice, "Hi there buddy, everything okay today?"

Still a bit flushed from running, Tyler simply looked at Sharon and didn't respond. She moved closer and guessed that the child couldn't be more than nine or ten years old. *What's going on here?*

"So, are you lost, or did you walk away from your campsite?" As she said it, Sharon looked around herself again in a 180 degree sweep in both directions wondering if she had missed something obvious. There was no noise except the soft vibration of the Tahoe's engine.

Tyler shook his head *no*.

Sharon nodded her head knowingly. "Okay, where are your parents, what brings you up this trail? Are they hiking or hunting nearby?"

The boy again shook his head indicating *no*.

Finally, and with a touch of exasperation, the Deputy moved still closer to the boy and squatted in front of him where she could look him right in the eyes to get his full attention.

"My name is Sharon, Sharon Toro. What's your name?"

Still there was no answer.

Sharon's lips pursed and she nodded her head. "Okay. Look, I really want to help you here. And no one is in trouble, you understand that, right?" She extended her hand in emphasis. "We just need to find your parents."

In the same instant that the final word left her mouth, Sharon recognized the danger as the boy's eyes darted up, looking over her shoulder and focusing on something behind her.

She knew it was too late even before she felt the cold round barrel of the gun pushing roughly into the back of her head.

Instead of shock or terror, Sharon was more furious with herself in that split second for not listening to her instincts and for letting herself be trapped into this situation by a kid in grade school.

She saw the lips of the boy turn up in a truly wicked grin at his achievement.

The man's voice behind her was raspy and gruff, probably southern she thought. "Lady, one move and I'll blow your head off. Understand?" Sharon didn't move or respond, but was weighing any options for resistance she could think of. Not one came to mind. "Do you understand lady? Yes or no?" the man screamed, with his raspy voice turning shrill.

The Deputy just shook her head up and down while she instinctively extended her hands away from her body where the man could see them.

"Good. Next time you don't answer me straight away, I'll bust your head with this gun - make your brain rattle round, get it?"

Sharon shook her head in acknowledgement.

"Now, little lady, put your hands on top of your head, slow as you please. And you stand up an' be slow about that too."

Sharon had left her hat in the SUV. She crossed her hands resting in her dark brown hair that was pulled back in a short pony tail with bobby pins keeping it off her ears. She stood up slowly.

"Now you keep goin' real slow and we'll be fine. I want you to reach in front of you with one hand and undo that belt an' drop that gun and phone from your hip." She could feel the gun barrel push harder into the back of her head.

Her duty belt carried a holstered 9mm Beretta semi-automatic, two additional loaded ammunition clips, a stun gun, pepper spray, small flashlight, handcuffs and a clip-on cell phone. The belt fell to the dirt and gravel trail with a thud.

"Where's the mobile radio?" He stretched out the *bile* in mobile, and Sharon couldn't tell if it was affectation or authentic.

"In the truck."

"Good." The raspy voice continued. "Now, I want you to spread your legs apart nice and wide and hold your arms out as far as 'ya can."

Sharon complied and wasn't surprised when her captor seemed to allow his hands to linger as he was patting her down. He retrieved her pocket knife, her wallet, and forty dollars.

"You're a nice looking gal there Miss Toro; mighty nice looking." His words hung in the air a moment too long.

"My husband thinks so," Sharon stated sharply. She was under no illusion that her marital status carried much, if any, weight with a man like this, but she had made a snap calculation that it was worth a try. Then Sharon realized, since she hadn't faced the gunman, that he couldn't have seen her name tag on the front of her shirt pocket. *How'd he know my name? That isn't good - not good at all*, she thought.

"Yeah, we'll talk about him later. Gimme those cuffs boy and you put your hands back on your head," he poked her with the gun barrel. She couldn't see the man's sneer, but only felt him handcuff her left hand while it was on her head, using the cuffs the boy provided him from her own duty belt. Then he pulled both of her hands roughly down behind her back and locked both wrists together. For the first time a small wave of helplessness approached her, as she stood with her hands fast behind her, stripped of the visual and mental authority that her duty belt afforded. Her fear was that that first wave of helplessness only announced the storm to come.

Next he pushed her feet together and she looked down to see his hands wrapping and binding her ankles together with nylon rope. "Now, you just have to sit here," and he spun her around facing him and pushed her with enough force that she dropped hard to the dirt on her backside like a heavy sack, unable to brace the fall without her hands or the ability to shift her weight with her legs. The man smiled, "I'll be back in a jiffy, soon as I fix up your truck." Then he ordered, "Watch her." The boy simply nodded.

Sitting in the middle of the trail, she was finally facing the man. He was of average height and build and he was filthy. His long stringy dark hair may have been brown for all she knew, because it obviously hadn't been washed in a while. It had the sheen of a rat, an image reinforced by his narrow and sharp nose guarding close set, dark eyes. He was wearing well-worn Timberland hiking boots with black socks and a pair of khaki cargo shorts that were tattered and stained, held up with a thick army-style canvas belt. The dirty T-shirt he wore had various stains down the front. He was still pointing the business end of his .45 caliber Smith and Wesson semi-automatic with dark wood handle inserts in Sharon's direction. She also noted that he carried a sheathed hand ax attached to his belt.

In that fleeting moment she had a vision of putting the ax in his skull.

The man retrieved the duty belt from where it had fallen and took Sharon's cell phone off the belt and set it down on the road, stomping on it with his right boot a

number of times, which made sharp crunching and grinding sounds. Satisfied, he scooped up the pieces of the phone and tossed them into the trees. Holstering his own weapon, he next took Sharon's Berretta out of its holster and examined it with the care of a dad holding his new born baby for the first time. Turning to her he beamed, "Nice. Ya' won't be needin' this anytime soon, will 'ya?"

The Deputy coldly stared at him. Then she offered flatly, "Well, be honest, I wish I had it right now."

The man looked at her for several moments and finally broke out in a broad grin. She noticed a large gap where he was missing two teeth on the front left side of his upper jaw. "Well now, I'll just bet 'ya do."

Watching as the man put the Beretta back in the holster and walk towards the Tahoe, it crossed her mind that he didn't care whether she saw his face or not. *That can't be a good sign either*, she considered to herself. *Can't be good at all.*

With her knees folded up nearly to her chest, she took the chance to dig the heels of her work boots into the dirt road creating two deep divots, thinking they'd indicate her presence should someone come looking for her up this trail. It was all she could think to do. Both her training and her experience in a long career in law enforcement were spitting out scenarios and options in her mind faster than she could sort them out. But behind them was the growing sense of peril and danger. *Oh, Lord Jesus, grant me Your peace - have mercy on me.*

The man climbed behind the wheel of the Tahoe and backed up a few yards, and then pulled out and drove off until he was out of sight further up the trail. Not long afterwards Sharon heard muffled sounds of metal crunching and bending, followed by the distinct noise of safety glass busting out of its frame. Presently, the man reappeared on foot with her duty belt slung over one shoulder and carrying the Remington 870P 12 gauge shotgun that had been mounted in the Tahoe. He looked at Sharon and the boy. "Yep. Yanked that radio clear out of the dash and busted it pretty good. Won't be using it, anyhow."

He focused on Sharon with a triumphal sneer. "Rolled that nice truck of yours down a good steep ravine a ways up the road here. I'm thinking it'll be awhile till they find it. An' we'll be long gone by then—long gone."

Sharon looked at him with no expression. "Hope you got my gym bag out of the back."

Momentarily stumped, the man gazed at her. Then he smiled, as though he guessed that she was being difficult on purpose.

"Nope. Didn't see no gym bag lady," he answered. "Let's get a move on, we've got some ground to cover. Help her up boy, we're done here."

Chapter 2

Young Tyler led Sharon Toro and the man back to the deer path that he'd run down only a short time before. He was thankful that he didn't have to run up the long rutted grade at least. Deputy Toro's heavy duty belt was now laid over the boy's bare left shoulder and he clung to the buckle with his left hand. The man had untied the knot that had bound Sharon's ankles and let out just enough of the nylon rope for her to walk with an abbreviated stride, while her hands remained in handcuffs behind her back.

Following up the rear, the man walked behind both of them without a word, moving like a slug on a tree branch. Sharon could hear his labored breathing. His own belt sported his holstered .45 semi-automatic and sheathed hand axe, while he carried the 12 gauge Remington he had taken from the Tahoe with the barrel cradled in the his left forearm and his right hand across the trigger guard.

By the sharp grade of the deer path Sharon judged they were headed to another of the thousands of miles of trails and service roads on the Western Slope. It would be the only reason they would be heading up into what otherwise appeared to be extremely difficult terrain.

Her mind was churning with the possibilities of who this man was and what his intentions were—and none of the scenarios she could imagine had a good outcome. The man had obviously planned out the successful abduction carefully, she considered, even if he didn't appear bright enough. Somehow, he or an accomplice made the 911 call that she had responded to, and lured her into a remote area where they were very unlikely to run into other people. Finally, the boy was the perfect bait to take her off guard and blunt her instincts for caution which had been honed over the years and varied experiences of law enforcement. Not only that, but the man knew her name and he knew her schedule.

"Hmm, just doesn't make a lot of sense," she muttered under her breath.

The pit of her stomach was in upheaval over the obvious conclusions she kept confronting. The only thing Sharon could think to do defensively was to pretend that her loosely tied feet were more constrained than they actually were. She deliberately dragged her feet every few yards, hoping beyond hope at that moment, that when someone came looking for her, they'd find her divots down on the unmarked trail that she had dug with her heels as she sat tied up, and the scuff marks she was trying to leave on the deer path now.

Sharon turned her head as far as she dared several times and the man behind her didn't seem to notice her dragging her feet, or he didn't care. His breathing was heavy and sweat was glistening off his face. The forest surrounding them was as still and hot as it was silent. Too silent. The only sounds were their own exertions and footfalls.

Finally young Tyler turned without breaking stride and said loudly, "We're almost there. Thought I heard something up there. Maybe Pop's here."

The man didn't respond and Deputy Toro didn't look up at the boy who had let the first bit of real information slip. *Okay, she thought, so dad is meeting us. Then who's this guy behind me?* In the background she heard the faint but unmistakable sound of a gas engine that she immediately recognized as belonging to an ATV. They kept walking without reaction.

The noise of the ATV had not gotten louder and now she couldn't hear the muffled rumbling at all, so it must have stopped she reasoned. Looking up the path as far as she could see, she thought she saw something move and in another moment the boy was waving his right hand high above his head at a man that Sharon presumed was "Pop," making his way towards them coming down the path.

Tyler turned and announced to the man, "It's Pop, he's here."

"Didn't 'spect he wouldn't be," the man replied gruffly.

As they closed the distance, Sharon saw a very large, well-built man. He had long brownish hair sticking out from under both sides of an army style camouflage cap, bridged by the dark sunglasses he was wearing. Sharon couldn't tell if he was armed because his sports tee fell over his gray cargo shorts that matched his light gray hiking shoes.

When they had closed the gap to only a few feet, the boy began excitedly reporting to his father that his plan had gone off without a hitch. "Just like you said Pop, worked like a champ!"

"Good to hear, good to hear." Pop was talking to the boy but had removed his sunglasses and was eyeing Toro's trim and tall frame up and down. She thought he seemed to be measuring her capability as a threat. *Or worse?* She was self-conscious that her khaki pants and shirt were sticking to her with the heat and exertion of the climb. Their eyes locked like a dead bolt. His were pale blue—washed out and cold. Sharon's coffee-colored eyes were bold outposts securing her sturdy face.

She didn't blink or make any expression at all, but stood looking at him with a firm jaw set and her head lifted up very slightly. She knew in that instant that she didn't dare let this man smell fear. Pop's eyes wouldn't turn away and they both stared at each other for an extended few moments.

The man unwittingly interrupted the visual standoff. "Went off without a hitch, boss, just like 'ya said." His voice was very raspy and he was clearly out of breath from the hard grade of the walk and the heat.

"The truck?"

"Just like 'ya said. Rolled it down a good drop off, an' it even flipped over once. I pulled a battery cable, like you told me. Busted the radios up good, her phone too." There was a pause, then the man proudly reported, "An' I picked up a nice one here." He patted the black-finished Remington, smiling weakly.

"Yeah, don't blow your foot off." Pop nodded his head towards the shotgun and then followed up. "Didn't see anyone coming or going down there?"

"Not a soul—and Tyler did a good job, Mr. Martin," the man responded. Sharon turned her head enough to see the man's haggard red face.

Tyler smiled. "Nothing to it, honest, running down this rut was the hardest part."

Pop was looking at Sharon again, who was digesting this new information internally. *The last name is Martin. The boy is Tyler. Now, who are you?* She looked at the man again.

"Turn around," Pop Martin ordered Sharon, as he glared at the man. "Why don't you give her our phone numbers too?" Sharon couldn't see it, but the man looked stunned at the sharp bark in Pop's voice. She wondered if the man even understood that he'd let more information slip out. *Maybe he doesn't care, she thought, because they have already decided I'm not leaving alive? Or maybe that little slip up just made that decision for them?* Sharon bit her lower lip, as her mind kept searching frantically for any alternatives.

"Okay son, take us up to the top." Martin spoke loudly and waved his arm at the boy, and stepped around Sharon and next to the man. "Keep the pace up, we need to make up some time," he added.

Well, at least I know who really planned all of this, Sharon thought as she fell in behind the boy.

In short order she saw the break in the path above her where she was sure it crossed a new trail. Behind her, she could hear a muted discussion between the two men swelling into an angry argument. She couldn't make out exactly what the clash was about but it was clear that Martin was the aggressor in the back and forth. *Now what?* She wondered. For the first time since she was ambushed, a spark of palpable panic found kindling in her heart and imagination and the speed with which the resulting fire spread to her spirit alarmed her. She prayed to herself, *Lord God, be with me in this very moment, hold my hand, I'm so frightened. Calm me Lord, calm my heart and mind, and let me lean into You.*

Tyler had just cleared the lip of the path onto the trail and was out of sight when the thunderous boom of the shotgun deafened Sharon and she could instantly smell the gunpowder. The boom was followed by the raging alarm calls and caws of hundreds of birds and the loud flapping and rushing sounds of their wings exploding into flight, followed by a sharp report of the shot itself echoing across the mountain.

Instinctively, Sharon dropped to her knees, and then rotated around with a fine haze from the shotgun blast drifting in the air. The Remington lay less than a foot away from the man's crumpled body.

Before she could react "Pop" Martin picked up the Remington and pumped a new shell in the chamber while the spent shell casing ejected a foot away. He pointed it at Sharon. "Stay where you are there. Just sit right down. The fool tripped over that tree root and he did just what I warned him about – except it wasn't his foot he shot off, was it?"

Martin bent down and pulled on the right shoulder of the man and rolled him over onto his back, exposing his left side with a gaping wound, where the pointblank shotgun blast appeared to have taken out much of the ribcage on that side of his body. There was an unimaginable amount of blood and a very audible rasping and rattling hanging on the man's breath – a breath that Sharon knew wouldn't last long. The man's

eyes were still open though they didn't seem to be fixed on anything specific. "He's always been a fool." Martin looked at him with contempt.

Sharon was certain the man hadn't tripped on a tree root on the rutted brown earth of the path. It seemed obvious that Martin had reached over and turned the barrel of the shotgun cradled over the man's left arm into his body and pulled the trigger. But as Tyler came sprinting down the last few feet to the scene she realized that Martin had just given her instructions on what the story would be in front of the boy. He was holding her Remington as the instrument that would make sure the story didn't change.

Tyler's eyes grew as large as a harvest moon sitting on the horizon. He stumbled to a stop within feet of the man's dying body, dragging Sharon's duty belt on the ground. His father moved in front of him to block his full view. "Nothing we can do here, boy. He tripped over that root and the shotgun went off when he fell." Martin made a show of pointing randomly over his own shoulder at a phantom root behind him on the deer path. "I told him to be careful." Tyler's mouth was hanging open but nothing came out of it. His father added emphatically, with an air of authority, "Deputy here saw it all." Sharon, sitting with her knees up, just looked at the ground without response.

"Okay, we're going to have to get going—I want you to escort the Deputy up to the ATV's." As he was saying this Tyler's father physically turned the boy's shoulders around towards the top of the path. He then reached down and pulled on the nylon rope around Sharon's ankles, cinching it up considerably. Now she would be shuffling. He reached around and checked the handcuffs to make sure they were secure. "Who has the keys to the cuffs?"

The boy, still dumbfounded and confused by what had just happened, half turned his head and pointed to the man. "He did."

"Okay, get going, and I'll be right up." He pointed the Remington straight at Sharon. "If she starts trouble, just holler at me and I'll come running."

"Okay, Pop," Tyler replied quietly as he pulled on Sharon, helping her to her feet as she struggled to get up.

Martin watched as they both cleared the lip of the path and then turned around and went back to the man and began going through his pockets. He took his wallet, then retrieved Sharon's wallet, knife and money. The pocket search yielded several keys and he took them all. Pulling the pistol and the hand axe from the man's belt he set them aside and could hear that the rattle in his breath was becoming louder but less frequent. Satisfied that he had all of the man's effects, he reached under the man's right arm pit, carefully trying to avoid the huge pool of blood under the body, and dragged him just off the path into the trees until the terrain dropped off steeply. Then he turned the man and gave the body a hard push with his foot. There was a low guttural noise that accompanied him as he rolled like a log quickly down the slope for fifteen or twenty feet and then hit a tree where he stopped with a thud. There was no movement or noise noticeable from the man.

"Good riddance," was his only eulogy.

Martin walked out of the trees back to the path, kicking what leaves, pine needles and loose dirt he could easily scuff up with his shoes to cover the blood trail, to little

effect. He reasoned that this path was so isolated and out of the way that the chance of someone coming across the bloody trail or the body before the animals or the exposure removed both was extremely remote.

After collecting the items he had recovered from the man, he scrambled up the remaining grade to the trail above and found Sharon Toro sitting with her back against a Kawasaki four-seat ATV, with his smaller Honda ATV parked right behind it. She didn't look up or acknowledge his presence but kept her head bent just inches from her knees. Her earlier panic had given way to an expanding dark swirl of intense horror that wrapped itself around her like an unseen snake squeezing the breath out of her, and driving a surge that wanted to expel the contents of her stomach and body.

Only minutes ago she had been determined that Martin wouldn't see any fear from her – now she prayed he couldn't smell it.

In truth, although Sharon had seen her share of dead people in accidents, suicides and even an occasional murder over her career, nothing prepared her for the actual violence she'd just witnessed. Even worse, she could physically feel the pure exuberant evil that Martin had employed to murder the man. He had enjoyed the act as much as the outcome.

Oh my God, give me courage, was the only clear thought that escaped the fear that held her mind as much a captive as the handcuffs and leg bindings did her body.

Martin sneered at his prisoner as though he was reading her thoughts. "Get your head up Deputy. We need a nice face shot for that husband of yours." Sharon reflectively looked at him. Martin had a small Canon camera pointed at her. "I've got the video running, say hello to him."

Sharon just stared at him. The horror and fear ebbed quickly as her mind found some sure footing. She realized that this madman intended to drag Floyd into this. She saw the flash of anger in Martin's face, while she just looked at him. It didn't matter because she wouldn't give him the pleasure of compliance – not where it concerned Floyd Marshall.

Sharon was a professional hard-nosed deputy, but a wife, first. Her emotions engulfed her and swept over her. Now, bringing Floyd into the middle of this nightmare had stopped all the circuits of reason and engaged her heart, and so drove out all her concerns for herself.

"Well, I suspect he already knows your head is as hard as a steel plate, huh?" Martin interrupted her thoughts, looking somewhat whimsically at Sharon. "There you are, refusing to say a word to me and sitting in the dirt looking like you'd like to claw my eyes out. Well, I don't think he'll be too surprised." Martin grinned at her. "Honest, this ain't about you anyway, Deputy, it's all about Floyd. I just figured he'd be a bit more..." he paused and thought for a moment. "How do I put it? Enthusiastic, that's it! He'll be more enthusiastic, when he finds out that you're my special guest."

Tyler sat above Sharon in the driver's seat of the ATV, watching the standoff without expression. He was looking a bit pale and secluded as he drank his second bottle of water. His father looked at him and just nodded at the boy, who he thought looked at that moment every bit of the nine year old he was.

Chapter 3

Deputy Tommy Atkins had only been on the Garfield County Sheriff's Department for a year and half, and had all the typical complaints that every rookie officer had. This morning's irritation was that he was called to "back up" Sharon Toro on what seemed a routine call. It had interrupted his early morning breakfast at a small coffee shop on Route 6 with Heather Barrington. Tommy Atkins was a smitten man.

Heather was as new a nurse as Tommy was a deputy. They had met at Fort Lewis College in Durango, in the southwestern part of the state, and had both graduated at the same time. Heather was the first to land a job that brought her to the area, and Tommy followed her, taking his first job as a Deputy in Garfield County. Finished with his primary training and a year's probationary period, he was now busily trying to save enough money for an engagement ring and wedding.

Heather rolled her eyes at his ringing cell phone. "Go ahead," already knowing that their too short time together, had just gotten shorter.

Tommy took the call and was writing in a small notepad as the dispatcher was assigning him to follow behind Sharon Toro with the same directions she had given to her earlier. "Nothing specifically wrong, but I tried to reach her on the phone and radio – nothing. Deputy Sanders is on duty, and she said to pull in whoever was close and have them follow up, just to be on the safe side."

"Okay, I'll handle it. She's probably out of radio range up in that area. But I'll run up now. Reach out if she checks in, I'll be in the truck in just a minute." Ending the call, he looked at Heather with a little frown. "It's Sharon, I gotta go and back her up. Call you later and let you know what's going on."



The sun was brilliant on another hot day on the Western Slope. Tommy had a laminated folding map of the county clipped to the computer screen between the Tahoe's front seats and he had traced out the Wild Spruce Creek service road, which he'd never been on. It was remote even by the standards of this part of Garfield County, so he assumed it would be a very rough ride. He picked up the mic to the two-way Motorola truck-mounted radio and checked with Sheriff's Office dispatcher before he left the paved route. He was sent straight to Deputy Sanders.

"Tommy, we still can't raise her at all. Haven't heard a thing. How close are you?"

"I'll be turning off to the service road within a mile."

"Good. I don't know why, but I really don't like this. I'm thinking you won't have radio up there, so take a look, but don't go further than a mile in the unmarked trail unless you find something. If you don't find anything come back down and get hold of me ASAP. Okay?"

"Yes ma'am, copy that."

Leaving the paved road and heading up the Wild Spruce Creek cut off he was already surprised at how bad the trail was. It clearly received very little vehicular traffic. He sat up straight and slowed the SUV down, looking for any sign of another wide tread truck tire. There were a few faint, indistinct places where a tire most likely had come or gone, but nothing that stood out. When he did turn off to the unmarked trail, the trip went from rough to bad.

He spotted a few tracks, and left the Tahoe with the engine running and walked up the trail some distance on foot. Nothing. When he had banged and rattled his way over one mile he stopped again, and looked back. There was no sign of Sharon he could find. *What am I missing?*

Making his way back down to the Wild Spruce, he was thinking about Sharon. She was more than twenty years older than he was, but she was his buddy in every way. She had been assigned as one of his training mentors once he had finished his academy training and they had spent months driving on calls together. Sharon worked a lot in the southern part of the county because she and her husband lived there; Tommy was assigned to work the lightly populated southern portion of the county because he was the rookie.

Sharon and her husband, Floyd, had also become close friends and had opened the Miner's Trail camp to Tommy and Heather, even becoming their counselors when they had decided to get married. They were the closest thing to family the two young people had in this part of Colorado.

"Gosh Sharon, where'd you get to? Where are you?"

Tommy came out on the paved road and headed down it until he saw his cell phone pick up a signal. Once he had a few bars he dialed into the office. When Deputy Sanders picked up her line he described the scene and gave her the bad news; there was nothing that even looked like she had been there. "So, that's my official report. I wanted to get it to you right away like you asked. But, honestly, I just feel that I need to go back up and take some time to comb the area over on foot a bit if you don't mind. Unless there is something else you think I should do?"

"No, something just doesn't sit right. But right now we're really short on personnel. Go grab a cup of coffee, let me talk to Sheriff Smith and I'll get right back to you."

Chapter 4

Sheriff Augustus Maynard Smith of Garfield County folded his 6 foot 3 inch frame into the passenger seat of Deputy Sheriff Sam Delaney's Tahoe and plowed his jet black hair straight back with both hands, before he laid his head back into the seat and closed his eyes.

He was never much of a believer in coincidence. The wreckage of the grey Ford Escape SUV they just inspected had been moved off the roadway and now sat on a flatbed wrecker like a mangled steel corpse waiting for its final procession. It had impact damage and red paint on its crumpled left rear quarter panel, which was consistent with an eye witness account from a person travelling in the opposite direction.

The witness had told the first Deputies on the scene that they saw the Ford clipped in the rear by a red car before it flipped over at least three times at high speed. The driver never had a chance.

"Well?" He queried Sam without opening his eyes.

Sam looked over at his longtime friend and smiled. He knew the way Gus thought and right now he had the same questions. "Well?" Sam held a dramatic pause. "As in, *well* there ain't no way Mr. Madero Velázquez flipped his car over like a can of peas on a clear, hot summer night with great road conditions without leaving so much as a tire mark?" He paused again. "Or did you mean *well* there ain't no way we have two wrecks, and two dead drivers, in our fair County in one night, under strange circumstances?" Gus couldn't see his Deputy smile at him.

"Do I have to choose?" Gus smiled back keeping his eyes closed. "I'm really tired. Mary was at church until all hours last night - your wife in on that? And the kids were up half the night. Only had a few hours of shut-eye before you called."

"Yeah, Judith was in on whatever is going on over there. Don't really know honestly. I think they may be laying out the fall kids program, not sure."

Both men sat without speaking. Gus then sat up in the seat and picked up a manila envelope that was recovered from an overnight bag from Velázquez's crushed Ford. Sam Delaney looked out of the window, running through the details of the two accidents with the new information they now had.

Then Sam offered, "Tell 'ya what, I'm going to find out where they took that red Honda that went head first into the concrete barrier and I'll take a good look at what's left of it. I'm not sure anyone really looked that close, especially after they spent an hour with the cutting jaws to get the driver out. No one was thinking that another car might have been involved."

Gus turned to look at his Deputy and nodded agreement. "Yep, get on it and I'll head up to headquarters and see if we can pull anything up on this Velázquez guy. Something here just stinks to high heaven. Look at this..."

Sam craned his head over the console of the truck and the center mounted data terminal and screen, where he could get a good look at a document the sheriff had pulled out of the envelop.

“Okay, what am I looking at, Gus?”

“It’s a commercial pilot’s license and this guy was certified for both fixed wing and rotary aircraft—a helicopter. Look at the name.” Gus dropped his finger down to the box identifying the pilot:

Benito W. Menendez, 1008 Old Windstar Road, Phoenix, Arizona.

Gus was mapping the details in his mind as he spoke out loud. “So the car rental agreement for the Ford is under *Armada Restoration Systems* out of Denver. The driver according to the California license is this guy Velázquez. But, he has a pilot’s license under Menendez from Arizona, with a cert for flying choppers.”

Sam broke in, “You know, we had a complaint yesterday afternoon about a low flying helicopter crisscrossing over those riding stables east of 82?” The Sheriff shook his head as Sam added, “I think we need to pull up that complaint and give them a follow up call out there, this might be a connection.”

“Yeah, I’m way past my coincidence threshold already, Sam.” Gus was still thumbing through the paperwork in the manila envelope when he stopped at one piece of paper and pulled it out. Turning to Sam he said, “Well, my guess is that our guy flew a...” Gus hesitated as he squinted at the paper. “Let’s see, a Bell helicopter—a 206L, to be specific. Whatever that is.” Gus held up a maintenance invoice towards Sam. It was from an aircraft operation located in Phoenix, Arizona. “Dated last week, looks like general maintenance before he headed out here,” he added.

“And we have a tail number here, N832W, so we should be able to track ownership, assuming it isn’t stolen. Anyway, we need to check with the Glenwood and Aspen airparks just in case, but I’d be very surprised if there is a flight plan for our guy. He’s not here for sightseeing.” Gus put the paperwork back into the envelope, then asked Sam, “Where’s the bag that this was found in?”

“Went to HQ, since they couldn’t find a name for next of kin this morning. Now I’m wondering about anything found in the red Honda. What do you think, Gus?”

He nodded. “Yep, I think we better look over everything. Something connects this whole mess together, that’s what my gut is saying.”



Getting back into his own SUV Gus Smith sat for a moment looking through messages on his cell phone and responding to questions that didn’t need much thought. He scanned a few longer emails but decided they could wait. As he belted in and started the Tahoe, his phone flashed with the incoming call from his wife, Mary. He couldn’t help the smile that pushed his cheeks up his face like a child at Christmas. “Well, well, what do you know, here is Mrs. Mary Smith—up and at ‘em and it’s not even noon yet.”

She was actually sitting in their kitchen dressed in blue jeans and white collared shirt, with her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail that dropped over the collar of her

shirt. She could give and take. "Well, if the Sheriff of this county was ever in his office, instead of gallivanting around town, I'd be able to come down and buy him lunch. But, doesn't look like that's happening."

"Whoa, whoa, don't be too hasty there..." Gus looked down to see another incoming call, this one from headquarters. "Hey beautiful, I'm headed in as we speak, and I'd love nothing better than to eat with the best looking woman in Glenwood Springs, especially if she's buying."

"Yeah, yeah, I heard that smooth talk before." Mary was smiling. "I'll be down within the hour, okay?"

"Yes ma'am. Love 'ya, gotta run." He didn't wait for the goodbye, as he sensed he dared not miss the call from headquarters.

Gus hit the *call waiting* button on his cell phone and heard one of his key Deputies, Olivia Sanders rapid-fire voice popping through the speaker. "Hey boss, we've got a couple of things cooking here, you headed in?"

"Good morning to you too, Deputy." Gus smiled.

"Yep. All good. You out with Sam? I just tried him and he didn't pick up?" She didn't wait for Gus to answer. "Anyway, I got a hit on the deceased from last night in the Honda, Edwardo Anduhar. Turns out his name is not Anduhar—the license is a fake. His real name is Marco Estranza Esqueda. He's a Mexican national, but he's in the system because of a drug trafficking conviction about ten years ago right here in Colorado. He served two years, was an early release and then he was deported."

Olivia paused for effect. "Get this, he's on a list as a suspected member of the Fuentes cartel family."

"Hmm, do tell," Gus exaggerated. He wasn't surprised to learn that the man had a record, or that he might have a cartel connection. But, Deputy Sanders wasn't finished, and Gus actually was stunned to hear her next discovery.

"Yeah, and now for the cherry on top." Olivia didn't wait a heartbeat. "Just got a call from the medical examiner, and Doc Frederick told me our Mr. Esqueda had a bullet in his head. They didn't find the entry wound at the scene because the impact damage was so extensive, but Doc says the guy was killed instantly, and *then* his car hit the highway divider. He'll get back to us as soon as he finds all the bullet fragments, but he thinks it was a 9mm hollow point round. How about that, huh?"

"Yeah, how about that." Gus settled into the seat of the SUV and pulled it into gear, then merged into the light traffic. "Okay, I'm headed in. Sam is on his way to take a closer look at the Honda this guy was driving. We're thinking it was the car that clipped the Ford that did somersaults down here. And that driver was using fake ID's too. And he was a helicopter pilot to boot. Small world, Huh?"

Gus heard Deputy Sanders whisper "Wow," more to herself than to him.

"So let's see," Gus continued, "we've got two wrecks, two bodies and one with a bullet in his head, but both have bogus ID's. One is a pilot. It all adds up to nothin' so far. It would be nice if this was just a simple road-rage incident, wouldn't it?" Gus asked rhetorically. "But obviously, Mr. Esqueda couldn't have been shot by a guy who was busy flipping his Ford down the highway, and then end up dead miles away."

"That's some crazy stuff happening last night, Sheriff," the Deputy offered as Gus was thinking.

Gus picked his thought back up. "Yep, you know how I feel about coincidences? I'd say we've got a drug deal gone haywire, minimum, maybe a lot more."

Gus gave Olivia a few items to track down, starting with tail number of the helicopter. "See if you can track down ownership and anything else that goes with the tail number Nancy-832-Whiskey, please. It is a Bell Helicopter 206L if that helps. Also, can you check with the regional air parks and see if anyone has seen this bird, or gassed it up?"

"Absolutely, boss."

"Next, we had a complaint yesterday from the riding stables on Highway 82. Look it up and give them a call. Their complaint was about a low flying helicopter from yesterday afternoon. Could you handle that, please?"

"Done."

Then he asked her to personally track down all the bags that were recovered from both wrecks and take them straight to Gus's office as soon as possible. "One more thing Olivia, can you keep trying to connect with Sam and get him up to speed on what was happening and tell him to get back as soon as possible?"

"Will do. Boss, before you go, we have one more issue that can't wait."

"Yeah, why am I not surprised? What's up?"

"We can't find Toro."

"What do you mean you can't find Toro, what's going on?" Gus pulled the Tahoe off to the side of the road and turned his emergency lights on.

"Well," Olivia exhaled loudly, "we're not sure. Dispatch gave her a 911 call for a kid lost up on an unmarked trail off the Wild Spruce Creek service road, but we haven't heard anything at all since then. No radio, no phone contact. I sent Tommy Atkins to back her up, but he didn't find anything. Of course, we don't have any radio up there, no cell either. We've called the camp, Floyd's out, but his assistant hasn't seen her or heard from her since she left early in the morning."

Gus was looking at a laminated local map. "That service road is off Route 108, runs into the 82," After a long pause, Gus's voice grew grave and direct. "Olivia, make sure Sam hears this and get a hold of Dr. Fredericks; I want a lid on this whole mess until we have some idea of what we're dealing with. Not a word to anyone. You're going to run point on this in the office. To the extent we can do everything between the four of us right now, the better. We absolutely don't want the press getting wind of this, or the Feds."

"Got it. Listen, Tommy only did a quick drive up and back. He's still close to the trail and wants to go back up and take a closer look. You okay with that until we find some more personnel?"

"Yeah, makes sense. Tell him to go ahead and take a careful look, but tell him not to wander to far afield. We may need him in a little. One more thing, Olivia. Keep trying to get Floyd Marshall on the line. I need to talk to him."

"Yes sir, see you soon."

As Gus wheeled his SUV towards headquarters, he was thinking through what he knew and how it fit together. The only thing he was certain of was that his worst enemy now was what he didn't know. Somewhere in his spirit there was a growing sense of dread. He knew that this whole chain of events was not a case of random coincidences colliding. This was all connected.

He questioned himself out loud, "This couldn't be a repeat could it?" He thought back a few short years when he was a Deputy himself, before being elected Sheriff, when he had discovered another deputy's body in these same mountains and the subsequent events that rocked Garfield County. "Not again?"

His mind returned to Mary, his wife for over a year now, and the profound and deep love he had for the woman God had graciously placed in his life on the most hopeless day of his life, and hers.

He re-dialed her and asked her to pick up some takeout food to feed five and meet him in the office – something that would involve her had come up.

Chapter 5

Jamie Gallagher filled his coffee cup and took a few minutes break on the front porch of the Miner's Trail hunting camp office, the overhang shielding him from the dazzling brightness on the already hot day. The expanse of sharp blue sky reached over the Western Slope with not even the wisp of a cloud visible. Beyond the porch the brilliant sunlight flooded the campgrounds and spread out like golden butter as far as the eye could see into the thousands of acres of wilderness to the southwest of the Miner's Trail. The other side of the camp abutted Tanner's Ridge, a long ridge line that lead into the high rugged mountain terrain above the camp that led to even higher mountains beyond. An old miner's supply trail ran across part of the ridge and then far into the mountains where ambitious hikers could follow the ghosts of prospectors from a long forgotten era.

It had been a busy morning. Before dawn, Jamie and Floyd Marshall had cooked and laid out a breakfast for a large group of mountain cyclists overnighing at the camp. Sharon, already dressed in her Deputy's uniform, was up early with them both and had lent a helping hand in the set up. As soon as the morning sun had overwhelmed the mountains futile resistance, the cyclists streamed out of the camp on a narrow brown trail heading into the wilderness looking like ants rushing a picnic buffet table. Sharon left afterwards, leaving Jamie and Floyd catering to other small groups of day hikers.

The camp was quiet now, with only a few of the scattered RV pads showing any activity. Earlier, there was a call from the Sheriff's Department looking for Sharon, and since she wasn't there, they wanted Floyd. However, he'd taken a small party out to hike the ridge line. With the camp business finished, it was the perfect time for Jamie to sit and catch up on some reading for school.

Just turning twenty-six years of age, Jamie had been an all-star basketball player recruited to play college ball at the University of Colorado at Boulder. At six foot one, he was a star point maker and a starting small forward - *in his day*. What he *had* been was never far from his mind. It revisited him time and again and he couldn't seem to stop its visits.

He *had* been an all-American student-athlete in high school and he *had* been a highly recruited ball player when he first strutted onto the UC campus parading that identity.

That's who he had been.

Now, five years later, sitting and drinking coffee in the quiet and solitude of an isolated hunting camp in a remote corner of the Western Slope, nestled next to the secluded border of the White River National Forest, Jamie could recognize that he had held those distinguishing characteristics so dear because he had no identity outside of them.

He'd grown up in Denver with a single mom. His father left the family when Jamie was only two years old, and there were only infrequent visits over the years. The

resentment of his father's inattention burned like a charcoal briquette in Jamie's breast every time he thought about it – and remained warm even when he didn't.

His life changing self-discovery about his own identity had actually begun with shattering emotional confusion in his second year at UC, after the end of the basketball season. Jamie had been invited to an invitation-only party in a private home just off campus by a fellow team member, Terry Mead. The two had become instant and fast friends over the basketball season, to the point of being nearly inseparable except for their classes. They were both reserved and private, and they both came from broken homes that they longed to forget.

The party had been in a stately older home, its entrance guarded by a thick heavy wood door with a massive brass knocker and a peephole winking at those who approached. There was no communication or identification – permission to enter was simply in response to the heavy door swinging open.

Once inside, the massive door locked with sharp authority behind both the guests and the host, who was a tall and slender young man with a shock of red hair jelled to a peak on top of his head, wearing only pajama bottoms and slippers. He slid a heavy bolt in place as an explanation point for security. Inside, the foyer was more inviting than the host's fleeting welcome had been. He had left Jamie and Terry after saying "hello," disappearing deep into the house. The rich side tables, old lamps and the elegant Oriental rug that protected the gleaming hardwood beneath it, had made them welcome nonetheless.

As they made their way further into the house, they seemed to be summoned along by loud music, with a surging rhythm and pulsating repetition. Jamie was astonished as they entered the busy great room with its high ceilings and dazzling intricate molding, set off by four beams that intersected the ceiling, each with a massive chandelier. The walls offered large intermittent inserts with delicate edging and differing patterns to each. The dark wide planks of the wood floor were covered by four enormous rugs, balanced at both ends with marble-faced fireplaces, each with a roaring fire.

"Whoa, this is unreal. Who lives here?"

"Charlie. You just met him at the door. It belongs to his family, but Charlie's the only one here year round." Terry was fiddling with his fingers as he spoke, and Jamie knew right then that he had just come to some dangerous crossing that he'd not seen coming and for which he was not prepared.

"You know, this is a really a private party. If you...well...I mean, you might get uncomfortable, but just tell me if you do and we can go anytime, really."

Jamie hadn't replied. Some darkness bid him along. He wanted to belong.

Out of the twenty-five or thirty people in the huge room, Jamie had noticed that there were only a few girls present. A few of the guests had on shirts, while most were shirtless like the host. Most had abandoned shoes for slippers or socks. There were half a dozen tables along the walls loaded with assorted snacks. In the center of the room was a long table with a beer keg at one end, and various bottles of wine and liquor stationed among the ice buckets and paper plates and plastic glasses at the other end.

Prominently in the middle of the table was a section of mirror squares, set with a variety of marijuana and smoking paraphernalia. There were several small dishes with white power in them, bordered by tiny spoons and small straws, innocently inviting.

Jamie had dabbled with pot infrequently since high school, always very careful to avoid the months adjacent to basketball camp, the start of training and the season itself, all of which carried the possibility of having to take a drug test. His use was so infrequent, that he never developed a taste for it.

However, on that fateful night he was introduced to the precious white cocaine that innocently waited in the dish, hiding the truth of its nature like a Black Widow spider did to its mate.

Jamie's appetite for it was instant and demanding. It was the gateway to a world he had never thought of travelling to. The voyage to that new world was across a sea the length of the great room, where dozens of young men were adrift, desperately trying to connect with one another, and yet only able to briefly cling, and grope, and use—one taking from the other—before the rough sea buffeted them apart again. Then the waves of chance would push them towards another drifter. One more anonymous man among a roomful of unknown men. There was no permanency, nor love, nor hope of love. There was only the rawness of that moment adrift in that sea of sensual confusion.

Something virtuous was exchanged for the worst that loiters around any good.

It was in that voyage to that new place, with his conscience deadened and his senses beguiled by the drugs and liquor and that bidding darkness, that Jamie's quest for identity and his heart's longing for acceptance was fulfilled—but only for that briefest moment.

He could faintly recall the encouragements and catcalls from the other drifters as they all gaped at each other's chance encounters and momentary unions, their lives exposed to all. But each in their own turn wanted that moment for themselves.

There were no celebrations upon arriving in that new world. There were no flowers and no bands playing music welcoming the traveler. There were no words of love, and, in fact, there was no love to be found anywhere. It was a barren place. It was lonely and the only thing that could make him forget where he had come to was the magic white powder that called him in the back of his mind, like the whistle from a teapot that never stopped.

Within months, the old Jamie had ceased to function. He had become a person that even his friends couldn't recognize, leaving school, the basketball team, and all he knew to live with all he didn't know.

In time, he had ended up in Denver without knowing exactly why, other than the large city provided more opportunity to find the fleeting seconds of fulfillment that he craved and the cocaine his body demanded. It was all consuming and there was nothing in between that he could keep in his mind. In those coming months he had exhausted all of his money. There were a couple of part time jobs at fast food outlets, and one at a local gym, none of which he could keep because he would show up for work high, or would get high at work. Then he sold his car and other possessions to raise money. Finally there was nothing left but to sell drugs and himself.

One night he tried to sell his services to a plain-clothes police officer and was arrested for possession of drugs with the intent to sell and solicitation.

It was a Friday and he languished in jail over the weekend and into Tuesday before being brought before a judge for arraignment.

Jamie was disheveled and bleary-eyed when they brought him to the courtroom. He had spent five days without his cocaine and he felt as though he could die right there. His mind was in a thick slow moving haze corralled by agitation on one end and depression on the other. There were spikes of pain everywhere in his body. His stomach would cramp, and then his legs would cramp. Then his stomach would cramp again.

He had been awakened early that morning, offered food that he couldn't eat, and then herded into a large holding cell just off the courtroom with about twenty-five other men who were to be arraigned that day. Those who had lawyers were handled quickly as the lawyers came back and identified their clients, and in some cases brought a change of clothes so that they would look presentable in court. The ten or so with no attorney were the last to be taken into the court and sat in the front row only feet from the Judge.

Jamie sat and watched as the courtroom was emptied of lawyers until there were only a few people left other than the sheriff's deputies and court personnel. One person he noticed was a dark haired, nicely dressed man who looked at Jamie with a pleasant smile. *Do I know him?* Jamie tried to remember if he had been a customer but couldn't recall him. He actually could remember very little about the long months that had passed since he had left one world for the other.

Finally, Jamie heard his name and his case number called. A county attorney - a young but stern looking woman named Karen Masters - stood and addressed the Judge. She was dressed in a blue business suit and wearing extremely high heeled shoes, which made Jamie's stomach even queasier as he watched her balanced on the tiniest heel pad imaginable.

He couldn't quite make out what the Judge and the attorney said to each other, but the Judge turned and looked at Jamie, then in a loud, sharp voice he said, "Mr. Gallagher, do you have an attorney?"

"No." Jamie's physical pain was deepening and he could barely hear himself speak. "No, sir," was all he could manage.

"I see you filled out a financial statement, Mr. Gallagher. You don't have a job or any assets, is that correct?"

Jamie didn't remember anything about filling out a statement, but he didn't have any money, he knew that.

"I don't have any money, and I don't have a job, your honor."

"Okay, then the court will appoint an attorney for you." Jamie noticed that the Judge turned his attention to the nicely dressed man he had seen looking at him when he had been brought into the courtroom. The Judge was nodding at him and then nodded at the county attorney, and both approached his bench.

After a brief private discussion, both the man and the county attorney took their seats and the Judge turned to Jamie. "Mr. Gallagher, do you understand that you have

been charged with felony possession of a controlled substance with the intent to sell, and a felony count of solicitation?"

Actually, Jamie couldn't even remember being arrested or being booked into jail. He had awakened the next morning to find himself behind bars. But he knew he was in a lot of trouble.

"Yes, Judge...I think I do, your honor."

"Hmm, I wonder," questioned the Judge, holding his chin in his left hand and looking at Jamie and then looked back at the man and the attorney. For a moment he didn't say anything, then he turned back to Jamie. "Sit down Mr. Gallagher, and a couple of people will talk to you shortly and then the court will address your arraignment."

Jamie sat and waited. Finally, all the other arraignments had been made and the courtroom was empty. The Judge returned his attention to Jamie.

"Mr. Morales, Ms. Masters, please." The Judge waved his hand. Both the man and the county attorney sat down next to Jamie. The man spoke first.

"Jamie, my name is Al Morales. The Judge is tired and we've all been here quite a while, so I'll get right to the point. I know you're hurting right now. But I want to help you. Of course, that depends on whether you want help or not. Do you? Do you want help?"

Jamie's mind was in freefall. But somewhere in its rapid descent, he had perceived that he was being offered something of value. "Yes. I want to go home."

Al Morales smiled, "Well, that all depends on where home is, Jamie. First you will have to go through some work here in Denver. Do you want to get well Jamie?"

Karen Masters didn't make any expression but simply looked at Jamie like he was a lab experiment.

Somewhere in his befuddled mind the words, *do you want to get well*, had resonated with something in Jamie's heart.

"Yes, I want to get well," Jamie replied, even though he had no idea what he was getting well from, or what getting well even meant.

Then it had been Karen Master's turn. "You have a guardian angel, Mr. Gallagher. Mr. Morales is going to take you into rehab, if you are willing to voluntarily go. Are you willing to commit yourself into a rehabilitation center?"

Jamie nodded his head up and down.

"Please acknowledge that you agree verbally, Mr. Gallagher. Say yes or no."

Jamie's mind was swirling and the emotion that came surprised him even in his diminished state. Tears poured down his face and he sobbed. Between heaving breaths he pushed the words out. "Yes. Yes, please help me. It is so dark here."

"Very well then," the attorney touched his arm, "look at me, Mr. Gallagher," she instructed. Jamie obeyed. "You will be released to Mr. Morales and the charges against you are being set aside until a later date. If you complete a program with Mr. Morales, and if you keep to the rules of your release - that means no drugs whatsoever, keeping curfew hours, and not leaving Denver - then my office will drop the charges against

you. If you break any rules of your release, you will be right back here to stand trial on the original charges. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"Good, we have some paperwork to do, just sit here for a few minutes. Are you okay?"

Jamie nodded as he wiped his eyes with his filthy shirt sleeves as Al Morales fished out a Kleenex and handed it to him.

Karen Masters had turned to the Judge and nodded to him; he cast a long look at Jamie, and nodded his head ever so slightly.



The passage of time had done little to take away the pain of remembering that different and dark world he had ventured into – and the even harder journey back.

His return had taken months and months of excruciatingly emotional effort. It ended in the deep wilderness adjacent to the Miner's Trail when he accepted God's perfect gift of redemption, with Al Morales and Floyd Marshall praying over him.

Jamie took a long drink of coffee and looked out into the wilderness beyond the Miner's Trail camp. In the far distance he could see a point where the trees and hills seemed to merge with the sky as though they were one thing, not two different things. He longed for the day when that same thing would happen to the memories of his addictions and the reality of who Jamie Gallagher had become.

Jamie hadn't even seen him coming until Al Morales crashed headfirst into his thoughts, "Good morning Jamie, did I interrupt a good daydream?" He passed by Jamie on the porch and didn't see the smile in response. In the background Jamie heard the office phone ring and then Al Morales answer. A few minutes later he returned with a cup of coffee and sat down next to Jamie. "That was the Sheriff's office on the phone, Gus needs to talk to Floyd as soon as he gets back. Something about not being able to reach Sharon after a call? Did you hear about that?"

Jamie nodded. "Yeah, they called earlier, they're trying to track down Sharon. Evidently her phone is off. She had been up on an unmarked trail off Wild Spruce Creek looking for a kid. So she may be out of range. They sent someone else up to look and didn't see anything. Floyd should be off the ridge with the hikers pretty soon."

Al Morales sipped his coffee in silence sitting next to Jamie for a couple of minutes. Then, looking at Jamie, he said quietly, "I got an email from Karen Masters in Denver last night, with some information on a young man who needs some help. So I'm headed over to Denver tomorrow to see him before he's arraigned." He took the last sip of sip of coffee from the cup. "What do you think?" You up for a drive to Denver, and we can meet with him together?"

Jamie turned to Al Morales with a smile of thanksgiving and the deepest gratitude, marveling at God's perfect timing.

"You bet, I'm up for it."

Chapter 6

Martin helped Deputy Toro to her feet and led her around to the smaller two seat ATV. He took the keys he had retrieved from the man's pockets and unlocked one of Sharon's wrists, positioning her sideways in the passenger seat and lifting her hobbled feet, physically turning her facing forward in the seat. Then he locked the open handcuff to an eye-bolt in the roll cage above her.

He deliberately provoked her. "I'm dropping you off with some friends of mine for safe keeping. Then I'm headed down to the Miner's Trail to see your husband. Any message you want me to give him?"

Sharon considered him with her head slightly cocked and bit back, "Tell him to shoot you and save the world a lot of misery?" She feigned a wide smile.

"Glad to see you haven't lost the fighting spirit there, Deputy. I'm sure you're drop-dead serious too!"

Sharon was immediately sorry she had baited him and chastised herself. *That was dumb Toro, you're just feeding the bear, and his need to be in control.*

Before her thought was complete she felt Martin pull a blindfold over her eyes and his hand work at the back of her head tying a knot. "Oh no! Please don't," she pleaded.

"Don't panic Deputy, It'll only be a few minutes till we get to another trail. Just a little precaution, you're such an important guest an' all."

This trail was so rough and bumpy that it made the unmarked trail Sharon had driven up on, seem smooth in comparison. She was instantly sick to her stomach as Martin began driving, and her head spun in vertigo under the blindfold. She didn't even know how long they drove but Martin stopped suddenly and pulled the blindfold off of Sharon. "Not too bad, now was it?"

"Thank you." She said it before she could catch herself, and was in disbelief she had just thanked him.

Martin drove the smaller ATV in silence while Tyler followed in the other ATV. They were headed up a steep, extremely washed out trail that Sharon had never been on and she judged that they must already be well into the White River National Forest. The higher they climbed the worse the trail became, forcing Sharon to use both hands to grip the cage bar she was handcuffed to.

They climbed until there was no real trail anymore but just rough and exposed rocks, deep ruts and encroaching brush and tree limbs. Sharon watched as the mixed trees changed from Juniper, Pinion Pine and Aspen that covered the lower elevations to predominately Pine and Fir. Even in the higher elevations it was still unseasonably hot and nothing but the two ATV's seemed to be moving.

Sharon judged they had been travelling up the trail the better part of an hour when Martin slowed to a crawl, followed by Tyler in his ATV, and pulled off the rugged track into a well-covered entrance that she had not even seen. It led to a very narrow dirt path that went steeply downhill into the trees. The path opened slightly and there were a number of ATV's already parked that were not visible from the trail.

“Okay, here’s where we walk,” announced Martin. He un-locked the one handcuff from the cage bar and reached down and loosened the nylon rope around her ankles. Once she was standing he re-cuffed her wrists behind her back.

Ahead of her Sharon could see the bald, jagged expanse of mountain side that rimmed the slope like a sleeve on a paper coffee cup. It was between fifty to seventy five feet straight up before it resumed a more gradual upward slope that was heavily forested. They began walking on a hard red dirt trail bordered on both sides by very rocky and difficult terrain and a solid stand of pine and fir trees as far as the eye could see. The trail itself had frequent tree stumps that appeared to be very old and deteriorated, so this could have been a trail to a small mine, Sharon suspected, since a larger mine would have required extensive excavation and suitable trails to move the precious ore off the mountain.

In a short walk they came down the trail and Sharon saw an aged mine entrance that looked like a lonely eye in the bald rock face, tucked into a fold. The mine opening was small, no more than five feet high and four feet wide, *probably cut directly into a natural seam of quartz*, she guessed. The entrance had been shored up with a large square-cut bearing beam across the top and two round timbers supporting the bearing beam on either side, all of which were extremely weathered.

Scanning the camp, Sharon could see only a hundred feet or so to the left of the mine entrance where the mountain face veered off from her view. Successive twenty foot sheets of camouflage netting had been anchored in the rock and strung across a series of poles, and followed the curve of the exposed face out of her sight. Underneath the nets were a few tents that she could see to the left.

The path into the camp suddenly became very hard to walk on and Sharon realized that the narrow trail had been bedded down with deep loose gravel, making it not only hard to walk on, but every step made a very loud crunching noise as the three walked to the edge of the netting.

This is clever, thought Sharon. *A great location and the chances of being spotted are slim to none. And trying to come in here unannounced you’d not get too far.*

As if he were reading her mind, Martin chuckled. “Pretty sweet, ain’t it? We’ve learned a lot about how to do camps – the hard way. Had a nice operation for a couple of years out in California – the Mendocino National Forest. We grew tens of thousands of pot plants and cooked some meth. Wouldn’t ‘ya know, the Feds put a tracker on one of my buddies’ car? They tracked him in one day and busted us!”

“Yeah, that must’ve been a shame,” Sharon said with an intentional sneer.

“That’s what I thought!” Martin didn’t miss a beat. “So we moved and set up a camp in a remote spot in the Pinchot Forest in Oregon. We’re minding our own business, and one day some hiker shows up outa nowhere and skedaddles before we could catch him. Next thing ‘ya know we have the Feds crawling all over that mountain.”

Sharon shot him a look. “Too bad you didn’t get caught.”

“Nah,” Martin chuckled. “Both times we got out just in time. But we lost all the equipment, about a thousand pounds of pot – tens of thousands of plants. We made it

out with the cash and the guns though!" He grinned widely. "Close one that was. Had some Mexican partners that weren't too happy though." Martin looked strangely satisfied.

Sharon realized that just as he had enjoyed the act and the outcome of murdering the man earlier that morning, he loved what he was doing right now.

He was drunk with evil. He embraced it. It caressed him in return.

"So we decided to abandon Oregon for the Rockies." Martin proudly continued the explanation. "We took real care finding this spot. We got alarms in the trees and this gravel path would wake the dead. No cars allowed, no cell phones and no portables allowed either."

Just ahead of her, Sharon saw a man with an AR-15 semi-automatic slung over his shoulder and a holstered pistol waiting at the end of the path. He was huge and unkempt. Dirty. His belly extended well over his jeans and the collared sports shirt he wore didn't quite cover the overhang. He looked even worse with his shock of gray-black hair that spread like some unknown growth from under his baseball cap.

Sharon stopped when the trail ended near the tent and the huge man didn't move. He grunted out, "Howdy, Mr. Martin."

"Hey, Henry. This one here goes to the mine for safekeeping." He pointed to Sharon. "Need to keep her in the cuffs, and the feet tied 24/7. Right?" Martin seemed to be telling rather than asking.

"Sure. She's a cop."

Martin nodded to the obvious. "Yep, this would be Deputy Toro, one of Garfield County's finest. Her old man is going to do something special for us though, so we need to keep her perky." Martin smiled at Sharon. "I want Rosario to help her."

Henry grunted again. Martin just looked at him then suggested, "If she tries to run on us, or causes trouble, you can do what you need to do, but don't mark her face up. Know what I mean?"

Sharon's heart sank. She was too experienced not to understand the clear message implied. Once her husband had done whatever they needed him to do, she was a dead woman. In the meantime, Martin had just given this man a free hand to beat her senseless. *Looks like he'd love to do it just because*, she thought.

Henry looked at the boy and back to Martin. "Where's Clarence?"

"He had a bad accident on one of the trails - afraid he didn't make it."

Henry grunted and nodded knowingly. "Ain't surprising."

Well, at least I know his name, thought Sharon. *A man shouldn't die without anyone knowing his name.*

"Yah, it's too bad. I've got his .45, some wallets, and a nice Remington 12 gauge that the Deputy here contributed, down in the ATV. If you can bring 'em up you can have 'em all. There's a Beretta and some extra clips in her belt, just bring 'em to me, don't need the holster and belt." He handed Henry the key to the handcuffs. Turning to Tyler, Martin pointed to his left, "Tyler, go and get Rosario, tell her to come on down here."

Sharon stood in the bright hot sun just outside the camouflage netting and looked anywhere but in the direction of Henry, trying to get her mind off him, while Martin

walked off to the far end of the netting that was visible and began talking to two men who were obviously waiting for him. Within a minute they were having an extremely animated discussion and even from the long distance, Sharon could hear that the men spoke English with thick Spanish accents. She couldn't make out the words, but the two men grew furious and began waving their arms, with Martin standing in front of them stone faced with his arms crossed across his chest. The thought crossed her mind, *if these two guys saw how Martin resolved his disagreement on the trail a while ago, they might think twice about getting him all riled up.*

The two men and Martin finally turned away and disappeared beyond Sharon's field of vision. Only moments later, Sharon heard Tyler's voice and looked up to see him walking with a young woman who appeared to be in her mid-twenties, dressed in old jeans, with white tennis shoes and a simple T-shirt. Even so she was pretty, with long black hair swept back and gathered in a ponytail. The woman had the slim shoulders and waist of youth, but the walk of someone older, someone who had lived on the harder path in life that Sharon had seen so often in her career. The way Tyler and the girl bantered back and forth, Sharon had the impression that they were very close. *She could even be his mother – but for that walk, she thought.*

Tyler brought the woman right up to Sharon. "I'm Rosario," her rich brown eyes widened when she looked at Sharon, but she didn't smile. "Martin wants me to make sure you're looked after while you're here. I'll check in with you when I can. Tyler here," she smiled at him, "is my buddy, so if you need something you can ask him too."

Henry grunted and rolled his eyes at the three of them. "You folks chat, I'm going to grab the stuff from the ATV, don't go anywhere."

After a short introduction with Rosario, Sharon looked past her and saw that Martin and his two belligerent companions were coming back towards the path. Sharon couldn't quite make out the ongoing argument until they were closer. Martin stopped and wheeled around to the two men who had been pecking at him like blackbirds chasing a circling hawk away.

"Look, what don't you understand? Esqueda's dead, there's nothing we can do about it. Mr. Fuentes is upset about one of his guys turning up dead? Okay, so am I. But, now if you want the coke, I've got to get a new pilot. It has to be my way. And, I need to get going."

Sharon was stunned at what she was hearing. The Fuentes drug cartel operated out of Northern Mexico and was well known to every law enforcement agency throughout the southwestern United States. Members of the cartel were infiltrating into hands-on drug trafficking in the U.S. and bringing their incredible violence with them. Sharon's thoughts churned. *This just goes from bad to worse. These aren't just run-of-the-mill drug dealers, these two are cartel lieutenant's outta Mexico.*



Martin turned around to see Rosario and Tyler standing with Sharon in the hot sun, and Henry walking back up the trail inspecting his new Remington. "Rosario, Henry," he waved at Henry. "Let's get this woman in the mine. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Don't let this one get away." He made a point of poking Sharon's shoulder as he walked by her.

Tyler and Rosario led the way to the mine, followed by Sharon and Henry. At the entrance, Henry moved forward snarling at Rosario, "Get her hands locked behind that pipe." He handed her the key to the handcuffs.

With the low entrance Sharon had to bend down to clear the bearing beam, and once inside, the roof clearance was no higher. The mine only went back four or five feet where it was completely boarded up. About two feet into the mine there was a large six inch pipe on the right side that came out of the ceiling and went into ground that had serviced an incline shaft at some time long past. About a foot away there was a three inch drain pipe coming out of the ceiling and ended about two feet from the floor, the bottom portion having rusted away and glistening with moisture, testifying to just how long ago the mine had been abandoned.

Rosario unlocked one side of the handcuffs and pointed to the floor next to the large pipe. Sharon sat down and Rosario reached behind her and cuffed her wrists together behind the pipe. Henry lumbered into the mine, crouched over to clear the roof and knelt down in front of Sharon and tightened up the nylon rope around her ankles, and rechecked the handcuffs, and took the key from Rosario. Seemingly satisfied, he turned and left them without saying a word.

"Okay lady, I've got to finish some chores, you need any water, anything?"

Sharon smiled. "I'd like some water maybe. Yeah, that'd be great. Thank you."

Rosario just nodded without a word, and left Sharon to her thoughts and prayers. Sharon felt overwhelmed with fear, and dread seemed to come rolling over the side of the mountain to surround her like a blanket of morning mist. Her eyes welled up as she thought of her husband, Floyd, the strong and proud warrior who led and fought alongside fellow heroes to save men from certain death in the Army; who now fought with the broken down and lost, to save men's souls for eternity. She knew beyond doubt that Floyd Marshall would move heaven and earth to get her back—and she knew that for that very reason it would be the worst thing he could do.

The murderers and drug dealers on this mountain were men of death.

Chapter 7

While Al Morales had gone to his cabin to do some preparation for the meeting with Karen Masters, Jamie returned to his light reading for school: *Introduction to Algorithms*. He was lost in his reading and writing notes, when a green Ford SUV pulled up in front of the office. He looked up and saw the large man exit the SUV and immediately recognized Martin as a customer from six weeks ago. He even recalled the cabin number he rented, and that he had a young boy with him, that he didn't see now.

The two Martins hadn't gone hunting or hiking that Jamie knew of, but had left the camp in the Ford after checking in, and returned the next day about noon. The only reason Jamie knew anything about them was that he entered their cabin the next morning to drop off fresh towels and to empty the trash, and the bed hadn't been slept in. Two travel bags sat unopened next to the door. Martin and his son did return in time for lunch, Jamie remembered, and they stopped by the office to pay for another day's rent while Floyd was working with someone on the phone and Jamie was checking out several guests. Martin was looking over the memorabilia, photos and odds and ends that both Sharon Toro and Floyd displayed throughout the office while he waited.

When Floyd had finished his call he turned to help Martin with another days rent. Then they had a long conversation mostly about the photos of Sharon receiving various awards for her service as a Sheriff's Deputy and photos of Floyd posing with crew members, all in combat gear, in front of a U.S. Army Blackhawk helicopter in Afghanistan. Jamie had only heard bits and pieces of the conversation, but Martin had indicated that they were looking at property in the area. *So what's this guy doing back here? Kind of strange.*

"Good morning. It's Mr. Martin, right?"

"Yeah, you've got a good memory." Martin didn't move towards the office porch but remained next to his SUV looking around the camp. "I was actually looking for Floyd. He around?"

"No, he's with some hikers up on the ridge, but they should be back anytime now. Something I can help you with?"

"No, not really, but thanks. I have something for Floyd that I want to give him personally."

"Okay, no problem." Jamie suddenly had the strong sense that this man was trouble. His prior visit was strange, but this visit didn't sit right - there was something in his demeanor that sent off an alarm in Jamie's mind.

"You and your son in the area now, huh? You guys in Carbondale, Glenwood Springs?"

"Yeah, something like that."

Before Jamie could even respond, Martin's back was turned and he said loudly, "Is that them?"

Jamie looked up and saw a group of eight coming down the camp road towards the office. Floyd, a tall black man with his gray hair going in a hundred different directions

was unmistakable, and was leading the group while talking to a hiker. Before Jamie could respond he saw Martin heading off on the camp road towards the hiking party.

"What the..." Jamie closed his book and stood up in time to see Martin and a surprised Floyd Marshall in the middle of the camp road.



As Martin approached the group of hikers, a somewhat startled Floyd had the immediate impression that something was wrong. *What's up with this guy?*

He instinctively announced to the hiking party, "Hey guys, hope everyone had a great time and a good hike. If you'll check in at the office, you can grab a drink on the house." He waved the group on and put on a smile for Martin as he walked up to him.

"Hi there. Sorry I can't recall the name...but it's good to see you back with us."

"Yeah, name's Martin. Have a good hike there Floyd?"

"Yeah, it's a great trail for groups. How can I help you today Mr. Martin?"

"Well, thing is," Martin did a quick look over his shoulder giving Floyd the impression he didn't want anyone to hear him, "I find myself urgently in need of a helicopter pilot."

Floyd was momentarily speechless. "A helicopter pilot? I, ah, well, I don't know why you'd think I'm in the helicopter business Mr. Martin."

"Because you told me you were a chopper pilot in the Army and flew 'em for twenty years, so I thought I might be able to talk you into a quick job."

Uncharacteristically, Floyd had no idea what to say. He just stood looking at the man. There was something missing in all of this. *How does some guy come out of nowhere with this...*

"So I have a chopper parked not too far away, and, you'll never believe it, but the pilot that brought it in here, died last night in a freak auto accident. So I'm short a pilot and I'm in a real time bind."

Floyd looked at him disbelievably. "Okay...appreciate that...but I don't fly anymore. I don't even have a current medical, up to date certifications, nothing."

"That's okay. How many hours someone with your experience have flying Floyd? Thousands, right? I don't think it's a problem for 'ya. It won't take long, really."

"Look," Floyd was growing irritated. "I'm sorry you've got problems, but I don't fly anymore. I need to get back to the office."

As he started to move Floyd felt the big hand of Martin catch his arm, "Maybe Sharon would appreciate it if you changed your mind, huh? I got a message from her right here, look." Martin stuck his Cannon camera up to Floyd's face.

The video was jumping around a bit, but Floyd saw his wife. She was obviously in distress and apparently handcuffed or tied up with her arms behind her, and he could see that her legs were tied. He also heard garbled, unintelligible words, but it was obvious that she was unable to move and that she was not a happy woman.

Floyd's long and lanky frame straightened as the instant rage surged through him. His shock of unruly gray hair seemed to bristle as his face muscles stretched taunt

across his jaws. The rage was so immense and consumed so much energy that words didn't even come out. Martin looked straight into Floyd's dark eyes, and smiled.

"Here's the thing, Floyd. Some really bad people are watching over Deputy Toro for me. And if I don't come back pretty soon with a chopper pilot, then they aren't going to be happy. Not at all. You gotta understand, that it was their buddy that died last night, so they ain't in a good mood anyway."

Floyd's boiling rage finally found a voice and he blurted out, "If you hurt her..."

Martin intercepted Floyd's now booming voice with a sharp, "Shut up!" Stop talking, we're finished talking. You're going get in the car with me and we're gonna get a look at the chopper." Martin lifted his shirt and Floyd saw the butt of a pistol in a holster. Martin reached in his pocket and unfolded a piece of paper and handed it to Floyd. "It's a Bell, you've flown a hundred of 'em, I'm sure. That's what we're doing – or pretty Miss Sharon ain't coming home, and you're going to be dead too. Let's get moving, now. And drop all the drama - no time for it."

Floyd wadded the photo of the helicopter without looking at it and dropped it on the road. The two men began walking to the green SUV parked in front of the office. Floyd's mind was reeling, first with the stark, immense love that he had for Sharon Toro – a love that seemed more intense in this single second than ever – and with the sheer rage at what was happening to them both that he had no control over.



Before Jamie could actually react, or process what just happened, the first hikers were reaching the office and everyone needed something that would take Jamie's time and attention away; snacks, towels, or paying their bills. Between assisting campers, Jamie could lift his head and see out the office window up the camp road. Even at a distance, the body language of the two men was obvious. Whatever Martin was telling Floyd was not going over well. Suddenly, Jamie noticed that Martin was holding something that Floyd was looking at – *A cell phone, a camera?* The next time he looked up he saw that Martin had handed Floyd a piece of paper. Jamie's imagination was going into overdrive.

One last hiker was settling his bill, and when Jamie looked up both Floyd and Martin walked up to the SUV. Floyd got in the passenger side and Martin climbed behind the wheel, and the SUV had backed up and was heading out of the camp.

"What's going on?" Jamie ran out of the office just as the Ford was moving out of sight down the camp road. He had been working around Floyd long enough to know that Floyd was a rock. He didn't deviate much in anything. He worked predictably hard and he didn't do many unexpected or strange things. Certainly not climbing into a car with someone and heading out of the camp without a word. *He just wouldn't do it.*

Looking in the opposite direction on the camp road where Floyd and Martin had been talking, Jamie saw something. He walked up the road and found a wadded up piece of paper. That wasn't like Floyd either - he kept an immaculate camp grounds and he'd never throw paper on the ground.

He unfolded the wad of paper and smoothed it out as much as he could. It was a picture of a helicopter. "Okay, what's this?" Jamie question himself. "Why would Floyd throw this away?"

Back in the office, Jamie felt helpless. He didn't know exactly to do, if anything. Floyd had gotten into a truck and driven off – *so what? It didn't make any sense, but Floyd wasn't at gunpoint and he wasn't forced to go anywhere.* He dialed Floyd's cell number form the office phone and it went straight to voicemail and Jamie hung up and tried one more time. It went straight to voicemail again. Before Jamie could argue with himself further, the office phone rang. The caller ID showed the Sheriff's Department.

"Miner's Trail, may I help you?"

"Jamie? It's Sheriff Smith, I just got into the office, and I haven't heard back from Floyd, is he back yet? I really need to talk to him."

"Sorry Sheriff, he just left, literally a minute ago. Came off the mountain and hopped in a car and left and I didn't have a chance to tell him to call you. I just called his cell phone twice and it goes straight to voicemail. I know, Sharon's not answering her cell either and it's important."

"Jamie!" The Sheriff sounded like he was coming through the phone. "What...good grief! What do you mean he left? Where did he go?"

Jamie briefly filled the Sheriff in on the strange visit from Martin and how the two of them had left together. Gus didn't say a word. Jamie continued about how the man had been in the camp a couple of weeks ago. Then, as almost an afterthought, he added, "And this guy Martin gave Floyd a picture just before they got in his car. I found it on the camp road where they had been standing. Funny thing is that Floyd wadded up the paper and threw it on the ground. That ain't Floyd. He's a neat freak about the camp."

"Yeah, what was it a picture of?"

"A helicopter."

After long silence, Gus answered in a low voice, as though he was trying to control himself. "Okay, do you have the picture?"

"Sure, it's right here."

"Jamie, is it a picture of a helicopter flying, parked, what?" Jamie could hear the deliberateness in the Sheriff's voice.

"Well, yeah, it looks like it's out of a magazine actually, and it's on that slick paper. There's a guy standing there and the caption below it says "Bell 206L Long Ranger."

"Jamie, don't touch the picture again, I'm going to have someone pick it up, understand?"

"Yeah, sure, what's up? What's going on?"

"Honestly, I just don't know, but I think it involves Sharon and Floyd, whatever it is. And now they're both not answering calls. I know you talked to Deputy Sanders about Sharon, is there anything that help us figure out where she went?"

"No, we were all up before dawn, we had a big group of mountain bikers here and we fed them breakfast. Sharon helped us set up and all. She had some paperwork she had to do before leaving, and she left pretty early. I know she was planning to be back early in the afternoon if possible."

“Okay, well if you hear anything let me know. I’m going to have to pull everyone in on this—I just have a really bad feeling. Remember to put that picture away and don’t touch it until a Deputy can pick it up.”

“Will do. Your Deputy said that Sharon was called out to Wild Spruce, there is some unmarked trail up there where they had a 911 call.”

“Yeah, that’s what I understand. They told me they just went over the recording here, and Sharon repeated the instructions from the dispatcher, so she knew where she was going. We sent a Deputy up but he didn’t see anything. Listen, I’ve got to get moving here. But give me a call if you hear from Floyd or Sharon. Please.”

“Yes sir.”

When Jamie turned around he found Al Morales standing and waiting. “Hey, did you hear any of that?”

“I heard you say Floyd got in a car and left. That makes no sense at all. And, frankly, I can’t imagine Sharon not calling in, but I can’t imagine her not being able to take care of herself, either. Fill me in.”

Jamie told Al Morales everything that he knew, and after he had finished, said, “I’m thinking I need to head over to the Wild Spruce on my motorbike and look around. I know they sent a deputy in a truck earlier, but I might be able to see something on my bike. Something about this whole thing doesn’t make sense. What about you?”

Al Morales stood looking down at Jamie with his arms crossed in front of him. “Yeah, something isn’t right, that’s for sure. I don’t know what it is, but this is just crazy. I think you should head over there. I’ll be here, but call me back, let me know what’s going on. You be careful, and I’ll cover the office.”

Jamie spent several minutes with Al Morales looking at the office wall map that showed all the marked trails in and around the area. He found the Wild Spruce Creek service road and one unmarked trail that split off from the trail a mile or so in. Tapping his finger on the map he said, “Be back as soon as I can.”

Within ten minutes Jamie was leaving the Miner’s Trail on his Honda 250L on/off-road motorbike with no idea what he was looking for or what he expected to find.

Chapter 8

Deputy Olivia Sanders had managed to track down Deputy Sam Delaney, who came rushing into the office just after Gus had arrived. Olivia had filled Sam in on the details of both the killing of Esqueda and that Sharon Toro was missing in the field.

The three of them convened in Gus's office, and Sam took one look at Gus Smith's face and knew in an instant that the events of the last 12 hours were not only interwoven, they now had one of their dearest friends in serious trouble.

"No coincidences here, ladies and gentlemen." Gus looked at the two without comment for a moment. "Now, we've got one more problem. I just talked to Jamie Gallagher out at the Miner's Trail. Floyd Marshall got into a green Ford SUV a short time ago and left with some guy named Martin; no goodbyes, no message, no note, nothing. Just left. Not picking up his cell phone." Gus shook his head at the irony of the moment. "No license tag number, of course. Jamie saw the two of them talking outside and this guy handed something to Floyd, who crumpled it up and left it on the road. Guess what it was?" Gus didn't wait, "A photograph of a helicopter."

Sam butted in, "Everywhere we go we got dead bodies, wrecked cars, and helicopters."

"I called the stables like you asked, boss," Olivia was flipping through her handwritten notes and speaking in her rapid-fire and breathless fashion, "and the complaint yesterday was a low flying helicopter heading over the property three times. Once it flew over very low, heading generally north, and then came back about twenty minutes later going the other direction. About an hour later it flew over again headed north. All they really had was that it was blue and white. I called the regional airports – nothing."

"Floyd is retired Army. Helicopter pilot." Gus shook his head. "My gut is screaming at me. We've got a nightmare here, and my instincts are telling me we have a very limited timeframe to work with."

He stood and wiped the white board clear. "Let's line this out." He wrote the name *Esqueda* on the board followed by; *Shot in the head, Fuentes cartel link. Phony ID.*

Next he listed *Benito Menendez*. "Mr. Menendez was sideswiped by another vehicle, fit the description of Esqueda's car, and is dead." *Menendez – Helicopter pilot. Phony ID.*

Sam joined in, "I looked at Esqueda's car, what's left of it, but on the rear quarter panel there is absolutely gray paint smeared in. Had professional driving skills though, I'd bet. Drove into the Ford at a slight angle, clipped it perfectly, and sent it flipping like a corkscrew."

"Makes sense." Gus frowned. "Well, we know we have a low flying helicopter crisscrossing the stables, with no known local connection. So it's a good assumption we have a chopper parked somewhere in the general area north of the stables." Gus looked at the other two for objections, then wrote, *Helicopter Pilot, dead, followed by, where is the helicopter?*

Gus wrote *Toro* on the board, followed by a question mark. "I just don't get a connection here. But there has to be one. Sharon answers a 911 dispatch, heads to a

remote trail and then drops into the black hole. No communications, nothing. Deputy Atkins is thirty minutes behind her and doesn't see a thing. Where's her vehicle?" He added *where's the truck?* after Toro's name.

Next, Gus wrote *Floyd* on the board. "So, our connection here is obvious, Floyd is a pilot, or at least was a pilot." He added *pilot* next to Floyd's name. "We have a dead pilot up here," Gus pointed up to Menendez's name, "and it just can't be chance, anyone think otherwise?"

Sam and Olivia both nodded agreement, while Gus wrote *Martin* on the board followed by a question mark.

"I think we can safely assume that Benito Menendez was killed by Esqueda. But who shot Esqueda? The only variable left is this guy Martin, right?" Both Deputies look at Floyd and nodded.

"So there seems to be three choices – the first choice I reject out of hand. That Floyd and Toro are involved in this themselves – whatever *this* is." Both Olivia and Sam agreed immediately.

"So we're left with two choices, right? One is that someone we don't know about yet shot the pilot, and this guy Martin is out trying to replace a helicopter pilot. Or two, that Martin killed the pilot himself for some unknown reason, and needs a new pilot. Floyd is simply available? Is that it?"

Olivia spoke up first. "The number one problem I have is how Sharon fits in all of this? She takes a routine call and ends up disappearing. We're missing something here."

"Here's another take on this," Sam added. "Sharon goes missing after an early morning 911 call, right? And then Floyd goes missing later in the morning. What if Sharon is the bait, the insurance, to make sure that Floyd goes with Martin later? Also, can we assume Floyd didn't know about the helicopter, why else would this guy Martin give him the photograph? Right?"

"Sam, you are dead on!" Gus was flipping through the file recovered from the Menendez wreck sitting on his desk. "The work invoice we found has the type of helicopter listed as a Bell 206L, and the photo that Jamie found is a..." Gus was searching his notes, "a Bell 206 Long Ranger. How about that, huh?"

"We find the helicopter we find Floyd. That's where I place my bet," Sam was stroking his face. "I'll get on the horn with the National Guard in Eagle at the High Altitude school, and see if they can spare a helicopter to look over this area here," Sam moved to the wall map and drew an imaginary circle. "There aren't that many places there that you could operate from, I wouldn't think. Pretty hard to hide a helicopter isn't it?"

Gus was tapping the white board looking over the information. "Okay, see if they can lend a hand and look around for us, but they're going to want a reason. It's really not their typical search and rescue mission. Do we tell them that we have a lost officer, or that we're searching for the chopper because they were flying too low over other private property and we have complaints? I still want to control the information we have."

"Good question. Let me try the latter first from a public safety angle," Sam offered.

Olivia quickly interjected, "Okay, but I'm not sure I'm following the reasoning, wouldn't more people looking be a good thing?"

"I just have a really strong feeling that we don't have a minute to waste. And, frankly, if we get the FBI or DEA, or even the State Police in on this, we're going to lose control. And if we lose control, *our* people—Toro and Floyd—are going to take a back seat to everything else. We've got two dead men, one has cartel connections, and the other flew this chopper in here. Spells juicy headlines and big 'ol spotlight shinning on some lucky Fed looking to be a hero, follow me?"

Olivia was nodding, "Yeah, you're right. They'll be all over this thing like buzzards on road kill."

"I agree," Sam responded, "let's see where we are later today, at least, before we even consider that option. And anyway, everything now is really speculation."

Gus looked to both of them. "Thanks. Sam make the call, and Olivia let's get bodies on that mountain just as fast as possible."

When Sam returned he reported that the National Guard would do some "fly overs," but not until later in the afternoon. Olivia and Gus were looking over a list of the twenty-three Deputies on the force and the various other personnel they could pull in to mount an all-out emergency search for Sharon Toro. Sorting through the Deputies wasn't easy and they didn't have the luxury of time. Some personnel were off duty for various reasons and unavailable, several were out of the county either picking up or dropping off individuals from other jurisdictions, and several were out on other travel. Gus counted ten Deputies available without calling other people into the search.

Gus looked frustrated. "Here's what we do. The three of us and all management from operations, investigations, and patrol need to be on duty here in town. Anyone left in ops, investigators, and patrol goes with our deputies. Olivia let's find out how many bodies they have to spare." As Olivia bolted for the door, Gus called after her, "Olivia, nothing else except Toro, understand. The rest I want kept in this room. And where's Deputy Atkins?"

Olivia clung to the door, "I understand, keep it on Toro period. I told Tommy to get back up to the trail like we discussed, but he caught a fender-bender with minor injuries out on 82 so he had to divert to that. But he's heading up now."

"Good. Find me some warm bodies to get up on that mountain with Tommy. Now."

"Yes sir."

Gus turned to Sam, "What do you think, who is senior on this list, or can Tommy handle this search out there?"

"Let Tommy report to Roger LaBrash, he's senior. But I'll call LaBrash and tell him to give Tommy some room, how's that?"

"Perfect, the young deputies need to be up front. I want them to scour the area, top to bottom." Gus stood and went to his wall map of the county. "Here's the Wild Spruce Creek trail," he followed the map with his finger, "and here is the unmarked trail splitting off. Hard to believe she got that far up. This whole area is really rough."

Sam was looking at the map, "Honestly, as dry and hot as it's been I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't much in the way of tire tracks up there."

"If something went wrong, Sharon is pretty resourceful, she'd try to contact us or leave us a sign."

The intercom interrupted announcing to Gus that Al Morales was on the line. Gus snapped up the receiver, "Al, what's going on out there?" Gus nodded his head up and down and Sam could tell from his expression that something was happening that didn't please Gus too much. "Yeah, I understand all of that, but I'm going to have a dozen officers up there, and I can't ask them to babysit the kid, no matter how well meaning." Gus listened intently again. "Okay, the second you hear from him tell him to call me, and if you hear anything call me or Sam. Okay? Do I have your word?" Now Gus was nodding yes, "Okay, fair enough, bless you brother."

Sam looked at Gus expectantly. "The kid - Jamie - took off on his mountain bike to Spruce Creek to have a look. He told Al Morales - and Al didn't even try to stop him! Actually sounds like he encouraged him. He says they 'prayed over it.'" The Sheriff shook his head. "Great."

Sam looked knowingly. "Swell, huh? Hope we don't add another missing person to the two we already have."

Chapter 9

Floyd's mind was turning as fast as the wheels on the Ford SUV that Martin was driving too fast down a dirt and gravel road that led to a paved two-lane road and back to the "82." Floyd hung onto the panic bar with one hand.

"Let me see your cell phone," Martin demanded. Floyd put it in his outstretched right hand, and Martin didn't even look at it—he tossed it out of his open window. "You weren't expecting any important calls anyway, were 'ya Floyd?" Martin's smile was crooked.

Floyd was questioning himself, sorting through his options – what, if anything, could he do? *Sharon, that's what's important. Nothing else matters except finding Sharon and getting her back safe.* He busied himself mentally with a list of action items, all of which he threw back against that task; finding and rescuing Sharon Toro.

There were no limits to what he would do to accomplish that. There was no sacrifice he was unwilling to make. He had loved her from the first moment he had seen her and that love had grown like a swelling ocean before a storm. It was rolling, heaving and strong—blustery and wild. That was how Floyd Marshall loved Sharon Toro.



Martin didn't slow down for the merging of the unpaved trail to the paved road. He smiled at Floyd's discomfort. "Too fast, huh?" Floyd ignored him. "When's the last time you had a bird in the air old man?" Floyd didn't answer. "Well, I'm betting on you – and so is Sharon. There is a flight manual in the chopper and I'm sure it's like riding a bike, what do 'ya think?"

"How far is the helicopter from here?"

"Not far. Why, you eager to get going now, huh?"

"Mr. Martin, do you intend this to be a successful helicopter flight, or is this a suicide mission?"

"I got 800 pounds of cocaine, worth \$5 million dollars, riding in that chopper, so what do you think?"

"I think you are a fool. You have no idea what you're doing. We're in some of the most difficult flying conditions in the country. You did notice the mountains, right? You're flying around 14,000 foot mountains for heaven's sake. And you want a guy who hasn't flown in ten years to be the pilot. Not too bright, honestly."

"Let me tell you what I know Mr. Floyd Marshall. You're going to fly us out of here, or you're going to die right here on the ground. That's your choice, and your wife is going to die too. Do you understand that?"

Floyd sat unresponsively.

The guttural scream surprised Floyd. "Do you hear me?"

Floyd looked at Martin – who now had his pistol out in his right hand – and every muscle in Floyd's body was on fire.

"Yeah. I understand."

"I've waited a long time for this chance. I don't care about killin' you today – and I ain't gonna care anymore tomorrow." Martin pointed the automatic pointblank at Floyd's head. "I shot a man in the head last night with this gun. I'm just fine with it."

Floyd turned to face Martin. "Look at the road and drive before you get us both killed. Get the gun out of my face." Floyd glared at Martin. "I've had a lot bigger guns pointed at me, by a lot smarter people than you. I'm not doing anything until I have proof that Sharon is alive, and that she is okay. You don't like it? Find another pilot."

Martin drew his right hand back and began a swing of the pistol towards Floyd's head, stopping it in mid-air. Fury was radiating out of him like heat from a furnace. His face was beat red with small beads of sweat were trapped on his upper lip.

The two men drove in silence for several minutes. Floyd resumed his inventory of concerns, ideas and prayers. If he confronted Martin, even if it was successful, he still didn't know where Sharon was, or even if she was actually alive. *What option is there? None. There is only one play I have.*

"Get me the manual, and I need to check out the helicopter. I need to know exactly what equipment is on board the helicopter – instrument package, that sort of thing. So I need to look at it firsthand. I need to know how far we're going. I need to know how many warm bodies are going besides me, and, I assume, you." Martin drove without reacting.

"I'll need to turn her over and start the turbine, and work through controls, re-familiarize myself with the aircraft. I can't fly it without doing some amount of refresher checkout. Then I'll need to work up a flight plan. Your pilot who died on you last night, was he working on anything?"

Martin didn't answer, he just shrugged.

"Okay, well, that's helpful. I've never flown up here, but I have friends who have, so I have a general idea. But I did fly in the mountains in Afghanistan, so I'm here to tell you that mountains cause problems. First you have to go around them or over them. Generally the wind is a huge issue, and there are no second chances and no room for pilot error."

Martin turned his head to look at Floyd, but made no comment. He looked like a brooding gargoyle on some ancient church building, Floyd thought.

"We'll have to plot the course and see what kind of weight we can handle. That'll be a big deal. Eight hundred pounds and the two of us, that's twelve hundred pounds plus and then we have to add the fuel. In this heat, that's another concern. Night flying is out of question in these mountains, plus we'll have more unpredictable winds in the late afternoon and evening as temperatures fall."

"What are you talking about?" Martin began pounding the steering wheel and unleashing a torrent of obscenities dripping in rage while Floyd folded his hands in his lap and waited.

"You finished?" Floyd said flatly. Martin struggled to control himself and didn't respond. "As I was saying, I'll get busy as soon as you give me some proof Sharon is actually okay."

Martin pulled onto an unmarked dirt turn-off from the highway and drove on a slight uphill grade for a mile, then stopped at a closed gate. "Stay where you are." He got out of the Ford and unlocked the chained gate and came back to the SUV and drove through, while at the same time a jeep pulled up. A burly pie-faced man with a baseball cap got out of the jeep and closed the gate and locked it behind the Ford. Black eyes were just visible in the slits in his face, and his sweat accented pockmark scars glistened like ancient volcano cones in the sun.

"Julio, everything okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Nothing going on here since last night." Julio spoke in perfect English without an accent, so Floyd surmised he wasn't one of the upset Mexican drug dealers Martin had mentioned, which seemed like a good thing.

"Excellent. We're going up to the barn, and then I've got to go and do something and I'll need you to keep an eye on my friend here. He's going to be playing in the chopper 'till I get back." Julio was nodding and Martin added, "I can run down to the diner on 82 on the way back – you want me to bring burgers...something?"

Julio grunted and placed his order. Martin looked into the Ford at Floyd. "Want a burger?"

"Sure, why not?"

Martin got behind the wheel and drove on followed by the Jeep for another quarter mile up the dirt road that dead-ended at a small white farm-style house. Floyd thought it looked like it was built in the 1940's or 50's and had received several upgrades and additions over the years. Just to the left and about a hundred feet behind the house was a very large barn that looked generally rundown but was padlocked Floyd noticed. There were a handful of cars parked on the other side of the barn under several large pine trees. Martin pulled up to the front of the barn and Martin looked over at Floyd. "Let's go."

Walking around the barn to the back, Floyd saw a blue and white Bell helicopter sitting on a wide cleared patch of dirt in the sun, with the rotor blades secured and the skids tied off.

Martin stopped. "Well, there's the chopper. You're so all-fired anxious to get into it – get going." Martin exaggerated the sweep of his arm towards the helicopter. "There's \$5 million dollars sitting in it...and sitting right over here," Martin pointed to a lawn chair next to two 55 gallon fuel drums, "will be Julio, with his trusty AR-15 and his orders are to shoot to kill. That includes you." Martin dug in his pocket for a moment, "Here's the door key. Do whatever – but get ready to fly this thing out of here."

Martin stared directly into Floyd's eyes; Floyd could see no emotion whatsoever in his. "I'm going to bring you back a fresh video of your lady friend. Then we're not going to have this discussion again until I've delivered my merchandise and I've been paid. Do you understand me?" Martin thrust his index finger into Floyd's chest.

Floyd just nodded his head.

"Well, don't stand here gaping, get to doing whatever you need to do."

“Okay. How many passengers do I count on, and how far do we have to go? I need to know for fuel planning, like I told you.”

Martin glared and interrupted him. “I’ll tell you when we’re ready to go. You figure out how to get us out of here, and I’ll take care of the rest. You need to worry about your wife right now.”

Martin was walking off when Floyd realized that he was totally alone. He understood at the same moment that Martin had guessed correctly that the power of Floyd’s love for Sharon Toro was a far stronger restraint on his actions than an armed guard could ever be.



In the still quiet, Floyd Marshall, the retired Army officer and decorated combat pilot, who had once commanded unimaginable authority and control over the men and the machines of war, found himself on a secluded ranch. He was alone and vulnerable, as he hadn’t been since he had lost his first wife to cancer, and drifted on the winds of coincidence that brought him to Colorado several years before. It was here, in the middle of his life, sitting in a hotel in downtown Denver that he had met Al Morales, who led him to his Savior and Lord—to a whole new life, which now marched as a parade of Glory and everywhere he looked was the signature of the Author.

“How’d I miss Him all those years?” It was a question Floyd often asked.

Where there had been the chaos and unsureness of a randomly lived life, Floyd found the order and purpose of a faithful life—and Sharon.

Floyd smiled for the first time since this nightmare had begun. It was the quickening in his spirit that he had learned to trust since coming to know his Lord and seeing His power laid out so clearly in Scripture. He looked up in the silence of his heart and mind, and lifted his hands up towards heaven.

“You are my God, who leads me on, even to where I would not choose to go. No matter; you’re my God. I rest in You, and I trust in nothing else. Lord Jesus, be with me, guide me, give me discernment, and judgement. A clear mind. My beautiful Sharon is lost. I know that You love her more than I could ever love her. I intercede for her, Lord God, protect her this very moment and in this night. Set your Holy Angels around her. And around me. Lord God, let Your will be done. I lift all of this up in the precious Name of Jesus.”

Floyd walked to the helicopter like a prize fighter walking into the ring. “Okay Lord, let’s get this helicopter ready to fly.”

Chapter 10

Other than Deputy Atkins earlier, Jamie was only the second person to make it to Wild Spruce Creek. It was extremely washed out and rough and eventually dead-ended far up the mountain. Jamie stopped the motorcycle and tried to check in with Al Morales at camp. There was no cell signal.

He started up the trail trying to methodically take in everything. It was dry, rutted and rock-strewn and even though he did see some tire tracks here and there, they were so indistinct they could have been old, new, from a truck, or a car. After only a couple of minutes heading up the trail in the hot sun, he stopped and took off his motorcycle helmet and used the strap to tie it to the bike. He continued up the trail chasing the sweat winding its way off his forehead with one hand while he keep his steel steed moving slowly up the trail with the other.

He had never been on this trail, but like so many others around the White River National Forest, this one began life as a miner's path, and once the mine had played out or become too expensive to work, nature chewed into it like a beaver on a tree. It was even more remote than most, because it didn't actually connect to any other trail, and the unmarked trail that split from it – that presumably Sharon Toro had taken earlier – also dead-ended at some long deserted, nameless mine.

When Jamie saw the cutoff to the unmarked trail he stopped the motorbike and examined the junction that was formed by the two trails. The Wild Spruce Creek trail had a natural "gutter" that ran alongside the trail that was cut by decades of rain racing down the trail. It was a good twelve inches deep and just as wide. There weren't tire tracks, but there was crushed rock and the lip was crumpled and flattened out, so Jamie thought several vehicles could have easily crossed the gutter, but he really couldn't tell if it was fresh evidence, other than having happened since the last rain, he reasoned.

After pushing the Honda over the gutter, careful not to get in the marks he believed were caused by vehicles, Jamie started the motorbike back up and headed into the narrower unmarked trail, trying to avoid the largest rocks and staying out of the deep ruts. He barely crept up the trail looking side to side trying not to miss an inch.

Well up the path, Jamie was suddenly overcome with a sense of urgency. He didn't hear any voices, and he didn't feel particularly spiritual, but someplace in his own spirit, he was convinced, without any basis, that the whereabouts of Sharon would be found up this trail somewhere – and that she was in gravest danger imaginable. He didn't begin to pray purposefully, it just happened. He didn't even know if the words were even his own.

"Lord Jesus, please favor me. Show me how to find Sharon. Show me how to help her. Oh, Father, send me some sign, a word, anything...I can't do this by myself."

He was so startled by the sudden commotion in the brush to his left he almost lost control of the motorbike. A young mule deer with its huge black-tipped ears standing straight up, burst out of the brush and trees and crossed in front of him on a full run –

as scared by the motorcycle's noise as Jamie was by the doe's thrashing hoofs on the hard dirt.

Stopped with both feet down and holding onto the bike, he watched as the doe disappeared into the trees on the other side of the trail when his eyes fell to the dirt not far from the right side. There it was right in front of him. There was no question of it. Someone had dug two divots into the trail. Jamie dismounted the Honda and closely inspected the two "v" shaped divots, and on one the sharp edge of a boot heel was clear. There was no proof, or reason to believe, of course, that they were made by Sharon. But, Jamie knew they were.

He thought immediately of the Biblical story of Gideon's demand for dew on the fleece to test God's instructions. "Thank you Lord!" The suddenness of the mule deer's appearance and finding the divots made him smile uncontrollably. "Guess I'm in good company."

Searching the area as carefully as an amateur could know how, he decided that Sharon was sitting, because the earth behind the heel divots was smoothed out and tiny pebbles were imbedded in the dirt. *She was sitting here.* In front of the divots he found a small half circle where it looked like a tire could have been turning in a tight arc. "Okay, Sharon came up the trail, and for some reason she stopped here - maybe she found the kid - so she sat here? Why?" Looking beyond where he thought she was sitting, he saw where the lip the trail met the surrounding forest was flattened out. "Someone could have been sitting here, maybe the kid?"

Walking to the other side of the trail where the mule deer had barged out of the brush, he didn't see anything that looked out of the ordinary but made his way off the trail several yards into the trees and he saw what he considered proof - a cigarette butt. It didn't look dried out by the heat, or washed out by rain. "Looks fresh to me." Several feet back he found a heel print. Looking out towards the trail, he could see the spot where he thought Sharon had been sitting. "Someone was here, and someone was watching Sharon. Clear as day."

Turning to go back to his motorbike, he saw a glint in the sun. Several yards to his left between the trees he found part of a cell phone outer casing, and part of a screen or lens that he felt sure went with the other piece. This was enough, he didn't spend more time searching for cell phone parts. *Where could it have come from? Had to be Sharon's phone.*

Jamie went back to the Honda and took a notepad from the seat storage, and wrote a note to the search party he was sure was coming:

See the divots from heel prints...Sharon's? Tire from truck left a track - look left. Also, on left side of trail, walk ten feet in and notice cigarette butt, and heel print. Ten feet to the left, pieces of cell phone. I'm heading up trail, will leave note if I find anything. JG.

He set the note paper next to the divots and set a stone on top.

Jamie was pushing the Honda up the trail slowly, looking for any type of sign made by the Deputy's Tahoe, or by someone on foot. As he moved up the trail, he saw a partially obscured opening to a deer run heading into the higher terrain off to the right side of the trail. Putting the kickstand down, he left the motorcycle and walked several

feet into the run. "Wow, you'd never know this was here unless you were walking." It was only a few feet wide with dished-shaped hard earth and was quite steep even at that point.

He moved up twenty or twenty five yards and didn't see anything that even looked like a foot print, but just as he was getting ready to turn around, he saw what appeared to be a drag mark that curled the hard dirt up like an ice cream scooper had been scraped across it.

Walking up the trail he found another drag mark that was less pronounced, but clear. In another ten yards or so he found another. He turned around and went back to the motorcycle and took out the note pad.

Up the deer run looks like foot drag marks every ten yards, on the left side. Going up here.
JG.

Leaving the note at the cut-in of the deer run, he started the Honda and began a slow ride up the run, keeping a sharp eye on the left side. Every ten yards or so he saw a scuff mark.

"This has to be a sign, what else could it be?"

The run become continually rougher and rockier, but he still found frequent scuff marks. Then suddenly they ended. Jamie stopped the bike and slowly walked back down the trail to the last mark he'd seen, to make sure he hadn't missed any marks. He couldn't find any. Looking up the trail, he thought he saw where the deer run came across the top of a ridge or maybe another trail. "Okay, we've come this far, let's see what's up there." He got back on the motorbike and continued up the trail.

His heart sank like a stone in the ocean when he saw the bright crimson blood on the side of the trail. It was such a significant puddle of blood that he could see it vibrating like some evil lifeform in harmony with the motorcycle engine. He turned off the engine and looked in horror at the evidence, and felt the pit of his stomach revolt as the odor of death and the stench of the blood drifted in the air. The initial shock gave way to fear, like a condemned man seeing the gallows waiting for him. *What have I walked into?*

Dismounting, he looked around himself in every direction. Nothing was moving in the heat of the forest. He was alone in the silence. Walking past the blood he saw the drag marks and impressions in the brush headed off into the trees. Cautiously he went off the deer run, careful not to step in any of the blood trail. The terrain started to drop off quickly and he could see more blood smears and impressions in the brush. He came to a place where it was difficult to stay on his feet because the slope was so sharp downward. Stopping with one hand posted on a tree to stop his feet from slipping, he saw a body crumpled up like a wad of paper against the base of a tree twenty-five feet further down the slope. It was obviously a man.

"Thank God it's not Sharon," he blurted out. In a second he thought, *it isn't Sharon – but it is someone.* He took a step further on the incline but had to catch himself from slipping again. It was too steep and his mission was to find Sharon Toro. He pulled himself up the hard terrain and back to the deer run.

He left another note next to the blood pool:

Body about 50 yards down left side, very steep. It's a man, not Toro. JG.

When he started the Honda he looked away from the blood and its evil dancing to the engine's vibration and continued up the run. Quickly he came to the lip of where the deer run cut into yet another trail. Jamie was confused. "This trail isn't on the map at all. Must be in really bad shape, or a dead-ender. Maybe both."

This new trail didn't have direct sun at the junction with the run, and its softer brown dirt had ATV tracks. There were different partial footprints in the immediate area that was littered with several empty water bottles. One footprint appeared to be a large hiking boot, *maybe a size 11?* He thought. Another was hard to make out but looked like a smaller sneaker. *Could be a kid?* Yet another print was a smaller ribbed boot. Next to a set of tire marks from a larger ATV were two perfect divots dug into the earth by those crisp heels. "That's Sharon, she's leaving a trail!"

As Jamie looked around the area, he was mugged by a sudden doubt *and...and what? Fear?* He had left the Miner's Trail on a blind impulse, like a child running after a blowing dandelion seed. Abruptly he was in the mix and mire of events that were already being defined by life and death as his heart struggled to find a sure footing. *This isn't a game. I could get killed, or worse, I could get Sharon killed.*

Jamie stood in the heat and stillness and looked up and down the new trail. *Where now?* There were ATV tracks in both directions.

Deciding, he left a note.

Chapter 11

The medical examiner had finally made it to Gus's office. He carried a manila medical folder with color coded stickers and a photograph clipped to the cover.

"Dr. Fredericks," Gus smiled, "I've been looking for someone to give me some good news all morning. You gonna help me out?"

"Well," Dr. Fredericks mumbled something Gus didn't quite hear, while squinting through bifocals at the chart that made his eyes seem twice their normal size from Gus's angle. "What we have here is a homicide," he said in his soft voice. "Cause of death was one gunshot wound to the head. The bullet entered the skull a quarter of an inch above the left ear, at approximately a straight line angle, meaning he was shot from another vehicle, in my judgement. Would have killed him instantly. Another bullet entered his left torso just behind the shoulder and armpit and shattered the scapula. I believe it was the second shot because of the angle. It is consistent with the victim's body rotating violently to the right after the first shot. I have fragments of what I believe to be a 9mm hollow point, but I haven't been able to find enough for a positive comparison of the bullet. The body is in bad shape."

"Okay, guess we know *something*—just not too much of anything." Gus smiled at the doctor. "All I know is I've got bodies and I've got missing people and I've got a missing helicopter, all in our little 'ol county, and I don't like it," Gus was tapping the table and Sam was busy writing. "Anything else Doc?"

"Believe me, wish I had more for you. I know it's not much. But, honest, we were really lucky to find what we do have. The guy was mincemeat when they brought the body in. Between being shot, the wreck and cutting the body out of the car with the jaws, well, it was messy."

Olivia Sanders stepped into the office and joined the group. Gus nodded to her. "Okay, here we are. We'll have five deputies," she handed out a rooster of names, "that will be on the mountain spread over the next twenty to thirty minutes - they are all in route now. And we'll have three more, with K-9, within the hour." She didn't take a breath.

"I just talked to the lovely Judith Myer Delaney at the Garfield County *Search and Rescue* who confirmed that she'll have a three member team there within thirty to forty minutes, they just left." She winked at Judith's husband, Sam.

"Gomez and Harper have been looking at the property maps and are heading out now. They'll be north of 82 and west of 108 canvassing properties, trying to get a line on that chopper from yesterday."

"Excellent. Have we heard from Atkins?"

"We talked when he left the accident scene, but I'm getting ready to call him right now that I have a hard count, and tell him who he can expect up there and when. I'll holler back to you if anything changes."

"Good job," he called after her as she was already out the office door.

“So Sam, we got every available deputy heading to the mountain, ‘ya think the rest of us can handle this place?”

Sam smiled. “Sure, we’re a tough crew here.” He gave Gus a quick overview of the people on hand to manage the regular duties and any contingencies of the day.

“We’re not serving warrants, and we’re going to respond to accidents only, no traffic control though. We didn’t put anything in writing, but passed the word through the remaining crew. We have the courthouse and jail covered, just barely. So far, no one has asked any hard questions. Walt in Public Affairs fielded quite a few calls and interview requests on the two wrecks last night, but it has been boiler plate questions and interviews. The news hype has been about two fatalities on the same night, but with the two events so far away from each other, no one has seen a connection, yet. Everyone else has been quiet – nothing out of the State Police.”

“Thanks Sam.” Gus turned to the Medical Examiner. “Doc, can you cover us on this mess? Just tell ‘em you’re waiting on toxicology, something like that?”

“Sure, Olivia filled me in, but no one has asked about it yet. I don’t have a problem dragging my feet. Typically no one would expect us to be finished this soon anyway.”

“Great, thanks.”

“Sharon is my friend too.” Dr. Fredericks looked like he was ready to cry. “Anything else I can do?”

“Just be available today, I have a feeling we’re all going to be busy.”

When Dr. Fredericks left the room, Gus turned to Sam who was already looking at him. They exchanged the glances that come from too many years picking up the pieces after bad people did bad things.

Gus frowned. “I don’t know what else we can do. If we get a bunch of Feds up here, taking over, it’ll be chaos and Toro will drop to the bottom of the to-do list. Am I missing something? Are we doing the right thing?”

“Nope, you haven’t missed anything. We have ten deputies plus Search up there. We’ve got the Army flying a helicopter in just a little bit. We have Atkins – and if Tommy doesn’t kill him – Jamie is up there as well. If we find the helicopter, we’ll find Floyd I’m pretty sure.”

“So we just wait?”

The rap on the door was Mary with a sack of sandwiches. She was looking back and forth between the two men, and they both exchanged knowing looks at each other. Sam’s wife, Judith, was standing right behind her.

Chapter 12

Tommy Atkins retraced his earlier route heading to the Wild Spruce Creek trail. He had been delayed for nearly an hour with the wreck on the "82." There had been injuries and he'd been the only Deputy in the area. Finished, he had a frantic urgency about getting back to the trail and retracing his earlier steps. What had started as a routine back up call in the morning had found some solid place in his mind; he was quite sure Sharon Toro was on the mountain, and that she was in trouble. He didn't know why, he just knew, and it was the one thing he'd learned as a rookie officer - trust your first instincts.

Before turning off the paved road and losing his cell and radio signals, he volunteered what his instincts were telling him to Olivia Sanders. She surprised him, "That's what my gut says too." Deputy Sanders then brought him up to date on the personnel that would be headed to the mountain to join him, and informed him that Jamie Gallagher was already there on a motorcycle. "Just what we need, huh, is this kid crawling all over the area? So keep an eye out for him."

"Not a problem ma'am, I know him pretty well from Sharon's place, so we won't have any issues."

"Good to hear. The Sheriff wants every square inch covered. Leave no stone unturned—find out what happened to Toro, clear? We have one more issue complicating this - goes no further than the Sheriff, Sam and me - understand?"

"Of course."

"Floyd Marshall is missing now. Somehow, this seems to be more than just about Sharon being lost. There's more, too, but for now just be extra careful up there, keep a sharp eye out. We can't lose anymore folks today."

Tommy was dumfounded. "I understand."



On the return trip Tommy was driving up Wild Spruce Creek trail as quickly as he could go and still keep the Tahoe's wheels on the ground - the truck was banging, rocking and shaking over the large rocks and ruts. Somewhere in this mind the image came to him of prospectors and even families coming over these harsh mountains with loaded wagons and pack animals, determined to find gold, or simply to find a new life west of the Mississippi River. *My word, how'd they do it - how'd they find the courage? They were a lot tougher people than we are.*

The unmarked trail was easy to miss if you weren't looking for it. This time, instead of just turning onto the unmarked trail, he stopped and looked the area over carefully on foot. It was as unnervingly quiet as it was unseasonably hot. The forest didn't sing at all and there were only infrequent rustlings. Tommy did a 360 degree sweep looking around himself, while he reached to his holstered service weapon and pulled the snap button on the strap that secured it.

Like Jamie before him, he decided several vehicles had gone over the natural gutter that separated the two trails. "One of these was probably me. And this looks like a motorbike here." He fingered the edge of a narrow print to the left. "Must be Jamie."

Back in the Tahoe he moved up the unmarked trail just short of a mile, stopped and began walking up the trail looking for anything out of the ordinary. Before long, he spotted a piece of paper with a rock on top of it and stopped to see Jamie's earlier note. He read it several times, then retraced Jamie's findings of the divots, impressions, heel print and the cigarette butt.

"Look at this will 'ya. Jamie's right, what else could this be." He was squatting looking at the pieces of a cell phone.

He walked back to the Tahoe and drove it up just short of the site, and brought a camera, several evidence bags, and bright yellow marking tape. As he was walking up to the area, the half-moon shape of a tire track that Jamie had noted seemed more clear from the new angle—a truck had backed up from a head-on position to the side of the road, and pulled forward moving up the trail. He squatted next to it and looked at it again. "Is it new?" He asked out loud. "Don't know? But it's the only real good tire print here, certainly since the last rain, right? But where did the truck go?"

Tommy returned to the Tahoe and grabbed the black finished police style Remington 870P 12 gauge shotgun from its mount and slipped the camera around his neck. "Let's see what's up the trail."

Not too far up the trail he found Jamie's note at the deer run and peered up its narrow sloping incline. "Wow," he continued his own conversation. "Okay, but a truck can barely get up the trail, much less this run - where's the truck?" He backed out of the run entrance and looked up the trail, and back at the entrance to the deer run, still talking to himself. "Here's what we do, let's do a quick walk up the trail, make sure nothing's up there, and we'll pick up the run on the way down." He headed up the trail at a brisk pace with the Remington laid across his left forearm.

The uphill climb produced nothing but heavy sweat and a winded panting. He hadn't even seen a tire print. Nothing. "It's like the truck just vanished, maybe it was driven down the trail, not up?"

He turned around and headed back down the trail scanning to his right at the sharp drop off on the mountain face when he saw it. "How'd I miss this?" He scolded himself. It was a cigarette butt just like the one that Jamie had noted. He began a panicked search around the immediate area, convinced something was waiting here for him to discover.

It was two clear but small tire imprints at the edge of the trail, where it merged into the forest and then straight down into the woods. Stepping up to the edge, he saw that it was a radical drop off, and it was obvious something very large had crushed small bushes and taken off branches on its way down. "Oh, Lord," was all that Tommy could say.

Peering beyond the immediate mangled branches and scrub's was futile. It was dense and gloomy beyond them. He didn't even know how far he could go down, but

he slung the Remington's strap over his shoulder and started picking his way carefully down, grabbing whatever he could to keep his feet under him.

He was barely out of sight of the lip of the trail when he found a side mirror of a white Tahoe that had been ripped off and a long piece of blue plastic that was off the roof mounted emergency lights. He could feel his heart pounding. Several large trees had major impact damage where the tree bark had been scrapped or ripped off and very deep wedges of earth plowed up. Shredded low hanging branches, like you expect after a fierce thunderstorm, were littered about and he found large pieces of safety glass and chrome detailing strewn between several trees. He slipped several times and slid on his back and tore open his elbow on one fall, but he kept grabbing, stumbling and sliding down the incline.

He found the crushed Tahoe wedged between three huge pine trees, sandwiched in like it was a mashed up toy – not a six thousand pound SUV. When he finally managed to get to the vehicle, he did a quick search for a body or blood. There was neither.

He didn't know what emotion to have. *If she's not here, it means someone deliberately rolled this thing off the road. But, at least she's not in it dead.* He took several pictures of the wreckage and started back up the incline.

It took enormous energy to climb to the trail, dripping blood all the way up from his elbow. When he finally made it back up, he laid down at the trail's edge heaving for breath. His tan duty shirt was soaked through with sweat and his legs were on fire from the climb. Looking back down at the incline, he grimaced as he thought through the implications of what finding Sharon's vehicle meant.

Taking a length of bright yellow crime tape he wrapped it around a small bush, and left a note; "Sharon's SUV down incline, no sign of her – no blood. Atkins."

When he arrived back at the deer run, Tommy Atkins had made the biggest decision of his young career. He hoped it wouldn't end it.

Chapter 13

Sharon had nodded off. The heat, exertion and altitude finally overcome even her fear. She didn't hear Rosario Gomez slip up next to her, until she felt her gently shaking her shoulder. "Lady, lady, wake up."

Sharon's head bobbed up and down a few times until she realized where she was and she felt her wrists strain against the handcuffs. "Yeah, I'm awake." She shook her head again and could feel the sweat that was trickling down her sides inside her shirt like a leaky faucet.

Rosario smiled coldly as she looked up at Henry who had accompanied her. He gazed down at both of them with an angry menace in his manner. He hated Sharon on sight. She was a cop. He intensely disliked Rosario because she had refused his physical advances several times and the last time he approached her, she threatened to tell Martin. She was disgusted by him.

"Make it fast." He threw the handcuff key in the dirt and gravel at Rosario's feet. Picking up the key, she reached around Sharon and unlocked the handcuff from her left wrist, releasing her arms from behind the pipe. When she reached to the right wrist, Henry snapped, "No, she don't need both unlocked. Get going and get back here, and do it now."

Rosario didn't even look up at him, she wedged her hands under Sharon's damp armpits and helped her wobble up to her feet, which were tied with very little slack, so she could barely move. Looking up at Henry, Rosario asked quietly, "The feet?"

Henry was irritated. "Now you want her feet untied? Toilet paper next?" Rosario just looked at the dirt floor. After hesitating for effect, Henry moved up and reached behind Sharon's feet and after fiddling with the knot, pulled the nylon rope out so Sharon could walk. "Okay, make it snappy. I'm watching you both."

Rosario guided Sharon by the elbow outside and past the camouflaged canopy top to a nearby rock outcrop, while Sharon massaged her wrists and arms that ached from being locked behind her. "Thank you, my arms hurt so badly." It was a genuine sentiment, but Rosario didn't respond.

They reached a somewhat private place and Rosario stood in front of Sharon and told her to hurry up and go to the bathroom. "That pervert will be watching," she said with loathing. After Sharon was finished, Rosario helped her up and then they turned back to the camp and the canopy area. Ahead of them they caught a brief glimpse of Henry walking quickly back to the camp area. "I told you he'd be watching," Rosario smirked.

Sharon took the moment and stopped and looked directly at Rosario. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Rosario responded without really looking at Sharon. "Look lady, let me tell you something. There are some bad men here. Make sure you think about that when you're playing tough cop, huh?"

Sharon nodded and at the same time noted that Rosario had bobby pins holding her jet black hair back on both sides of her head just behind her ears. Looking at Rosario's hair, Sharon had just received the spark of inspiration she needed – an escape plan dropped into her mind as though she was organizing documents in a file cabinet. "Of course!" Sharon exclaimed.

Rosario looked at Sharon with a quizzical look, but Sharon ignored her and looked up briefly and whispered, "Thank you!"

Not knowing what to make of her smile, Rosario simply moved ahead, "Let's go."

They started walking again and after only a yard, Sharon groaned, "I'm cramping from sitting tied up. I hurt so bad, I gotta rest on you, please." She didn't wait for an answer, but simply draped her left arm across Rosario's shoulder with her left hand laying over to the front of her shoulder.

Rosario reached up with her left hand instinctively and held Sharon's arm and turned and rolled her eyes, "Yeah, come on, before Henry comes after us." With Sharon using her for support the two walked back under the camouflage netting headed to the cave entrance.

Sharon didn't see anyone at all except for Henry just ahead as he took up a position at the mouth of the mine waiting for the two ladies. She didn't hesitate – she was out of time. Not able to use her right hand with the handcuffs dangling from her wrist, she let her left hand casually – she hoped – brush over Rosario's hair and she put her hand into her own hair behind her ear until she could feel her two bobby pins, and with one smooth motion pulled one out.

If Rosario realized what Sharon had done, she didn't let on. As the two approached the mine, Sharon let her left hand come behind Rosario and deftly – she hoped again – kept the hairpin in the fold of her palm.

When they were inside the mine entrance, Henry ordered Rosario, "Lock her up."

Not waiting, Sharon sat herself down and put both of her wrists together behind the pipe and switched the bobby pin from her left to right palm. Henry stood and watched Rosario clasp the handcuffs tight, locking her wrists together behind the pipe, then he reached down and pulled the knot in the nylon rope around her ankles until Sharon grimaced in pain.

Henry smiled at her. His hand followed Sharon's leg all the way up to her thigh, then under her thigh, and finally down her leg very slowly. Sharon closed her eyes and screamed in her mind – it was revolting and she could feel her stomach churning. *Oh God, please don't let this happen.* His hand made one more foray up to her thigh, then he took it off of her completely. Sharon opened her eyes to see Rosario holding the key out to Henry with a withering and disgusted look on her face.

"Well, ain't that something. Maybe me and you we'll get better acquainted while you're with us." Henry took the key from Rosario while he continued looking at Sharon. "She's all yours. Need me, I'll be down at the tanks."

Rosario mumbled as Henry left, and when he was out of sight, she was shaking in anger. "The man is a pig!" Sharon simply gave her a weak smile.

"Glad you were here."

“Yeah. Don’t think it was me, he just has chores that can’t wait.” Rosario looked at Sharon and grimaced at the thought. “I gotta’ get going. I’ll be back with some water and cookies.” Rosario shrugged her shoulders, “It’s all I’ve got to eat right now,” she said to Sharon’s unspoken question.

Sharon leaned back as hard as she could against the ancient pipe she was handcuffed to, and pulled her legs up tight. Her mind immediately turned to the subject that had been on her mind all morning. *What do these people want? Why do they need me and why do they need Floyd? How do I get out of here?* The three questions kept rotating on the spit of her mind.

There was an obvious pattern in the camp as far as she could see from her vantage point. This was a working camp. She was sure they were preparing or making drugs out of her line of sight, and most, if not all of the camp was involved. Second, she now knew that at least two members of the notorious Fuentes drug cartel out of the Mexican state of Chihuahua, led by the flamboyant and charismatic Vicente Fuentes, were in the camp, and they didn’t care who knew it.

“They are stone cold killers of the worst kind,” she muttered to no one but herself. “Stone cold killers, but why are they on this mountain?”

Chapter 14

The Bell 206 was the most popular light helicopter ever manufactured. Its basic airframe had been around for more than forty years, and was still in production and widely used. Even the Army had a modified version of the venerable *Jet Ranger*. It was stable, reliable, and predictable. Floyd had to smile at the thought of those qualities being found in a piece of machinery, while not one of them could be found in the drama unfolding around him.

The version of the Bell 206 Floyd was looking at was a stretched version designated as a 206L4, accommodating seven instead of five occupants. Its Rolls Royce gas turbine engine offered more power to handle the increased weight and performed better in higher altitudes. Like any helicopter, the Bell had multiple simultaneous actions that kept them airborne. They were accomplished with three primary controls; the cyclic, or “stick” that sat between the pilot’s legs, the collective that was located between the two front seats like a handbrake handle would be in an automobile, and the tail rotor pedals that were foot operated. The cyclic controlled the tilt or attitude of the aircraft in any direction, the collective operated somewhat like a handlebar control on a motorcycle, and allowed the pilot to adjust the applied power and the pitch of the rotors, while the tail rotor pedals allowed the pilot to control the pitch of the tail rotor blades and control the directional heading of the helicopter. “Yeah, just like riding a bike,” Floyd impersonated Martin’s earlier comments.

He first did a walk around of the aircraft. This would all be part of any preflight checklist, but his years of flying helicopters in the military made this rote for Floyd. He went to the nose and popped a small rectangular cover that exposed the large battery. He checked the connections, cables and wiring, and everything seemed in order. He moved on and unlocked the cargo bin. There was a moving blanket covering a sizable load tied off and secured. He unclipped a tie down and lifted a blanket end and saw what he presumed were individually wrapped kilos of cocaine. “Hmm, nowhere near 800 pounds, betcha they removed the seats and the rest is in the cabin.”

Before he opened the cockpit door, Floyd walked towards Julio who was quietly watching from his lawn chair and took an aluminum step ladder resting against the side of the barn and walked back to the Bell. Once on the ladder, he opened the cowling covering the remarkably small turbine engine. There wasn’t a speck of dirt or oil residue, and he could see the crimped bolt tags indicating that maintenance had been done. *Always a good sign*, he thought.

Floyd then checked for grease leakage and made sure the various connections weren’t showing signs of seepage.

Closing the cowling, he moved the ladder forward and opened the cowling to the transmission case where the turbine’s power was transferred to the main rotors. Again, he found spotless machinery. Checking the hydraulic and transmission oil levels, he was pleased and closed the cowling. Before heading to the cockpit, Floyd checked the

fuel sump and drained a small amount to make sure there was no water settled in the fuel system.



Satisfied with a quick visual inspection, Floyd unlocked the right door of the helicopter and was greeted by the Spartan but functional instrument panel that straddled the front two seats. He glanced behind the seats and saw that the center passenger seats had been removed and there was a large cube three by three feet wrapped in a sheet of blue plastic. *There's the rest of the cocaine.*

In the door flap he found a laminated card titled "Preflight Checklist: Bell 206L4 Long Ranger" with a hand written notation of the tail number; Bell N832W. In addition he found a credit card receipt for routine maintenance that had been done the week before. The large flight manual was sitting on the pilot's seat. Floyd flipped through the manual for a brief review.

The aircraft was manufactured in 1997, and the registration and serial numbers all matched, *so at least it isn't stolen.* The current owner was *Armada Restoration Systems* in Denver who purchased the Bell less than two years ago. *Never heard of 'em. But its clean and at least current maintenance has been done. All that matters,* Floyd smiled.

Satisfied with his review, he climbed into the right seat, and attached the preflight checklist to a small clip just to the side of the instrument panel and settled in to go over the location of mechanical and electronic controls and gauges. Floyd guessed the checklist itself had over 50 items, including the engine run-up and the engine shut down procedures, in addition to many of the visual checks he had already done. It had been so many years since he'd flown a Bell helicopter that he decided to err on the side of caution and use the whole checklist.

Floyd began his rundown of the cabin, and once he was content that he knew the position of everything, he started though the engine pre-start checklist. "Flight controls, freedom checked and position for start. Check. Throttle, full open, flight idle closed, check. Landing light off. Check." He spent some time going through the lengthy checklist and then turned to the engine startup procedure. "Main rotor clear, check. Throttle, full open, idle closed. Check." He went through all eighteen checks.

Finally he reviewed the checklist items for the engine startup and the ten items for the engine run-up to full power, followed by the list for engine shutdown procedures. By the time Floyd was finished he was soaking with sweat in the tight cockpit and the still hot air. He stepped out of the helicopter and saw that Julio was still sitting in the lawn chair next to the fuel barrels. Walking towards him, Julio didn't look anxious or disturbed, *why would he? He's got the AR-15,* Floyd reasoned.

Julio motioned with the barrel of the gun towards a small cooler chest next to the chair. "There's water in here."

"Thanks, I appreciate it. Cockpit is pretty toasty." Floyd took a cool bottle of water and opened it, splashed a bit of water on his hand and wiped his face. "Feels good." Julio just nodded and adjusted his ball cap.

“Okay, so I’m ready to start the helicopter. I’m going to untie the rotor straps, and go through a startup procedure. I’ll do a full check then go through a shutdown procedure. You okay with that?”

“You start that chopper up and I’ll put a bullet in your head.” Julio didn’t even look up.

“Huh? Well, I...I thought the point of this was me flying that thing out of here?”

“Yeah, I don’t care what you thought. When Martin gets back you ask him. But you don’t do nothin’ ‘till he says you can. End of discussion.”

“That’s just great.” Floyd sat in the shade and thought about Sharon.

Chapter 15

True to her word, Rosario was back with a bottle of water and several plain tortillas. “Found these instead—figured these were better than cookies.” She sat down next to Sharon with a frail smile.

Rosario took five minutes and tore the tortillas apart and fed them piece by piece to Sharon, and helped her down a bottle of water. “Maybe later I can bring you some coffee.”

Sharon nodded her appreciation and smiled. Rosario looked at her hands and Sharon could sense that she was shy about her circumstances – *perhaps deeply ashamed*. Sharon said softly, “It’s okay. I understand.”

“You don’t understand nothing.” Rosario didn’t look up. “You have it all. A real job, a family, and everything you want. What do you know about me?”

“I know you’re being good to me.”

“Because Martin told me to keep an eye on you.” Rosario was still looking down. There was a long silence, and around them there was a lifelessness in the heat of the day.

“I’m not a bad person.” The words slipped out before Rosario could track them down for capture. They were heavy words that hung in the thick air with a weight that didn’t allow any other words in the same space until they had completely settled. Her black hair shined in the light of the day behind her, framed in the mine’s entrance. The expression on her young face showed the price of a hard life.

Sharon felt a strange emotion surging through her. She was hot and her face flushed. It wasn’t a reaction that came as a response to a feeling, she realized, but a swelling passion traveling in her very spirit itself like the incoming surf from the ocean that no power on earth could turn away. Then, as though that power itself broke open some secret passage way, a quiet whisper came to her. Not in her ear. But somewhere in her mind, or in her soul itself, she wasn’t even sure. But she understood in a split second that the whisper was from the Master Himself. She couldn’t even breathe – her heart raced ahead of her as though it wanted every blood cell she had to participate in this event. In that first moment she couldn’t understand the whisper, then it came clearly, raising up and spreading through her whole being:

“Sharon, you are prepared for this time. Will you love My daughter, Rosario? Will you tell her how much I love her?”

“Oh Father.” Sharon couldn’t say more. It was not a response but a prayer of adoration. The whisper came again:

“Do not fear Sharon. You are not asked to do more than you can do today, or ever. I ask only that you abandon yourself and lean to My Word for your bearing.”

The emotion that had raced through her was gone as quickly as it had come, as was the Whisperer. Sharon looked at Rosario who sat gazing back at her with astonishment.

Rosario gently shook her head from side to side and asked, "What was that?" She was genuinely mystified having perceived something, yet at the same time she couldn't see or hear anything.

They were quiet for a minute or two, then Sharon looked tenderly at the young woman. "Rosario, are you a woman of faith?"

"You mean, like faith in God?" Rosario weakly smiled with a chuckle. "Nah, never was. My mom was. But I never saw the advantage myself. Why?"

Sharon smiled, praying that she had the right words for this young woman. "Just wondered." She drew a long breath. "I see a lot of the tough stuff in the world and a lot of hurt people. And I see a lot of pain that girls go through. Sometimes their fault, sometimes just because they're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sometimes...just because."

Rosario looked blankly at her, softly nodding her head as though she understood what Sharon was saying. In truth, she had no idea where Sharon was going.

Rosario spoke defensively in advance of whatever lecture she suspected Sharon was preparing for. "My mom and dad tried the best they knew. I didn't turn out this way because of them." Her voice dropped off with a softness that told Sharon that Rosario's heart was speaking. "I dunno, I just went wild when I was sixteen...me and my friends, we did it all. One thing led to another. I dropped out of school, and started *really* messin' with drugs. It wasn't too long and I, uh...I started...well, you know, I started working on the streets to pay for my habit." Rosario glanced sideways at Sharon. The pain in her appearance needed no reply.

"I was using anything I could get, but I loved my crack—that was my preference. That's when I met Martin, when we were in Portland. He was recruiting for girls to work the street for him, for...you know...and drugs of course. But before long, he took a liking to me and helped me get cleaned up." Rosario was silent for a minute, and simply sat looking at something in the solitude of her mind that Sharon could tell hurt tremendously.

"I've been clean for over a year now, you know." There was an uptick of accomplishment in Rosario's tone, Sharon noticed.

Not pushing back or responding, Sharon just looked at her caringly.

"So, Martin had that little boy, Tyler. He was his son by some woman years ago, but she's long gone. That was why Martin wanted me clean, to help take care of him. It's just the two of them. When we first met, Martin did everything with me. Now, well, I don't guess we're a couple, but he watches out for me. I mostly watch Tyler and I do what I have to do to get by."

Sharon tried to be affirmative. "We all do things to get by." She took a deep breath, hoping that the young girl couldn't hear her lack of confidence. "Rosario, what do you want out of life, can you tell me?"

"What do I want out of life?" Rosario looked at Sharon with a surprised expression. In the silence Sharon thought of her own life at Rosario's age. She'd never asked that question of herself; she just didn't want to be like her mother she recalled.

After a long moment, Rosario answered, "Well, I guess what every girl wants. I've dreamed of my own family, sure, and a house. I dunno, really, that sort of stuff."

"Don't you want to be loved? Don't you want to be accepted?"

Rosario looked at Sharon like a drowning woman spotting a floating raft. "Sure, of course. But, I don't think that's happening, not for someone like me. I have been out here too long – seen too much. You wouldn't understand."

Sharon didn't look at her, but interrupted gently. "I understand more than you'd know. You're not the only person to go haywire somehow, Rosario. You think you are the only girl who did things – had to do things they aren't proud of?" Sharon kept her voice low and steady. "I grew up in a home without a dad, and my mom had a new man every couple of weeks it seemed. For a long time I didn't understand that was how the rent got paid. In high school I got lucky, I could run really fast, so being on the track team meant I didn't have time to get in trouble."

Sharon was still praying for just the right words, "I promised myself I wasn't going to throw away my life like my mom. I had it all figured out. Well, I went to college a couple of years on a track scholarship, and I ruined everything. Just like my mom. I got pregnant and the boy didn't love me so much anymore after that." Sharon let out a revealing laugh. "Before I knew it, I was out of school, a single mom working part time jobs, and trying to make it all work. I got lucky, and I got hired on at the Sheriff's Department, but I did what I had to do. I had to sacrifice so much to make it. I didn't like me much back then."

"So one day," Sharon turned her head and caught the eyes of Rosario and wouldn't let go, "I meet this lady, Miriam Patterson is her name, and she asked me the question I just asked you. Honestly, I answered just about like you did."

It was Miriam who introduced me to the idea that Someone loved me more than I could ever love myself and that I was loved just because I'm a child of God. Just because He made me. She told me that it didn't make any difference that I made so many wrong turns in my life, because there isn't a person born who doesn't do terrible things. Maybe they don't sell their body, but maybe they sell their soul. Or maybe they don't do drugs, but they poison themselves with hatred and indifference instead. Maybe they steal, or lie. Maybe they're just plain cruel."

Sharon sucked in a deep breath, as she and Rosario sat in the oppressive heat and staleness of the mine entrance. "God provided a way for us to be pure again, Rosario. To be new in every way. Just a few minutes ago," Sharon stopped for a second and tried to take in everything in Rosario's expression, "God told me to tell you that He loves you."

The roiling emotions of that momentary encounter washed over her again. "Can you imagine, God loves you so much he has me locked up in handcuffs on the side of a mountain, so that I could tell you that He loves you?"

"God told you that? How?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what He told me to tell you. I can't explain how, I can only tell you why. God loves you, Rosario. He wants you to be his daughter. Right now. On this

mountain, and in this dirty mine. He wants you to know His unending love for you personally - *you Rosario!* And He wants you to love Him."

Rosario had a look of bewilderment and wonder on her face. "What...why...wants me to love Him..." she couldn't finish a thought.

Sharon smiled knowingly. "The real question for you now, is whether or not you are ready to turn the mess that is your life over to Jesus Christ?"

The prisoner and the guard sat and talked about God's plan for rebuilding ruined lives and about the new love, the new mind and the new spirit that God promises everyone who would trust Him.

It was on the dirt floor of the entrance of an abandoned mine, on the side of a nameless mountain, on a stifling hot day, in the company of murderers and thieves, that Rosario Gomez yielded her broken life to Christ.

Chapter 16

Tommy Atkins stood peering up the narrow deer run, identified by Jamie's note. *How'd he even find this run? Good catch, Jamie.* He could clearly see the motorcycle track where Jamie had set out up the run. Looking at the run again after finding the SUV only confirmed his decision. "I don't have a choice."

He rehashed the circumstances one more time with himself and slowly began walking up the trail. It wasn't long before he saw the scuffs and drag marks Jamie had made note of.

"Okay, we've got Sharon's empty truck rolled down the mountain, and she was taken up this run against her will, or maybe even hurt." Grimacing, he was in discussion with himself again. "This is a really narrow run, even an ATV won't make it. So, this really isn't even a choice. It'll take hours to get bikes up here now. Hate to do it on foot, but, guess that's what I get paid for. Wow, I bet Sheriff Smith and Olivia Sanders are going to blow a gasket."

He walked back to the truck and rummaged through the first aid kit and found alcohol wipes and cleaned up his elbow and wrapped the large gash with gauze and tape. He also picked up his large water bottle, note pad and the folded laminated county map. Locking the truck, he started to walk away when he had second thoughts. *Could get a bit cool up there.* He turned and grabbed his light weight wind breaker before walking back to the entrance to the deer run and leaving another note next to Jamie's.

Sharon's truck wrecked up trail on left – marked the spot with evidence tape – no blood, no body. Her foot marks are up this run – need to get motorcycles up here. I'm going ahead on foot. Will leave notes. Atkins.

Tying the windbreaker onto his duty belt, he set off up the trail with the Remington's barrel resting across his left arm. He kept up a steady conversation with himself. "None of this is on the map? Maybe this run feeds into another old trail, just not on a map? Or maybe they just camped in the forest somewhere? That'd be more likely. Speak to me Jamie, Sharon."

He could see the infrequent drag marks and Jamie's motorcycle tracks and didn't stop to inspect them but kept a steady pace up, sweat running in tiny threads down his back and soaking through his tan duty pants.

In the distance he could see a note under a rock. "Good man Jamie. What do we have now?" Before he even reached the note, he could smell the unique stench of blood drifting in the heat and he could hear the frenzy of swarming flies. Seeing the note and then the pool of blood, brought a plea from his heart. "On no, not Sharon's please."

Bending over and reading the note, he said out loud, "Thank God. Wonder who it is though?" He walked through the brush looking at the clear impression of something heavy and bloody being dragged along, then to the steep drop off where Jamie had seen a male body. "You know what, I've had one good spill down a mountain today, try not to kill yourself this time." After slipping and sliding – and awkwardly trying to keep from hitting his bandaged elbow – he worked himself down to a position where he

could see the body crumpled against a tree. It was clearly a man. "Good enough for me."

Leaving a note next to Jamie's original note, he wrote to those who would follow him:

Confirmed it was a male body. Hard to get at, will need ropes for recovery. I'm headed further up. Atkins.

The altitude and heat were beginning to win their battle to break Tommy into a potshard – his head pounded, his elbow throbbed in pain, and he could feel his stomach still churning from the reek of the blood pool. He had not looked up from his march, so when he stepped onto the trail he was surprised. Looking both ways on the trail he could see crisscrossing tracks which he realized were different sized ATV tires, and Jamie's Honda. "Well, I'll be, the kid was right," he said of his contemporary.

Finding Jamie's note, he collapsed on his bottom leaning against a tree trunk. He drank most of his water, and realized that he hadn't grabbed any of the snacks he kept in the Tahoe's cab. "Brilliant, just brilliant," he chided himself out loud.

He roused himself thirty minutes later, drenched in sweat. Before he took off following Jamie on the trail – on foot – he gathered the strewn water bottles left at the scene and emptied whatever was left in each of them into his water bottle, which collectively amounted to a quarter of a bottle.

"Hope none of them was carrying some exotic bug."

Chapter 17

Mary Smith and Judith Myers Delaney made a formidable team coming in the door to Gus's office. Mary was smaller, intense and analytical. Judith was tall, powerful and a natural leader. Gus pushed his six foot three inch frame into his seat as far as possible while he noticed Sam tried to bury his head behind a computer screen.

"Ladies, thanks for the lunch. Mary catch the door, will 'ya."

Mary closed the door behind her and moved next to her husband while Judith started distributing sandwiches. She finished but didn't take a seat. "Gentlemen, we have a problem. We've got Sharon and Floyd missing, and all sorts of bad things happening in the county."

Gus reacted with irritation. "Who told you Floyd was missing?"

Judith shook her head at Gus in surprise. "Why, Al Morales, of course." Gus could only roll his eyes. "Any luck figuring out where he might be?"

"Nothing so far."

There was knocking at the door again. Daniel and Miriam Patterson were waving through the glass. When they entered, Gus looked at his Pastor and his wife and shook his head. "I know, Al Morales called you."

Miriam didn't get the sarcasm. "That's right, how'd you know?"

"Wild guess."

The three couples ate their sandwiches while Gus and Sam alternately filled them in on what they knew, what they didn't know, the frantic efforts to locate Sharon, and how potentially dangerous the situation could be.

Gus finished the update, "We need intense prayer." He and Mary, followed by Sam and Judith prayed over the events of the day and pleaded for safety for their lost friends and those already looking for them.

During the break in the discussion and prayer, Judith looked around the room. "So, I know that area Sharon went missing in as well as anyone in this county. Probably better. We'd all," she swept her hand across the room, "like to get in on the search, and I would be responsible as the Sherpa." She looked at Gus with her eyebrows raised in a question.

"Absolutely not."

Mary looked crossly at her husband. "Absolutely not? How about a discussion instead of a decision without discussion, Sheriff Smith?"

"Mary, listen to what you guys are asking! We've got two of our best friends - and one of my best deputies - missing. We've got two dead bodies in twelve hours, one with cartel connections. We've got...oh, what's the use." Gus stopped in frustration. "Sam, a little help here."

Sam looked sheepishly at the group. "Yeah, it is a bizarre situation and it's dangerous no question. We really don't know enough..."

Judith stepped on Sam's remarks. "Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before as I've led, oh, I don't know, *how many* hundreds of rescue operations in these mountains?" She

looked witheringly at Gus and Sam. “Sounds to me like you guys could use some expert help.”

Daniel Patterson was the pastor of the Grand Valley Bible Church, and along with Miriam had one of the most active ministries in the area. They had deep connections into the county and had mentored everyone in the room at one time or another. Daniel stood, his tall lean frame crowned with his silver hair touching his collar. The room fell quite as Judith took a seat.

“Seems to me we have an urgent need here. Our friends are in trouble. No greater love is there, than to lay down your life—your safety—for your friends, remember? Sharon is like my daughter—she and her son grew up in the faith with Miriam and me. We married Floyd and Sharon. You can bet your last dollar that we’re gonna be there for them. We married you and Mary, Gus.” He turned and looked at Sam, then Judith. “We married you two as well. Do you think we’d do anything less for you all? Not happening.”

Gus looked like a child whose toy truck was just taken away. Sam was looking at his hands.

They were saved from more browbeating by Olivia Sanders barging in. “We’ve got some news!”



Gus launched from his chair like a charging elephant. “*He did what?*”

Olivia’s rapid-fire speech stared again. “Yeah, Tommy Atkins left a note. Mat Kuhlmann was the first Deputy on the scene - he found it and had to drive down the mountain to call it in. And LaBrash just got there. Tommy found evidence that Sharon was ambushed. Cell phone was found in pieces, and boot marks—he thinks Sharon left them on purpose. Tommy found Toro’s truck, rolled down a drop off, but there is no blood, no body, no Sharon.”

She flipped a page on her note pad. “Jamie Gallagher left a note at a deer run that says there’s boot prints up the deer run. That run is right here,” she moved to the map and put her finger on an imaginary spot. “Tommy verified the tracks, and he left on foot, says we’ll need motorbikes, even ATV’s can make it up. He wasn’t going to wait though.”

“So, let me get this straight, *now* I have two deputies *and* a civilian missing on the...” Gus’s face was beet red.

Olivia didn’t stop talking, “I’ve located five motorbikes and they’ll be headed to the mountain within the hour I’m told. So, maybe what he did wasn’t so dumb. He would have had to go back down the trail to pick up a signal to call the information in, and then drive all the way back. He knew Deputies were in route.”

“We can’t read minds here...if we can’t talk to him.” Gus threw up his hands.

Olivia stood looking at Gus with her arms folded over her chest defiantly. “We know more right now than we knew ten minutes ago.”

Sam was nodding his head in agreement with Olivia. Gus gave him a short look and Sam jumped in, "We're riding a whirlwind right now. Tommy and Jamie are the only ones even close to knowing what's going on."

"I know, I'm just frustrated." Gus felt like events were ganging up on him.

Olivia accepted the surrender and moved off the battlefield. "I'm checking to make sure the motorcycles are being picked up. Also, I haven't heard anything out of Gomez and Harper canvassing properties, I'll try to get an update."

With Olivia finished Judith got up and was examining the county map carefully. She was muttering to herself and her husband looked at Gus and shrugged, indicating that he had no idea what she was doing either. Olivia was watching Judith trace something on the map.

"So, the four of us," she looked at the Patterson's and Mary, "can head out to the far side of 108, here," she pointed to the map. "Some of these old trails that aren't on the map crisscross up here. Here is the Wild Spruce, and here's where the deer run is." She moved her finger as a pointer.

Judith moved her finger forty-five degrees and found Route 108 on the map. "I'm just thinking there is an old trail near here, and maybe we should take a look and see if there was recent traffic. It's really out of the way, but 'ya never know."

Gus immediately jumped in: "We can't afford any more lost people, frankly." Judith pushed harder, and after some back and forth in which Gus's body language was strongly suggesting disapproval, he finally relented. "Okay, but we can't afford anyone else missing today. Call us if you find something, and if not come on back here. Understood?" He was looking at Mary who gave him a stone-faced stare.



Once the four civilians were belted into Judith's four wheel drive *Search and Rescue* SUV, she turned to them and stated empathically: "There is an old trail up there—I'm thinking it goes well into the mountains. Wouldn't be surprised at all if that deer run goes right into it. Let's go take a look." She smiled at them and didn't wait for an answer.

Chapter 18

Rosario had various chores throughout the afternoon. But every time she had a moment she was back in the mine with Sharon. "It's like I'm watching a movie in my head," she explained to the handcuffed deputy. "Everything you've told me about today. It's all true, every word, ain't it?"

Sharon nodded her head, with her eyebrows extended upwards and a soft smile sneaking across her face like a meteor against the evening sky.

Rosario couldn't be contained. "Everything I thought I knew is wrong. I can live a new way and a new life. I can love someone, because Jesus loved me. *He told me!*"

Sharon was incredulous. She was bristling with instantaneous excitement pouring out of her expression like soap suds running over in a washing tub. "What? What did He say, when?" Tell me everything He said! Come on, tell me!"

Rosario smiled at Sharon's delight. Then she grew quiet and lowered her face. "I was down at the tanks, me and Tyler have to clean them every day. I was thinking on what you said, that God told you to tell me that He loved me." A tear escaped down Rosario's cheek and slid off like it was on a playground slide. "I just stopped my chores and said out loud, 'Thank you God for loving me, thank you, I didn't think anyone but Tyler loved me.'" Sharon could see a smile crossing Rosario's face. "I was thinkin' – all those men that used to take me out, lots of them told me they loved me, 'ya know? But they really just loved themselves, didn't they?"

Sharon simply listened.

"Then, outta' nowhere, He spoke to me. He spoke right to me!" Rosario's lifted her face to Sharon. "He told me that was my story yesterday – but it wasn't my story today. He said I was being changed from the inside, and that He'd never leave me, ever, because He loved me! I heard Him just as plain as day. Right there next to a smelly tank of chemicals and stuff, in front of everyone, He spoke just like we're talking right now."

Just nodding, Sharon was overwhelmed. Rosario wiped away another tear and continued. "He told me to read and learn His Word. And then He told me that I'd find more love right here on this mountain. Then He was gone." She was as bright as a campfire on a moonless night.

"I asked Tyler if he heard Him, he was standing right next to me. He said he didn't hear a thing, but I tell you He was clear as a bell, and it wasn't just my imagination, honest."

"You don't have to convince me, Rosario. I know it was real. It's written all over your face. What did you tell Tyler?"

"I told him that the Lord Jesus had just spoken to me."

"What did he say?"

"He asked me what the Lord said. I told him, but he didn't say much. But he'll listen to you, maybe if you talked about God. I think he really likes you."

The two women sat for several minutes basking in the miracles of the day, both of them filled with the excitement of Rosario's new faith that had been found and sealed in such a miraculous way.

Finally, Sharon took the conversation back to Tyler. "Well," she let out a laugh, "I'm glad to hear Tyler likes me, he didn't like me much this morning."

"No, no, it's nothing like that." Rosario's whole manner became apologetic instantly. "Tyler has to do what Martin says...we all do. Don't blame the boy. It don't matter if you're a man, woman or a boy, that man will beat you to within an inch of your life if you cross him. Or he'll kill you. Same with Henry, that's why they get along so well. They're mean as snakes. I've been black and blue all over my body. Same as Tyler. He whips him too." Rosario's head dropped.

Sharon didn't need to ask Rosario why she didn't leave, or why she hadn't escaped from Martin and this group of thugs. Over her years as a Deputy Sheriff, she had seen this rationalization of emotional bondage time and again with women who had been severely abused. She knew that often they believed in some distorted way that they deserved whatever punishment life meted out; or their abuser killed them before they could leave.

"Yeah, I saw that side of Martin this morning with Clarence, the man who blindsided me this morning. Did you know him?"

Rosario spoke quietly. "Sure, but he kept to himself pretty much, did odd jobs here and there. Mostly he was a thief.

Met him in Oregon. Martin picked him up on the streets somewhere. Sometimes Martin would be screaming at him, and then other times he'd be all buddy-buddy. Martin kept him on edge like that on purpose. Honestly, Clarence wasn't too bright. But Martin would use him to do things he didn't want to do. Ain't surprised that he didn't make it back."

"Oh, why's that?" Sharon's investigative instincts were alerted and she pushed as hard on Rosario as she thought she could.

Rosario looked around and craned her head towards the mine entrance. She lowered her voice when she turned to Sharon. "Well, something big is going on. I don't really know what it is, but I know it was really late last night when Martin made it back to camp. He came to get Tyler—he sleeps in my tent when Martin is gone—then he woke Clarence. Martin was excited. He said that they were going to make more money than they could ever spend. That's what he said. So when Clarence doesn't make it back, it just means that Martin doesn't want to cut anyone in on whatever he has going on after he used them. I've seen him do that that before. Believe me."

"Okay, what does all of this have to do with me?" Sharon pushed.

"Honest, I don't know. Martin already had it laid out for everyone. He told them that the three of them were leaving after daybreak, and that Tyler and Clarence would take the big ATV and he'd take his own.

Martin's smart, he had it all planned. He told Tyler and Clarence that they'd go down where he showed them, and leave Clarence on the trail to trap you. Tyler would take the ATV back up to another trail out of sight so you wouldn't suspect nothing.

Tyler would come back on foot to be there waiting for you. That was the plan. Martin was going down to pick up his car, to get to a pay phone and make a phone call so that they would send you out on the trail looking for Tyler. Then he'd tell your husband that he had you, but he never said why he'd wanted to do that."

"It worked." Sharon had plenty of questions, but was confident that Rosario didn't really know many details, but pushed her a bit more. "How did he know I'd be the Deputy on duty, do you know?"

"No, not really, but he talked like someone told him. He's smart like that."

"Wow. That's not good. So they have cars somewhere?"

"Yeah, not far off the mountain there is a house that has a large barn behind it, and somehow Martin gets to use it. I'm not exactly sure where it is, I've only been down there one time. But the trail is so rough, I don't think anyone uses it. Martin won't let any cars on the mountain. So everyone parks there, and then they get picked up at the trail in an ATV. He has a guy down there watching everything, too."

"Rosario," Sharon tried to sound as casual as possible, "are there really alarms in the woods and the trail?"

"Sure. Martin is super nervous about being discovered. I don't know what kind they are, but deer have set them off a few times and it makes a terrible noise. And the other way," she pointed in the direction that she had taken Sharon out to go to the bathroom, "a little bit further and the mountain falls off like a cliff. The trail is the only way in, and they put Henry right there at the end of it."

"All that gravel makes a lot of noise." Sharon nodded hoping not to sound as disappointed as she was. "Who were those guys arguing with Martin a while ago?"

"Yeah, that's crazy, huh. They are from Mexico, part of the cartel Martin says. They're really bad people is all I know. They came in a couple of days ago to make sure their investment is safe, that's what Martin said. They lost a lot of drugs up in Oregon and they're still pretty mad about it. Martin hates 'em, but he says they are the only way to he can operate without getting hurt."

Rosario told Sharon she had to get back to her chores, but promised her a cup of coffee as she left the mine, with the sun starting its trip to the western horizon, softly lighting the thick trees, and beyond them another mountain.

Sharon watched the scene for a moment and was reminded that God redeemed the bad for the good, and no human intellect was sufficient to gather that truth and hold it. She thought about her husband, and where he might be now, and she asked God to bless and protect him through the coming night.



Her mind drifted off as she thought about the extraordinary man she had married over a year ago. She had never been married and was nearly fifty years of age—and as much as she thought she might marry, it never seemed right in all her years as a single mom. Then, before she knew it, her son, Vincent, was out of school and in college, then off to seminary. She had been content with her life in the Lord, her church community

and in her job, but...something always seemed to linger around the edge of her days that she couldn't quite touch.

Then one bitterly cold, snowy night, she had followed a hunch that lead her to the Miner's Trail camp, in search of Richard Murray and his two children who were lost in a freak October blizzard on the side of a mountain. It was a phone call from Floyd and his fierce certainty of the lost hiker's whereabouts that fueled her hunch, so she had come through the snow storm in the dark to Floyd's hunting camp. She could still remember getting out of her truck and being met by Floyd, smiling at her with his gray curly hair going in a hundred different directions, and his reading glasses bouncing around on a lanyard around his neck. His grin was infectious—or was it providential?

She was intrigued with him in a moment, and in love within minutes. It seemed a little strange at first. He was a tall black man, a widow, a retired Army officer and a new believer in Christ. But he had this something, she thought. He had an aura about him and his peculiar, yet authentic mannerisms...well, *who could explain such an attraction.*

The next day, she and Floyd had spent a cruel and brutal time together in the deep snow and the strenuous climbs on the ridge that ran up from one side of the camp. There was death on the mountain that day. But—and she didn't ever dare say it aloud—there was love on the mountain that day as well. She loved this man Floyd Marshall with a passion that felt like a clamp on her heart; and she knew even before he told her, that he returned that love. *That was that.*

They had married within a month and it was the best of times in her life. She was filled and she was overflowing. And between the two of them they made the best of each other, and in them both, she could feel the very love of Christ as she had never known it.

Hmm, am I a blessed woman or what? Sharon smiled at her own thoughts.

Finally, she gave thanks for the day, even as bad as it had been; first with the kidnapping and a young boy on a trail and a wizened, foolish man, who stole her Remington only to die by it an hour later. Sandwiched in between the hours there was Rosario. *What kind of scale could weigh all of that,* she wondered?

Chapter 19

"Now what?" Gus looked at Olivia Sanders with dread.

"Not all bad." She started her rapid fire inventory of events. "Waiting on the bikes. LaBrash took another deputy and walked part way up the deer run. There are tracks, and he's sure it's Sharon. The *Search and Rescue* squad found Sharon's truck where Atkins had marked it. Not expecting anything, since we already know there's no body or blood. Bad news is that the motorcycles aren't there yet, and I'm trying to find out where they are."

Gus nodded as he looked at the map.

"One other thing, the canvassing turned up a guy who thinks that a helicopter might have been flying in and out of a property here." She moved to the county map and held her finger in place. "He doesn't know the owners. It's a good sized property and the owner of record is a Gabriel Zagorsky, with a Chicago address. Could be a gentleman rancher. Our guys are in route to try to check it out now."

"We heard from our intrepid foursome?"

Olivia was chuckling. "No. Not a word, but I'd imagine they are going to be asking forgiveness before they are asking permission."

"Yeah, sounds about right to me."



Judith had stopped at a *Search and Rescue* member's house and picked up a Polaris ATV on a trailer. She didn't make another stop until the foursome went off Route 108 onto a gravel road, just before 108 disappeared, taking a 90 degree swing around the mountain, heading due east.

"All this is county land now, I think, but there used to be a feeding station years ago. The trail up the mountain we're going to look at is about half a mile or so in, and it's in *real* bad shape. I haven't been on it actually, I just know it's there because we had a team that had to go up and carry down a banged up hunter a couple of years ago."

The gravel road ended abruptly. It had serviced a holding stockade for animals at some time outside anyone's memory, and time and termites had chewed up the timbers and left a forlorn tin roof partially collapsed and listing.

"Here's our dead-end." Judith pulled up and parked, and Daniel Patterson began releasing the hold-down straps on the trailered ATV.

"Looks like the area is used though," Daniel remarked and pointed out there were both car and ATV tracks in the immediate area. Finished with unstrapping it, he backed the ATV off the trailer and offered the wheel to Judith and within minutes the four of them were headed up a very narrow grass and dirt path bordered by dense scrub, and Judith noticed that there had been a lot of ATV traffic on the path, and it all looked recent.

Chapter 20

Startled when Tyler Martin came into the mine entrance with a cup of coffee, Sharon realized she had nodded off again. She wasn't surprised that Rosario wasn't there and had sent the boy instead.

"Well, well, young Tyler Martin himself, with coffee. That's a welcome sight."

Tyler looked surprised, "Oh, yeah, I brought coffee. Rosario told me to get it here hot. Here 'ya go." Tyler sat the paper cup down next to her. He craned his head to one side when Sharon looked at him with a big grin. "What?" he questioned.

"You may have noticed that I'm handcuffed, how do you think I can drink it?" Sharon laughed lightly and smiled at the boy.

"Oh, right. Here, I can help."

Sharon took a sip of coffee when Tyler held the cup up to her lips. "Oh, that is so good. Thank you, Tyler." There were more sips and a few uncomfortable moments of silence for Tyler, but not Sharon. She sipped and smiled. "So Tyler Martin, what do you like best about school?"

Tyler squirmed like a bee was in his pants, nearly spilling the coffee. "Oh well, yeah, I guess I like it fine."

Sharon pressed ahead. "What grade are you in, fourth or fifth? What's your favorite subject?"

Tyler held the cup up for Sharon to sip. "Well, I had to leave the third grade because we left Oregon. So I've been doing school work with Rosario since we've been travelling. I'll be ten in two months, so I could be in the fifth grade if we had a school."

"Oh. Rosario is pretty talented, that's good to know. Do you have a favorite subject?"

"Oh, yeah, you asked me that, well, I don't guess I thought about that too much. I like to read."

Sharon was intrigued. "Reading? Wow, I didn't see that coming."

"I kinda like science, but I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

"Well, I mean that I like it..." he stretched out the word 'like' ... "but, I'm not sure I'm good at it, 'ya know."

"Okay, I think I know exactly what you mean. So do you like it here in the mountains?" Sharon tried to make the question sound natural.

"Well, it's okay I guess." His head dropped as he looked away trying to hide from the lie he had just told. "Pop says that after we finish here, we are going to settle down somewhere in a real house."

"Hmm, that'd be nice, huh?"

"Yeah, really. This is kinda boring. I mean that I miss my friends...miss school, sort of."

Sharon smiled at him, and nodded to the coffee, and Tyler lifted the cup again without a word. Finally, the coffee cup was empty. Sharon smiled at Tyler in the quiet

and said softly, "So...you and Clarence scared me pretty good this morning. I know you were just doing what you were told to do."

Tyler was squirming and didn't look up at Sharon.

"Pretty scary to see Clarence shot, wasn't it?" Her words fell soft as drizzle.

"Yeah, I never saw something like that."

"Me either."

Sharon was quiet for a few moments. "You know, we all have to decide what kind of people we're going to be, Tyler. Did you know that?"

Tyler shook his head "no." Then he looked up at Sharon and reversed himself. "Yeah, you decide to be a good person or a bad person, right?"

"That's right. We have to make the decision that we want to be a person who wants to do the right thing. Rosario became that kind of person today."

Tyler scrunched up his lips and Sharon felt he was still in turmoil over the shooting earlier in the day. "Rosario told me she talked to Jesus today. Is that why she decided to be good?"

"That's a great question Tyler. Every person makes the decision on what they are going to do with their life - which road they are going to take - all by themselves, so no one else can ever quite understand how they make that decision. I think Rosario came to the place today where she could see that choosing the wrong road had made her very unhappy. She lost everything, and she didn't like herself very much. But, you know what, Tyler?"

Tyler shook his head.

"Here is something hard to understand. Once you decide you want to become a better person and do the right things, it becomes harder to do that. Kind of strange, isn't it, you want to do good, but it is really hard?"

There was a pause and Sharon smiled at Tyler. "I was like that, I tried to do the right things on my own but I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it because I didn't know God. You see, we're born to seek God and we're born to love God because He handmade each of us to love Him. Handmade us just like whittling down a block of wood into a beautiful table. There are fancy words to describe this, but the truth is that you can't be good without loving God because you don't even know what good is without God. He made a special way for us to know Him, but first He had to pay for all of our bad stuff that we can't pay for. That's what Rosario learned today."

"So, Rosario told me that God wants us to love Him, is that really true? I mean, why does He need us to love Him?"

Sharon sat in the dirt next to Tyler for a long time. The boy who had wickedly smiled at her just hours ago as he participated in her abduction, listened and asked the hard questions that a street-smart boy would ask. In the back of his mind, Tyler could feel the vigorous tug of war that was going on inside of him - the passions that the very young can feel so intensely before the years of life have enough time to rust their hearts shut.

Chapter 21

Like rousing from a restless sleep where some important decision had been made, Sharon understood she had only two options, and neither one was good. She could stay put, locked up on this mountain and she would die right here with a bullet in the back of her head. And that was after Henry finished using her.

There was no question of that fate.

Or she could use the hairpin that she had poached from her own hair earlier in the day and set her hands and feet free and make a run for it in the dark. That alternative seemed just as dangerous considering the obstacles escaping from the camp presented, and the fact that she had no idea where she was exactly. One wrong turn could take her into thousands of acres of remote and unforgiving terrain where even her bones might never be found.

Sharon was hesitating over another thought; *once she was free, then what?* She had no doubt that by now every available officer in the Garfield County Sheriff's Department was in a mad scramble to find her. And she knew that Floyd Marshall was as intimidating a force as any ten men, and would turn over every stone in Colorado if need be to locate her – if he was free to do so, or even still alive.

But what were the realistic possibilities that they could even pinpoint this tiny speck on a mountain, in a land of mountains, in hours, much less days?

No, if I'm gonna die, she thought, then there is no decision to be made here. I'm going to die on my feet, not locked up in a mine.

Sharon was well aware of the limits of handcuffs. They were excellent short term restraints, but they were designed as just that – temporary. When the handcuff bracelet was open both halves of it pivoted on a pin, and each side typically looked like a half moon piece of metal with rounded or square teeth. When the two halves are closed, the teeth of one half engage the teeth of a spring-loaded pawl inside the other half, and the pawl both locks the handcuffs together, while preventing backwards motion that would open the bracelet. To open the handcuff, the pawl must be disengaged with a key. Usually.

Sharon learned how to open handcuffs and even snap zip ties from a locksmith that worked with the Sheriff's Department from time to time. The locksmith had Sharon lock his wrists using her own handcuffs and was out of them within minutes using a paper clip. Using a hairpin, he was out in even less time. After the demonstrations he showed Sharon and the other Deputies how the mechanism worked, and he went on to teach them how to bend a bobby pin into an "L" shape that could be used to slip under the pawl, disengaging the mechanism over the rest of the teeth, releasing the bracelet.

There was no doubt in her mind she could open the handcuffs, even with them behind her back.

One more concern crept into her mind. Once she took off the cuffs and untied her feet, then what about Henry who was guarding the only exit from the camp? There was

no chance that she could make it past his tent on the deep gravel path, and wandering into the woods meant setting off the alarms in the trees. *Then what?*

The thoughts kept sprouting in her mind. *The only way I'm going to get by him is to kill him.* Sharon sat in the silence of the growing darkness and nursed the cup of that thought for some time. Like the vast majority of law enforcement officers, Sharon had never even fired her weapon in anger. She'd been trained and believed that taking a life was the last resort, and only in the defense of others or herself. *Lord, what do I do?*

Sharon's question was met with silence. The only thing that came to her mind was what God had whispered to her earlier, *lean to My Word for your bearing.*

"This is no decision at all. I guess it is determined by my motives, no? This is clear self-defense and the defense of innocent life."

With that decision settled, the larger question seemed to be; was it really wise to kill him in this situation? "Well," she whispered to herself, "if I don't kill him, what's the option? What if I miss my only opportunity? Then he'll kill me on the spot, and then Rosario and Tyler are jeopardized too. Nope, no second chances here. Now, how do I do it?"

Rosario had been in and out a few times under Henry's watchful eye. Henry himself had looked in as well. She felt certain there would be a few more check-ins, and that she had to wait until pitch dark to make her escape. *After dark, when Henry is sleeping, that's the only time I really have a realistic opportunity.*

She hadn't expected Rosario back so soon, but she showed up with a half-cup of coffee and a cookie. "It's all that's left."

"Thanks, looks good to me, believe me."

The two sat and chatted, with Rosario asking question after question about what she should do and what she could expect in her new faith life. Even though Sharon thought she possessed a good handle on her answers to the hard questions of walking with God, Rosario's questions were very practical and very tough – coming out of a hard life few people could begin to understand.

Henry stuck his head in the entrance and tossed the handcuff key at Rosario's feet. "Finish up and take her out to the bathroom. Last time today."

"But, I can come up later and help her, I don't mind, really."

"Just do what you're told," Henry spat. He looked at Sharon with brutally cold eyes, "I may see you in a bit." He was looking at her body. "But don't you go raising no ruckus – give me a reason to come in here tonight and I'll beat you 'till you can't stand up, hear me?"

Sharon just nodded.

"I ain't twenty-five feet away, remember that lady."

After unlocking Sharon's wrists, Rosario took her off to a private spot. Sharon asked, "Does he check in during the night, do I need to be worried?"

"Well, I don't like the way he's looking at you. But, no, normally I don't think he'd be checking all night. He's in bed pretty early 'cause he's up early. He doesn't sit up chatting with the others mostly."

"What about the Mexicans, they around?"

“Pretty much keep to themselves – drinkin’ mostly, but they’ve only been here a few days. Listen, I’ll be back, don’t worry.”

Sharon was focused on anything she thought could help her escape. But, in the end she realized it was simply going to be an ugly affair - there was no way around that fact.

Chapter 22

Earlier, when Jamie had found the unmarked trail with multiple ATV tracks earlier going in both directions, he had chosen to head higher into the mountain. Calling it a trail was too kind. It had form but no definition. There were huge humps of exposed rock, and deep ruts caused by the rain water racing downhill. On the edges of the trail the distinction between the forest and the trail was long ago eroded. It was slow going. Every so often he would see what might be an ATV tire mark, but there was nothing more conclusive that anyone had been on this trail in sometime.

“And now I’m here by myself – and I’m not even sure where here is. Brilliant Jamie, just brilliant,” he chided.

Later in the afternoon he came abruptly to the end of the trail. It just ended in trees and rocks and more mountain. He dismounted and started walking into the trees and brush, suspecting that decades ago this part of the trail was buried in a slide or a portion of the mountain face collapsed. Shortly he came out of the trees to be greeted by bare rock and rubble and just beyond that he saw a boarded up mine gazing back from the bald mountainside. He carefully made his way up to it, not knowing what to expect. Even the planks of wood had turned an ancient gray. “Washed out like the bones of the miners who dug it,” he said out loud. There were no footprints or any type or indication that anyone had been at this mine in years, much less today.

Making his way back down to the motorbike, Jamie was pondering his options. He had started this search carrying a liter of water that was now nearly empty and he had long ago eaten an energy bar he had grabbed on the way out of the Miner’s Trail office. It had been very slow slog up the mountain both because of the difficult terrain and his attention for clues, but going down should be fairly quick he judged. “The hardest part will be going back down that deer trail. I might have to walk the bike. If I’m lucky the Sheriff’s team will be all over it by now. Al Morales is probably having a cow back in the office.” His voice was the only sound he could hear in the hot still air.



Heading down the trail was more a matter of keeping the Honda from bouncing off a rock or picking up too much speed on the sharp downhill grade and laying the bike down. Finally he came to a fairly level section of the trail and stopped and walked the motorbike just off the trail to relieve himself and to take a breather in the shade. He sat at the base of a pine tree, finished his water and soon his eyes were closing. The hard ride up the trail and the exertion in the heat and high altitude, in league with being up before dawn working with Floyd, all melted together. He had to close his eyes for just a moment.

It was the distinct noise of an ATV that woke him up. He was immediately startled and alarmed thinking that the ATV was headed his way, *there ain't nothing good that would be heading up this way*, was his first thought. Before he could react, the sound of

the ATV's engine dropped off and Jamie quickly stepped to the edge of the trail just as the back end of a two-seat ATV disappeared into the trees several hundred feet down the trail on the other side. He could hear the low muffled noise of the ATV drifting over the trees, then it was quiet.

Jamie was amazed at the timing. *Tell me this isn't connected to Sharon and Floyd.* For a moment he weighed the option out loud of heading back down the mountain and finding either the Sheriff's search team or a cell phone signal. "They're either already coming up this trail now, or they're not. If the teams came off Spruce Creek without motorbikes, they would have to walk that deer trail, and wait for some to be brought in. Even if this trail goes straight down the mountain somewhere and someone knows about it; they're still going to need bikes or ATV's, the trucks would never make it up here."

He leaned against a tree and closed his eyes. Even considering his compulsive decision to head out after Toro from the Miner's Trail earlier in the day, Jamie believed that God had honored his effort. "Or maybe in spite of me, huh? I wouldn't be here right now without that mule deer You sent Lord." Jamie had to smile. "And if I hadn't stopped and taken a little rest right here, and was still heading down the trail on that motorbike, then I would have run right into whoever is driving that ATV. Lord, I'm just playing it by ear right now. I don't know what to do, but I know You do."

He decided it was better to push the motorbike deeper into the trees and walk, at least until he could see just where the ATV had vanished to. His primary responsibility now was that he couldn't make a mistake - he felt certain Sharon's life depended on that.

He crossed to the other side of the trail and made his way down, not seeing the narrow entrance in the brush until he was right on top of it. He peered in and could only see that the grade was downhill. Stopping and listening for a full minute, Jamie couldn't hear so much as a bird or a squirrel. Moving on, he hugged the very narrow path on his left, trying not to make any noise at all. The woods were dense on either side of the path which cast a gloomy pall over the pathway. In several hundred feet he saw the path flattened out and there were ATV's scattered about. He stood perfectly still for a minute or two listening. He couldn't hear anything.

Cautiously moving down towards the ATV's, Jamie could now see the mountainside and a red dirt pathway with impenetrable looking terrain on both sides. He stood perfectly still again and waited and watched for several minutes. Nothing moved.

He warily stepped closer, and stopped at the nearest ATV. He touched the engine cover which was still warm, so this was the ATV just driven in, he reasoned. He looked around the vehicle and nothing stood out. After looking over the interior, he moved on to the next ATV, which was a larger four-seat ATV with an open case of bottled water in the carry bed. "Well, look here, excellent!" Searching in the cab he found a three-pack of energy bars still shrink-wrapped. "How about that, I'll have dinner after all."

Jamie noticed a strap end sticking out from the storage box lid. When he opened the lid, he found a pair of cheap plastic, low power binoculars. "Well, at least I can see who

is going to shoot me – if he gives me a minute or two to focus,” he chuckled at his own humor.

Stepping back to the first ATV with its still warm engine making an occasional cracking noise as it cooled, he thought he should check its storage box. The first thing he saw was a duty belt without the gun. He knew in an instant that it belonged to Sharon. “Bingo.” The belt carried a small flashlight, a Taser, and pepper spray but no weapon, ammunition clips or handcuffs. He lifted the belt out and decided to take it.

The other ATV’s could wait for inspection, he decided, until he ran out of things to do, but right now he needed to figure out where Sharon was.

Chapter 23

By herself again, Sharon was trying to methodically think through the ramifications of her escape plan, especially as it might impact Floyd. *But, she thought, it's too late now. They'd simply never tell Floyd I escaped, so he wouldn't know anyway. It wouldn't make any difference.*

She was startled when Martin stuck his head into the mine, with a small camera in his hand, and one of the Mexican cartel men right behind him. "Well, there's Deputy Toro, I hear you made some friends today. That's real good, we're all like family on this mountain." Martin was beaming.

"Does that mean I'm free to go?" Sharon looked straight at him, determined not to appear fearful.

"Well, we ain't that kinda family yet." Martin laughed out loud and turned to the Mexican. "I told you Palas, she's *very* funny. Let me introduce you to Sharon. Sharon Toro, meet Francisco Javier Hernandez, pride of Camargo, Mexico. His friends call him Palas. Palas is *Shovels* in English."

"Shovels, huh? Let's see, 'ya want me to guess why he's called Shovels, right?"

Martin sported a huge grin and wagged his index finger at Sharon. "Very good, Deputy, very good."

Palas was rather short, but solidly built, with a sparkle in his dark eyes that seemed to flash like a blinking warning light. His jet black hair was swept back from the crown, and his front teeth protruded just a touch over the lip. His English was heavy and unnatural, but surprisingly good. "My pleasure, *senorita*."

Sharon corrected without expression. "Soy la señora Sharon Toro."

"Ahahh..." Palas looked at Martin and smiled. "She's a tough one!" Looking back to Sharon, he responded in his thick accent, "Of course you're married down *there*, but that is of no matter up here in the mountains. Here, we share everything." Palas made himself laugh out loud.

"I always steer you straight," Martin offered a smirk to the Mexican, as he was taking video of Sharon with the camera. "She a character...has some spunk. And she's a very attractive lady, no?"

Palas simply smiled.

"Anything you'd like to say to Floyd, I've got the mic on just for you," Martin lied.

Sharon was slow and clear, "I love you."

When Martin escorted Shovels out of the mine they were talking in low voices so Sharon couldn't make out the conversation. But she was sure it was about her. She was going over the mental arithmetic trying to figure out how this might affect her escape when Martin reappeared. "You didn't disappoint me Deputy. That was perfect!"

"Glad I could be of service. What'd I do exactly?"

"Well, to be honest, Palas wanted to go with me down the mountain and fly a chopper with me and Floyd. I didn't want him around tonight. And, you should be

happy too, because he'd want to kill Floyd as soon as we're done. He's trigger happy if you know what I mean. They're all *never-leave-a-witness behind* type of guys."

"A bunch of sweethearts I'm sure. What is my husband flying for you, precisely?"

"I'm hoping he's flying my cocaine outta here, that's what. I say 'hoping' because I still don't know if he's really going to do it. He's mighty sweet on you—so that's working in my favor—but I'll tell you he's got a stubborn streak as big as this mountain. Like, he wouldn't do anything unless I had new video showing you were alive. So, here I am, 'ya know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I do. So if he flies your cocaine, then what?"

"Well, if he flies my cocaine, and if I can keep Palas and his buddy out of it, then we can get you back down the mountain to meet up with him. How's that sound?"

"Improbable."

Martin smiled and squatted in front of Sharon and put a hand on her knee. "Sharon, I'm not a cold-blooded killer. And I don't want a cop killed up here, believe me. But, this all depends on you now."

"Me? Why me?"

"Well, Palas is going to visit you later, when it gets dark. You know what I mean."

Sharon was devastated. *What does this mean about escaping, where is Henry gonna be?*

"So, here it is, Sharon. When he saw you earlier today he asked me all about you—he kinda took a shine to you, 'ya know? He's got himself all worked up, so he ended up deciding it was worth waiting for me up here on the mountain and spending the night with you. I promised I'd come get him tomorrow."

"How can I ever thank you?" Sharon tried hard not to scream.

Martin smiled, "You are going to have to do whatever you have to do to get through tonight. I can't do anything about that."

"And here I was fretting about Henry."

"What's that mean?"

"Well, he told me he was going to...well...tonight..." Sharon's voice dropped off. She hoped she was saying just enough to stir up trouble between all of the men. She was thinking as fast as she could. *I can take one of these slobs, but probably not two.*

"Well that's a...I'm really surprised...okay, don't worry. Henry won't bother you. But Palas, I can't take him down the mountain tonight, or your husband will be in jeopardy. You understand that?"

Sharon just shook her head.

Still squatting in front of Sharon, his voice went very soft. "My advice is just close your eyes, let it go. By that time Palas gets back he'll be drunk. He and his buddy haven't stopped drinking since they got here. It'll be quick, and then tomorrow I'll come pick him up and we'll get this whole thing behind us. Do this for Floyd, okay?"

Sharon's mind was racing and before she could even answer his question, Martin jumped to his feet to meet Henry, whom she hadn't even noticed until now. He was standing just outside the mine entrance and almost instantly Martin engaged him in a heated discussion. She couldn't quite hear Henry, but she couldn't help but understand Martin's very loud orders. "You'll go down and sleep in the tents tonight. He's coming

up here to be with the woman and he'll sleep in your tent." There was more unintelligible argument from Henry, then Martin stepped up his voice. "Henry, enough! Just do what you're told. I can't afford to have anything go wrong tonight, do you get it? These guys will kill everyone on this mountain if they have half a reason...honestly they'd like to do it just because they love killin' people. Let's not give 'em more motivation."

The discussion grew quieter outside the entrance, and then Martin stuck his head in the mine, "Okay then, we'll see you tomorrow around noon." He turned and left and she was alone again.

Chapter 24

Jamie had no line of sight of anything yet, but he heard an infrequent sharp metallic sound and he clearly heard distant voices more than once. Coming down the trail very slowly, hugging the side so that he could slip into the trees with a moment's notice, he talked to himself softly. "They must have some sort of watch on this trail, you'd think. Maybe I just can't see it yet? Maybe I need to sit tight until dark?"

In only a few yards the mine entrance came into view, glinting in the sunlight, and standing next to it was a large man who Jamie realized had a rifle slung down his back. He froze in his tracks and backed up to a tree. Focusing the purloined binoculars he could clearly see Henry and a tent near him. Moving further up the path, Jamie discovered that the path turned from red dirt to deep gravel. He slid inside the trees lining the path again and where he could see that sheets of camouflage netting had been strung up.

While he was watching, two people came to the mine and went in while the large man loitered in the area. "He's kinda like a Walmart greeter except he shoots you if he doesn't like you."

Kneeling down just off the path Jamie watched as several people came and went around the general area to the left, but no one came over to the mine except the two men. Within a few minutes, they came out of the mine and talked, with the smaller of the two listening and then shaking his head in agreement with the other man. After the smaller man left, his companion went back into the mine for a minute, then came out again to talk to the "greeter."

The two of them began an animated discussion. The body language was very clear; the man who had gone into the mine was the boss and whatever he was doing or going to do was not going over well with the big man, who finally turned and wandered off towards the tents to the left. The boss went back into the mine and came out within only seconds and was walking quickly down the pathway towards him.

Jamie panicked and backed several more feet into the trees and laid himself flat out on the ground between a tree and heavy brush. "Did he see me? Oh God." He buried his head into his arms. Moments later the crunching and grinding of the man's stride in the deep gravel was almost as loud as the sound of Jamie's heart beating in his chest. The man went by and in only seconds was on the dirt pathway heading towards the ATV's.

Lying prone in the woods and waiting in the silence was fate's cruel joke he thought. *What's he doing? Does he know I'm here?* Finally he heard the ATV start and sit burbling at idle. Jamie didn't dare move, so he could only think the worst about the reason for the man's dithering and now idling the ATV. Jamie scolded himself, *What if he opened the storage and saw Sharon's belt was gone? That was a stupid move, Jamie.* It seemed like twenty minutes to Jamie, but it was only a few, in reality, when he heard the ATV swing out and head up the path to the trail.

When the ATV's rumble was gone, Jamie buried his head in his hands. He had never been so terrified in his life. And his fear now was that it wasn't the last time it would happen on this mountain.

Chapter 25

Martin arrived back at the barn carrying three white bags. He came straight to Floyd who was still sitting in the shade by Julio with his eyes closed and his arms closed over his chest. Looking to Julio, Martin told him to take a break in the house and handed him a bag. Floyd looked up at Martin without expression and took the bag as Martin sat next to him in the dirt.

Floyd set the bag in front of his feet and glared at Martin. "I don't want food. I want news on my wife."

Martin didn't argue. "Keep your pants on, she's just fine," as he pulled out a small Canon camera. "Miss Sharon says 'hi.'"

Martin located the video and handed the camera to Floyd, who watched it several times, and checked the time stamp. The video showed Sharon was sitting in dirt, handcuffed to some type of pipe in a poorly lit area with her legs pulled up. She was disheveled and a bit dirty looking but didn't have any marks visible – at least any that showed up on the video. The audio was off, but Floyd could make out her facial expression – she was not a happy woman. Finally at the end of the video she clearly and slowly said the words, *I love you*. Floyd closed his eyes for a moment and said out loud, "I love you too."

He attacked the burger as he and Martin sat without speaking. When they were done, Floyd gave his best Army officer order; "Okay, let's get into this thing and run-up the engine. I've got to make sure I know what I'm doing. Your armed Rottweiler wouldn't let me start it up."

"How long is this going to take?"

"As long as it takes, and the longer you argue about it the longer it will take."

Martin grumbled and complained but joined Floyd walking to the helicopter. He opened the left door and waved Martin in.

"You sit in the seat and don't touch anything." Floyd shot him a stern look, and then went around and got into the pilots right hand seat. Glancing at Martin, Floyd could see his fists were clenched and his jaw tighten as he was eyeing the cockpit window bubble that extended below the rudder pedals, where the dirt pad below the nose of the aircraft was visible. "Have you ever flown in a helicopter?"

Martin shook his head no. "Never even sat in one. Didn't know you'd be staring at the ground under your feet."

"Yeah, how about that, huh? Good view of stuff below you. Do you get airsick or carsick easily?" Floyd was enjoying this.

Martin shrugged his shoulders. "I hate flying period."

"Go figure." Floyd replied unsympathetically. "Okay, so here is what I'm doing. Every time we fly, we go through these steps. Floyd pointed to the check list. "This is not optional. Even in the military, this isn't optional." Martin rolled his eyes.

Floyd went through the preflight list. Then he looked at Martin, "Sit tight, I'm going to release the rotors." After he had released the rotor tie-downs that held the two rotor

blades from turning in the wind and made parking easier, Floyd returned to the right seat and held up the headphones. "When we fly, you and I can talk on these, but right now just put them on, it will get a bit noisy in here. Watch me put on my seat harness." Floyd proceeded to pull the upper shoulder belt over his head and connect it to the catch between his legs. "All there is to it. Pull these straps to tighten it up," Floyd demonstrated.

Martin remained silent but followed Floyd's directions.

Floyd went through the startup procedure except this time he actually preformed the engine startup process. "Main rotor, clear. Check. Throttle, full open, flight idle close. Check. Starter engaged, engine oil pressure at 10% N1. Check."

"What's N1?"

"It's the compressor speed in the turbine."

Martin tensed up even more.

The drone of the starter filled the cabin, and Floyd could see Martin stiffen. "Throttle open to flight idle at 15% N1 with TOT less than 150. Check. Main rotor turning by 25% of N1. Check."

"What's TOT?" yelled Martin.

"Turbine outlet temperature," Floyd didn't look up to see Martin's panicked look.

The 37 feet of rotor blades were swooshing around slowly and the whine of the turbine engine increased. "Starter released at 58% N1. Check. Engine and transmission pressure, check. Stabilizing flight idle for one minute."

Floyd was checking gauges as Martin seemed hypnotized by the increasing rotor speed which made them a blur as the turbine whine increased and the cockpit gently shook. Floyd continued. "Idle for one minute at 60% N1. Check. Throttle open to 70% N1. Check." The engine and rotors made their own melody - an ever increasing *whoop, whoop, and whoop*. "Generator on. Check. We'll skip avionics for now."

Floyd went on to complete a full engine run-up check, then went through the detailed shut down procedure which took several minutes. With the turbine shut down and the blades finally at rest Floyd turned to Martin and said, "Okay, now we can fly. Depending on where we're going of course. I still have the plotting to do, so we need to get on it." Floyd could tell by his response that Martin was frightened just sitting in the cockpit, and that he had no idea that there was such an involved process for getting airborne.

Floyd sneered at him. "What? You thought you just jumped in and turned a key? It's an aircraft not a toy, and if I - you - don't treat it seriously they'll be picking up pieces of us on one of these mountains. Frankly, I've just done the ground refresher, flying this thing is a whole different story."

"You're not leaving the ground 'till we leave together."

"Your call, you got the guns. Let's get some water though."

The two men piled out of the hot cockpit and Floyd tied the rotor blades down, then they moved to the shade next to the barn and drank a bottle of water. After several minutes, Martin reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper with map coordinates on it. "It's an empty ranch road west of Greeley. In the middle of nowhere,

not far from the grasslands. My pilot promised me he could get us there off the grid. No radio, no transponder, no nothin'. So, you're going to do the same thing. Then when we get there, we'll off-load the cocaine to a truck and your job is done. Then I'll make the call and Sharon is released."

"What about the helicopter?"

"Ain't mine. I don't care what you do with it."

"I imagine the folks that own it will be looking for it."

"Guess so. Sure will be when they find out their pilot is dead as a doornail. It's a cartel front operation."

"Hmm, you help that accident happen, Mr. Martin?" Floyd deadpanned.

Martin looked genuinely surprised, and then gradually his surprise turned to a sly grin. "I'm a creature of opportunity, Mr. Marshall. Sometimes destiny needs a push, 'ya know what I mean? None of this is personal, it's just business."

Remembering Martin's earlier threat to shoot him in the head, Floyd couldn't keep the question from popping out like bread from a toaster. "So, he's the guy you shot last night?"

Martin smiled broadly at him and Floyd realized that Martin relished the opportunity to provide the details, if for no other reason than to further terrify Floyd. "No, not me, one of the other cartel boys ran him off the road, if you really wanna know. The pilot was a guy named Benito Menendez. His SUV flipped down the highway like a pancake - he was dead before it stopped. Me? I shot the *other* guy. His name was Marco Esqueda. I hate 'em, every last one of 'em, tell you the truth. Being in bed with the cartel is like living in a garbage dump."

"Wow, pretty good body count for a day's work. Why would the cartel want their own pilot dead, doesn't make much sense?"

"Strangest thing," Martin's smile crossed his whole face, "Marco came down to meet the chopper yesterday. But when it didn't show up where it was supposed to land, he called me. Well, I had to tell him the truth that Benito had landed at this place instead. Somehow, Marco got the idea that Benito was going to heist the coke for himself and leave him to deal with the cartel. That actually is the truth, it just wasn't Benito doing the heisting." Martin had an evil cast over his smile and merged into a deep chuckle. He enjoyed every minute of it Floyd thought.

"Wonder how he got that idea?" Floyd mocked.

"Yeah, great break really. I was thinking I'd have to kill 'em both. But Marco picked Benito up leaving the ranch in his SUV and the rest is history, 'ya know? I followed Marco after he ran Benito off the road and I put two shots right through the driver's window." Martin improvised a demonstration of the shooting with his index finger and thumb. "Nice shooting if I don't say so. The bonus was his car went straight into a divider, then off the road. Can't get much better than that."

"Guess not."

"My advice is that when we deliver the goods, you leave in the chopper or hitch a ride, but don't dilly-dally." Martin began chuckling to himself again.

"So, just out of curiosity, how'd you pick me as your lucky pilot?"

“Well, everything just kinda fell together in the last day or so, be honest. But, you stuck in my mind when me and my boy were out at your camp on a scouting trip for a place for Benito to land the chopper. I’ll tell you what, I saw all those pictures in your office, and I thought, *lookie here*, a chopper pilot right here in my back yard, and I don’t even have to go far to get him! Of course, your wife was a real bonus. You guys are just so stuck on each other, well, it was kind of a no-brainer.”



They moved to the farmhouse, where Floyd opened the flight manual he brought from the helicopter for more review, and Martin went through the late pilot’s belongings. He found an aeronautical chart tucked inside a folder.

“Is this what you were looking for?”

After Floyd’s approval, Martin kept hovering over Floyd’s shoulder as he worked with the chart and the flight manual for some time, looking over every option. Satisfied, he plotted a course for the coordinates that Martin had supplied.

“Here is where I am.” Floyd waved Martin to attention. “This is really a math problem, not a flight problem. We’ve got about a 320 mile range on the Bell, fueled to the max in normal conditions. By the way, I’m trusting that the fuel you brought in is Jet A fuel, correct?”

“That’s what Benito had me get, that’s all I know. And a hand pump.”

Floyd nodded. “We can top off at 112 gallons in the Bell, but that’ll push the weight up. Fully loaded with fuel, the 800 pounds of cargo – and the two of us are at about 430 plus pounds – we’d be close to 4600 pounds. The maximum gross weight is a little over 4,400 pounds. This is without Julio – put him on board and we’ll be at almost 4,800 pounds. That’ll be a big problem at this altitude.”

Martin looked angry. “Benito said the chopper was fitted for high altitudes.”

That’s fine, it does have what is called a high altitude tail rotor. But the issue is the total weight, the heat, the altitude, all combined. My guess is that with that total weight we may not even get airborne; *literally*, we might not be able to lift off. We certainly won’t get enough altitude to get out of the mountains.”

Martin’s rage was volcanic. A torrent of expletives filled the air and droplets of spittle rained down.

Floyd stared at his red-faced abductor with withering scorn. “You’re good at temper tantrums, not so good at math.”

Martin was on him in an instant waving his 9mm semi-automatic in one hand and clutching the front of Floyd’s shirt in the other. “This isn’t a debate you...!”

Floyd grabbed his hand and shoved it away from its grip on his shirt and barked, “Unless you’re flying and you don’t want your stinking \$5 million dollars, put the gun away and shut up.”

Martin stood holding his automatic at his side with sweat now pouring down his beet-red face to his chin.

“You wanna fly outta here? We only have one option now because of weight. You’re the genius who came up with this ridiculous scheme, not me. I’m just the guy

who has to make it work.” Floyd looked at the gun and then up to Martin. “Put the gun up and sit down. I’ll tell you what we can do.”

Martin dabbed at the sweat on his face then pulled a chair next to Floyd without saying a word.

Pointing to the chart, Floyd explained, “Here’s our destination northeast of Greeley. Using the route we’re taking it’s about 200 miles or so. If we only carry 75 gallons of fuel instead of 112 gallons, that’ll cut our weight by about 250 pounds. But, if we add Julio, we’re still well overweight. If it’s a hot morning, which it will be, or if we pick up some strong winds, we could have some serious issues.”

Martin again made no response, but Floyd noted his normal coloring was returning.

“Here’s the tradeoff with taking only 75 gallons of fuel. It’s cutting our flying time really close. I figure we’ll have less than a fifteen minute cushion before the turbine flames out and we have engine failure. It burns over 220 pounds of fuel an hour in good conditions, which we ain’t doing. We’ll be on a razor’s edge and there’s no room for error really.”

“We have to be there absolutely no later than 9:45 A.M. sharp, tomorrow. That’s all I care about.”

“That’s no problem really. We’ll leave at 7:30 and we’ll have time to spare.”

“I wanted to get out of here tonight.” Martin crossed his arms defensively across his chest.

“We’d be going through the mountains with strong winds building up, in the dark, with an inexperienced pilot. Not going to happen. We already discussed that.”

“So, how’re we going?” He looked resigned.

“Best route will be generally following I-70 east, keeping far enough off the highway that we attract minimal attention,” Floyd moved his hand along the map, “and then we’ll swing north here and head through the Rollins Pass. We’ll come down the pass near Boulder and hug the foothills north, then cut east between Longmont and Loveland heading straight to our destination here.” Floyd put his finger on the chart.”

“So, this is the easiest, the safest way?”

“We’re in the mountains and Rollins Pass is over 11,000 feet, which means that we are at about the absolute ceiling for the Bell with the weight and temperature – even with the high altitude equipment. She’ll be huffing and puffing just to do that. So I’d say it is the best for us – but there is no easy way. Not with what we’re doing.”

“Okay, I’ve got to go talk to Julio. He’s the one who had the contacts with the buyer, this guy named Mosely, and he says he’s very picky. We need to be careful about this meeting. I don’t want anything – *I mean anything* – said about this trip in front of Julio, you understand?”

Floyd didn’t respond and in a second Martin slammed the table, “Do you understand?”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever.”

After Martin had left, Floyd smiled. He had managed to goad Martin into a rage and make him lose control. He didn’t know exactly how, but he felt the more he worked on Martin, the more doubt he stirred up in Martin’s mind generally. *That can only be a*

good thing, I think. He picked up all of his calculations and the chart and set them aside. *Wow, some trust issues between Julio and Marin though. Hope they don't start shooting at each other, at least with me around. Now what?*

The house was sparsely furnished and poorly kept. Floyd suspected that there was an absentee owner – *perhaps Martin was simply squatting?* The front windows were open and underneath them was a small sofa with a throw spread over it. Floyd laid down, and the late afternoon heat and the stale air of the house combined with his pre-dawn labor and the emotionally wrought day to overwhelm his anxieties and fears. Within minutes he was sound asleep.

Chapter 26

It had been a non-stop full day, juggling the demands of the continuing investigations, the on-ground search and attempting to continue the normal functioning of the Sheriff's Department. Even by confining activities to only essential services because of the ten Deputies dedicated to the search, Gus, Sam and the remaining personnel were hard pressed to keep up. Worse, there were whispers coming back to Gus that made it obvious that word of the massive on-going search effort was slowly leaking out, like a pin prick in a beach ball.

Gus knew it would be only a matter of time before the County Board, the press, or the State Police were calling asking questions. Then the Feds. Once that happened, he would have to show his hand, and with that, he knew he would lose control of the investigation – and any hope of finding Sharon and Floyd alive.

The thought crossed his mind; *is it my own pride at play here – is that the real problem? If I had called the State Police and the Feds earlier, would we already be a lot further along? He rolled that thought around like a bean in a bag, and his mind went back to his formative experience as a Deputy – and the scandal and murders that had led him to run for Sheriff in the first place. Nope, I'm right, this is the only hope of keeping it about Sharon, and protecting Floyd, whatever it is he's doing. If this mess gets outside these walls, it'll be about cartels and drugs and murders; stroking egos and selling newspapers.*

Sam came into the office as exhausted as Gus. "Just finished up on a pedestrian call, guy hit by a car on Miller Avenue. Not serious, thank God, but the EMS driver was asking why I was the only one there. Some folks are noticing that we're pretty thin today."

"Yeah, I was just sitting here thinking that it won't be long before we start getting some calls, 'ya know?"

"I think you're right."

"Sam, honestly, did we do the right thing keeping this mess inside?"

"Don't second guess yourself on this Gus. Of course you did the only thing we could do. Especially considering the Feds. That would've been the worst thing we could have done. I can hear the TV reporter now: *'FBI agent So-and-So said today that they were in pursuit of a known cartel member suspected of two murders. Mr. So-and-So, District Director of the DEA confirmed that they expected to capture ten tons of drugs, a record for this state.'* Something like that."

"Not bad, and I like the reporters voice." Gus needed the encouragement and reinforcement.

Olivia Sanders hit the office like a whirlwind, and starting talking while her feet were still moving.

"Okay, we got the motorcycles finally on the way to the mountain. It was just one issue after another. Everything that could go wrong, went wrong. But, now they're going." Olivia looked embarrassed for a moment.

“Most important thing, LaBrash was tired of waiting on the motorbikes and sent three deputies all the way up that deer run on foot after Tommy. Here’s what we know now. There’s a body up there, pushed down a steep drop off. It’s an unidentified middle aged male, no ID, but he was shot. They found a 12 gauge shell and a bunch of blood on the trail. Maybe it was Sharon’s Remington 870?” Olivia looked at the two men and shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe? The *Search and Rescue* team are on their way up now to recover the body for us so maybe we’ll find out more.”

Olivia pickup up speed. “But LaBrash is thinking Sharon is hobbled judging by the tracks she’s leaving.”

Moving to the map, Olivia put her finger on a spot, “Now, get this, the deer run crosses another trail right here. The trail is not on the map, just like Judith was talking about earlier.”

Gus ignored the taunt. “This goes from bad to worse. Three dead bodies. Thank God none of them is ours – *yet.*”

“One Deputy came down with the intel, and the other two are at the new trail, prepared to stay the night to make sure no one comes up or down until we can get all the Deputies up there. There is no telling how many miles the trail runs, and, of course, no telling how many people are involved in this.” Olivia looked at both Gus and Sam, who both just nodded.

“There’s more. There are multiple ATV tracks on this other trail, and foot prints from at least three people – one pair is Sharon’s, she’s still leaving signs for us – seems her prints are heading east – or up – the trail. Best news, of course, is that it means she’s alive.”

Olivia held her breath. “And Tommy Atkins left a note up there they found. The reason we haven’t heard a word from him is that he’s gone up the trail after Sharon, on foot.”

“*Oh, Lord.* Tommy, Tommy.” Gus half-stood, and was shaking his head side to side with a sigh. “What are you doing?”

“Boy’s got a lot of brass in him,” Sam interrupted Gus. “Reminds me of a certain Deputy Sheriff that did the right thing at the right time, even though it didn’t look that way to anyone else—and it was dangerous.” Sam paused and looked Gus dead in the eyes, “Tommy is doing what you already did once—or I would do—if we were there, and you know it.”

Olivia finished up, avoiding the two men’s conversation. “Okay, Judith called in, they found where this trail starts just off the 108 not to far from an abandoned stock feeding station right here,” she was pointing at the map again. “This is really remote. They took an ATV and went all the way up to the deer run. She reported that there are ATV tracks all over the trail. They’re headed back tomorrow first light.”

Now Sam was shaking his head. “That’s why we haven’t heard from them. *Just great.*”

Gus agreed. “So do we assume the bad guys are going up into the higher mountain? We don’t know how far, or how many? So maybe they have that chopper somewhere down 108 and they are coming and going? They’re coming down to do

something, right? They have to be using one of these ranches out there," he waved at the map. "Sam, can you get hold of Eagle, and ask them if that helicopter has the ability do a fly-by in the mountain area east of the deer run, see if they can spot anything?"

Sam and Olivia left the office to make calls, and Gus buried his head in his hands. He felt powerless and the only relief he could think of was a silent prayer.

Chapter 27

Sharon turned her attention back to the hairpin after Martin left, handling and maneuvering it like a priceless heirloom. It was now as much a lifeline to her as the old supply trail up this mountain had been to the miners who long ago had dug out the mine that she now sat captive in.

It would be getting dark shortly and she closed her eyes and concentrated on the task of unlocking the handcuffs.

With the hairpin in her right hand she felt the round key slot for the handcuff bracelet on her left hand. Then, she positioned the hairpin and inserted it in the key hole, and carefully bent the hairpin in an "L" shape against the ridge of the key hole. From that point she visualized the process she had been rehearsing in her mind and within minutes was pulling the hairpin along the curved teeth and felt the tension of the pawl release the bracelet. It worked the first time.

Quietly, she pulled her right hand, still handcuffed in its bracelet, to her lap and using her now free left hand picked the bracelet. Done with the handcuffs, she carefully placed them, open, behind the pipe in case someone came in unexpectedly. "I can at least sit with my hands behind pipe Maybe in the darkness no one will notice that my hands are free," she mused to herself. Finally she placed the hairpin at the base of the pipe, just in case she might need it later. "Ya never know."

She debated with herself about the feet bindings. "If I take them off completely, someone comes in here, or Shovels shows up early, they'll see immediately something is up. If they are just slack, maybe no one even notices?" Before starting on the bindings, Sharon's breath stopped when she heard the heavy steps approaching the mine entrance. She sat back down sliding her back on the pipe stem and put her hands behind the pipe and as she pulled her legs up into her chest, she turned her body slightly to the left, hoping to obscure her hands behind her body.

It was Henry. He crouched down and put his head and shoulders through the entrance and put a flashlight beam in Sharon's eyes.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, sure, I'm fine."

"Good, that Mexican fella is getting all liquored up and he'll be down here soon, I'd say. He don't have the handcuff key, so I'd get comfortable if I were you. I told Rosario to check in later, in case you needed some cleaning up. Me 'an you will have to wait, I guess." With the flashlight in her face, she couldn't see the grin on Henry's face.

With that, he was gone. As soon as she couldn't hear him walking away anymore, she started to loosen her leg bindings considerably. *This is it, you got one shot girl, make it count.*

She had been eyeing the drain pipe that, untold decades ago, had taken water and condensation from the mine section above the entrance she was in and directed it outside. The bottom portion of the pipe that had carried the moisture out through the entrance had corroded away, leaving the rusted and jagged end of the pipe about two

feet off the ground. She grasped the three inch pipe firmly and pushed it one way then pulled it the other.

Yep, pretty weak. I can do this, get after it. Before she started in earnest, she got on all fours and crept to the entrance with her head almost touching the dirt and glanced out into the pale light. She couldn't see or hear a thing and Henry's tent was dark. Back in the mine, she positioned herself at the pipe and pushed and pulled until the perspiration was cascading down her face and she could feel the moisture dripping off her arms and down her back.

The drainpipe had started out moving just inches in each push and pull stroke. Now she judged it was maybe five inches in each direction. Every time she wanted to stop for just a moment and catch her breath, she didn't. She kept pushing and pulling the drain pipe, back and forth, back and forth. Her forearm muscles were cramping and her shoulders felt like hot pins were sticking in them when she heard a faint, soft crunch where the pipe entered the rock of the roof. In a few more push and pull strokes, the pipe was wobbly and finally it snapped off in one hard push. Collapsing on the ground, drenched in sweat and holding a section of the drain pipe over two feet long, Sharon spread out on the mine shaft floor exhausted.

Her original plan had been to sneak up on Henry and bludgeon him while he slept. It wasn't terribly creative, but it was practical and somewhat plausible. Now she had to figure out how to attack Palas in the mine, which would be more difficult, since he wouldn't be asleep. He was a substantial man, and even if he were drunk there was little doubt in her mind that he could overpower her with ease if he was intent on doing so. *Hmm, well, maybe we should try some honey?*

Chapter 28

Floyd woke up in the early evening and was startled to find the day scattered to the growing darkness. There were no lights on and he could feel the evening's coolness waiting in the open windows to drive the remaining heat away.

His mind went to Sharon. "Is she okay? Lord watch over her, protect her tonight."

Going to the hall bathroom, he found what appeared to be a clean towel and took a quick, but hot shower. Without any specific reason, he felt that this would be his last few minutes of peace for some time. Drying off and putting back on the same clothing made him chuckle at himself. "At least I feel better even if I don't smell any better."

Sharon was the ever present thought on the edge of his mind. He was thinking about the predicaments she had been in just in the time he had known her. "She is the most resourceful and smartest person I know. Tough as nails. She'll be okay. I don't know how she's gonna do it, but I know she'll figure it out." Saying it out loud made him more confident even if it didn't appease his concern for long.

Floyd went into the kitchen scrounging for food and found only a few odds and ends in a cabinet and settled on a large can of peaches. As the can-opener peeled the top off the can, Floyd continued his conversation with himself, and began a search for a spoon. "What is the likelihood of these thugs letting Sharon go? I'm not sure I understand how they have any incentive at all. Am I missing something?"

Sitting down, he made short work of the peach slices. "I don't even see what incentive any of 'em have in keeping me alive." He went back to the cabinet looking for something else to eat. "So what am I gonna do here? Sharon has to take care of Sharon right now. How do I take care of Floyd?"

The front door opened and Martin and Julio came in together looking around the room. "Nice to see you up and at 'em. Came in a while ago and you were out like a light." Martin looked almost like a normal person in that one moment, Floyd thought.

"Yeah, been a long day. You've made it just extra enjoyable too."

"Now, now, Floyd, don't get cranky on us. Listen, Julio and I pushed the chopper into the barn. Can't close the doors all the way, but at least there is some light in there. Had a chopper fly over too, so our timing was perfect. I gotta wonder if they were looking for you. Maybe Toro? Anyway, we're gonna grab something to eat and take turns getting some sleep and keeping an eye on you. So, you need to get the chopper ready to go. Do whatever you're gonna do and whatever keeps us on time. Hear?"

"Yeah, I hear you. Is the cockpit door locked?"

Martin handed him the key.

"You're mighty trusting, aren't you?"

"Nah, not really. You're flying for Sharon, remember? You give us trouble, or you don't get us to the meeting on time, well, she don't come home. And, Julio here—being real honest with you—he's just dying to put a bullet in your head." Martin shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Julio smiled for the first time that Floyd had seen.

Martin walked to a narrow door just off the kitchen and opened it. It was a small pantry filled with assorted canned goods. Floyd looked at it and sighed.

"Didn't know this was here Floyd? Huh, wondered why you were eatin' peaches." He smirked at the empty can on the table.

Martin and Julio found a couple of items and moved to the kitchen table while Floyd rummaged in the pantry and grabbed a few things for himself.

"Okay, I'm heading to the barn. We're lifting off at 7:30 sharp. I'll need one of you to help me get the helicopter back out of the barn by around 7:00 in the morning. No one responded. "You know where I'll be." Floyd didn't wait for an answer. He went out the door into the cool night and headed to the barn when he heard the door open and shut behind him. He didn't stop to see who was following him.

Chapter 29

Sitting alone in the deepening darkness, Sharon knew she was running out of time to come up with a game plan on how to attack "Shovels." Incapacitating a sleeping man was one thing, taking on a drunk intent on assaulting you was quite another.

She was thinking that in the near darkness she could try to stun him the second he came into the mine entrance. *I could crack his head wide open.* But as she thought about it more, it became obvious to her that that course of action carried a huge risk—if he wasn't as drunk as she hoped, he would enter the dark mine with a measure of caution. *Heck, even if I thought it was empty, I'd be cautious,* she reasoned.

The thought had briefly crossed her mind that she could leave now. *But if I sneak out now, then everyone in the camp is going to be pulled into a search. And then I'm back to Rosario and Tyler; what about them? I just can't leave them, no matter what.*

"I'm getting into circular arguments with myself. I already decided this. Just stick to your plan and play it by ear," Sharon scolded herself in a whisper.

It only took an instant for her mind to turn to Floyd. Her professional grit about how and what to do melted away into a surge of emotion, followed by tears tracking down her cheeks. She turned her head to the side and let herself go for just the moment. She loved this man, she trusted him and there was nothing she wouldn't do for him. Yet nothing she could do for him. "Oh Floyd, I love you so much. Be safe tonight. I'm here and I'll be okay. I love you so much. I just want to hold you."

Tugging at her was the reality of the moment, shooing away the emotion of her love and desperation for her husband and inviting her mind back to Mr. Shovels.

She began thinking about how to make herself appear less threatening to the cartel thug. *I don't want to give this guy the idea that he has to beat me senseless. Of course, if he realizes I'm not handcuffed, he'll do it anyway. If I'm too inviting though, will he know something is up? Probably.*

Outside, what was left of the grayness of the evening was drifting off and being swallowed up in pieces by the black night, while inside the mine it was already gloomy and dark, and increasingly cool.

She was sure that Palas would be coming in with an electric lantern or flashlight, which would mean that he could see her and she might not be able to really see him until he was close. She decided that when she heard him coming past the tent in the gravel, she would sit down with her hands behind the pipe and her body turned slightly to the entrance.

She positioned the piece of broken pipe behind the large diameter incline pipe with about two-thirds of it towards her right side. With her hands around the pipe as though they were still handcuffed, she tested the arc of the swing from a sitting position and then from a standing position. She would clearly have a great deal more leverage if she could stand over him to hit him, but that was a very unlikely possibility she judged.

Debating whether or not to re-cuff her left wrist just in case Palas looked behind her, she figured she would need all the mobility she could get. *Hope this doesn't take long,*

she thought. She was going to indulge him only to the point that she had a clear opportunity to attack him with the pipe.

It felt good just to be on her feet after spending a good portion of the day handcuffed and sitting, but sooner than she had anticipated, she heard the crunching of feet outside. She panicked and flopped down with her back to the pipe and her hands behind her. She put her feet together hoping that Shovels wouldn't give a second thought to the loose nylon rope. Then she prayed. "Holy Father, I pray for your protection when this man comes in. Watch over me, and protect me, and protect my body, Lord. Give me wisdom and give me courage. In the name of Jesus."

Instead of coming into the mine entrance, Sharon saw a lantern pass the entrance. *Maybe he's headed to the bathroom? Could I get lucky enough for him to fall off the mountain?* She just sat, waiting in the dark.

Finally, the lantern and its owner returned, casting its eerie shadows over the walls of the mine. Before her eyes adjusted and she could actually see Palas, she could smell him. *Good heavens, I hope I don't stink that bad.*

"Ahh, there's my lady cop. You and me, we're going to have fun tonight. You'll have a real man all night." She couldn't see anything yet except his gray outline behind the lantern light.

"Oh, Palas, you know how to treat a lady, do you?" Sharon wasn't accustomed to making her voice light and softer, but she hoped it sounded realistically suggestive, even though she wasn't quite sure what that meant to a man like this.

"I was born to treat the ladies nice. That's my gift for you." His voice wandered off, but Sharon immediately knew that he was less drunk than she had hoped for.

Palas set the lantern down next to her and produced a liquor bottle and placed it next to the lantern. "For later, so we can have a drink." Then he rested his hand on her left knee and let his hand slid all the way up her thigh. "So, I don't have a key to get you unlocked, but that's okay, you know, I'll take care of all your buttons for you!" He began a low chuckle that turned to a gurgling laugh.

In her mind, all she could see was her husband and pain on his face if he knew that this animal had forced his will on her. She couldn't even imagine the torment he would endure knowing what had happened.

"Palas, don't be in such a hurry, let's take it slow, no?" Sharon smiled as much as her mind would allow. It was a defensive statement that she didn't expect to slow the inevitable even for one second.

"Don't worry lady, I'll make you happy tonight. We have plenty of time." He began aggressively rubbing her thigh, with his hand continually angling towards her lap, while with his other hand pushed upwards from her stomach. Then he withdrew his hands and positioned his body over Sharon's legs and began tugging on the nylon ropes. "But we have to take these off your legs to get those pants off, eh?"

While he was concentrating on the nylon rope, Sharon didn't even mentally process the risk but gripped the pipe with her right hand as tight as she could and brought it around with every bit of energy that she could generate – seeing a glimpse of the pipe

in her peripheral vision as it was hurtling towards Palas's head. In the next instant she saw the wild-eyed reaction of the man as his left arm swung up to protect his head.

Chapter 30

Walking around to the back of the barn, Floyd saw that the large barn doors were shut as far as they would go, with about four or five feet of a rotor blade sticking out, keeping them from completely closing. The lights were on inside the barn, and a shaft of gold shot out into the gathering dark. In the afternoon the doors were closed and he hadn't seen inside the barn. Sliding between the doors he could now see the interior of the large barn, with its twelve foot ceiling. On the other end of the barn were another set of large sliding barn doors and a regular 36 inch door, mostly blocked by random equipment including a small tractor, feeding equipment stacked up, pallets of feed, and bales of hay to the roof in one corner. The opposite side had a very long work bench with various mounted tools on one end and chemicals and what appeared to be various animal maintenance items on the other.

The Bell could have easily fit in the barn except for all the material and equipment. Floyd saw a hand truck in among the various items and pulled it out. On his way out he stopped to find the switch to the large flood light overhanging the sliding doors. Once outside next to the 55 gallon fuel drums, he was hoping to find a hand pump for transferring fuel from drums into the helicopter. Not seeing one he went back into the barn and found a large shipping box with other boxes in one corner. It was labeled as a brand new hand pump with a meter and hose assembly. "Excellent. Our dead pilot was thinking ahead."

His various chores took the better part of the evening, including setting up the pump and transferring all the fuel by hand from one barrel and refitting the pump on the second barrel and transferring part of its fuel. Then Floyd triple checked the fuel load making sure he had exactly what he wanted. In addition he performed another preflight check on the turbine and transfer case. He was satisfied they were ready to fly.

Walking back to the work bench Floyd found some clean shop towels and hand cleaner and was noting the assortment of tools, chemicals and animal medicines laid out on the bench. Martin walked in and looked the helicopter over and looked in the open cabin door, then made his way over to Floyd. "So, what's the status of this thing now?"

Floyd, finished up cleaning his hands and turned to Martin. "We're fueled and ready to go. I thought you were sleeping?"

"Nope, Julio is going first. I've been outside keeping an eye on you and my money, don't 'ya worry."

"Oh, I wasn't worried at all right now, it's tomorrow I'm worried about."

There was an uncomfortable silence in the barn. Martin busied himself looking over the tools and animal products - mostly for horses - with the AR-15 slung from his shoulder. Floyd had brought the flight manual and chart with him. He found a folding chair and set it next to the helicopter and began a quick review of the flight manual. He looked up several times and saw that Martin was engrossed with something on the long bench.

Finally Martin sauntered over to Floyd's chair and pulled a folding chair next to the door. "Well, you excited about getting a chopper in the air tomorrow, old man?" He smirked at Floyd.

"It'll make me more excited if we don't become tiny bits and pieces on some mountain."

"Nah, I don't have a doubt you can fly her just fine."

"From your lips to God's ear."

Martin sneered, "Oh yeah, forgot you and the missus are real religious folks, high and mighty. What hogwash."

"Don't approve, huh?"

Martin shrugged, "Nah, it's a bunch of fairytales and nonsense, if you ask me. I haven't seen Jesus showing up around the neighborhood too often, have you?" Martin let out a long snicker. "Haven't seen him around when a lot of terrible things or disasters are going on. I just see a lot of people who are pathetic losers and they want someone to save 'em. Me? I'll save me. And when I can't, then my 9mm can!" He patted his holstered automatic and snorted out a laugh.

Floyd didn't argue. Martin looked at him with a twisted smirk which Floyd recognized as a taunt, or maybe just an irresistible urge to confront Floyd. "Raised mostly by my Aunt, she used to take me and my cousins to church all the time. Meanest woman I ever met. My mother had big time drug issues so she basically gave me to her sister to raise, kinda like giving her the family cow." Martin grinned at Floyd. "Only credit I'll give the woman is she didn't like her own two kids any more than she did me." Martin broke into a prolonged chortle again.

"What she really liked was her bottle. She'd get drunk and take a hair brush to us when we were little, and draw blood. No lie. Or she'd lock us in a dark closet. Got a little older, she'd use belts, broom handles, anything. She really *liked* hurting people."

Martin looked as cold as a frozen lake.

"But, she was always yappin' about God this, and God that, and how he was going to punish us. She'd drag us down to church on Sunday mornin' smiling at everyone, like she was something special, and none of us dared say a word. And not one person in that church ever asked why we were black and blue half the time. Huge phonies. Couldn't wait to leave."

"Yeah? I can understand that. How old were you when you left home?"

"Well, thing is that she fell down the stairs to the cellar and broke her fool neck when I was about thirteen or so. Real shame. She was drunk of course. Nobody was too surprised and the local Sheriff didn't give it a second thought." Martin smiled like he was on center stage in a New York theater.

"My cousins went off to live with their real dad and I went with my mom, sort of – off and on thing – between the drugs and the men." Martin wasn't smiling any more.

Pausing for a moment as though he was revisiting a memory, he picked up again, "Didn't notice that all that praying ever changed anything. Just a bunch of blather. I believe in winning, Mr. Marshall, not Jesus. So I don't need no preaching from you, believe me."

Floyd pursed his lips and nodded. "Thought hadn't even occurred to me, be honest." Floyd closed the flight manual and looked at Martin for some time before he spoke. "You know, I spent over twenty years in the military, including a couple of combat tours, so, there ain't much I haven't seen – or done. And I dealt with my share of cocky, know-nothin's like you, all puffed up with themselves 'cause they can use brute force – or a gun – to fix what they can't fix with their brain."

Martin's face turned red, and his eyes bulged while Floyd was momentarily fixated on his right temple where a vein ballooned up like a garden hose.

"Truth is, most of 'em are the real losers in life. They don't make or create one thing. They can only destroy things. They don't build, they take. In the end, they don't contribute anything to the world but misery."

The words exploded from Martin. "You religious kooks make me sick, all a bunch of liars and cheats!" "There ain't nothing worse than you all...telling everyone what to do and then...then you all do the same thing behind closed doors." Martin was spluttering in his rage, his face spotted with sweat, as he gripped the AR-15 sitting in his lap.

Floyd chuckled. "Oh my, there are plenty of religious folks who are phony – plenty of hypocrites – even worse."

"What's that mean?"

"I'm agreeing with you, what do you want?" Floyd shrugged his shoulders and intentionally let the moment work itself out. "Thing is, there is a big difference between being religious and being a follower of Jesus. Jesus isn't a good cause. He's not a character in a book; He's a living Person. He's not a memory; He's a presence, not someone to debate and discuss; He's someone to meet, to actually know."

Martin fixed a stare on Floyd.

"So you met some rotten people who called themselves Christians – so what? You never met any rotten bad guys, drug dealers and murderers? Or rotten bankers, mechanics, police or bad politicians." Floyd smirked and shrugged his shoulders again at Martin as if to ask, *well?*

"Real Christians aren't people who know all *about* Jesus or treat Him like a gumball machine, but they're people who actually *know* Him. What I've learned is that the smartest person, the greatest banker, scientist, politician, the greatest anybody in this world, is a lot less than the humble sinner who knows Jesus."

Floyd waited but Martin's scowl didn't diminish, nor did his death grip on the AR-15.

"He ain't a magician, fixin' what you think needs fixin'. He's God. He's in the business of remaking lives – He'll even remake a miserable one like yours if you let Him."

The rage flashed like lightning striking Martin's face but Floyd didn't wait to see it. He set the manual down and decided to go over the helicopter one more time.

Chapter 31

The three inch pipe caught Shovel's forearm that he had instinctively swung over his head to block the assault. His cry was ear splitting in the cramped mine with its low ceiling and was followed by a bellow of pain. Sharon was working on pure adrenaline as she swung the pipe again and it hit Palas just above the temple and his left ear. The blood erupted from the side of his head and sprayed away from its source like a stream of plasma from the sun.

It seemed to her that everything happening in slow motion in her mind's eye as every nerve in her body was operating for its own survival. Palas' eyes increasingly expanded like stage curtains opening. She swung the pipe down again with every bit of force she had, and this blow landed on the little finger of the left hand that he put up in defensive position again. She could see the finger bend and lay back against the top of his hand in a bizarre angle like a divot of grass clinging to the sod on a golf course.

Sharon managed to push herself up against the incline pipe to a half standing position, where she drove the pipe into his head with renewed force. He was on all fours and finally crumpled on the dirt. Sharon leaned against the pipe she had been locked to all day, finally free.

After a few moments she collected her breath and reached down and took the last loops of rope from her legs. Then she took the handcuffs and locked one bracelet down on his outstretched left wrist with the mangled little finger sticking straight up in the air like an empty flag pole. Using the other cuff end as a pulling ring, she dragged the weight of his body up close to the pipe and stretched out his left arm one side. She moved to the right side and pulled his right arm up past the pipe so she could lock the right wrist in the open bracelet.



Sharon was so focused on locking Palas' hands together that she'd not seen it coming. He was up on his knees in a split second and drove his right fist forward into Sharon's face, knocking her off her feet and into the wall of the mine. She could taste the blood pouring down her lips into her mouth, and saw him staggering to his feet, first bouncing his head off the low ceiling then charging forward like the wild bull of a man he was, raging in Spanish, with blood still pouring out of his head. In one unthinking turn Sharon missed his wild grasp and raked her hand across the dirt and gravel and with her right hand full, threw it into his face as he wheeled his frame around to catch her.

Palas staggered blindly clawing at his eyes with his rage turned to wails of pain. Sharon pushed herself to her feet and off the wall and made a wobbly few steps to re-employ the pipe she had abandoned.

Before he could turn to attack her, Sharon swung the pipe one more time and it slammed into the side of his head with a sound of a melon being dropped. Shovels went down again.

This time she worked quickly and dragged his left arm, then his right arm behind the pipe and hurriedly handcuffed his wrists. She fingered the dirt behind the incline pipe to find the hairpin she had left, thinking that it would be ironic if he opened the handcuffs with her own hairpin and came after her. Then she collected the nylon rope and wrapped both of Palas' ankles together as tightly as she could.

The pain in her face and mouth was excruciating. She gently probed above her lip and felt one gash, where she thought the tip of a tooth may have punctured the surface. Running her tongue inside her mouth, she could feel a large flap of skin where the skin was torn open.

While the pain across her jaw was intense, she didn't think she had lost any teeth. She pulled her shirt completely out of her pants and used the end of it to push against the flow of blood and then decided that her best bet was Henry's tent. "Might be something in there to use."

Chapter 32

Palas' punch to her face had been so hard that she still felt a bit dazed and before she did anything she had to sit a moment and let her senses and her body calm down. "The worst decisions are made when you're not thinking things through, compose yourself." She sat on the right side of the entrance with her back to the mine wall. She didn't even know how long she had been sitting, but she had clearly dozed off, exhausted and dazed, but she was startled by the sound of footsteps coming past the tent outside. She reacted and grabbed the pipe and squatted next to the entrance, praying that Henry put his head in first. The electric lantern was still next to Palas illuminating his body, and the thought ran through her mind that she ought to try to grab it so Henry didn't see the man spread out and handcuffed to the pipe first thing. But there was no time.

She thought that her head was clearer, perhaps, but her face was a pit of fiery pain and she could taste the iron from her own blood even though the bleeding had slowed. It didn't make a difference now. She had one more obstacle to overcome, and she prayed that she could knock Henry clean out with one blow. He was far larger than Palas, and there was no way she believed she would get more than one swing. The left side of the mine entrance would have made it easier to swing with her right hand, but she didn't dare move now. The footsteps seemed right outside the entrance and she could hear them stop.

Oh, Father, be with me now.

Barely hearing the footfalls in the entrance her only thought was that Henry didn't want to barge in on Palas. She drew the pipe up as far as possible and was up in a half-crouching position ready to swing when Rosario's dark black hair poked into the entrance. Sharon collapsed on her bottom with her hand over her chest. "Oh, Rosario you scared me half to death!"

Rosario's eyes were bulging in astonishment at the sight of Palas covered in blood and handcuffed to the incline pipe, then turning to Sharon her hand covered her mouth to stifle a cry. "Oh no! Are you okay, oh no." She came right to Sharon's face and reached out gently and touched her cheek. "Are you okay, your face is purple? Oh God, you're bleeding."

Sharon touched her hand, "I'm okay, I guess. It really hurts, but I don't have time to worry about it."

"Is he dead?"

"I dunno."

"Oh, Sharon, now they'll kill you for sure."

"Rosario, they weren't ever going to let me go anyway. But, no one is going to kill me. Right now I need your help, can I count on you?"

"Anything. What can I do?"

"I need you to go alert the others about what you found here."

"No, no, no! I can't do that, they'll come down here and find you."

“Calm down and listen to me, okay?” Rosario nodded without conviction. “Look, if you go back to the tents and *don’t* tell anyone, they’ll know something is wrong. Martin already asked me about my new friends – meaning you and Tyler. He’s no fool. And Henry has been agitated all day – *he’ll know*. Then, it won’t be me in danger – it will be you, and Tyler too.”

Rosario was thinking and Sharon could tell that she was becoming frightened at the thought of Martin or Henry deciding that she and Tyler were involved in Sharon’s escape. “Yeah, I see what ya mean, you’re right. So what do we do?”

“Give me a few minutes, I need to go through Henry’s tent and see what I can find. As soon as I leave, I want you to go back and say that you came by to see if we needed anything and you found Palas, and I was gone. If they ask why you were gone so long, tell ‘em that you were afraid to interrupt us, but then you thought maybe we were asleep. Can you do that, Rosario?”

“I’ve been a workin’ girl and druggie, ‘ya don’t think I learned how to lie pretty good?”

Sharon held out her arms, “Come here.”

Rosario slid closer and Sharon embraced her, and Rosario embraced her back. “I love you Rosario. You are God’s child, and I know we’ll be okay somehow. I’m not going to leave this mountain until you and Tyler are safe. I’m not leaving you two up here, because, I’m pretty sure Martin isn’t coming back – *ever*.”

Rosario pushed back to look at Sharon. “What? Really? How do you know?”

“Because I’ve been a deputy sheriff a long time, and I just know. This was all a contrived set up, somehow. I don’t know all the details exactly, but I can feel it. You’ve got to trust me Rosario. We’re on our own. But, don’t breathe a word to Tyler. Let’s get through tonight first. I’m going to be close and I’ll be keeping an eye on you two. Just trust me, I’m not leaving you.”

“But, you could get off this mountain, *you* could make it down.”

“Well, honestly, I have no idea where we are, so I’m not even sure I could make it out of here. But you know what? Even if I did, I wouldn’t leave. God has entrusted you to me. He has put me here in this place for you and Tyler. I’m just being obedient, Rosario. Sometimes being obedient is the hardest thing to do – not the easiest.”

Rosario leaned in and embraced Sharon and gently kissed her cheek, oblivious as Sharon grimaced at the pain of the touch. “Thank you, thank you. I promise, I’ll keep Tyler safe.”

“Now let’s get over to the tent. I may need you to help me for a second, then you need to get going.”



Rosario went first, and waved Sharon on behind her. Once inside the tent and using Palas’ lantern, reasoning that anyone in the camp would think it was him if they noticed the light, Sharon found her Remington 870 lying on an air mattress. She checked to make sure Henry hadn’t unloaded the weapon; the safety was off and there were seven shots left. Rummaging around the tent, she didn’t see her duty belt or her Berretta, but

she did find Clarence's .45 Smith and Wesson automatic and his hand axe. She removed the clip and counted eight rounds, with one round in the chamber. She also found her wallet, knife and \$40 dollars.

"Well Lord, at least I won't die broke." Sharon tried to smile but it hurt too much.

Neither woman could find a first aid kit or suitable bandages, but Sharon did find two empty boxes in one corner that were labeled as outdoor motion detectors. "Isn't this interesting." Rosario came to look over her shoulder. Sharon opened one box and found the instructions for *Serial Motion Detectors* and a high-decibel alarm run off a 12 volt battery. Turning to Rosario, she said, "Oh yeah, this would make a *huge* racket. But guess what?"

Rosario shrugged, "What?"

"Henry put multiple motion detectors on each side of the path out in the woods, and that's smart. But each side of the path has its own battery, and look here," she pointed to a crude map penciled out the instructions, "He was nice enough to tell us where he put them. That *ain't* smart."

Rosario looked perplexed. "Why would he do that?"

"Because you have to recharge the batteries a lot, and this way they are out of range of the detector and easy to get to – and he wouldn't forget where he put them. Lucky us, huh? I just have to disconnect the batteries – I don't have to find the motion detectors, and then I can have the run of the woods." Sharon closed the box and put both of them where she had found them.

Sharon noticed a jacket folded on the floor and she grabbed it and slipped it on. It engulfed her slender frame, but it would get cool in short order. She took off her trouser belt and slipped the holster and .45 to it, and put the belt back on, sticking the handle of the ax through a loop. She also picked up a flashlight. Rosario handed her a plastic bag she had filled with three small bottles of water and a partial box of crackers and a chocolate bar she found. "Give me just a couple of minutes and then head back. Remember, don't tell Tyler. I'll be watching."

Sharon and Rosario held hands for a moment as Sharon asked God's blessings for their safety and for protection for Floyd.

Chapter 33

Rosario ran back to the tents like her life depended on it – which she believed was true. The scattered tents were well out of the line of sight of the path and Henry's tent, arranged on a level stretch and surrounded with dense trees and brush, and most of them under the camouflage netting. Seeing the outline of Henry and the other Mexican cartel thug sitting in folding chairs just outside a tent, she tried to be more breathless than she really was. The thought kept churning in her mind that Henry would assume that she had somehow unlocked Sharon's handcuffs. In truth, she realized that she hadn't even asked Sharon how she opened them and had no idea how she did it. It was one less lie she had to tell she decided.

She slid to a stop in front of them and was heaving breathlessly. "Went down like you said, found Palas...he's, he's handcuffed in the mine, there's blood everywhere, 'ya need to come quick."

She saw Henry's eyes reduce to a slit, and his face contort in rage.

"There's no sign of the woman," she added hesitantly.

The Mexican leapt from the chair in frenzied panic with his arms flailing and screaming in Spanish. Henry stood without a word and before Rosario could react he backhanded her so hard that she was knocked off her feet and landed on her back. Her breath was gone and she couldn't immediately make a sound, then she became hysterical, digging her feet into the dirt backing away to get as far away as she could, screaming in fear and rage both, "Why did you do that you disgusting animal! Why are you hitting me, you're the one who did it, not me."

The Mexican looked stunned and fell quiet and turned to Henry. "¿Qué haces?"

Henry looked at the girl and back at the Mexican. "What do you mean 'what am I doing?' Nothing, can't you see what's she's trying to do?" He pointed to Rosario. "You...get up and let's go."

As she got up, Henry glared at the Mexican and grabbed Rosario under the arm pit with tremendous force that was excruciatingly painful. "One more word from you and I'll beat you into the dirt, do you understand?"

"I...I...don't know why you're hurting me, why?"

"Shut up and walk."

They marched around the side of the mountain and the faint outline of the dark tent was visible ahead, looming like an abandoned outpost. Reaching the mine entrance, Henry stuck his head in with his electric lantern and pulled it back out looking at the Mexican. "Looks bad." Pointing at Rosario he growled, "You go in first."

With the three of them in the mine, Palas' cartel co-worker lifted the battered man's head and examined him for a pulse, while Henry took the handcuff key and unlocked both wrists. The Mexican held up his forefinger and thumb just a fraction of an inch from each other; *Shovels was barely alive.*

Henry moved to the side of the Mexican and examined Palas' wounds for himself. "Man, she sure beat the tar outta him. Well, nothing much we can do about that now. Let's find this cop and teach her a lesson she'll never forget."

Rosario wasn't sure the Mexican even understood what Henry meant.

They went to the tent and Henry immediately grew even more furious, venting out a flow of obscenities unrelated to any obvious subject. He turned to the Mexican, who stared back vacantly. "She's got the shotgun," he explained, while throwing things around the tent with no apparent purpose that Rosario could tell. She noticed that the Mexican, who had lost two co-workers in as many days, was quiet, and didn't seem to be paying any attention to Henry's raging.

When Henry was apparently finished, he said more to himself than to the Mexican or Rosario, "We'll see. If she is in the trees she'll trip a motion detector soon enough."



After sending Rosario on her way, Sharon had followed the path away from the camp towards the trail where Martin had parked the ATV's. Before long she found the first of the two batteries, just where Henry had marked in his crude sketch. She took her pocket knife and cut both wires. Then she used the hand ax and crushed the post connections on top of the battery so that it couldn't be reconnected. She moved on and located the other battery and did the same thing.

Now safe from tripping an alarm, Sharon moved into the woods and kept within eyesight of the path heading back to the camp. It was very dark with only a sliver of moon out. The flashlight was out of the question so she moved slowly and carefully along. She felt certain that Henry's anger and general disposition would compel him to come after her very soon. *My guess is that when he figures out that the motion detectors haven't gone off, he'll think it was me. Maybe I should hang out around here? Wonder if he even realizes how dumb that was? Surely he didn't do it on purpose, as a trap, did he?*

With that thought, Sharon determined to be even more careful.

Moving further off the road she stopped between two large trees that formed a natural berm between them. While she couldn't see the path now, she felt sure she'd hear Henry long before she would need to see him. "Hmm, what if he brings Palas' buddy? That'd be interesting."

Wrapping the extra-large jacket she had pilfered from Henry's tent tightly around her to fight against the invading cool night air, she laid the Remington across her legs, and began examining her lip with her fingers. Delicately, she probed the gash, then the side of her face which was still extremely painful to the touch, and finally the caked blood on her lips and chin. "I'm lucky he didn't break my jaw. I must look something awful. Guess I've earned a spa day," she suggested softly to the trees. She could hear a rustle of a passing squirrel or chipmunk nearby, and the quiet chirping of an unseen bird. Everything else was deathly still.

She had no idea how long she had drifted off but she heard the distinct crunch of gravel—just once—as though someone was trying to be very careful and not make any noise. Crouching, she looked over the small berm between the two trees. She couldn't

see anything so she just listened. Minutes passed then she heard a faint whisper. It was Henry talking to someone else.

“Battery’s gotta be close.”

She left the bag with water and crackers, the bulky jacket, and everything from her pockets, taking only the .45 automatic and the 12 gauge shotgun with her. With all the discipline she could muster, she began a step by step move parallel to the path, and then carefully she moved towards the path. She could just make out the dark shadowy figure of Henry with his AR-15 strapped to his back, and next to him was another indistinct figure. They flashed on a pen-light for their search and then it went out. Laying carefully down next to a huge tree she didn’t dare make a sound. Then she heard Henry’s whisper clearly. “She’s destroyed the battery.” There was a soft roll of swearwords that described her that carried across the cool night air followed by his summation. “That’s why the alarms didn’t go off.”

Sharon weighed the options. An excellent shot with a handgun, she thought she was just too far away for a clean gunshot in the dark. The chance of hitting them with buckshot wasn’t much better, but the Remington’s noise might put the fear of God in them and *mark* her territory for this night – maybe. She choose the Remington.

Before she took a shot, she did a quick inventory of the terrain, and decided to use the noise and confusion of the shotgun blast to make her way back to the two trees as her best defensive position. She’d have cover and surprise there. Satisfied with her plotted retreat, she lined up the sights of the Remington and waiting for more noise. She heard a soft whisper of a heavily accented voice in the dark asking if there were more batteries. She smiled, “I’ve got something better for you buddy. Eat some buckshot.”

She fired into the sound and up. The dramatic orange flash was followed by the deafening thunder of the Remington against the silence of the dark world, followed immediately by the shot’s report rebounding off the mountain. Hesitating for a moment, she heard the crashing of feet against the gravel road and a pain-filled cry. “I’m bleeding, my face is bleeding here, do you hear me...” A piece of buckshot had indeed found a home.

Sharon wheeled her body and pumped a new shell into the Remington and began running in a crouching slant back to her two trees.

Setting the shotgun on the lip of the berm she barely drew a breath, but couldn’t hear anything but the rising wind in the trees.

Well, is that enough of a scare to keep them in camp tonight?

Chapter 34

Jamie had made the decision earlier to keep his position just off the trail in brush and trees and kept watching the camp. Obviously, something was going on in the mine, and his thinking had been that Sharon was being held there.

Getting to her was the issue.

There were people moving around the left side of the mountain and it appeared that they were organized and working. He could only imagine it was drugs of some kind. No one had come or gone from the mine or the path, so as soon as it turned dark, he decided that the first order of business was to confirm that Sharon was there.

He had placed himself just at the path's edge with his back to a tree which gave him a good field of vision and he just waited. Evening came and broke the heat and it wasn't long before he saw the "greeter" come shuffling towards the mine with a flashlight. Jamie followed him with the binoculars. Not far from the mine he stopped, turned towards the tents he had come from and switched off the light. Jamie had the impression that he was making sure no one was following him. After a minute he went straight to the mine entrance. The flashlight made the interior of the cave cast out a blue hue as the man seemed to be leaning into the entrance. It seemed only seconds to Jamie that the big man backed out of the entrance of the mine and began walking back to the tents.

Lights were sprinkled around like tiny sparklers on the left of the mine and he could hear an occasional clank or bang. Settling in again, he pulled a rolled up long sleeve t-shirt from his waist pack, wishing he had some long pants as well in the in the growing coolness.



Jamie awakened with a jolt. He had dozed off just waiting. It was now totally dark and just a tiny crescent of moon was out. The stars were slowly joining the moon in an ancient heavenly chorography without a hint of clouds. The cool night air was on the advance against the day's heat. He realized that someone was on the gravel path. Not walking on it but trying to keep out of it he thought, but they missed a step and there was a loud crunch. *Oh Lord, how long have I been asleep? What'd I miss? Oh Lord.* Jamie had to hold his position, no matter what. The noise had been so close that he felt he could reach out and intercept it. *Could they see him crammed into a wedge between a tree and the brush?*

He heard a large voice trying to whisper, presumably to someone with him, "Where are the batteries?" There was a hint of disbelief in the voice. "How could my map get lost?" Jamie shifted his head and leaned forward to take in more of the area and he saw a spot of light which he realized was a flashlight. The light abruptly went out. Jamie could only see gray forms pasted against the darkness, one very large and the other average size.

What are the batteries for? Was as far as Jamie got, before the large voice, trying very hard to whisper reported; “She’s destroyed the battery,” followed by a swearing description of Sharon. “That’s why the alarms didn’t go off.” A cascade of under-the-breath cursing followed.

Jamie was nodding his head. “Sharon is out here, no question. When did she escape? I must have dozed off during the fun. But, if there were alarms planted out here, then it’s a good thing I took a nap!” Jamie was amazed that for a second time a nap had saved him from discovery. “I could have ruined everything. Wow, thank you for protecting me, Lord. Now, how do I find her?”

A new, accented voice asked about more batteries. There was no immediate response.

The night lit up for an instant as a red-orange flash exploded from the other side of the pathway followed by an ear-pounding shotgun blast and then the shot’s echo across the face of the mountain. It was followed by sound of feet trying to get a bite in the gravel and stumbling and a panicked shouts and someone with a heavy accent wailing that they were bleeding. Jamie caught a shadowy glimpse of both men trotting up the path towards the camp.

Jamie didn’t waste a minute. He sprinted across the path and into the woods on the other side and made his way as best he could tell towards where he had seen the gun discharge. The sharp odor of gunpowder hung in the air even though he didn’t see anything. Moving further into the woods, he wanted to call out Sharon’s name, but caught himself at the last minute. *Don’t be stupid* he scolded himself, *there could be others out here.*

Scared and feeling powerless and vulnerable, Jamie dropped to his knees and pulled the Taser out of Toro’s rescued holster from the ATV and the small flashlight. *How do you work this thing?* The instant the flashlight went on, he realized that he might as well as shoot a flare in the air – it was as bright as the shotgun had been loud. *Okay, good grief, why don’t you put up a billboard dummy!*

The sound of a footstep and the hammer on a weapon cocking stopped Jamie cold; his breath was exhaled in a fraction of a second and he was so terrified that he couldn’t inhale again.

“Jamie? What in the blazes are you doing out here, good grief! You could get yourself killed pulling stunts like this.” Sharon’s hushed, hissing words were hard as stone and unsympathetic to his fear. “Put that Taser up before you hurt yourself.” She stood looking slowly in every direction and when Jamie started to move she stopped him and per her finger to his lips. He could smell the scent of gun oil on her hand.

Sharon stood in the silent night for several minutes looking back and forth. Finally she tugged on Jaime’s arm and motioned for him to follow her. She listed like an overloaded boat into him and whispered in his ear. “Watch where you step and don’t say a word.” They stopped at the two trees and she put her hand up. She picked up the coat and her other items and just stood looking back past Jamie watching something or some spot in the woods. It was the first time he had seen her full face. Even in the faint moonlight he could see her blood stained shirt and the swollen cheek. She finished her

surveillance and looked at his stare with both palms upturned and her eyes arched widely, clearly asking *'what?'* She shrugged her shoulders and moved out without looking back.

When they came out of the trees they were back to the red dirt path. She put her hand up again and stood looking behind them and listening for a full minute or two. Jamie didn't know what she was listening for, but it was spooky and creepy all at the same time. "Sit down," she whispered. Doing as he was told, she sat down right beside him, but facing behind them. "Pretty sure someone is behind us. We'll just sit here for a while. He'll come to us." Jamie didn't think he could be more terrified than he had already been. He was wrong.

He could feel Sharon's breath on his ear. "What are you doing here? Is there anyone else with you? What about Floyd?"

Jamie turned to whisper back to Sharon, but she stopped him and told him to keep his eyes on the path and to the left, looking for anything moving. He complied and Sharon scooted closer and had her head almost next to his, while he filled Sharon in on the day's events that he knew about. She made him tell her about Martin and Floyd several times. She made him go over his journey up the trail twice.

Finally satisfied, she whispered again. "Okay, you're probably right about not turning back on the trail. You're wrong about coming here by yourself - but right about that. I'm sure the Sheriff had to find some motorbikes that could get up that deer path too. We won't see them 'till tomorrow sometime, if they can find this turn. Might get an Army chopper from Eagle Station looking around up here, but it could be pretty tough to find except by accident anyway, that's my guess."

After a silence and sharing a bottle of water with Jamie, Sharon whispered matter-of-factly, "Yeah, Floyd is either going to figure out what to do or not. Nothing could have been done differently." Jamie really didn't understand what she meant, but this was no place for long explanations. "Have any more water?" Jamie nodded and then he felt Toro's body tense. She put her hand on his shoulder and he saw the Remington now lifted up and suddenly he couldn't breathe again.

There were the sounds of footfalls coming closer and then the deputy's sharp order. "Come out, hands up now!"

Jamie couldn't see it, but Rosario came slowly towards Sharon with her hands held high - with twigs, pine needles, bark and dirt clinging to her after her walk through the woods without a light.

"Rosario, what are you doing here? Come here, get down."

Rosario slid in next to the two, looking shaken up and disoriented. "I...I thought I was lost for good." Still in her t-shirt she was chilled and hoarse. "Oh, I was so scared - so scared."

"Yeah? I bet you were. What would possess you to be out here?" Sharon had anger in her words. Neither woman was watching Jamie who opened his waist pack and produced another T-shirt, handing it to Rosario. "Good job, buddy." Sharon pointed towards Jamie. "Rosario, this is Jamie Gallagher, he works at the camp Floyd and I

have. And he doesn't have any more sense than you do, by the way." Jamie turned around completely, waving a *hello*, with Rosario shyly waving back.

Sharon looked at Rosario and gave her an encouraging nod, "Well?"

"I did what you told me to do. I found Henry with the other cartel guy at the tents. When I told him about finding you gone and the cartel guy being locked up, Henry hit me so hard, I thought he broke my jaw." Sharon instinctively reached over to Rosario's face and turned it towards her. She had a large whelp that was obvious even in the dark.

"Guess we're a matched pair, huh?"

Rosario tried to smile. "He grabbed me and made me go with him and the Mexican guy down to the mine. He looked everywhere, but the other guy just grumbled about his friend being beaten so bad - they don't think he's gonna live." Rosario made a grimace. "They went to the tent and Henry was furious about the shotgun. Honestly, they didn't pay any attention to me. When Henry got to screaming about the alarms and they decided to go check on them, they walked off and never even looked my way. So I decided I better follow them and maybe I could help you."

Sharon shook her head at Rosario and then at Jamie. "Neither one of you has a lick of sense at all. So where is Tyler?"

"He was in a big compound tent, lights out already, so I didn't get to see him at all."

"Can we find him?"

"Sure, what about his dad though?"

"I think that's tomorrow's problem. It's in my husband's hands now, anyway."

Sharon was silent for a moment as she thought about Floyd. She wanted to hug him right now more than anything else on earth. Then she enthusiastically stated, "Okay you two. We're going to be creative tonight, and we're going to snatch Tyler. And we might just get to catch a bad guy, who knows? Follow me."

Chapter 35

Sharon, Rosario, and Jamie moved down the dirt trail to the ATV's sitting like dark, cold horses in the night. Jamie pointed to the four passenger ATV, "There's bottled water in the bed of this one." They converged on it like bees to the honeycomb. Sharon took deep drafts and finished two bottles without even a sound, even though the inside of her mouth was gashed and there was an intense pain as the water played in the soft torn flesh. Jamie offered the best news. "Look what I found in this one earlier," and he produced three shrink wrapped energy bars. "Dinner! In all the excitement I didn't get a chance to eat them."

It was very painful for Sharon to chew the bar and she had to push the food to the other side of her mouth, but she was famished. Rosario's jaw hurt so bad that she offered the last half of her bar to Sharon. Swiping the last crumbs from her face, Sharon turned to Rosario, "Does Tyler have the key to this ATV?"

"Sure, pretty certain he does."

"Good. Jamie where's your bike?"

"Not too far up the trail on the other side. I pushed it into the trees." Sharon just nodded.

"Here's what I'm thinking. I ruined the batteries for the alarms, but we have a couple of 12 volt batteries right here," she pointed to the ATV's. "So we pull two batteries and use them to rewire the alarms. Then, once we've done that, I think I have a way to get Tyler out of the camp, and to get us out of here. Jamie, do you know where we are, or at least how to get us off this mountain?"

"I can get us off this mountain, no problem."

"Okay, first let's take a break and look for something more to eat. Then we'll pull a couple of batteries and see what kind of mischief we can make."

Rosario found a half empty bag of trail-mix on the floor of one of the ATV's. The two escapees and their would-be rescuer sat down with water and the trail-mix, resting in the cool dark night. Cast over them was a now full canopy of stars, strewn across the sky as a reminder of the ageless Glory that scattered them.

Rosario looked up at the heavens for a long time. Her voice cracked as she looked at Sharon, "You told me today that everything in the whole creation was made through Jesus Christ. Did He make all of these stars too?"

Sharon reached for Rosario's hand and held it like it was a delicate orchid, lovely and fresh. "Yeah, that is exactly what I said. Pretty amazing isn't it." She turned to Jamie. "Mr. Gallagher, today was a very special day for our sister Rosario. She made the most important decision of her life – she became a follower of Jesus Christ today. And, not only that, the Lord had a special word for her, both from me *and in Person*."

Jamie looked at Rosario with his mouth wide open. "Wha...whoa, that is incredible, just incredible. Oh Lord! Tell me all about it."

Rosario told her story slowly, and when she explained to Jamie that the Lord had told her that her past “was my story yesterday – but it wasn’t my story today,” Sharon could not have spoken if she wanted to, and Jamie wiped away something in his eyes.

Somewhere in the stunning, dazzling swirl of creation that spread over them in millions of uncountable stars, and the whispering trees that wrapped around them, Jamie looked at Rosario and quietly said, “I was an addict too, coke mostly.” He stopped for a moment to compose himself. “I was picked up one day for trying to sell drugs and stuff to a cop. After a long time and a hard road back, I fell on my knees in the forest, and Sharon’s husband and his friend prayed over me as I told my story to Jesus. I felt so small, so unworthy of any forgiveness. All I ever thought I deserved was more punishment for being so dirty and so weak.”

The two women sat silently, as Jamie examined the same spot of his upturned hand and waited for his emotions to synchronize with his thoughts.

“That night, back at camp, I looked up at these same stars,” he paused and looked up and shuddered, as though he were there again, “and I had the thought that they had seen everything in human history. They had seen every day of every human life. And yet they were still there and they’d be there long after I’m gone. In my heart somewhere, I can’t tell you exactly how, I had the word that nothing past is undone, but today is new. Jesus has paid that passage for me. Now, am I going to take that new day, or not? I was saved from myself that night, and I am on a journey to live under His glory.”

Rosario reached and took Jamie’s hand and as they touched she instantly trembled, remembering the promise she was given earlier in the afternoon; *she would find love on this mountain that day*. She turned, covered her mouth to stifle a gasp as her rich brown eyes expanded across her face, looking at Jamie and then at Sharon. “Oh God, oh God, His promise! I mean, I didn’t think He meant *today*? Oh God. Oh Jesus!”

Sharon still couldn’t speak and Jamie was only looking at Rosario, not listening to her.

Somewhere deep within his soul he felt a certainty, an inevitability that swept over him and flowed out of him as a torrent of joy and love. “Yes, of course. That’s it—a promise fulfilled, and so much more, isn’t it?”

Jamie gently squeezed Rosario’s hand and she responded by gently squeezing his. An unspoken contract had been presented and accepted by both parties. Somehow, Sharon felt compelled, and deliberately reached over the two young people and rested her hand on top of theirs. The contract was witnessed.

“So today a word was spoken and a promise was kept.” Sharon kissed the top of Rosario’s head, and then the top of Jamie’s head.

On the side of an unnamed mountain in the remotest reaches of unnamed mountains, the three of them sat in silence in the late night, their whereabouts known only to the Maker of Heaven and Earth.



Jamie did the hard work, pulling two 12 volt batteries out of two smaller ATV's, clipping the wires with Sharon's knife. Then he disabled the third ATV which left only one operable ATV - Tyler's four-seater.

Sharon led the way back into the woods and parallel to the path. She stopped often to listen, then moved slowly always looking behind to Rosario and Jamie. She cut back to the two trees she had used earlier, and past them to the path and the first battery. "Okay guys, here's the plan. Once I wire this one and the other battery across the path, we'll have six motion detectors up and running. But Henry and others don't know that, they think I ruined the batteries." Sharon shrugged her shoulders and smiled. "Tough break, huh?"

Chapter 36

Rosario sat quietly listening to Sharon and Jamie discussing how to get in and out of the camp area to rescue the boy.

"Show me how to use this stun gun," Jamie patted the Taser, "and I'll have your back."

Sharon smiled. "Yeah, I'll show you, but the truth is during high stress situations, with someone coming after you, you're more likely to miss than actually hit someone. That's true with a gun, too. So the first thing you have to know is that freezing up is your first enemy, *not the attacker*. You have to think about it before it happens." Sharon offered a few suggestions on picturing how to respond to an emergency, then quickly went over the Taser basics, showing him how to fire the two wire controlled electrodes, and then how to use the "drive stun" for direct contact on an attacker.

After Sharon and Jamie went over their plan twice, Rosario, who had still not said a word, interrupted, "I think I can do it a lot easier."

Once both Sharon and Jamie had heard Rosario's reasoning, they realized she was right. "Makes sense, it really does. But I just worry about you. If anything does go wrong, Henry will kill you this time." Sharon reached out and took Rosario's hand.

"Don't worry. He hit me as hard as he could, and I made it, didn't I? Besides, I doubt he even realizes I'm not in camp anyway."



Her plan was simple. Rosario wended her way up the gravel path towards Henry's tent as quietly as she could, rehearsing the story she hoped would appease him about why she was coming out of the woods if she was noticed. As she came close, she couldn't see anyone, the tent was dark, as was the entrance to the cave. *Wow, did I luck out?*

Making her way to the front of the tent she stopped and listened, but didn't hear so much as a breath. Gently lifting the flap she was greeted by an empty tent, and she could see the shapes of the tent's contents strewn about. She smiled to herself. *He had a temper tantrum throwing all his things around - then didn't want to clean up so they could sleep here.*

Making her way to the mine entrance, she peered in and couldn't see anything in the faint moonlight, so she crept further in and as her eyes adjusted could see the open handcuffs glint in the dirt and gravel, but there was no Palas, alive or dead. "Where'd they stick 'ya, Mr. Shovels?" Even in the near dark she could tell where Sharon took him down by the large wedge of dirt, discolored by his blood. "Couldn't happen to a nicer guy," she muttered.

She walked into the main camp, past the chemical vats, with more confidence, but still as quietly as she could. She doubted that anyone but Tyler had even noticed she wasn't in camp. Should someone stop her, she'd explain that she was returning from a bathroom break, and headed back to her tent. If it was Henry, and he had done a bed

check, which she wouldn't put past him, she'd tell him that after he and the Mexican left to find Deputy Toro, her head hurt so bad from the slap he gave her, that she had curled up and fallen asleep near his tent. "I think I can pull that off," she assured herself. "I'll be okay either way, let's just get Tyler out and we'll figure out the rest."

As she passed the tent where she had earlier found Henry and Shovel's friend to report that Sharon had escaped, she saw a small lantern light was on. Every muscle in her body was telling her to move on, but somehow there was an irresistible temptation to see if Henry was there. She stopped and after a brief argument with herself, she tiptoed to the tent flap and barely separated it. The two men were stretched out in the dim light, and she could see that the Mexican had a large gauze bandage on one side of his face, courtesy of Sharon Toro, through which he had already bled significantly. *Wow, bet that hurts*, Rosario smiled.

Henry was on his back with his mouth open. A low rasping snore drifted out – that she imagined in that split moment came like a foul odor from his smoldering black soul.

Rosario made her way to a communal tent backed up against a steep face of rock, at the end of the camouflage tenting. She gingerly stepped in and could see Tyler curled up not far from the opening. When his dad wasn't in camp, the boy would sleep in Rosario's tent so she wasn't concerned about being challenged inside the tent should someone wake up and start asking questions.

Tyler, like most nine year olds, took a bit of shaking to rouse. He finally responded to her prodding, and sat up rubbing his eyes. She reached out to him and touched his lips and mouthed, *don't say anything*, then handed him his shoes and grabbed his large backpack that contained everything he owned. Once he was up, she guided him past several sleeping souls on the way out. No one woke up at all that she could tell.

The next stop was her tent. She leaned into Tyler and whispered directly in his ear. "You *know* I love you Tyler. I need you to trust me right now. Just do what I say and don't say a word. Stay right with me. It's really important – can you do that?"

The slender boy rubbed his hand over his buzz-cut hair and nodded back. He was wearing only a T-shirt and shorts, so the first thing she did was open his backpack and find a long sleeve shirt. The cool mountain air made him grateful.

"Where's Dad?"

"I'm not sure."

She was stunned as he looked away and she could see a tear parked at the corner of his eye and he reported softly, "I went to his tent before bed. He wasn't there. His big bag was gone."

"Oh." Rosario didn't know what to say. She just thought of what Sharon had predicted; that Martin wasn't coming back. "Did he say anything to you?"

"Not really. When he left he told me to be good and do whatever you told me. He didn't say anything about being gone. But he took his bag," he repeated.

Rosario wondered if he understood the implications of what he was saying. *Did she?* As old as Tyler could act – having grown up around adults who openly flaunted the law, dealt drugs, murdered, and who lived like nomads for months on end – he was still a young boy, she reminded herself.

“All I know is that Henry or the Mexican will kill me if they find me here. I’ve got to leave, and I’m not leaving without you. Do you have the key to the Kawasaki?”

“Yeah, right here.” He patted his shorts. “But,” Tyler looked confused, “what about Dad?”

“I just don’t know. He’s doing whatever he’s doing. We’ve got to do what we’ve got to do. I want to keep you safe, and I can’t do it unless we leave.”

“Where we going?”

“Lots of questions, huh?” Rosario took both of her hands with the fingers spread like a fan and plowed her hair back, retying it with an elastic hair tie and putting bobby pins in to hold the hair off her ears. “I can’t really tell you, Tyler. I guess all I do know is that me and you – we’ll be together. I think God is doing something today. I think he’s making a family. He’s making us a family.”

Tyler stared at her and furrowed his brow. She could feel the tightness in her chest. They were both scared. They were stepping off the ledge of a faith neither one of them even really understood yet – and yesterday, they hadn’t even known of it at all. His was the new faith of a boy who still possessed enough spiritual innocence to hear over the noise of the world, and hers the new faith of a broken woman who could finally face the truth of her life that had been lost in that same world.

She knew that they were both called to a blind faith now – which demanded obedience to step away from everything either of them had ever known.

“I’m scared too, Tyler, but I believe. I just believe. I guess that’s got to be enough.”

She picked up her own backpack, and stuffed a few items lying next to her air mattress into the bag and zipped it up. On the way out of the tent she picked up her aluminum six battery flashlight that was hanging from a post hook, and she and Tyler headed out.

Nearing the last tent on the way back to the path Rosario suddenly felt a huge hand clamp around her left arm and her heart leap up her throat in pure terror. She hadn’t even seen Henry standing next to the dark corner of the tent. “Where ‘ya two think you’re going?” His face bent down inches away from her and she could smell his revolting breath pouring over her like a film. The dark metal outline of his gun waited in his right hand, a token of death.

Without even a conscious mental command – an instinct refined working the streets and protecting herself – she became aware that she was hurling her right arm in a roundhouse fashion and in the next second she felt her hand and the flashlight collide with Henry’s face. She didn’t know whether the mist that hit her face was blood or saliva, but she wrenched her arm free from his grasp and turned, grabbing the boy’s arm and screamed, “Run.” Reacting with pure fear she didn’t realize she was already running as fast as her legs could carry her.

Rosario’s head involuntarily snapped and in the same moment the horrendous sound of a gunshot seemed to reverberate throughout her whole body. In only an instant she could feel that her face and shoulder become wet and the shot’s awful noise replaced by a deafening ringing in her ears. *Did I just get shot?*

With a quick glance over her shoulder she caught a glimpse of Tyler on her heels but couldn't hear anything except the terrible noise echoing in her head. Reaching the turn for the path near Henry's tent, Rosario reached behind her and unconsciously slowed enough to take hold of Tyler's arm, as they both raced down the path with gravel flying, gasping for breath in the high mountain air.

When she thought she was close, Rosario followed the plan and bellowed as loud as she could, "It's us, we're coming—we're coming!" In the next moment the night erupted with a flash of a shotgun blast followed by another, neither of which Rosario could distinguish even though they rolled like thunder across the mountain. Rosario dragged Tyler off the path and into the deep woods.

The shotgun blasts were followed by two ear-piercing cracks as Sharon fired two rounds from the .45 Smith and Wesson. She caught up to the two exhausted escapees bent over and heaving for breath. "Maybe that'll hold them until they figure out it is just one person, but...oh my word Rosario, you're bleeding, let me see." Sharon gently pushed Rosario's head up and tried to examine her in the dark. Rosario was pointing to her ears and shaking her head.

"Your ears, you can't hear?" Sharon asked slowly as Rosario nodded.

"I can't see very good, looks like he took off a piece of hair and scalp. Tyler, look at me," she snapped. The boy looked dazed and confused. "Can you hear me?"

Tyler squirmed, "Yeah, sure, just pretty scary."

"Yeah, it is. Plenty scary." She touched his shoulder. "I want you to get her to those two trees," she pointed to the two trees and the berm she had used earlier. "See the little rise between them, I want you to get her there and wait for me. Find a shirt or something and put pressure right here." She pointed to the wound on Rosario's head. "Can you do that?"

"Yes 'em."

"Good." She looked at Rosario. "I'm moving up to cover Jamie as he finishes wiring the alarms and then I'll meet you there." She realized that Rosario had no idea what she had just said and patted Rosario's shoulder and weakly smiled.

Tyler, with Rosario in tow, moved at once without responding. She had been so terrified when Henry grabbed her that she was only now realizing how close she had come to death at his hands. But she couldn't quite process it all; her head now hurt so bad that she thought she might pass out, or throw up.

Moving back to the path Sharon could just make out Jamie coming back from the other side of the path. They met at the second battery. Jamie looked concerned. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good. But that shot we heard from camp, looks like they may have grazed Rosario - her head has a pretty nasty wound. Let's get this battery hooked up and get out of here."

"Are you sure she's okay?" Jamie was nearly shouting.

"Jamie, calm down, she's gonna be fine. Let's get this done and leave."

Jamie was already working on the battery. "Sooner the better as far as I'm concerned."

Sharon stood guard as Jamie finished with the battery for the alarms. She could hear distant, indistinct voices and noises, but unless someone had left the camp site already, she couldn't hear anything close. Then on her right she saw a light go on where Henry's tent would be. *Well, there you are.*

Jamie was finished quickly and as they scurried back to the trees, Sharon told him, "Don't get panicked when you see Rosario's head. We need to keep our wits right now. These guys are coming after us. You can count on it."

Reaching the trees, Sharon and Jamie were met by Tyler, standing up with a blood soaked T-shirt. "Tried to stop the bleeding like you said," was the only report.

"Thank you, Tyler." Sharon knelt next to Rosario and Jamie knelt in front of her and took her hand. The two exchanged a smile that belonged to love.

"I can hear a little now," she said softly.

"Just relax and let me take a look at this," Sharon ordered. "You guys, stand over her, Jamie let me see that penlight."

Sharon used the light pointing away from the path, hoping that no one was close enough, yet, to see them. The wound was about 3 inches long and had plowed flesh off the right side of the young woman's head close to the crown, but Sharon didn't see the skull bone.

"You're one lucky girl. It's a nasty gash up here, but no bone is showing. It's going to hurt, but you're okay and a few stitches and you'll be good as new. How's it feel?"

"Oh Lord, it hurts so badly. My head - just hurts everywhere, so bad." Rosario reported with tears creasing her face. Jamie knelt back in front of her and held her hand again.

"How's your hearing?" Sharon was still dabbing at the wound with the T-shirt Tyler had been using.

"A little better. I didn't even know he shot me, but I felt something that hit my head and then my ears were ringing so bad - I couldn't hear nothing. I thought I was going to die it was so loud."

"What happened in camp?" Sharon pressed her more than she wanted, but she needed to know what reaction to expect from Henry and the Mexican.

"Well, I looked in at Henry's tent and in the mine. No one in them."

"No one is in the mine, really?"

"Nope."

"*Hmmp*, wonder what they did with our cartel boy? Maybe he didn't make it?"

"I went into the camp, snuck a peep into his buddy's tent. Henry and him were both there asleep. So I went down to the big tent, grabbed Tyler, made a stop at my tent to get my backpack. We were almost out of the camp when Henry came outta nowhere and grabbed me. I hit him as hard as I could with my flashlight and me an' Tyler were running for our lives, 'ya know. That's when I felt it."

"Wow, you're one brave pair, aren't you?" Sharon smiled at Tyler. "You okay there?"

"I'm fine. My dad left, and he took his big bag. You know where he is?"

“No son, I don’t. But right now we need to get off this mountain. We don’t have much time to waste here.”

Rosario gripped Tyler’s hand. “I love you, buddy. You gotta help Sharon now, I don’t think I’m going to be much help. Can you do that for me?” She didn’t think Tyler had ever looked so vulnerable. She squeezed his hand and he silently mouthed *I love you too* as they looked at each other’s smile. She turned to Jamie, still holding her other hand, and winked at him, drawing his broadest grin.

When she turned back to Tyler, suddenly, he had never looked so grown up. She smiled at him again as her eyes were closing.

Chapter 37

That last thing Gus remembered was laying down on his office couch to grab a short nap. He woke up with a jolt as his cell phone's insistent chirping. "Sheriff, it's LaBrash here, I'm down on 108 ready to get back to the Wild Spruce, so I'm checking in while I have a cell signal. We've got the bikes ready to go, and I've got two Deputies up on top of that run making sure we don't miss anything."

Gus listened appreciatively as he his Deputy filled him in, again, with old information. *This is hard on everyone, have some grace*, he reminded himself. He moved to the office window and peeked through the shade. It was still dark but the retreating stars told him that dawn was coming. "Anything on Tommy?"

"No sir, except he left us good notes. He's on foot up that trail, and having looked at it, might be just about as fast as these motorcycles, honestly. He's got a good head on his shoulder's Gus, he'll be okay."

"I know, you're right Roger. Did your guys get much sleep? Everyone okay?"

"Most of 'em slept in the back of the trucks with the tailgates down. I had a bedroll, so I got a couple of hours. Everyone just wants to get moving up that mountain now, be honest. Couple of us just went down and brought up coffee and donuts, more water, so we're heading up at first light."

"Okay, extra sharp up on that mountain. Make sure the younger guys take this cartel stuff seriously – they'll shoot first. And get one of the guys to come down with a report as soon as you can. Okay?"

"Will do, my goal is to bring everyone down safe and sound."

"Thanks, Roger."

Gus quietly left his office; he could see Olivia asleep in the reception area's couch, and he was sure Sam was sleeping nearby. He went across the building to the locker room, showered and put on a clean shirt. By the time he was out both Sam and Olivia were up. "Morning ladies and gentlemen, what'd I miss?"

"Hey, good morning. Judith and Mary called, woke me. They were checking in and were heading up the trail. I tried to get them to at least wait for dawn, but I either had to cave in, or go home to an empty house if you know what I mean?" Sam shrugged his shoulders.

"Yeah, I understand, believe me. No problem." Gus shrugged in a sign of solidarity.

"Mary told me to tell you that they'd call soon. She has the neighbor looking after the kids this morning."

"Wow, I just hope they have enough sense to run at the first sign of trouble."

Olivia smiled at them both and shook her head. "I'm going to make coffee and get cleaned up. Be back soon."

"So, we're on standby here. Be right back, gonna get cleaned up."

Gus nodded and as Sam left the room he bowed his head. With the night slipping away, he felt helpless in the face of the events coming at him from so many directions, none of which he could control. Prayer was all he could think to do.

Chapter 38

“Okay, what’s Plan B?” Jamie furrowed his brow in disapproval as he sat stroking Rosario’s cheek, wishing he could tell her that it would be okay, even though he didn’t know that it would.

“Well, I don’t think she is going be up any time soon, honestly. That’s a really traumatic shock to the body.”

Tyler was kneeling on his knees next to Jamie, “Is she gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.” Sharon put a hand on him. “It’s gonna hurt like all get out, but it isn’t a fatal wound, honest, but we can’t let her lose more blood. They can stich her up just fine, I promise. We have to get moving, now.”

Jamie looked at her, suggesting a question. She answered his unspoken words. “She is going to be just fine, Jamie, just fine. Now, these guys are coming down this mountain any time here. Tyler, you have the key to that big ATV you drove up here?”

“Yes ma’am. Right here.”

“Great, here’s what I need you to do. I’m going to walk you to the path and then I need you to run as fast as you can down to the ATV and bring it up here. Can you handle that?”

Tyler nodded to her. “Good, come on then,” she encouraged him while grabbing the Remington.

After walking Tyler to the path, Sharon returned to Jamie, explaining, “This isn’t complicated. You and me, we’re going to carry her to the path. I’m standing guard and you and the boy get her in the back of the ATV as comfortable as possible. If we luck out and there are no bad guys coming after us, we’ll have enough time for you to get your motorcycle. If not, we’re all leaving in the ATV.”

Sharon checked the Remington and then the Smith and Wesson. “Hmm, okay, I’ve got four rounds in the shotgun and seven in the .45 – make sure you turn the Taser on.”

Jamie checked the Taser, then without a word, reached down and lifted up Rosario cradled in his two arms. “I’ve got her, can you grab her backpack?” Sharon took the backpack and the two made their way to the path, with Sharon in the lead. She glanced back to see Rosario carried safely in Jamie’s arms, and silently praised the God who had walked with her in His arms that day as well. Her mind turned to her husband. And she prayed that he, too, was carried in the Lord’s arms in safety.

Once at the path, Jamie knelt down with Rosario’s upper body resting against him. Sharon took up watch and in what was only minutes, she could clearly hear movement in the woods and on the gravel path. “Come on Tyler, get up here,” she encouraged out loud. “Stay down Jamie, and don’t make a sound.” She knelt on her knees and keep her eyes scanning both sides of the woods and the path.

The stars were becoming less distinct and the dark sky in the east now contained a faint shade of gray and pink, delicate looking, as though the morning couldn’t make up its mind yet. “Great, we’re going to have daylight soon,” she scolded. As she said it, the burbling engine of the ATV could be heard and Tyler came up the path slowly with no

lights. "Smart kid, I forgot to tell him no lights. Good job Tyler," she said to no one in particular.

Sharon waved Tyler to a stop. "Pull around and back up here, and we'll get Rosario in first." No sooner had the words left her lips than the first shot hit the dirt twenty yards beyond them. In a split second the sound of the shot boomed through the waning darkness. "Move, move, move," she yelled at Jamie. "Get her in now. Move." Sharon crouched in front of the ATV and fired a round from the .45 in the direction of the incoming shot. She moved ten feet to her left and fired again.

The next incoming bullet made a terrific smacking sound as it hit the center of the ATV body, followed immediately by the gun's thunderous report.

Jamie was in the rear with Rosario and Sharon was pushing Tyler into the driver's seat. "Jamie, right or left when you get to the trail?"

"You turn left to get out of here?"

Tyler broke in, "I know how to get down the mountain."

"Where's the bike?" Sharon didn't take her eyes off the area in front of her.

"Turn right, and it's a couple of hundred yards up in a little wash out to the left, maybe 15 feet or so into the trees."

"Key?"

Before Jamie could answer another shot whistled by and hit beyond them, followed by a crack. Just seconds later one of the alarms went off with a deafening siren sound. "Key's in the side pouch." Jamie was half standing and leaning over towards Sharon. "Get out of here, *now!*"

"We can't..." She cut Jamie off.

"No argument, go. Find a place to park a mile or so down the road, and if I don't show up in within 30 minutes, leave. Don't worry about me. Now go!"

Two more shots rang out and the other alarm was now blaring as the ATV pulled away with no lights heading for the washed out, rugged trail that Jamie had travelled up and down only hours before. She fired one more shot from the Smith and Wesson.



Sharon decided that the two trees and their natural berm was the best defense she had to give the trio time to get on the trail. She made a broken run towards it and heard multiple shots ring out over the pulsating alarms, but she thought they were random, not aimed at her. *They have to be right on top of me if they set the motion detectors off. Now what?*

Setting up behind the trees, she set the shotgun and .45 out. She just caught the glimpse of a single figure moving away from the path headed her way. The thought crossed her mind that it might be a sacrificial scout, sent out to locate her position. *But how do they know I'm not in the ATV? Probably don't.*



Jamie was amazed that a nine year old was driving the Kawasaki ATV, careening down the path without the lights on, and seemingly didn't have any doubts about where he was going. He came to the other parked ATV's and didn't slow down but hit

the uphill grade hard. Tyler barely braked as he came to the trail, took a hard turn and floored the Kawasaki while turning on the lights.

"Wow, you can really drive this thing." Jamie realized how dumb he sounded as soon as he shouted it out.

"Been driving 'em and snowmobiles since I was six or seven," reported the veteran.

Jamie could only smile. Tyler hollered out, "Trying to get a good head start on 'em before they get to the other ATV's."

"No worries, we tore the batteries out of all of them already." Tyler couldn't see Jamie beaming.



Sharon made a calculated decision. Whether they knew she wasn't in the ATV or not, they'd be all over the trail and the parked ATV's in mere minutes, making her escape much more unlikely. She had slowed them down, allowing the youngsters to get out of the area, and with that done, she needed to move. She waited with the Remington until she caught a glimpse of the stranger once more. She fired high again and the result was a blood-curdling scream. "I'm hit!" She pumped another shell in place.

Another voice nearby she didn't recognize hissed, "Shut up you fool!"

Sharon leaned back and fired again towards the new voice. She heard a commotion in the woods, and heard shouting voices in the distance. *Okay, I've got two rounds in the shotgun and four in the .45. Pick your targets carefully, girl.*

She moved from the berm and retraced her steps from earlier in the evening when she had made her escape. "I can do this." She moved low and fast in the exact opposite direction towards the path, sure that they'd be converging on the berm. As she made her way she stopped and listened. There was a lot of commotion and voices behind her, and it seemed clear that they were slowed by what happened to their fallen comrade.

With every passing minute the darkness was being overrun by the light and the stars retreated. She had just made the decision to make it to the path and make a flat out run for the trail, when she looked up and saw a large figure in front of her pasted against the light gray surroundings. She didn't recognize this person but he turned to her approach and quickly lifted an AR-15. Instinctively she lifted the Remington and without getting it to her shoulder, accidentally fired from the hip in panic. The boom and tremendous kickback from the 12 gauge caused her to stumble backwards and she ended up with her right arm and the shotgun pointed skyward, on her bottom. Without thinking she pumped a new shell into the barrel, brought the gun to her shoulder and aimed where the man had been.

He wasn't there.

Scrambling to her feet she ran full out between the trees to the path that would take her to the ATV's and the trail beyond.

She had just cleared the trees when she saw him. The sky was now pale gray with tinges of pink. She could clearly see the muzzle and saw the muzzle flash before she could react.

Chapter 39

Finished with the purposeful distraction of reviewing the Bell once more, Floyd hadn't even noticed that Martin was gone. After looking around the barn, he stuck his head out of the barn door and couldn't see him anywhere.

Floyd's long career as an Army officer taught him to treat details with care; his combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan educated him on expecting the unexpected. He realized that he needed both those abilities now.

Something had caught his eye earlier when he had first inspected the barn's work bench. He made a bee-line to its lower shelf and found a polyester bag marked "Orion Flare Kit." There were six flares and a safety vest inside. He took three of the flares, closed the kit and put it back exactly where he found it. On the top shelf, behind a clutter of cans he picked up a quart can of turpentine.

Turning to leave, he noticed something was missing from the bench that he had seen earlier. Reflecting for a moment he realized that there had been two boxes of Rompun, one stacked on the other, on the counter, right at the corner - and now there was only one box.

Rompun was a popular brand name for xylazine, a powerful depressant widely used in animals - horses in this case - for minor surgery, dental work or castration. Through his work with Al Morales and recovering drug addict's recuperating at the Miner's Trail, Floyd was well aware that xylazine was also a dangerous recreational drug. Even though it was approved only for animals, it was often used to lace heroine and other drugs unbeknownst to the purchaser, or to make "speedballs" mixed with narcotics by both dealers and addicts alike.

"Only person in here was Martin. What's he up too?" He opened the remaining box and found a partial 50 ml vial of Rompun and took it while glancing at the doses required for animal use: "*Large animals, including Horses and Elk, 0.5 mL/100 lbs body weight.*" He put the instructions back in the box and left the box in its place on the work bench.

Floyd put the flares in the flap on the right door of the Bell, and set the can of turpentine behind his seat, while he considered the possibilities of how Martin might use the xylazine. He couldn't think of any use that didn't involve him dying. He decided that under no circumstances could he drink or eat anything offered by Martin, not even if it was sealed. Weighing the options in his mind he talked to himself; "Obviously, he's not going to kill me until we finish the flight, but he took the xylazine for a reason. Why not just shoot me? Maybe he wants the helicopter back. Who knows? It ain't good, whatever it is."

Floyd settled into the right seat of the helicopter and closed his eyes for a moment thinking about his wife. *Where is she?* Every time he thought about it his heart hurt as he realized all over again that not only was there nothing he could do about it, there was very little chance of either of them living through this ordeal unless they each

independently took their fate in their own hands and the Lord gave them fair winds at their backs.



The rapping at the side window of the Bell startled Floyd and he jumped forward shaking his head clear. It was Julio at the window. Floyd looked at his watch – he'd been asleep for a few hours. He opened the door and grunted to Julio, who basically grunted back and then wandered off to a corner where he settled in with a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

Floyd watched him for a moment and realized he didn't have the long gun, but he did have what appeared to be a Berretta 9mm automatic in his belt. Resting his head back into the pilot's seat he waited until he was wide awake, then climbed out and went to a utility sink in the rear of the barn. He washed his face and took long drafts of water that he captured in his hands. Walking back to the Bell, he noticed several cases of bottled water among the equipment pile. They were still shrink wrapped and hadn't been touched as far as he could tell, so he pried three bottles of water from the case. *He doesn't have enough xylazine for everything. Now if I can find a snack we'll be in business.* With that he headed to the house.



Martin was snoring on the same couch that had wooed Floyd to sleep that afternoon. Tiptoeing past his keeper he went to the pantry and found a couple of items that would carry him through for a while. On his way past the kitchen he could smell the rich aroma of coffee, but all he could think about was the missing xylazine. *Hmm, think I'll pass on the safe side.* Making his way back to the barn in the cool night air gave him a jolt of energy and when he slipped back into the barn he noticed that Julio was asleep and quiet. *Let sleeping dogs lie.*

He climbed back into the Bell's comfortable seat and began eating Ritz crackers and drinking a bottle of water. When he was finished he went outside and took up the chair Julio had been using earlier in the day and waited for daybreak.



First the sky turned ash colored, then shortly afterwards a delicate layer of gold set over the mountains – all of which fell away in mere minutes as the unblinking sun lifted itself into the perfect, cloudless sky. It would be another unseasonably hot day on the Western Slope.

Checking his watch, Floyd made his way once more to the utility sink and washed his face and tucked his shirt in, and then went outside to go to the bathroom. When he came back in Julio was still sleeping without a sound. There was an empty cup of coffee next to his chair. The idea of getting his hands on Julio's weapon appealed to Floyd, but, as with every other deliberation on the subject he'd had in the last day, he kept coming back to wrestle with the problem of Sharon.

He mumbled to himself. "Killing one or both of these thugs does nothing to get her back. As long as there is some hope of learning where she is, no matter how small, don't

I have to go along with Martin? And what about all the thugs involved in this, what are they going to do if they find out I just killed one of their buddies?"

Only minutes later Martin came into the barn and looked at the helicopter and Floyd, then he turned to Julio in the chair. He walked over to the chair and felt his neck and then he felt his wrist.

Without any hesitation or evident emotion, he announced to Floyd, "Okay, so we just dropped 250 pounds. *Now what?*"

Chapter 40

Pure adrenaline, training, and instinct all merged in one moment. Sharon was on her face in the dirt as she heard the first booming crack from the .223 caliber AR-15. She lost her grip of the shotgun when she hit the ground and was trying to pull the .45 Smith and Wesson off her hip when she instantly saw she had lost this contest. *Oh God.* The man had her dead in his sights – an easy shot only yards away.

She felt her whole body freeze and her breathing stopped as panic swept over her like a monstrous wave racing towards a ship at sea, intent on capsizing her even before the bullet left the barrel. *Oh God,* the refraining thought was all that came to her. All the previous moments of fear during the hours on this mountain now fell away to this split second of terror when she saw the certainty of her death.

As though it were happening in slow motion, she saw the muzzle blast and heard the powerful boom as the second shot sent up an impact wave of dirt and debris ten or fifteen feet to her left. Like an imploding building being dynamited the shooter was folding up in front of her. He crumpled first to his knees, shaking, and then hit the dirt with a thump, face down. His body was convulsing in spasms, and he was producing a deep, gurgling moan. Behind him was Jamie, who had discharged the Taser with its two electrodes hitting the man in the small of the back. Jamie hurriedly waved her towards him. “Come on, let’s go.” In one motion he made the distance to the man and applied the Taser directly to the man’s neck, sending the body into continued agonizing convulsions.

Clambering to her feet, Sharon recovered the Remington. She was dazed, shaking and raging mad at the same time. Reaching the man she grabbed the AR-15 that had dropped from his convulsing hands, and slung it over her shoulder. “Jamie, get his belt off.”

While the stunned man was still on his stomach she helped Jamie put his hands together behind his back and then Jamie bound the man’s hands with his own belt and cinched it as tightly as he could.

They both stood and Sharon vented at Jamie, “What are you doing here? Where is the boy, Rosario?”

“Gee, I thought I might hear a ‘thank you’ before you chewed me out.”

The surge of emotion barged up the core of Sharon’s body like an old steam pipe hissing and cracking and rushing to deliver its warmth to the surface. Her eyes swelled, then filled. “Of course, thank you, thank you.” She grabbed Jamie around the neck and hugged him tightly, and he thought he could feel her body heaving just a bit – *she’s crying!*

“I thought I was dead, I couldn’t get my gun up. Oh God, I knew I was going to die right here on this *stinking* mountain. Thank you Jamie, you saved my life.” She hugged him even tighter. Finally breaking the hug she suggested, “Let’s get outta here, huh?” She turned her head so she could discreetly wipe the tears from her eyes.

They sprinted down the edge of the path, past the graveyard of ATV's and Jamie suddenly stopped, ducking behind a tree and pushing his Honda onto the path. He started it and banged on the seat for Sharon to take her place behind him. They were up the incline to the path and going as fast as Jamie dared on their way to meet a waiting Tyler, as the sun barged its way over the horizon and displaced the last hints of gray from the sky. Jamie turned his head and half yelled to her, "Tyler didn't head off the mountain like we talked about, he went right up the trail and took me straight to the motorbike without even asking. He said we weren't leaving you behind. Made sense to me."

Sharon mumbled, "Great. Two nine year olds making brilliant decisions together."

"Pardon, didn't hear 'ya." He yelled over the Honda's rumble.

"Nothing. Just saying it worked out great."

Jamie was half-yelling over his shoulder again. "Yeah, it was a God moment, be honest. When the kid turned up the trail, I just knew it was what I had to do."

Sharon, riding behind Jamie with her arms wrapped around him, had more tears. She felt embarrassed, and a bit ashamed that she had faced death—not with the calm and certainty that she had always assumed she would—but frozen in terror. She looked up at the new day, *Oh Lord, I'm so sorry for being so weak. I was so afraid. I didn't remember who I am and who I belong to. Forgive me.*

Jamie continued yelling, "So, I stashed the bike and was heading up the path to find you. I heard a shot and then I saw that guy standing off the side of the road, aiming at you. I just pulled the Taser and decided I couldn't freeze up—couldn't miss—like you told me to do. Honestly, I felt the Lord was moving my feet—He was there with me and telling me not to fear anything."

Like the new day that had just exploded over the mountain, the thought came to Sharon that this was the Lord working in the heart of *Jamie*, to show something to Jamie—and *him alone*. It wasn't about her at all.

She blushed on the back of the zig-zagging motorcycle and smiled towards the heavens. *You mean it's not all about me Lord?* She began chuckling—and she imagined that the Lord was chuckling along with her. "Good job, believe me Jamie. Good job." She patted his back repeatedly.

Tyler had pulled off about a mile down the trail just into the trees and waited. When he heard the Honda coming he stepped into the road and waved them over. Sharon was surprised that the young boy who helped a killer waylay her yesterday, was hugging her delightedly today. She returned the hug and rubbed his head. "You okay."

"Yeah, just glad to see y'all. I could hear gun shots from here." Sharon just nodded and smiled.

"How's Rosario?"

"She hasn't moved."

Jamie and Sharon looked the young woman over together, and as far as they could tell, her vital signs seemed fine. She was breathing hard, but other than that didn't make any noise. The ugly head wound was oozing, but the heavy blood had stopped. Sharon

looked at Jamie and put her hand in his and called Tyler over. "Let's ask the Lord to be here with our sister, Rosario, okay?" They prayed out loud into the cool morning air, asking the Great Physician to heal and protect the child He had only hours before rescued from her bondage.

Tyler asked his new Father to heal this new family, holding Rosario's still hand as he did. It was the prayer of a guileless youngster, climbing into his Father's lap.

Chapter 41

Sharon was nervous and kept stepping to the edge of the trail and looking up as she, Jamie and Tyler decided on what to do next. "How long will it take to get off this mountain," Sharon was looking at Jamie.

"Well, not to sure, I'm guessing maybe an hour or an hour and a half to the deer run, then we'll have to carry her down—the ATV can't make it."

Tyler interrupted, "There's a better way, this trail goes all the way to a road, there's a house there. That's where dad makes people park, and they use the ATV's to get up here."

"Oh, I think Rosario talked about that. Okay, so where exactly is that?"

"Well, I'm not sure I can tell you but I can show you. It's a pretty bad road, you have to go slow but you don't have to walk."

"Jamie, what'd 'ya think?"

"Well, sounds okay I guess. But if the road is guarded, then what? Are we better off waiting for the people coming to get us?"

"Sure, if they're coming. If they found your notes, you're saying they can't make it up that deer run, so that means they're on foot, right? Or they had to find motorbikes someplace. I know the department doesn't have any. There's no telling what's going on down there."

"Hadn't thought about that." Jamie was watching Rosario in the ATV. "Okay, so what if we get to the deer run, and if we haven't found any deputies, I'll take the Honda down and you guys go down Tyler's way."

"Well, if they were on the deer run at first light with motorbikes, you're saying they could be here within an hour or two?" Jamie shrugged his shoulders *maybe*. "I think you're right, let's head down, and if we don't meet up with them, then we'll make a decision then. Who knows what Henry and his buddies are up to? Let's get going."

Sharon and Tyler walked to the ATV, with Sharon getting into the back with Rosario and Tyler driving, while Jamie mounted his Honda. Tyler had just started the ATV, when Sharon asked out loud, "Smells like gasoline, is it always like that?" No sooner had she spoken than the Kawasaki's engine died. With Jamie waiting at the edge of the trail Sharon and Tyler got out and saw a large pool of gasoline on the right side running downhill. "Wow, look at that." There was a perfect bullet hole below the fuel spout. A quick inspection confirmed what was already apparent. The bullet that had barely missed, hitting the ATV earlier had gone straight through the fuel tank. "You've got to be kidding me?" Sharon motioned to Jamie who was dismounting his motorcycle.

"Well, we're not going anywhere in this thing."

Jamie had to look at the damage to satisfy himself while Tyler just sat behind the wheel looking dejected. Jamie was convinced. "Okay, here's the plan. I'm carrying Rosario out of here. Sharon, can you ride the Honda with Tyler?"

"Well, I don't see why not. Show me the basics. But I'm not sure about you..."

“Don’t worry about me, Jamie interrupted. “I’ll be moving slow and steady down to the run. You’ll find me when you get help.” Jamie showed Sharon how to start the Honda, and how to use the brakes and gears as the engine purred.



Engrossed with the motorcycle, none of them even heard or saw them coming. Henry and the Mexican were on them in an instant. Henry had the AR-15 aimed at Sharon and the Mexican had a pistol he was waving back and forth, with a blood soaked gauze square taped to his cheek.

“I’ll tell you *one time* only, get on your knees, hands on your head.” Jamie and Sharon went down on their knees and Tyler stood looking at Henry. *Whack!* The slap was brutal and echoed in the woods and sent Tyler sailing backwards. “You think I care who you belong to right now?”

The Mexican waved towards someone on the trail and a two-seater ATV come rumbling down to meet them. Henry smirked at the new captives. “Y’all ruined the batteries, but ‘ya left two good ones at the alarms...think everyone else is *so* stupid, don’t ‘ya? Who looks stupid now?”

The driver of the ATV was the large man that Jamie had taken down with the Taser earlier. He stood looking down at Jamie. One side of this lip bent up, and Jamie could see streaks of pain etched into his face like tile squares in a countertop. “This is the one thinks he’s real special.” He reached down and pulled the Taser from the holster. “Think we’ll see where you like this most. Get your clothes off boy and we’re going to do some experimenting.” The Mexican just grinned.

“Just wait your turn there.” Henry’s rage danced in his eyes. “First, we got the Deputy here. I’m gonna carve her up like a turkey. She’s gonna feel every cut, believe me. Then you can do whatever you want with this one afterwards.” He pointed at Jamie.

“And Tyler?” The big man pointed to the boy.

“Nope, we’ll wait on Mr. Martin – his boy.”

“But you said Martin was gone.”

“I said he took his bag, I donno where he is or what he’s doing. Just know he ain’t here.”

The big man produced a roll of duct tape from the ATV and taped Sharon’s hands together while Henry set the AR-15 aside, and took off his shirt and undershirt. “Don’t want to get my shirt messy.”

He pulled a Buck hunting knife out of his trousers and unfolded the gleaming four inch steel blade with a gut hook on the end that looked like the blade took an extreme U-turn. He pointed to the wicked looking hook and smiled at Sharon. “Gonna hurt you a lot more than me.” His laugh turned into a nasal snort and his huge stomach hanging over his belt shook. “This here’s a gut hook – you see this hook, right?” He held the shining steel blade under her nose, “You know why it’s called a gut hook? It can peel the skin off a deer – slick as grease.”

Sharon's head was swimming – *how did I escape only to be captured again?* She could feel pure terror forcing its way up her throat as she was instantly covered in sweat. She glanced at Jamie, with the big man standing over him, who seemed as though he was in shock.

Henry looked at Jamie. “You pay good attention, maybe we’ll skin you clean too after seeing where you like that Taser best?” His grin was anticipating evil. “Now missy, when I field dress a deer, I make a cut along the centerline of the belly right on up to the breastbone – but I recon you already know that. ‘Course, the deer is already dead, and you ain’t.”

Oh, God, be with us. Oh God have mercy on us. Sharon could find no other thoughts but those.

Chapter 42

"I don't want to push the chopper out until we're ready to fly." Martin looked for confirmation from Floyd.

"Okay. Why?"

"Told 'ya that another chopper flew by late yesterday. I'm thinkin' they're lookin' for someone. Probably your wife, but maybe you too. Anyway, no point in giving them something to gawk at if we're not ready."

"Fine, I'm going to the house for a minute to use the bathroom and get a snack. You coming?" Floyd turned and left the barn but heard footsteps behind him. Once he was inside the house and Martin didn't follow him inside, Floyd made his way to the coffee pot, and sniffed at it. He couldn't smell anything but coffee, but Julio only had a cup of coffee and some type of sandwich when he arrived at the barn. "How'd that work out for him?" Floyd muttered. Erring on the side of caution, Floyd emptied the pot in the sink and went to the hall cupboard and found individual coffee packs. "Great, solves that problem." He went back and microwaved a cup of water just as Martin came in and took a seat at the kitchen table. "I'm fixing some toast, you want some?"

Martin looked at him with surprise. "Well, yeah, that'd be good." Still looking at Floyd he belatedly said, "Thanks." Floyd just nodded.

He loaded the toaster and found a jar of honey in the kitchen cabinet and set it on the table. When it was ready, he brought four slices of toast and his own cup of coffee and took a seat across from Martin. As he and Martin ate, Floyd said matter-of-factly, "I'm not going to lie to you. We're flying a helicopter at its maximum gross weight this morning. It's already hotter than I thought it'd be and we have an 11,000 foot pass to get through. If we hit some strong winds and turbulence in the mountains we could be running on fumes crossing down the other side of the pass and on to Greeley."

Floyd had expected a furious reaction. Instead, Martin was looking at Floyd holding his second piece of toast suspended in front of him.

"I'm telling you this because if anything happens in the pass, or coming down the Front Range, I need you to keep your head. You can't get hysterical on me and lose it. I'm going to be busy flying. If we have a turbine shutdown, there will be warning lights going off and we might even go into a spiral coming down. But you'll need to be calm – it's important, okay?"

Martin turned pasty faced. "I thought Julio's weight made the difference?"

"Well, I cut 250 pounds of fuel, remember, which just got us close to the maximum weight limit. Julio would have added back that 250 pounds give or take. I already told you, this isn't like flying around the city, this is seat of the pants flying around some big mountains, with strong winds and downdrafts and all that stuff. Just don't panic and I'll get us through this okay."

Martin was clearly terrified as what little color he had left drained from his face and his right hand trembled. Floyd even momentarily felt guilty about scaring him so bad –

but only momentarily. Recapturing his transient sympathy he chuckled at his own thought. *Must be Stockholm syndrome.*

Floyd got up and ignored Martin and fixed one more individual coffee in the microwave. When he was finished, he turned from the table to find Martin had left the room. He could hear water running in the bathroom and what sounded like someone being sick. He smiled to himself, *this may just work after all. I just pray Sharon is figuring out what she has to do.*

When Martin returned to the table, Floyd offered, "I've made myself coffee, want one?"

Martin nodded, and as Floyd made it, he also washed out an old style stainless thermos bottle sitting on the counter. "This yours?" Martin shook his head *no*. "Well I'm going to put a couple of cups of coffee in it for our trip."

"Yeah, that'd be good." Color was returning to Martin's face.



The pair were at the barn just before 7 AM. Floyd unlocked the Bell's right door and placed the coffee thermos inside with two paper cups, and set the chart he'd be using on the pilot's seat. He also retrieved several bottles of water from the stash he had discovered in the barn and put them on the passenger seat.

Pointing to the barn doors, he and Martin opened them wide, and pulled the helicopter back onto the dirt pad outside of the barn. Once they were done, Martin went back to the barn and closed both doors. When he came back, Floyd said quietly, "What about the body?"

Martin didn't even look up. "Why don't you worry about flying?"

The fact that Martin didn't care about Julio's body being found only confirmed in Floyd's mind, once more, that he had no intention of releasing Sharon, or him. *Wow, every time I think there might be some hope this guy kills someone.* Floyd unstrapped the rotor blades and then climbed into the right seat, motioning to Martin to climb into the left seat. As he was climbing in, Floyd stared at him and the AR-15 motioning with his head to the rear. Martin backed out and put the weapon across the rear seats.

Once in the left seat, Martin was clearly nervous and was having trouble getting his seat harness secured. Climbing out again, Floyd came around the aircraft and stepped up on the skid step and pulled the shoulder harness assembly tight and secured it between Martin's legs. "If for some reason we have to exit quickly, just push this," he pointed at the harness release. Martin nodded, while Floyd noted the tiny pearls of sweat on his upper lip already.

"Don't forget, no radio - nothing electronic. Don't want nobody being able to track us."

"Yeah, got it."

Once Floyd was settled in the right seat, he spent five minutes going over the pre-flight checklist. Satisfied, he began the startup checklist. "Main rotor, clear. Check. Throttle, full open..."

Like the day before, when the drone of the starter filled the cabin, Floyd could see Martin tense up.

Floyd handed a headset to Martin. "Put 'em on, make them comfortable. We'll be talking through these in just a minute."

The constant checking of toggle switches, clicking adjustments and mechanical adjustments accompanied the increasing rotation of the blades, the whine of the turbine and the gentle vibration of the cabin signaled the near completion of the startup with Floyd still audibly calling out progress. "Generator on. Check. Avionics up, check. You should hear me now, correct."

Martin looked surprised. "Yeah, I can hear you."

"Stabilizing flight idle for one minute." Floyd continued a routine of checking gauges as Martin gripped his seat, the rotors racing in a blur, rocking the cabin.

Suddenly Martin heard an increase in the turbine's power and whine as Floyd was working the flight controls, not even looking up. Martin felt the helicopter lift off the ground and his eyes fixed on the dirt just below his feet, which seemed to be shifting gently from side to side.

"We'll do a 180 degree sweep to clear the building and then lift off," Floyd stated quietly.

Martin couldn't have held the seat any tighter. The aircraft slowly came around in a semi-circle and Martin was shocked to see that the Bell was at approximately the same height as the top of the barn they were now facing and seemed to be moving backwards slowly.

"We don't have much room here, so I'm going to climb up and back just a bit until we have plenty of clearance, we'll be staying here just one minute until I'm comfortable we can fly with this load." Floyd didn't look at his white-faced passenger.

The turbine whine and the chopping whirl of the rotors, the vibration of the aircraft and the backwards motion made Martin actually cover his mouth for a moment. Floyd was too busy to notice. Finally, the helicopter was well above the barn and the one visible electric pole nearby, and Floyd looked around in a 180 degree sweep, and announced that he was doing a final visual check, and the aircraft swung around another 180 degrees to face the opposite direction and the trees and mountain beyond the back of the property. "Okay, we're clear and heading to the highway now, and we're off." With that, the helicopter came about once more and with her nose down began picking up speed while climbing at the same time.

Floyd was still fingering switches and handling the controls all at once and doing sweeps with his head watching around the aircraft. "Looking good. Fuel, generator, oil pressure, transmission pressure, altimeter, all good," He muttered. "We'll be leveling off soon. Looking good."

The helicopter was following the road generally towards the highway Martin realized, and he began relaxing his death grip on the seat. The cabin was only a bit quieter and the straining turbine seemed to have gone from a whine to a heavy groan. "How fast we going?"

"We're just under a hundred miles an hour. Generally it would be faster, but with the altitude and the weight, it's about what I expected. She's flying like a rock, no question, like a rock. We're maxed out. Be honest with 'ya, we're lucky to be airborne."



It wasn't too long before Floyd brought the helicopter alongside of Interstate 70 that they would follow eastward. Then he drifted off to the north of it at some distance. "We're running with no communications, so we've got to be extra careful," he explained to his disinterested passenger.

"Okay. Will we be on time?"

"Sure, if we make it over the mountains and we don't run out of fuel," Floyd deadpanned.

"So, what's the big deal with this pass we're going through?"

"You know what the continental divide is?"

"Ah, well, not too sure. Actually no, not really."

"The Rocky Mountains stretch from Canada through the U.S. and Mexico. There is an imaginary line that runs through the mountains, where the watershed on one side flows to the Atlantic and Gulf, and watershed on the other side of the divide flows to the Pacific Ocean. So, basically the mountains that lay west of Denver, are on the continental divide and Rollins Pass is the low pass on the divide. We're going to be flying along the pass to the crest of the Front Range, coming down southwest of Boulder."

"Aren't there other passes?"

"Yeah, but this is a natural low and wide crossing to where we need go. It's the best for us anyway. Been used since the middle 1800's to get over the mountains between north-central and central Colorado. Cattle used to be taken through the pass, and wagons, and even a railroad. Tunnel is still used."

"Okay, I'm not getting why it is so dangerous."

"Because idiots like us load up aircraft with too much weight on hot days and try flying over a mountain pass at 11,600 feet, that's why. All the high passes in Colorado are littered with crashed aircraft that flew smack into the mountains." Martin looked uncomfortable again.

Floyd pressed on. "Usually wind or bad weather. Wind patterns around 12, 13 or 14 thousand foot mountains like these are unpredictable and dangerous. The winds comes off ridges and over peaks and if pilots fly into it—if the conditions are right—it's just like getting hit with a giant flyswatter if you're in a light aircraft...or a helicopter. You can get caught in a powerful downdraft of air that is dropping much faster than a light aircraft can climb out of it - so they're pushed down right into the mountain they are trying to fly around." All the color drained from Martin's face again.

"Our concern is that we're flying without ground communication - per your orders. So I can't even access the automated weather stations near the pass. I have no idea what current conditions are in the area or if there is turbulence being reported. We're on our own."

After an uneasy silence, Martin asked, "So, how's the fuel doing?"

"I'll know more when we come down the pass."

The unlikely pair were pushed along without further talking by the droning turbine and lifted over the wide and rugged spaces of central Colorado by the thrusting rotors of a machine, while one man's heart dreamed of fortune and the other's dreamed of love.



Floyd turned north leaving Interstate 70 behind, and glanced at Martin who looked as relaxed as Floyd thought he was likely to get. He had the aeronautical chart folded in half and was constantly surveying the instrument panel, and adjusting the flight path while consulting the chart. "I went a little out of the way. I understand there's pretty good radar coverage in places, so I wanted to make sure we kept our distance. We'll be turning to work our way into the pass soon, heading east and climbing up, winding along near the floor of the pass where we can, flying pretty low."

Floyd didn't expect an answer and Martin didn't surprise him.

Chapter 43

“Drop the knife! *Now.*”

The words rang out and hung in the air with authority. They were courageous and said with a ferocious edge, like they could bite, but they drifted into Sharon’s ear like an old friend. She knew the voice, but not the bravura style.

Henry turned around with the knife held like a torch, and a low chuckle came up from his massive girth. He closed his huge fist around the handle and drew the knife back.

The shot shattered the early morning world like glass falling on concrete and Sharon could see the explosion erupting from the barrel of the weapon, warping the air as the 9 mm bullet raced to its target. In an undetectable fraction of an instant the bullet entered Henry’s forehead just above the eyes and he fell backwards in one motion, dead before his body hit the ground.

Tommy Atkins stood in classic shooting stance with both legs slightly spread, bent at the hip and the Beretta clasped with both hands. The Mexican never had a chance. As he lifted his gun and it rose to a firing position, two successive rounds found his body core and he collapsed to his knees and fell face first in the forest, dead and forever without a name.

Jamie pivoted on his knees and grabbed the Buck knife from Henry’s dead hand while the stunned big man stood where he had turned to witness the death of his two accomplices in mere seconds. Before he could react Jamie drove the knife into the big man’s calf as far as he could thrust it. Pulling the knife out with all his might, the gut hook sliced through the muscle like tissue paper. The huge man bellowed like a bull and fell to his knees with blood spraying in huge jets with his racing heartbeat. Tommy Atkins was on him in one leap handcuffing his hands behind him. “If we don’t tie this leg off he’ll bleed to death in minutes.”

Jamie went first to get a shaken Sharon Toro off the ground, and used the Buck knife to cut through the duct tape. She was wordless and ashen as he helped her to the ATV.

Moving to the boy in silence Jamie stroked his hair. He was making tiny hoarse sounds and blood oozed from his nose. Jamie left him and found a bungee cord in the bed of the ATV and held it up in the air and he and Tommy acknowledged it without words. They both turned the big man around and tied the cord around his thigh as tightly as they could pull it. A pool of blood collected under his huge leg, and the agony in his groan of pain was deep and gurgling like a stream coming out of a rock formation without a visible source.

Finally Jamie and Tommy could take a hard look at each other. Jamie went first. “What took you so long? I left notes for you.” He smiled weakly.

“Yeah, that was nice. But, you didn’t leave me a motorcycle. I’ve been walking since yesterday afternoon. Walked all night until I couldn’t walk anymore—gunshots woke

me up around dawn, and I've been trying to find you all ever since. Don't guess you fixed coffee yet?"

Jamie and Tommy spontaneously hugged each other, "Good job buddy. Good job." Jamie slapped Tommy's back.

"Yeah, not too bad yourself. Remind me to put the knives away when you visit."

Jamie supplied the hard truth. "By the way, you look just awful."

"Yeah, probably better than I feel, honestly. I took a nasty fall yesterday, ripped open my elbow." He turned up his arm wrapped in blood soaked gauze for inspection. "I have no idea how long I've been walking, and I ran out of water. But other than that I'm in good shape." The two men looked at each other and burst into gentle laughter.

"We've got water over here." Sharon was coming back to reality from the far-off place her mind had just been, where everything she had thought she knew about herself was changed – forever she thought in that one moment. Her color returned and the pall that had fallen in proportion to her terror was gone. She turned and tossed a bottle to Tommy and smiled at him.

"Tommy Atkins, you done good today my friend, you done *real* good," dragging out the phrase affectedly and smiling. She tossed a bottle to Jamie and she took one. "Must be that good field training a certain Deputy gave you."

"Yes ma'am, I wouldn't argue with that for a second." Tommy held up his bottle of water as a tribute, and Jamie joined in.

"Here, here." A hush fell over the three of them as they sat and drank their water.

There were two dead bodies that lay within feet of them, a third gravely wounded, and the horror of what almost had happened – at once it all seemed to sweep over them from out of nowhere. Their emotions were invaded and ransacked – and all of the boundaries that they had carefully constructed about their own safety and their own goodness were breached. The enemy had laid the ladder of events against their castles of character, and in no time, were inside the gate.

Sharon saw the reaction on Tommy's face first and watched as it seemed to leech from him to Jamie. She had not even had the opportunity to process the emotional toll of her own actions – beating Shovel's head in with the pipe in the mine, *maybe killing him?*, or wounding at least two others – much less the terror of her two near misses with death in the same hour.

She let the minutes pass. When she did speak, it was with the softness of the scent of the Pine and Fir trees drifting in the crisp morning air.

"We're children of God, called by Him, so we believe every life is precious. We are called to love the unlovable, to forgive our enemies." Sharon could feel her voice break ever so slightly. She determined to carry on.

"But yesterday and today we were called to resist evil, and to protect innocent life. To protect our own lives. I believe that all of those things are simply two sides of the same coin. We're called to it all, each as needed in its own season. It's a hard thing, a mystery, and sometimes more confusing than others. But, don't ever forget that God made sheep – *and He made sheepdogs, too.*"

More minutes passed in silence. "Well gentlemen, what do you propose we do now?"

"I left a note yesterday at each of my stops, right next to my friend's notes." He pointed to Jamie. "So I got to believe that we have the Calvary coming. The question is when."

Both Sharon and Jamie started laughing and Sharon buried her head in her hands chuckling.

"What did I miss?" Tommy looked lost.

"We were having this exact conversation when these guys showed up and interrupted us!" Sharon looked over at Tyler, who was just sitting up. "Okay, let's get going. There is no telling what can happen with us sitting around. Our ATV is dead. So we'll put Rosario in the bed of theirs—they won't be using it. Tommy you can hold onto her. Tyler and me will be in the seats, so Mr. Gallagher here can take the bike. Sound like a plan?"

"Makes sense as long as I don't have to walk. Let's collect the guns."

It took a few minutes to quiet Tyler down and for Sharon to tend to his nose and lip. Tommy and Sharon ended up in the seats with Tyler holding on to Rosario in the small ATV bed.

Sharon was never so glad to leave a place in her life. She didn't look back at the mountain.

Chapter 44

The summer beauty of the Rocky Mountains was stunning. Floyd thought it was a prayer—or a love song—of the created order to the Creator. Even in the midst of the calamity going on around him – and surely around his wife – the awareness of the majesty of the natural world he flew over was overpowering to Floyd. It was as though the splendor and the grandeur were whispering encouragement to him; *could others hear it?*

Working their way up Rollins Pass they flew very close to the walls, slopes and the floor of the pass that were enfolded with the incredibly vibrant grays and blues of the rock, accented with patches of snow that hid in the shade deep into the summer – all bounded by the line of snowcapped peaks that stood like solemn defenders of the other world that lay beyond them.

Even the soil had rich and bold browns, reds and blacks and the trees glistened with shifting greens, and hues of silver-green that changed with the brilliant sun.

The Bell groaned and dug into the air as it climbed, buffeted gently now and then with turbulence coming off the ridges. They swung from side to side in the pass following it always up. Floyd's deft hand and the helicopter seemed to have become one as they snaked their way along, with the high mountains now crowding in on them, and with every new turn the helicopter audibly strained with the weight and altitude ahead to the next.



Floyd called out with a military snap, "We're at 11,660 feet, the highest point on the pass and we'll be heading down now. We'll come out of the pass soon and work our way along the foothills. Could get a little bumpy this close to the big mountains."

Martin sat silently and focused straight ahead. Floyd cast a sideway glance at him, like one would focus on a cockroach they spotted in the corner of a kitchen. *He is a murderer; he is a twisted and wicked person and a lost soul. He's wrecked my life with Sharon. He deserves to die.*

Floyd thought that, and he believed it. Yet, as soon as the thought slipped its mental mooring, Floyd frantically tried to recall it. It was too late.

Now, what'd I do with him? Floyd had been pondering various ideas and schemes since he ended up at the barn the day before. He was back on the mental merry-go-round of the last twenty-four hours. Nothing changed. He just rehashed the same internal arguments and the same probabilities, coming to the same conclusions every time.

He didn't think any of the ideas were particularly good, or even workable. The likelihood of this man telling him where Sharon was being held was exactly zero. He knew that, and setting him free was not going to happen. *He's going to promise me he'll let me go, but if he didn't think a second about killing his buddy, Julio, why would he let me go?* And if Martin didn't kill him first, the drug dealers waiting for their 800 pounds of

cocaine in the remote prairie and grasslands northeast of Greeley probably would. In fact, Floyd wasn't sure why they wouldn't kill Martin first before they killed him.

As if reading Floyd's mind, Martin looked over at him and grinned. "You'd like to kill me wouldn't you?"

"Actually, I hadn't thought about it in the last few minutes."

Floyd's sarcasm earned a grin from Martin. "Yep. Reckon those boys waiting on this cocaine are thinkin' the same thing. I'll be callin' them when we clear the mountains, giving them an exact time, and location for the transfer."

"Oh? Thought we had a location already?"

Martin gurgled up obscenities explaining the limits to his generally good nature. "Well, I'm changing the location. We're landing a ways off. And when I see the cash and my transportation, they can have the cocaine. Not complicated."

"We driving out, huh?"

"I'm driving out, not sure what you're doing."

"That's great, thanks for the help."

"We already discussed this." Martin actually looked perplexed. "When we finish, and I have my \$5 million dollars, I'm callin' to tell 'em to release your sweetheart and you have to figure out how to get there. You can take the chopper if you want - I don't know how far you can make it. Whatever, I wouldn't wait around these guys if I were you, for sure. If everything goes smooth, I might let you hitch a ride and drop you within a mile or two of a busy road. I'll think on it."

Sure, you'll drop me off with a hole in my head, Floyd wanted to respond, but didn't.



As Floyd predicted, the wind coming off the high mountains was buffeting the helicopter hard and Martin was gripping his seat as though it was the only thing that could save him. They flew on in silence - a tiny piece of machinery improbably descending down the mountain pass surrounded by snowcapped mountains straining for the heavens, as far as they could see in any direction.

"As soon as we clear the pass and get out of the turbulence, why don't you pour some coffee for us? I could really use some after this."

Martin nodded. "Yeah, me too."



As the strongest turbulence diminished, Martin was digging in his small backpack and retrieved a cell phone. It was a brand new pre-paid phone. He smiled. "Can't be too careful, don't want no one listening in do we?" After he turned the phone on, he rummaged around and produced a small piece of paper. "I'll need the tail number. That was the code Julio was using so the buyers knew who was calling." Floyd gave it to him, and Martin began punching numbers into the phone. "No signal, not going through."

"Yeah, not in all these mountains. You'll find a cell signal when we come off the foothills." Martin surprised Floyd by not complaining.

Digging further in his backpack, he pulled out Floyd's wallet. "I'm gonna give this back to you as soon as we transfer the cocaine from the chopper. Call it an incentive to work quickly and keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word around these guys, period. Sorry, you'll have to replace your cell. But..."

Floyd didn't even look at him. He was thinking about Sharon Toro.

Chapter 45

Slipping off the eastern end of the Rollins Pass, the helicopter seemed almost to sigh, like a great burden had been lifted from it, Floyd thought. They'd burned off well over 300 pounds of fuel he calculated, and combined with the lower altitude it wasn't fighting to fly anymore. But it had come at a cost; fuel consumption at the maximum flying weight, the high altitude and the toasty warm day was definitely on the higher end of what Floyd had expected.

"Okay, here is where we stand. If everything goes well, we can be past Greeley to the drop off point in about forty minutes. The bad news is we're going to be running on fumes."

Martin looked at Floyd in surprise. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying our fuel is tighter than a tick on a dog. Just like we've been talking about. We will barely make it, if we make it at all."

A pained look returned to Martin's face.

The Bell swung north and began working its way along the foothills, assembled like soldiers dug into guard the eastward approach to the high Rockies through which the pair had come. The foothills were rolling, then sharp, then jagged without pattern, and splendidly clad in bold browns and greens, with sheer rock surrounded by dense trees looking like they had been inlaid in place by a master stone mason. The lower foothills had juniper and pinon, mixed with ponderosa pine the higher they went, and higher still, mixed pine and aspen. Scattered lakes and ponds were sparkling like gems in the mid-morning sun.

Floyd nodded to the thermos of coffee, which Martin finally opened and poured coffee into a paper cup, put the lid on, and held it in front of Floyd.

"Thanks...really need this." Martin didn't respond at all and didn't make an effort to fill the other paper cup for himself. Floyd didn't take the cup to his lips, but set it in a cheap plaster cup holder hanging off the door panel. He pretended to be checking the map and then the flight panel. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that Martin was still watching him.

Taking the cup, he held it up to his lips and titled the cup up. "Oh, still nice an' hot, great."

Martin made no reaction. Floyd took the cup up to his lips again for a sip and set it in the cup holder, making some type of adjustment with the instruments that Martin watched; then he took the cup out of the holder and again and lifted it to his lips.

After a few minutes, Martin poured himself a cup of coffee and took a sip. Floyd looked over at him and suggested, "I'd put a lid on it in case we hit some more turbulence."

As they flew on Floyd held the cup up to his lips once more, for the last time, and replaced the cup in the holder and made adjustments and chart checks. Martin sipped on his coffee frequently, much to Floyd's relief.

Finally. Take a couple of good swigs buddy, will 'ya? Floyd's thoughts were churning as he tried not to stare at his victim. *Wonder how long the xylazine takes to work if you're sipping it?*

Floyd had put all of the half-empty vial of xylazine into the coffee thermos back at the ranch house, but he was in uncharted territory and had no idea what amount of xylazine was required to have an effect other than what he had read from the instructions when he took the vial from the work bench. It was a calculated risk in every way.

Addicts, he knew, bought drugs laced with xylazine, so it had to be a fairly small amount to have an effect. *How much am I getting on my tongue when I stop-up the coffee lid slit? How many times did I actually touch it, two out of four times, maybe? Hmm, wonder how much he gave Julio? But, it's gotta be really diluted in the coffee, right?*



The helicopter swung eastward off the foothills slipping between the towns of Longmont and Loveland, with the imposing majesty of Longs Peak, the northern-most 14,000 foot mountain in the Rocky Mountains, as a backdrop to the journey. She was a menacing, barren mountain with sharp angles and sheer rock faces that seemed in some way to portend the difficulty that lay ahead for Floyd.

He flew east until he could pick up Highway 87 headed north. He had chosen the route because it seemed most likely to avoid attention. Then he worked his way eastward south of Highway 34 headed towards Greeley. Keeping a wary watch on Martin, between checking the chart and monitoring the instruments, he couldn't see any difference in him at first. Then Floyd noticed that his head was sagging and when Martin turned to him, he realized that his pupils looked like dinner plates.

"Oh, my, look a little green there buddy, you okay?" Floyd showed no emotion or empathy.

"Oh, I feel so sick," was all he could offer. Without warning his head drooped to the left and hit the door window with a thud. Floyd strained across the seat and took his cup of coffee dangling from his hands, and set it in his plastic cup holder. It was nearly empty.

"Wow," Floyd muttered. He had no idea how much xylazine Martin had actually taken in, nor how long the effects would last. But he knew that he had no time to spare.

He gently pushed Martin's shoulder. No reaction. He pushed harder and he didn't move. Floyd used a small shop rag he commandeered in the barn and reached into Martin's belt and pulled out the 9mm handgun. Using his knees to help keep the cyclic steady, he dropped the 17 round clip from the weapon and pulled the slide back vigorously to eject the live round from the chamber. Then he methodically used his thumb to slide the 17 rounds from the clip into his lap. Using the shop rag he wiped the clip down to remove his own fingerprints, and reinserted the empty clip. Finally, he slipped the gun back into Martin's waist holster using the rag. He rounded up all the loose ammunition and dropped it into the side flap on his door. Just in case, he reached

over and patted along Martin's sides to make sure he didn't have another loaded ammunition clip.

"Well, at least if this all goes haywire I won't be found with a gun used in a murder last night. It'll have his prints on it – I guess that's some comfort," he mused.

Reaching between Martins's feet he hoisted the backpack into his lap and made a quick search, finding the prepaid cell phone and his own wallet. At the bottom of the pack was another loaded ammunition clip, which he wiped down and dropped into the door pouch with the loose bullets he had unloaded, and the road flares he had taken from the barn.

"Well, well. Here it is." The last item was Martin's regular cellphone. It was turned off.

Chapter 46

Sharon and Tommy discussed what to do with the big man; he was in agony, groaning continually, still face down in a pool of his own blood. There was nothing they could do beyond stemming the bleeding using the tie-down tourniquet. Tommy's eyebrows raised in an arch. "He might lose this leg if it's tied off too long – I don't have any idea how long that might be, but I'm thinking not very."

"My guess it's measured in minutes not hours. Realistically, all we can do is get off this mountain and hope we run into the rest of the Deputies coming up. They're going to have to deal with him. But we need to tie his feet together."

"Sounds like an excellent plan to me."

Finishing up, Tommy took his seat in the ATV after helping Rosario and Tyler into the bed. "Let's get this show on the road. I'm exhausted."

"Believe me, you don't know the half of it." Sharon tried to grin at him.

"Okay, ready?" Jamie yelled from the saddle seat of the idling Honda motorbike. Without waiting for a response, he began working his way down the trail.

Going down was agonizing for Sharon. She grimaced with every dip, rock and bump that the ATV hit, which were numerous. Tommy had looked her over before they left and she could tell by his expression that it was bad. The gash on the inside of her cheek was surrounded by a huge and angry looking black and blue welt on the outside. He made her open her mouth and poked around her inside cheek. "Can't quite tell, but you're going to need a couple stitches, I'd say."

Now all she could do was grip the seat and hope that she could outlast the trail.

"You okay over there?"

She could only nod her head.



The red dirt bikes, mounted by Deputies dressed in their duty khakis and tactical vests with long-guns slung over their shoulders, swarmed like ants coming up the trail. Six Deputies had made it half-way up the trail, zigging in and out of the difficult ruts, boulders and tree roots without knowing what lay ahead of them.

By the time Tommy and the ATV caught up to them, the Deputies and Jamie were stopped on the trail facing each other, with the law men cautiously eyeing Jamie on his motorbike.

It was a joyful reunion with Atkins and Toro, and a solemn thanksgiving for safe delivery, all at once.

As the celebration over finding all of them alive calmed, Deputy LaBrash spent the next ten minutes getting a report on the events of the previous night and the events of the last two hours. The other Deputies crowded around listening to the harrowing details and exchanged astonished, knowing looks at each other and the banged up officers; Sharon Toro and Tommy Atkins had been where very few law enforcement officers ever stood and endured more than most would ever be called upon to do.

Satisfied, LaBrash turned to Tommy and said out loud, like he was thinking. "So, you've never been to the camp, right?" Tommy nodded agreement. "And Toro's busted up pretty good." He turned to Jamie standing next to the Honda. "So, son, how'd you like to guide us back up the trail, and show us how to get to that camp? Since three of their men are down, we need to move in while the rest of them are trying to figure out what's going on."

It didn't sound like an invitation to Jamie. "Sure, I can do that."

"Okay, good. Atkins, can you get Toro and the other civilians down to the deer run? I've got two Deputies there that can help you all get down to the trail. And tell one of them to go down and get on the phone to headquarters and tell them that you all are alive and coming down the mountain - Sheriff's been there all night waiting for some word. Tell 'em I'm taking the Deputies up the mountain to a camp they were holding Toro at - may be more bad guys."

He studied Sharon and grinned. "You know, you had us all worried out of our minds. But the Sheriff said he wasn't worried for anyone except the guys who grabbed you. Guess that was prophetic, huh?"

Sharon attempted a smile but her face seemed to be stiffening into a hard mask.



Just as they were breaking up, the distinct noise of an ATV was coming somewhere behind them, and in only a minute or two, Judith, with Mary and the Pattersons drove up in their borrowed ATV.

Jamie, Tommy and Deputy LaBrash stood, slack jawed and stared. Finally, Jamie asked incredulously, "Where did you guys come from?"

"Hi to you too, Jamie." Judith and the other passengers were piling out and gathering around the battered and banged up crew. "Thank God, thank God!"

Mary went straight to Sharon Toro and they held hands for a long moment without a word, but spoke in the gentle tears that crisscrossed their cheeks. The Pattersons went person to person and smiled, shook hands or hugged, and offered prayers of thanksgiving, while Judith, in her commanding voice as head of Garfield County's *Search and Rescue* explained to LaBrash that she had suspected the trail was a long forgotten, unused and unmarked trail that had to be picked up well off Route 108.

"Really, really rough - calling it a trail is not being real honest. But at least you don't have to use the deer run." LaBrash just raised his eyebrows, and Judith answered his unasked question. "Gus didn't look convinced so we decided to investigate on our own. We ran into your Deputies at the deer run, and I pulled rank. I told them that the Sheriff had sanctioned us - which is true of course, and they let us go." She smiled, but Deputy LaBrash saw a defiance in her statement that he knew better than to challenge.

"Well, good thing you're here," he said, mentally following the old adage to make lemonade out of lemons. "We have a bad guy up the trail here, he's in really bad shape and we need to get him off the mountain. Can you handle that for us?"

"Of course, anything, where is he?"

"Jamie here," he pointed up towards him, "is taking us up to a camp. So just follow us and he can show us where they left him. He's got a knife wound in the leg that tagged an artery. Lost a lot of blood. You guys need to load him up in the back of your SUV and let Deputy Atkins go with you just in case."

"Don't worry, you guys do what you need to do. We'll work out the logistics and get everyone off the mountain."

The Deputy smiled knowingly. "Yep, believe me, I know you will."

After five minutes of discussion with Sharon and Jamie concerning the lay of the camp, and what they knew about the cartel members, the various Sheriff's Department personnel on their motorbikes were moving up the trail again with Jamie in the lead. Behind the half-dozen motorbikes was Judith with Tommy Atkins in the ATV.



When they returned with the big man loaded in the bed of the large ATV, Tommy took Judith's spot in the big ATV, and Judith took the wheel of the two seater with Rosario and Tyler in the bed, fast asleep, and Sharon still in the passenger seat with the pain encasing her face. The morning was turning from warm to hot, and Sharon was having a hard time keeping her eyes open.

In only minutes, they began the decent down the trail, with Tommy leading the way. Sharon's mind turned to Floyd, and how he had spent the night. She asked all the questions in her mind that she couldn't ask him. *Floyd, where are you? Did you fly their helicopter? Are you okay, did you find a way out?*

Chapter 47

Floyd flew away from the high mountains and the foothills into the plains and prairie lands of eastern Colorado. It was a bit dreamlike he thought. *A few minutes ago we're flying through some of the highest and most rugged mountains in the country, and minutes later it's like we're flying over a dinner plate. Hmm...*

Martin startled him and took his breath away for a moment when his head bounced up like a jack-in-the-box. "Wh...ware...we? Ugg. Where?"

"What are you doing there, why don't you put your head back against the seat?" Floyd patted the seat behind his head. "You look really bad, is it airsickness?"

"I...I...ugg...I feel so ba..." his voice fell off, and his face contorted—his lips looked like a piece of twisted licorice to Floyd. He seemed to be semiconscious again.

"Kinda ironic—or is it poetic justice? You caffeinated Julio with xzylaline, and now the drug dealer gets wiped out on the stuff. Go figure!" Floyd smiled at his own pronouncement.



Floyd was nearly past Greeley, flying low and to the south of the town to avoid getting mixed up with any aircraft using a small airpark noted on the chart, and to keep from drawing attention to himself. He was just crossing the South Platte River and was carefully rehearsing his upcoming procedure. It was almost time.

Just before he reached the small farming community of Kersey, on Highway 34 East, Floyd took the Bell around the tiny spot of a town in an arc heading northeast over the looping South Platte River once more. He could see nothing but the rich green squares and circles that were the sharp definitions of irrigated farms on the plains surrounding Kersey. In a few minutes, the plush patterns of farmland that were so precise and elegant gave way in an instant to the barren gray plain tinged with pink and greenish hues. Crossing over into the barren plains he could see the dirt paths used by the ranchers and oil workers that crisscrossed the land separated by occasional dirt roads.

The wide dirt road he had located on the chart that he would use for his escape was directly under him. But his planning had been complicated by the tailwind he had picked up once he left the foothills. To make his plan work, he needed to come around into the wind. "Well, in for a penny, in for a pound. I might as well make this a good show for these thugs, so at least there's a chance they buy the story and don't chase us down forever."

Scrubbing off altitude and speed he pulled the helicopter around 360 degrees to make sure there were no oversize obstacles or unnoticed dangers in what he was about to attempt. *As perfect as any location is likely to be out here*, he thought.

He regained altitude and speed and proceeded on his northeasterly course which was a mile south of the original meeting coordinates Martin had given to him the day before. If his calculations were correct he would make a wide turn and head north and

then come around heading southwest putting him into the wind and directly over the meeting site and on line heading back to the dirt road he had just surveyed. The wide turn and pass-over would give him only a few moments to make sure that he had enough altitude to make the distance.

“Okay Floyd, make this work,” were his only instructions to himself.

Chapter 48

Floyd checked and double checked coordinates and the fuel. The coordinates were spot-on; the fuel was not. He was very close to the ten gallon warning, where the instrument panel warning light would be flashing to him; *put the aircraft down now!* There would be no more than five minutes flying time before the turbine flamed out on ten gallons of fuel, so he had to be extra sharp.

The Bell's flight manual provided the raw data Floyd needed to calculate and implement what was known as an autorotation. It was a straightforward procedure – and a gut wrenching experience all at once.

In normal powered flight, air is drawn into the main rotor blades and pushed down, away from the helicopter. Without power, the reverse happened; as the aircraft descends, air is forced up into the freewheeling rotors, which continue to turn, allowing the pilot to retain control of the aircraft even without the turbine's power.

Every helicopter pilot spent hours of practice time in emergency procedures over the course of their careers, and Floyd was no exception. He had even set a Blackhawk down in autorotation while in Afghanistan after total engine failure on a mission. *But that was years ago in a different life*, he reminded himself. The glide angle of the descent, winds, terrain, and other variables made practice autorotation's anxious events – *but this wasn't practice*.

A novice pilot—and Floyd considered that he'd not trained for this type of emergency procedure in over a decade—could easily *spread* the skids, squashing them or severely damaging them by landing with too much speed. The helicopter could even bounce off the ground like a ball out of control in extreme cases. Worse, if the pilot miscalculated the approach and went in with the nose of the helicopter too high, the angle could be so radical that the tail rotor section could contact the ground first, often leading to a catastrophic crash. This technique was known as *flaring*, where during the last moments of the descent the pilot pulled the nose of the helicopter up to take speed off and gently set down.

"Wow. This could be really interesting." Martin didn't move.

Spotting the originally planned landing site with the drug dealers, Floyd saw a large SUV and a small cargo van parked right behind it, on a large patch of earth next to a narrow rutted dirt road. He flipped the cell phone open and re-dialed the number Martin had tried to call unsuccessfully earlier.

"Yeah, Julio, this is Mosely, what's the password? The voice was hard but carried no accent.

"This is Bell N832W. We have you in sight, and we're doing a wide sweep to make sure we're alone before we land to make the transfer." Floyd didn't wait for a response, he hit the "*end call*" pad.

Setting the helicopter back on a bee-line to his chosen road, Floyd prepared himself. He tightened his harness, and took the aircraft up to 500 feet. He had thought this through as far as he could and he knew that if this contrived flight didn't look like an

authentic accident, he would be tracked down to the ends of the earth by these drug dealers, the cartel, or both.

Setting the collective control to idle speed, the turbine whine dropped off to blade noise. "Have I forgotten anything? Let's see, the gun, the call, got my wallet. Grab the bag and water on the way out. What else?" He felt a bit dizzy. "Could be that xzylazine?"

He had practiced the speech to make it as dramatic as Floyd Marshall could ever get; he hoped it was convincing. He called the buyers back.

"Yeah," answered the same voice.

"This is the pilot, we have an onboard emergency... repeat...we've lost power. We're going down! We're going to crash land. No longer maintaining altitude."

He hung up without waiting for an answer and turned on the avionics and set the radio to frequency 121.5 MHz, often used as an emergency frequency and monitored by most air traffic control towers, and various emergency services. "This is Bell helicopter, Nancy-8-3-2-Whiskey declaring an on-board emergency. Again, Nancy 8-3-2 Whiskey, declaring an emergency. Preparing for a forced landing." He turned the avionics off.

He turned to see Martin gaping at him again. "Ahh..." was the only sound he emitted. He looked even worse than he did just minutes ago, Floyd thought. His pupils were so large that they looked like they were going to overrun the iris' boundaries.

"Bad news, buddy. We're going to have to crash land. We're going down without power. We may not make it."

Even in his minimally conscious state, Martin must have subconsciously understood the danger. His face revolted against every physical restraint and what minuscule color he had drained from him instantly. His mouth was wide open but nothing came out.

The helicopter was now in autorotation dropping down through a prescribed mathematical formula as though it were a child's slide - gravity demanded submission. The cell phone chirped. He ignored it, sure that the drug dealers could still see his steep fall from the sky.

Floyd Marshall was flying by the seat of his pants, praying that the years of military training meant something right this very minute, or Martin's worst fears would be answered.

Spotting the landing site at the dirt road ahead he made several small adjustments.

Even though he was carefully watching the air speed, attitude and rate of descent, Floyd felt the beads of unwelcome sweat trickling down his checks. It didn't feel right. In what seemed only a flash of seconds, he saw his set-down point.

The road was coming up fast. Too fast. He had misjudged glide path and the landing, and then failed to flare enough in the last moments of the descent.

The Bell hit the ground with such force that it lurched against the road bed skidding along the dirt and gravel, then reeled sideways at 45 degree angle to the road, finally came to a rest fifty feet beyond, leaving a billowing cloud of dirt spreading out like a rolling wave. The impact had been so hard that Floyd thought the seat harness could never hold him, and it knocked his glasses off his nose and they dangled on their

lanyard like an explanation point to his rusty flying skills. Martin seemed vaguely awake, but only groaned.

"Nice landing, Floyd, lucky you didn't bury yourself right here," he muttered to himself as he regained his composure and his racing heart calmed a bit. "That was as close as it gets."

He didn't waste a second as he pulled the harness off and opened his door. Reaching behind the seat he took the quart can of turpentine he had brought onboard, unscrewed the top and tossed it on the bundled cocaine covered in plastic sheeting. Retrieving the three road flares from the door pouch, he pulled the striker cap on the first one, struck the flare which answered with a billowing white ignition. He tossed the sizzling, erupting red torch on top of the cocaine and immediately a blue flame danced up as the turpentine ignited and he could immediately smell the rancid acid odor coming from the melting plastic sheeting.

Stepping out of the helicopter - noticing for only a split second that he had hit the ground so hard that the helicopter skids were partially collapsed close to the ground - he headed around the nose, instinctively ducking his head with the blades still rotating overhead, headed to the cargo compartment. It was a purposeful march. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Then, suddenly, as though a hand had been lifted at an unseen traffic light, he came to an abrupt stop. Shaking his head from side to side he grimaced knowingly. "I just can't do it like this."

Turning, he opened Martin's door and pushed the harness latch between his legs and literally pulled the man headfirst out of the helicopter. Martin crumpled to the ground. "Believe me, I *want* to leave you in there. But I guess I can't barbeque you even if you're..." he stopped himself. "Just get on with it, Floyd," he admonished himself out loud.

Unlocking the cargo door, he placed another gushing stick of fire on the second chunk of the cocaine and then ducked under the aircraft. He had to get down on one knee, surprised at how much damage the landing had done, to open the drain on the fuel sump. Returning to Martin, he grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him off the road. He went back to see a large spot of fuel was already spreading quickly in the dirt under the drain valve. Striking the last flare, he threw it underhand across the dirt and watched as it rolled into the growing pool, with its spurting tip of white hot flame lapping at the fuel.

The burst of angry orange fire was so immediate and intense that it caught Floyd off guard and he stumbled back and lost his footing in the dirt and landed on his backside.

He watched for a moment as the flames raced across the belly of the Bell, with thick black smoke already pouring out of the cabin. Picking himself up and returning to Martin he dragged him still further from the road and checked his pockets, hoping that there was some hint concerning the whereabouts of Sharon. Nothing. He took Martin's original cellphone out of the backpack and hit the power button.

"Sharon, where are you? Lord, show me the way, show me the way."

The last time he turned and saw Bell Nancy-8-3-8-Whiskey, her belly was consumed in flames that chased an enormous plume of dense black smoke twirling through the rotor blades and climbing into the cloudless blue sky.

Chapter 49

Dragging Martin away from the wreck, Floyd had noticed a shallow, rock strewn dry wash cut out by hard rains about fifteen feet away. It headed off in the right direction and Floyd didn't think he would leave an obvious trail of footprints walking in it. Martin was still somnolent or unconscious and Floyd gave him one last look, "Okay buddy, you're on your own."

Scampering to the cut, he started very quickly picking his way along, stepping in the rocks and avoiding soft soil. He'd only gone a few yards when he heard a car engine followed by the rumble of a truck. Instinctively he dipped down flat in the wash bed and pulled the backpack close to his body. Whoever was coming, he was sure he didn't want to talk to them. Multiple car doors opened and shut, followed by indistinct voices, but he didn't turn around. Then a loud voice pronounced, "Wow, these boys dropped like a rock, huh?"

That was followed by another, alarmed voice, "Better back up—maybe this thing could blow up!"

The loud voice responded, "Yeah, let's get out of here before someone else sees this smoke. The coke is gone, these guys are roasting, that's all I need to know. Maybe drop by later, look around."

Floyd laid still for several minutes after the sound of the vehicles driving off faded away. Slowly, he poked his head up and didn't see anyone, and looking towards the spot he'd left Martin he couldn't see or hear anything. The wreckage wasn't visible from his vantage point, but there was a towering column of black smoke that seemed to be stapled accidently to the edge of the blue horizon. "Wow," was the only word that fit the scene.

Making his way as fast as he could, he followed the wash bed. "Don't stop for *nothing*, keep moving," he instructed out loud. He had no idea how long it would take someone to respond to either the radio message or the smoke, but it would probably be sooner than later he figured, even if it was only a nearby rancher or oil well workers. The black smoke would be seen for miles out here.

"What do I say if someone sees me? Ain't like you see a tall black man on foot out here in the middle of nowhere with a helicopter on fire down the road every day." The thought brought a chuckle to him that spread to a genuine laugh. "That'd be some sight, wouldn't it?"

After he put some distance between himself and the crash site, Floyd starting sorting through the next steps, giving thanks that he'd not heard a plane, helicopter, or vehicle—nothing. But, maybe he was already too far off to hear, he considered.

"Well, bottom line is that no one gets 800 pounds of cocaine. That's a good thing, right? And our friend Martin is going to have a *really* bad day - if he even makes it out alive." Floyd thought about almost leaving him belted into the burning helicopter. "Hope I don't regret that someday." He stopped to take a drink of water from one of his water bottles.

“If the cops get out here and find Martin, surly they’d find that gun. That leads to at least one murder if they check it out. The cocaine is burned up to nothing and the Bell is a charcoal briquette.”

Floyd turned and eyed the black smoke billowing up, well behind him now, and smiled in satisfaction.

“I’m sure the cartel’s front company that owns that helicopter doesn’t want too much attention. Julio is dead back at the ranch. He ain’t talking. The drug dealers are gone, at least for now, and they don’t know about me anyway. Sounded like they thought it was an accident—tough luck—and they didn’t seem like they were too concerned about survivors, that’s for sure.”

Floyd finally felt a degree of security. “I don’t see how I get connected to all of this. So I think the less anyone knows about this whole nightmare the better. Now, let’s go find Sharon.”

He fished out Martin’s prepaid cell phone and then dialed the Garfield County Sheriff’s Department from memory. After two transfers, he heard Gus, “Hi, Sheriff Smith here.”

“Gus, thank God I caught you! It’s Floyd. Have y’all found Sharon, is she okay? Where is she now? Can she talk...” Floyd was firing questions like a machine gun.

“Floyd, stop!” Gus squawked into the phone. Sam and Olivia were in his office and turned to look at him, and he reported loudly, “It’s Floyd.”

“Floyd, calm down, where exactly are you? Are you okay?”

Floyd looked around himself in a 360 degree sweep. “Yeah, I’m okay. Listen, I’m on the other side of the mountains, and it’s a really long story. But I’m okay and I’m gonna get a car and head back as soon as I can. But where is Sharon?”

“Floyd, we’ve got everyone looking for her, we think we know where she is. But, one thing at a time. Let me get someone in law enforcement over there to come and get you...” Gus didn’t finish.

“No, no, no. I’m fine. I may have a way to get a lead on Sharon, but I’m going to have to go through a phone first. I know she can’t be more than an hour from a ranch about 2 miles from route 82, heading due east, I think.”

Gus was clearly exasperated. “Yeah, we’re already in that area. Floyd, you have to work with me here, what’s going on? Are you safe?”

“I’m fine, listen I’ve had an interesting twenty-four hours, but I’m okay now. All we need to do right now is find Sharon. That’s all that matters.”

“Floyd, Al here.” Gus had put the phone on speaker mode. “Look, yesterday Jamie headed out looking for Sharon. Sharon left us some signs on a remote trail that Jamie found—but now he’s missing too. We’ve got everyone possible up there on the mountain we think they’re on. And this morning Sam and Judith, the Pattersons, Mary, all left too. I’m telling you, we’ll find her. I know it.”

There was a moment of silence, then Floyd’s voice cracked with emotion. “Oh God, Al, I love her so much. I just can’t lose her too.”

“We’re not losing anyone, Floyd,” Gus broke in. “Okay, you said you might have more information. What’s that about?”

"I've got a cell phone from someone. I'm going to do some checking. I'll get back to you. You can't reach me right now, but I'll call you back just as soon as I can."

"Floyd, I'm a Sheriff remember, are you telling me everything I need to know, or just what you think I should know," Gus asked suggestively.

"You know what you need to know. I'll call you back as soon as I can. Pray guys, pray." Floyd turned the phone off.

Chapter 50

Floyd came to a dirt road running parallel to the dry wash he had been walking in and decided he was too far away now to make any difference, so he took to the path. It was a much easier walk. Checking the chart, he judged that he should be very close to what appeared to be a paved road ahead. He pressed on as fast as he could walk.

Within a short distance, he came to the paved two lane road and headed due east. The traffic was light and no one seemed to have a second thought about him walking down the side of the road. Within a half hour came to a small group of buildings surrounding a truck stop.

Entering the large and busy store area, the first thing he noticed was a sign that read "no hitchhiking." *Great*, thought Floyd as he made his way to the bathroom area, stopping to buy a toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, and a solid blue T-shirt. Once in the bath room he gave himself a thorough paper towel bath from the sink; the cool water pouring over his face was almost worth the walk he decided. Wearing a fresh T-shirt and brushing his teeth made him feel fairly presentable.

Returning to the lobby, he found the hot food counter and bought a hamburger and a tall ice-tea. As he ate he was scanning the trucks pulling into the fueling area when he saw a large pickup truck with tandem rear wheels pull in, headed east. It sported a bed mounted towing tongue and was pulling a large trailer with three cars loaded on. The driver was an affable looking young man, wearing blue jeans and a cowboy shirt and a pair of work boots, smiling and chatting with a fellow patron pumping gas.

Floyd watched as the driver started fueling and then made his way into the crowded sales area and went straight to the restrooms. He lingered over his tea, and the man finally reappeared and went to the hot food section, looking at the hot meat turnovers. Floyd moved right next to him and smiled.

"Howdy, name is Floyd Marshall. How 'ya doing today."

Looking up, the man smiled like he'd never met a stranger. "Hi, Floyd, I'm doing dandy, you?"

"Doing great too. I wonder if I could ask you if you're headed to either Kersey or Greeley. I need to get to a car rental and pick up a car. I'd pay you whatever you wanted for a ride if you're headed that direction."

The man looked carefully at Floyd. "Oh."

There was an awkward silence and Floyd thought his would-be chauffeur was suspicious. "It's a long story, but I lost my transportation, and I need to get home. I own a hunting camp on the other side of the mountains southeast of Carbondale. I'd throw in a free cabin for any weekend you wanted." Floyd smiled wide. He pulled out his wallet and handed the young man a business card from the *Miner's Trail*. "Look, I'm not a deadbeat, I've got credit cards and cash - I just need to rent a car."

"Hmm, hunting camp huh?" The man was looking at the business card. "Be honest, I don't pick up strangers. Ever. Just the crazy times we live in, ya' know?"

Before Floyd could press his case, the young man said, "You're welcome to come along. I'm headed east. Take us right into Greeley and I could drop you at a car rental. One right there in the middle of town. I don't want your money. But I might take you up on that weekend cabin if that's for real?"

"Oh yeah, it's for real. You call me at the camp, and just tell me you're coming. And you bring your wife, girlfriend, kids, whatever, and we'll treat you like a king. We'll feed you, everything."

"Deal, Floyd. Let me grab a bite here and we'll be leaving in just a minute. My name is Billy Hays."

Shaking hands, Floyd offered, "Thank you Billy. Pleasure is all mine. I'm going to grab a coffee, can I get you one?"

Waiting for Billy, Floyd made his way to the coffee station and prepared two coffees. Finishing up, he heard two men talking about the "helicopter crash." Floyd moved as close to them as possible.

A portly, balding man dressed in overalls seemed to know the most. "Yeah, didn't hear if there were any fatalities, but I heard on the CB that the chopper burned up good. I saw one of them big TV satellite rigs headed that way." The men walked off leaving Floyd in suspense.

"Well, I'm getting outta here just in time, I'd say. Thank you Lord."

True to his word, Billy was rolling down the road in no time. They chit-chatted about their respective families, and Floyd told him more about the Miner's Trail. When a break in the conversation came, Floyd pulled out Martin's regular cell phone. He flipped through the contact section and didn't find any familiar names, *why would I?* He questioned himself. Scrolling through the phone calls, he was looking for calls made after he reached camp yesterday and calls made this morning. When he dialed the last call made, the name popped up as an identified number for *Julio M.* The next to last call went to *Rosario.* He pushed the redial number. It went to a "no connection available" message. Trying the next calls made in order, there were no answers. *Well, if all these people are in the mountains, there's probably no signal.*

Nearing Greeley, Floyd again expressed his appreciation for the lift. Billy just smiled and they drove on.

Knowing there were only minutes left before his host dropped him off, Floyd couldn't resist the urge. "So, Billy Hays, are you a man of faith?"

"Hmm, I knew it." Billy spread a wide smile. "You're a Christian aren't you?"

Floyd shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *you got me.*

"I knew it the second you said hi back in the truck stop." Billy was chuckling. "I was, not all that long ago - a Christian, a believer, I mean." He was adjusting himself in the seat and Floyd had the impression that he was very uncomfortable spiritually, not physically.

"Were?"

"I messed up pretty bad. Ain't proud of it. I was on the road, and I struck up a friendship with this female long-hauler on the CB radio, and, I don't know, just one thing led to another. My wife found out, and we're, well, we're separated now. I really

want to go back home, but, dunno...may never happen. Ruined the best thing I ever had."

"Oh, I see." Floyd waited patiently for minute before he asked, "So what about your faith, you said you used to be – what's that mean?"

"My wife went to our pastor, and then the deacons. It got pretty ugly. Basically, they kicked me out. I didn't just lose my family, I lost the Lord. Wouldn't wish it all on my worst enemy."

"Is that what the folks at your church said, that you lost the Lord?"

"Yeah." Billy looked like he might be a thousand miles away to Floyd.

"Doesn't sound right to me. Did you ever ask Jesus Christ into your life, Billy?"

"Oh, yeah, a couple of times."

Floyd looked questionably at the driver. "Well, of course, once is enough, 'ya know? You read much Scripture, Billy? You go to a men's bible meeting ever?"

"Yeah, yeah, I used to read a little scripture, sure. And I went to church when I could."

Floyd looked up just in time to see the entrance to the car rental office. "Can you give me just a minute, Billy, I want to tell you something that I've learned?"

He didn't actually respond but pulled his rig alongside the curb in front the Enterprise Car Rental on Route 34. And then turned in the seat to look right at Floyd.

"Billy, I've been on a couple of combat tours in the Army. Seen some pretty gruesome stuff. Done some pretty gruesome stuff. I thought I couldn't be through anything worse emotionally, to be honest with you. But my wife died a few years ago. That was much worse. And the last twenty-four hours? Let's just say they have been that bad and more. Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean you get a free ride through this world. Frankly, I've found out it is usually a harder road to walk with God, not easier. That's because you know what is right, what is wrong, and you have to walk in His Truth."

Floyd watched Billy, but couldn't tell if he really had his interest or attention.

"I don't know what your deacons are saying, I just know what the Lord says. Go read Romans chapter eight. Christ only died once Billy. He died for everyone's sins. Everyone who ever lived, or ever would live. That means you too. You can't be anymore forgiven – any more redeemed – than you already are if you've invited Christ into your life. No man determines if you're a believer, Billy. You have either accepted Him, or you haven't. Doesn't mean you can't or won't fall flat on your face. Just means you will see it for what it is – without excuses. *You'll see it as sin.*"

Billy looked like a reprimanded school boy focused on his hands.

"I want you to do me a favor – do yourself a favor. Call me next week. I've got some friends who you need to meet. They specialize in putting lives back together, brother. I want you to come out to my camp by yourself. Get your bearings, get your balance back. Then maybe you can bring your wife out. There's no cost at all, just come. How's that sound?"

Billy looked for all the world like a man desperate for some sure footing – some hope for tomorrow. Floyd saw that his eyes were misting. "I've got a critical situation I

have to get to, Billy, on the other side of the mountains. I've gotta go. But will you call me, promise me you'll come out to the camp?"

Billy Hays pulled away leaving Floyd on the side of the road after promising him that he'd call. Floyd prayed after him and turned and set his mind once more on Sharon Toro, anxious to get a car and drive over the same mountains that he'd already flown over earlier in the day.

Chapter 51

"Gus, its Floyd."

"Floyd!" Gus was yelling into the phone. "Where are you, what's going on? You have us all on the edge of our seats here!"

"I'm headed back now. Maybe Four or five hours out. Have you heard from Sharon, what's going on? Have you located her?"

"Not yet," Gus deliberately sounded hopeful. "We know where she is and we've got lots of boots on the mountain heading to her. It's difficult going. They're on a really rough part of the mountain and we had to get motor bikes. But Jamie and Tommy Atkins have been up there since yesterday. I think we'll hear something soon. What about you, you said you had a phone that might help?"

"Yeah, I came up with nothing."

"We've got a lot of balls in the air, do you have a number I can call you back on?"

"Nope. Sorry."

There was an uncomfortable silence as Gus tried to formulate his question. "Floyd, I saw an alert from the state police that a helicopter crashed and burned out in Weld County, east of Greeley in the middle of nowhere. Wouldn't know anything about that would 'ya?"

"I haven't heard any news." There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Don't say?" Gus sighed. "Two of my deputies were looking around a property off 82, not far from where we think Sharon is." There was a long pause and Floyd didn't say a word. "They found a guy named Julio Mena, heavy set male, 44 years old, sitting in a chair in the barn. He was as dead as dead can be. No cause of death yet, but the guy has a long list of felonies, mostly drugs, going back fifteen years and is - *was* - on parole for felony assault. Real prince of a guy. They also found two 55 gallon drums of aviation gas and what looked to be a smoothed out helicopter pad behind the barn - and signs that someone actually took off from there. Don't guess you'd know anything about that either?"

"Been gone all day, Gus."

"Okay, well, that settles that I guess. So I can't call you, so when are you going to check in next?"

"Yep, I'll call you. Don't worry about me. You guys just need to find Sharon. That's all that matters right now."

Finishing the call he reached into the backpack and made sure Martin's cell phone was off. He wasn't even sure what to do with it; if the bad guys called it, they'd know it was on line. In fact, he tried to call one of the last phone calls Martin made to someone named Rosario. He chided himself, *I hope she doesn't realize that the call had been made well after the helicopter crash.*

"I ain't telling anyone, anything, and I ain't leaving a trail if I can help it, except this rental car I guess. Nothing I can do about that. But nothing else."

Driving on in silence with the front range of the Rockies daring him on, Gus could only think of Sharon's smile, long ago in a snowstorm, on a night of tragedy, and a night of hope.

Chapter 52

At the junction on the top of the deer run that led back to the trail and the Wild Spruce Creek service road, two Deputies were stationed to make sure no one left the mountain. Tommy Atkins was the first person they'd seen. He explained to the Deputies briefly the events of the last twenty-four hours, and what was happening up on the trail with LaBrash and the other Deputies. After the briefing, one of the Deputies headed down the deer run with instructions to call headquarters, reporting that Toro, Tommy and Jamie were safe, and to request an ambulance to meet them at the abandoned feed station where they were headed, to transport both Sharon, Rosario and the big man to the hospital in Carbondale.

Judith arrived a few minutes behind Tommy in the smaller ATV with Sharon. She and Tommy took some time with the big man, now unconscious in the back of the ATV, while the Pattersons were passing out water and snacks. Looking up at Tommy, Judith shook her head after checking his wound and vitals. "Very rapid pulse, my guess is that he's in circulatory shock from loss of blood. We don't have much time to get him off this mountain."

Mary was looking over Rosario, who was conscious, but quiet. "How do you feel?"

"My head hurts so bad," she said barely above a whisper.

Mary smiled and stroked her face gently. "I know. Tommy said you were very brave today, but you need to be brave just a little longer. Can you do that?" Rosario smiled softly. Mary turned her attention to Sharon, the two woman just nodded to each other and held hands.



Within minutes the ATV's were heading down what was left of the trail. Over the decades the racing rain water coming off the mountain had eroded almost all of the trail bed, and left it a wide rut grooved with smaller ruts, with large rocks and exposed tree roots. It was slow going and when the two ATV's finally came to the end of the trail, they had to maneuver over half a mile of difficult terrain to get to the abandoned feeding station.

Judith couldn't believe her eyes as they rumbled over the gravel near the rickety skeleton of a building. There was an ambulance and two sheriff department vehicles, with her husband leaning against the fender of one of the Tahoe's.

Like taking a deep draft of cold water after a hot run, the couple embraced and held each other for a long moment, before Judith's professional demeanor brought her emotions under control. She began hurriedly instructed the ambulance EMS personnel on what to do while Sharon made it over from the ATV and took Judith's place in front of Sam. Her face was in such pain and so swollen that she had to fight to form words. "Sam, do we know where Floyd is, have you heard..."

Sam stopped her with his hand, "Don't worry, we've talked to him and he's on his way back. He ended up on the other side of the mountains somehow, but he's heading over as we speak. He's fine Sharon, *he's fine*. All he's worried about is you, believe me."

They were the soft and gentle tears born in relief and answered prayers—and she let them go freely as Sam held her. Finally looking up at Sam she had a quizzical look. "The other side of the mountains?"

Judith and Mary and the Pattersons grouped around her joining in the news that Floyd was safe and hearing the few available details, all of which turned to belly laughter when Mary suggested, "Floyd ended up on the other side of the mountains because the bad guys couldn't get him to shut up."

After Judith explained the situation to Sam *one more time* they placed the big man on an ambulance stretcher with Rosario sitting on the side bench along with Tyler, and Tommy Atkins for security. Sharon took an ice pack that was offered but wanted to drive in with Sam.

During the trip into Carbondale, Sharon spoke briefly to Gus over the radio. Her face ached deep into the cheek bone and it felt hot even with the ice pack.

Gus was upbeat and positive, considering the last twenty-four hours. "I just heard from Floyd, he's four hours out. He's okay Sharon, all he can talk about is you. I can barely get a word in edgewise. Of course you don't have a phone, and evidently neither does Floyd, he's using a prepaid phone and I don't have a number, but I'll have him call you on Sam's phone as soon as he calls back. I know he's fine, but I don't know much beyond that, honestly."

There was a long pause, finally Sharon sighed. "Sounds like Floyd. No telling what's going on. Probably not good for Martin, though. He's the guy who ambushed me yesterday, and he killed one of his people right in front of me too."

"Would that be on the deer run, near the top?"

"Yeah."

"We found him yesterday - we were all wondering who blasted him. You sound like you hurt, we've got time to talk later. You get checked out, okay?"

As Sam drove, he looked over to Sharon and smiled. Reaching across the seat, he took her hand and felt its slight tremble. "You're the best of the best, Deputy Toro, and you made us all proud." He didn't let go of her hand. "Tommy said you *beat the stuffing* out of a cartel member up on that mountain and escaped and saved that girl and boy—and Jamie Gallagher too. I can't imagine what you went through, but you know what? I'm not surprised how you came out of it, not at all."



As they pulled in behind the ambulance into Carbondale's Memorial Hospital, Sharon was silently praying a thanksgiving for Floyd's safety, and all of the friends that God had surrounded her with. After the big man was taken from the ambulance, Sam called for a Deputy to relieve Tommy as they both escorted Rosario and Tyler into the building with Sharon right behind them.

Just inside the doorway, Heather Barrington greeted Tommy and they held each like they were stuck together with a u-clamp. She could feel the emotional energy rippling through his body as she held him. Glancing up she saw Sam, Judith and Mary all gathering around them and she knew that her future husband had come off the mountain a different man than the one who left her at breakfast the day before.

Sharon Toro stepped up to them and smiled at the two young people. "Just so you know Heather, Tommy saved my life today. He's my hero." She patted him on the shoulder.



The big man had already been rushed into surgery, and Rosario, along with Tyler who wouldn't leave her side, had been moved to an examining room when a doctor made his way to the group.

Dr. John Bussey had been on the staff of Memorial Hospital for ten years, and he and the Sheriff's Department and the Search and Rescue team were all familiar friends. He smiled at Sharon. "So the Sheriff just gave me a call and ordered me to get you in an exam room and go over you with a fine tooth comb—somehow he thought you might forget to get looked at. No idea why'd he think that." He smiled at his friend and nodded his head towards an examination room. "That one's empty."

Toro smirked. "Yeah, that'd be Gus. Can't mind his own business." She took Judith by the hand, "Come with me—might need to make a break for it."

On the way to the exam room, Dr. Bussey gave her a quick update on Rosario. "She has a nasty wound, the bullet peeled a piece of the scalp off—but doesn't look like it took any skull bone. That's really lucky. I have a nurse cleaning her up now, and as soon as she's finished we'll see what we can do for it. First glance I'd say we can suture it up and she'll be good as new."

Once they were in the exam room, he looked over Sharon's face and asking her about other scrapes and bumps she had. A nurse walked in and told him Rosario was ready for him. "Okay, thanks. Sharon has a probable zygoma, rapid swelling. Let's get a fresh bag of ice on it." He turned to Sharon, "That just means the cheek bone is fractured, but it didn't break the skin. There isn't anything we can do for it really, just takes time to heal."

"Open up." He examined Sharon's mouth and the gash on the inside cheek. "Looks like this will heal itself, as well. Don't think we need any stitches. But, if it doesn't heal quickly, or if you have real trouble with it, come back and we can put a few stitches in it." He whispered something to the nurse, who left. "We're going to give you some antibiotics to take, just as a precaution. And we're going to give you a couple of anti-inflammatory pills right now. You'll want some Advil around for the next week – that cheek is going to be painful. Drop in next week and let's take a look at you, but call me if it gets worse, right?"

Leaving the exam room, Sharon found Tommy sitting, working on a stack of paperwork. "Sam said I had to get started. Evidently shooting people causes a lot of paperwork." His feeble smile was an invitation.

"Yeah, there's always that, isn't there? Where's Heather? Is she okay?"

"Sure, sure. She seems to be fine. This whole thing just has everyone a little stressed, I guess."

"So, how about Deputy Atkins? How's he?"

"I'm okay, really. What you said up on the mountain, I know that's right. I don't think you are ever prepared to shoot someone like that. Then it happens, and you understand that you have done something..." Tommy's voice trailed off.

Sharon patted his knee. "I know. I also know it's a good thing that you're not pretending this wasn't a big deal, or that taking a life is just a job description. If we ever take killing someone lightly, or if we don't reflect on what we've done, then we have led ourselves into a dark place where we diminish our perspective of good and evil." She smiled, "Guess I'm being a bit preachy, huh?" She got a smile and shirk from Tommy and she smirked at him. "Pretty nice shooting though, did I mention that?"

"Yeah? That other guy almost had me. I think he was just stunned by the guy with that knife dropping so fast. I was lucky that he was distracted. And talk about lucky, how about Jamie? That big guy was so fixed on me shooting his buddies that he never saw Jamie coming."

"I think we were being watched over, no question."

Tommy studied the pen he was holding, then quietly said, "I don't even know what to tell Heather. Or if I should tell her at all. I'm afraid it could change us, 'ya know?"

"I think I understand. Maybe you don't have to tell her today or tomorrow, but you have to tell her, Tommy. If she's going to be your wife and your partner, then she deserves to know the things that are shaping you - changing you. And I'm pretty sure you'll find she'll be your best listener ever. She'll get it."

A beat-up Sharon Toro, and a shaken up Tommy Atkins sat in the hospital lobby drained and exhausted, each to their own thoughts.



Sharon was startled, her chin had dropped and she'd fallen asleep. Sam was gently rocking her shoulder. "Hey, it's Floyd on the phone." She bolted from the lobby bench and followed Sam outside. He pointed to the department Tahoe, and handed her his phone, retreating to the sidewalk. He couldn't help but notice the animation in the discussion that Sharon was having, her hands gesturing and then her stillness. Finally, she was rapidly dabbing at her eyes.

Judith found Sam still on guard. "She's talking to Floyd, he's heading over the mountains now, so he won't be too long."

"How'd he sound?" Judith touched her husband's arm.

"Good actually. He told me he was fine, just tired. I asked him a few questions and he didn't share much. He wasn't telling Gus anything either I understand."

In a few minutes, Sharon emerged from the Tahoe with bright red eyes. Handing the phone back to Sam, she smiled and wiped the leftover tears from her eyes. "Do my eyes match my cheeks now?" She deadpanned.

Glad her friend had a sense of humor, Judith asked softly, "How is he?"

“Yeah, he’s good. I’m thinking he’s had a twenty-four hours like mine. How can you even process all of this? How can you even believe something like this could really happen?” Judith put her arm around her friend. “We’re going have to have some time to catch our breath before we can sort it all out. But, we’re both alive and free, which I honestly didn’t even think was going to happen only a few hours ago.” She shrugged her shoulders in emphasis. “Praise God, huh?”

New tears emerged and Judith embraced her friend, and the tears quickly turned to a sob of exhaustion and relief.

Chapter 53

Sometime later, a Sheriff's Department vehicle pulled up and deposited Jamie Gallagher at the emergency room entrance. He had called a few minutes out from the hospital and Sam met him in the lobby to hear more details on what was happening on the mountain.

"I led the Deputies up the trail, and once I showed them the turn-in to the camp, Deputy LaBrash told me to head back and to tell you that he and the other Deputies were going to stake out the camp and see how they would proceed. He's going to send someone down the trail as soon as he had news. I went past the run, checked in with the guys there, then came all the way down the trail. I met up with one of your Deputies, and he gave me a ride in. Really appreciate it. How's Rosario? Sharon? Have we heard anything on Floyd?"

"Sharon is around in the lobby, waiting with Tommy." Sam pointed over his shoulder. "Floyd is safe and sound. He called in earlier, and he's on his way in as we speak. I don't know much more than that, but he's alive and kickin'. They stitched up Rosario and she and the boy are down in the exam room on the left. She was sleeping last time I stuck my head in, but I'm pretty certain you'd be a welcome visitor."

As Jamie turned to leave, Sam reached out and stopped him. "I'm just getting bits and pieces of the story, but I know you saved Sharon Toro's life this morning. I hear we can call you *Taser man* from now on, huh?" He and Jamie shared a good chuckle. "Just wanted to tell you that we're proud of you, and I'm thinking Floyd's going to have to give you a big raise when he gets back."

"Oh yeah? Tell him that will 'ya?"

Sam patted his shoulder. "Get going, folks are gonna want to see you."

After a brief reunion with Sharon and Tommy, and talking more about Floyd, Jamie made his way to the exam room. The closer he came the more difficult it became to breathe; his heart beat so fast that he felt light headed. Stopping at the door, he tried to compose himself. *Wow, what's this about?* In that instant he knew what he needed to say to Rosario. There was no doubt in his mind. None.

Entering the exam room, he saw Tyler curled up on a chair with a blanket over him, sound asleep. All he could see was his buzz cut blonde hair that looked like it was fringe sown to the edge of the blanket, which made him smile. Rosario was drinking from a glass with a long straw. Her smile was like an instantaneous eruption, followed by a severe grimace – the local anesthesia was wearing off and the stitches were barking loudly at her.

"That hard head still hurts, huh?" She returned his smile with a nod.

"Well, didn't until a little while ago. Doc sprayed it down with some goop before the stitches, so it just felt uncomfortable when he was doing it, but it really hurts now, for sure."

"Yeah," Jamie moved next to her and was looking at the bandage. Their eyes locked and there was an unspoken understanding, a warmth, a hope, a dream, that crossed the space between them.

"I'm thinking you'll be discharged later today, early tomorrow. You guys are going to need a place to go."

Rosario shook her head. "Hadn't even thought that far ahead, actually."

"Well, I just happen to know two ladies in Glenwood Springs who'd love to help both of you. And it won't cost you a dime either." Jamie's eyes dropped along with his voice. "Plus, I won't be too far away." Rosario reached for Jamie's hand.

"Last night—out there under the stars—I don't know, it was so incredible. I've never been so sure of anything. I think we are supposed to be, well, you know, we're supposed to be a couple."

Rosario squeezed his hand. "Jamie, I don't think anything - *I know*."

Jamie blurted out excitedly, "I have never wanted anything like how I want to be with you. I'm thinking that the three of us," he nodded towards the slumbering Tyler, "that we are a family now. I can take care of us. I'm working, I'm going to school." He looked away, suddenly thinking that he sounded pushy, or worse, immature.

"What are you saying Jamie?" Rosario's bright brown eyes danced, encouraging him on, searching his face as closely as the x-ray machine had searched her head only hours before.

"I'm saying...well, actually, I'm asking..." Rosario could see that his eyes were suddenly moist. He took an audible gulp. "I'm asking you to marry me." He hurriedly added, "I know, we just met, and we should take some time and get to know each other better..."

"*Ya think?*" Rosario smiled widely, then grimaced in pain again.

"Yeah, sure. But I already know. I just know..." he was shifting into a persuasive tone before Rosario cut him off.

"Okay, okay, Jamie. Yes, I'll marry you." She chuckled. "But can we let my head heal up first?"

Jamie panicked, "Oh, sure, sure. Sorry, first things first. I know, we have to get things worked out. But I just want to know what I'm working towards, 'ya know?" He looked at her and she realized his cheeks were crimson colored.

"Don't worry, we'll make it work, Jamie. You don't have to talk me into it—I *want* to marry you."

"Really?"

"Of course *really*. Why wouldn't I? Isn't that what we were talking about last night?"

"Sure. I just thought..."

"You're thinking too much. It was settled last night. I love you Jamie, and that's all I need to know."

They sat and held hands for the long time without speaking until Rosario's eyes closed and Jamie could hear her rhythmic breathing.



When Floyd finally reached Carbondale and pulled into the hospital parking lot, he turned the key off and sat in the coming evening for a few minutes. He was physically and emotionally exhausted. He'd spent hours driving over the mountains and he kept replaying the last twenty- four hours in his mind – *the unbelievable and wild events that you'd expect to see in a TV crime series, not in real life*, he thought. Except it was all too real. It was life, and death. And when he wasn't replaying the events of the day, he was thinking about Sharon. He had worried about her, and turned her fate over to God, only to reclaim his fears, and finally give those fears back to God.

In the end, he came to understand that God's plan was beyond him – he could only see his small part, whatever that was. "Sometimes you just have to let go and do what you can with the circumstances you're dealt – and you have to believe God's plan is working around it." He smiled at his own statement. "Hmm, that's pretty good, maybe I should write that down."

Floyd climbed out of the rental car and looked up into the evening sky and the soft coolness it brought with it and smiled to the heavens, "Okay, maybe it wasn't that good, but thank you Father, thank you so much." Floyd marched into the hospital and saw Sharon standing at the far end of the lobby. She waited for him there.

Sharon Toro cried into the shoulder of her husband, and her body gently shook for a long time. The emotion roiled up and spilled down the causeways of her spirit and out to water the vast love she had for this man. They didn't speak. Floyd stroked her hair and kissed her head and cheek, and just held her. Any words that they could have used would have been inadequate compared to the moment.

Later, they drove to the Miner's Trail mostly in silence. They were spent – bone weary. Sharon's only words were soft, almost apologetic. "It may be a while until I can start telling you about it. You may need to be a little patient with me."

Miles passed. Floyd finally reached across the dark car and held his wife's hand. "I know. It will be a while for me too. It's been an awfully long day."

Chapter 54

Three Months Later

After ordering his driver to turn the music off, Vicente Fuentes laid his head back into the leather seat and watched in silence as the lazy *Rio Conchos* wound its way along the Highway 45 corridor leading into Santa Rosalía de Camargo, a city of 40,000 less than two hours from his own home outside of Chihuahua, Mexico. The river's seemingly tranquil waters twinkled and glimmered in the warm afternoon sun and gave him a sense of calm he'd not known in months. It was peaceful and inviting and seemed connected to something real – everything his life wasn't, and never could be.

His bullet proof black Suburban was followed by an identical black Suburban filled with heavily armed men. Following behind the two Suburban's at a discrete distance was a third non-descript sedan with four more heavily armed men, just in case. Fuentes, the leader of the Northern Mexico's most powerful – and violent – drug cartel, traveled safely throughout his home state of Chihuahua. But he was a careful man. He controlled most of the local police throughout his drug empire, as well as many of the *Federales* – the Mexican Federal Police – as long as he paid the right price. But he was still a careful man.

The caravan passed the mostly cinder block and adobe homes of various sizes, shapes, and conditions, many finished in stucco and painted in whites, blues and tans. Elaborate security fencing including twelve foot electronic gates, were common regardless of any other sign of affluence; but there was still a sleepy quality to the area, just the same. The river provided the semi-arid land with plentiful water, which combined with the mild year round temperatures made it one of Mexico's most productive farming and ranching regions. Yet it had not outgrown the character of a small farming community it had been for five centuries.

The *Rio Conchos* rose in the wild western Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains and made its way across the state of Chihuahua and down to Camargo, spread between the foothills of the eastern Sierra Madre Oriental Mountains on one side and the expanding high desert on the other. When they crossed the confluence of the *Rio Conchos* and its tributary, the *Rio Florido*, Fuentes smiled. The newly enlarged *Rio Conchos*, he reminded himself, would now turn north and begin its march across the great Chihuahuan Desert to empty into the *Rio Grande* at the Texas border.

"Just like my drugs. I set them loose here and they turn north. Finally, they get to the United States – and I get rich." He smiled at his own declaration. The brief whisper of calm that he had felt earlier was gone.

Turning off the highway, the two Suburban's made their way on a gravel road that went past three or four small stucco-faced adobe homes with chain-link security fences and large floodlights hanging like watchful eyes over their roofs, and on corners. The follow-up sedan took up its position on the entrance to the gravel road, like a steel sentinel.

The road ended at a pecan orchard, and just to the side of its first perfect row of trees was a white adobe house with stucco crumbling in places, making it appear run

down. Several older cars were parked around it and instead of a security fence, every window was bared, and the front storm door was bared with several massive deadbolts.

Standing outside, leaning on a walking cane, Francisco Javier Hernandez — *Palas* — gently waved to acknowledge his visitors.

Fuentes was shocked to see his old friend, whom he had recruited years ago, first as a street seller of drugs, then a *mule*, who carried large caches of drugs to buyers, and finally as an enforcer and killer, who cleaned up various messes when they inevitably arose. *Palas* listed to one side and his head was shaved. A huge ugly wound was obvious on the left side of his head, and there was a smaller red welt below it that had clearly had stitches in it recently. Finally, Fuentes couldn't help but notice that the little finger and ring finger on *Palas'* left hand were wrapped together in white adhesive tape, and the end of a metal finger splint flashed in the sunlight.

Fuentes didn't wait for his security or his driver, but was out of the Suburban in a few steps and standing with his hand on the shoulder of his friend, only to be shocked again when his animated and effusive greeting was returned with *Palas'* slurred speech. His lips didn't seem to quite meet, as though he couldn't bring them together.

"My friend, my friend, what have they done to you my friend?"

"Senor Fuentes, thank you for coming to see me, thank you. This is my honor." *Palas* was trying hard to make the words clear, slowing them to a crawl and making sure he didn't drop the ends of his words off completely. The effort produced beads of perspiration on his face. "Come, Senor, let's us go in, I have refreshments ready."

If the house appeared drab and run down on the exterior, the interior was simple but beautiful. Heavy wood beams supported a wide expanse of a textured ceiling, leading to large, heavy, floor-to-ceiling glass doors at the rear looking into the lush orchard. Dark wood floors were appointed with area rugs and comfortable furniture. The open kitchen area had every modern appliance and sat behind a large heavy wooden kitchen table.

"This home is nice my friend, for your mother, no?"

"I sent her away Senor. She went to stay with a sister in Matamoros for a while. I didn't want her here, in case, you know, that the troubles in Colorado followed me." *Palas* stopped to wipe his mouth where saliva escaped in the gap where his lips couldn't close and turned his head down so that Vincente Fuentes couldn't see his shame. "And, I didn't want her to be around me like this, until I was well."

Fuentes smiled. "I know my friend. That is why I'm here. We must make this right. Sit with me."

The two men sat at the long wooden table and Fuentes declined a drink while the two guards armed with M4 Carbinets stationed themselves near the entrance.

"*Palas*, it was *bad* in Colorado. I lost a great deal, you know that." Fuentes stayed silent and simply smiled at his friend. It felt to *Palas* as though his boss was judging his words, which terrified him even more. Unwanted beads of sweat appeared again.

"I lost my cousin that I entrusted to you. I have a, what shall I call this person — a *business associate* — in Colorado, someone very close to the authorities. This associate

hears things, and tells me they shot my cousin down in the dirt like a dog on that mountain." Fuentes continued softly. "I lost my pilot, Benito Menendez. They say he crashed his car, but I don't know, that just seems too easy." Fuentes leaned back in his chair and studied Palas, who lowered his head, again, so he didn't have to look at his gaze.

"Someone – maybe Martin did it – killed Esqueda. I lost a load of cocaine, and I lost a helicopter, Palas." His name stretched out in a long low sound, and Fuentes laid his hand on the man's shoulder. "It did not go well in Colorado. Now...you. Look at you." There was more silence.

"Then there is the question of the woman, the one who did this to you, and her husband." He held his hands out, palms up in a frustrated expression. "I must be satisfied, or I invite trouble if people know I don't fix my problems. In our business, you must always fix your problems, my friend."

After what Palas thought was another terrifying silence, Fuentes continued. "We found the man who wanted to buy my cocaine from Martin." Fuentes nodded his head in agreement with himself. "We found him and some of his friends, and they will no longer be in the business. And, Martin was found, shot in the back of the head. My men, they say this man Mosley confessed to doing it. But who knows what a man says before he dies is true?" Fuentes shrugged his shoulders in a question. "All I really know is that I lost a great deal of money and men. And, now, I only have you."

Palas made a rasping noise and wiped his mouth again. He was very uncomfortable.

"Here is what we will do, my friend." Fuentes looked at Palas without blinking. "We *will* settle our accounts." Then, as though it was the point of the discussion he left until the very end, he added, "You won't fail me in this, will you?"



At the end of a dusty dirt road, miles from the nearest paved highway, the two older sedans pulled up to a sturdy iron gate topped with barbed wire. On either side of the gate, barbed-wire fencing was strung between steel posts, spread out like stems on a vine for as far as the eye could see. Greeting them at the gate was a mangy Collie wagging its tail and a crusty looking, middle aged man, browned in the sun like toasted bread, leaning against the fender of an old Jeep. He was wearing a sweat-stained cowboy hat which was once white, a well-worn cowboy shirt and equally well-worn Levi's that sported a huge silver buckle, and cowboy boots, one of which was worn through on the side. He was a working man, round and robust looking, and carried a permanent smile as well as a black-finished semi-automatic pistol on his side. His right hand rested on the gun handle.

Palas approached cautiously, leaning on his cane, while his fellow travelers remained in the two cars. "Javier?"

"You must be Palas," Without waiting, Javier got down to business. "Senor Fuentes told me you would be coming, and that you would have something for me?" Without speaking Palas unzipped his panel pack and passed an envelope through the gate. After

a quick inspection, Javier, still smiling, unlocked the gate and swung it open as he waved his arm towards the rolling scrub brush, Brittle Bush, Barrel Cactus, and the scattered Mesquite and blooming Palo Verde that lay beyond them. The two cars pulled through the gate which Javier closed and locked behind him, while the dog ran to sniff the new arrivals. A whistle brought the dog to the passenger seat of the Jeep and he energetically called out to his visitors, "Follow me."

The three vehicles drove on a dirt road that was nothing more than a two smoothed out ruts with occasional intersecting fencing for an hour until they came to an adobe outbuilding. When the caravan stopped, Javier opened the door to a small, single room building that had a large table, chairs, and in one corner a utility sink, a shower and toilet, with a blanket hung up for privacy. "We use this if we can't get back to the main house before dark, or if we're chasing stray cows - sometimes chasing trespassers." Javier laughed. He waved his hand over the table. There was a tray filled with tamales wrapped in corn husks, frijoles, and a large canister of tea and another of water. "Sorry, Mr. Fuente's gave orders - no beer."

As they ate, Javier explained to them the plans for the rest of the trip. "We will be taking dirt roads, and when we are close to the U.S. border, we will leave the cars and I will deliver you across the fence. It is very remote, very difficult country - we are crossing between Nogales to the west and Sonoyta to the east. When we cross you'll be on the Tohono O'odham Indian reservation in Arizona." He looked at Palas. "Can you walk some?"

Palas self-consciously wiped his mouth. "I can walk."

Javier nodded. "Two special friends - police officers from the reservation - will be waiting. They work for Mr. Fuentes. Eagleman is the name the boss uses. Mr. Fuentes has arranged everything and they will take you north further into the reservation, and then they will tell what will happen next. Your identification - everything you'll need - will be provided."

Javier stopped and snapped at Palas, whose hand was extended out to the Collie, "No scraps for the dog!"



The two police officers from the Tohono O'odham Nation were looking over their six new wards, when Eagleman heard Javier's parting grunts. He turned to see the round man and the dog disappear in the dark, headed back across the four foot fence that separated Mexico and the U.S. He turned to the men, pointing to his companion, "We are going to tie your hands with these," his associate held up plastic zip ties, "just in case someone is curious, you will be smugglers we picked up. The drive won't be too long."

The coolness of the evening came as quickly as the dark had, and Eagleman wanted to move as soon as possible. He was a ranking member of the reservation's police force, but even his position had boundaries; and the fear of discovery that motivated him was not having to face American justice, but having to face the justice of the Fuentes cartel - not just for himself, but his family.

After Palas passed Eagleman a fat manila envelope, filled with the “appreciation” of Senor Fuentes Palas noted, the two police vehicles were loaded and moving over the rugged and pitch black pathways that would take them close to Sells, Arizona—the capital of the Tohono O’odham Nation. The reservation, situated in the Sonora Desert that spread across southcentral Arizona and into northwestern Mexico was remote and desolate, with an astonishing combination of desert valleys, plains and mountains that extended over three million acres with only 10,000 inhabitants. Its seventy-four mile border with Mexico was a notorious crossing point for both human and drug traffic—and violence—and was dotted with U.S. Border Patrol outposts.

Which was why Eagleman, with his police credentials and instant access to information was worth his high price to the cartel. On this night, the Border Patrol was acting on a tip from a high level source in the Mexican government that a major drug run was underway many miles to the east, along the extremely rugged and dangerous Baboquivari Mountains.

Eagleman smiled at his good fortune, and marveled at the reach of Senor Fuentes, as the two police SUV’s drove into the dark night.



Outside of Sells, the two police vehicles pulled into what appeared to be an abandoned ranch. The house looked like just one more of the ramshackle homes in the remote places of the Nation, and the adjacent barn was about to collapse. It had been a victim of too much hope placed upon the arid and unforgiving Sonora Desert.

The house was dark with only one faint light visible as they pulled up. While the passengers were unloading, various lights went on in the house and finally an outdoor floodlight lit up. The front door opened and a young woman stood in the frame, watching as the men were released from the plastic ties that held their hands.

Eagleman looked to the young woman, then the men. “This is Carmen. She will feed you and take care of anything you need.” Carmen smiled at them, her dark hair and slim figure shimmering under the harsh light. Her father was Tohono O’odham, but her mother was a slim Irish woman with auburn hair and green eyes, and Carmen had inherited the slim form and green eyes. Like a majority of the Nation’s members, she was raised off the reservation, and had met Eagleman at a hotel conference. She was the event facilitator and her efficiency and charm impressed him, and he found a place for her in the Nation’s police department and quickly introduced her into his real business; *Senor Fuentes*. Great wealth had its benefits.

Carmen spoke English, Spanish and the O’odham language, but started out in English, guessing that the extreme effort to sneak these men into the country when they weren’t bringing in drugs, meant that they were the best men the cartel had, and spoke English. “Right this way gentlemen, we have breakfast and coffee for you.”

With the men seated and eating, Eagleman asked her if everything was ready. “Of course. Everything is done.” Eagleman nodded and Carmen produced a large package and sorted through it. Next to the six men she placed a wallet, each with a driver’s license from various U.S localities, ten \$20 bills, and a pre-paid Visa card. Finally, she

handed each man a pre-paid cell phone, and gave Palas three. "If you call anyone, anyone other than to these men, you must destroy the phone, do you understand?" Palas nodded while he wiped his mouth. "Two Toyotas are parked out back with full tanks. Follow the directions *exactly*, and don't stop until you've passed Tucson. It is important that you not stop. Under no circumstances break any traffic laws, and keep a couple of cars between you so you don't draw attention."

She turned to Eagleman, who turned to Palas. "When you pass Tucson, I'll call you with directions to the final stop. When you get there, you will find two new cars waiting for you with the weapons Senor Fuentes requested."

One of the men asked, "How will you know we've passed Tucson?"

"We'll know, don't concern yourself with that." Eagleman looked at the men then nodded at Palas.

Palas finally stood up, leaning on his walking stick, and smiled, trying to keep his saliva from dripping between his open lips. "We're taking a trip north my friends. Senor Fuentes has someone close to the authorities – someone who provided important information on the people who did this, and he has a very special job for us."

As Palas explained the plans and objectives of the trip, heads was bobbing up and down in agreement. Every member of the cartel understood the naked and brutal unwritten code under which they lived – or died. Accounts always must be settled.

Eagleman gave the six men who left, split up in the two vehicles, a few minutes head start. Then he left with his partner to follow them until they reached Interstate 19 which would take them straight to Tucson, where another vehicle waited to discreetly follow them.



Once Eagleman was gone, Carmen made a sprint for the barn to recover the hidden cell phone. It was a "burner" or pre-paid phone, and it was to be used only in the case of emergency. To use it, she would have a very limited time span while Eagleman was off shadowing the cartel men off the reservation. She didn't dare fire up the phone on the ranch, for fear that its whereabouts might be detected. She'd been assured that couldn't happen, but her life was the cost if that wasn't *exactly* true. It wasn't worth the risk.

Recovering the phone she climbed into her truck and went in the opposite direction of Eagleman, towards Sells, where she knew she'd pick up good reception.

After driving for several miles she pulled over and turned on the cell phone. With a good signal, she dialed the only number she was ever to use the phone for, praying that it was answered and didn't go to voice mail.

"Yes."

"Thank God you picked up, it's me. Listen, this couldn't wait until our regular debriefing. I've got something really big going on here – and really dangerous."

"Go on."

Carmen spoke at breakneck speed, telling the Sheriff everything she'd heard at the house concerning the cartel's plan.

“Anything else?”

Carmen finished with the weapons they’d pick up after Tucson; “They’ve got some real firepower waiting. Military M-4’s with laser sights, Beretta M-9 side arms, and, *get this*, smoke grenades and live grenades. Somehow they’ve got an Army connection, go figure?”

“Wow.” There was silence on the line for a few moments. Finally the Sheriff spoke softly. “You did the right thing, Carmen. Now, the question is how I handle this. Even if we had time to intercept them – which we don’t – they’ll know they have a leak down here, and you’re the newest person. If the Feds go romping in, same thing, your cover will be blown. They won’t care, *but we will*. It took too long to get you inside the Nation.” There was more silence. “Okay, let me handle it. Somehow I’m going to make it happen the right way. Head on back, Carmen, keep a low profile and we’ll meet at our usual time and place.”

When she finished, Carmen dismantled the phone and destroyed it. She couldn’t risk being caught with it in case she wasn’t back at the ranch by the time Eagleman and his companion returned.



Sheriff Nathan Hutson was considered a senior sheriff in the southwestern United States, with nearly thirty years of continuous service in one of the most difficult counties in the country. He had battled the cartels on his home turf, as well as the plague of drugs, gangs, human trafficking and child prostitution. He was well known and well connected – *and he was very careful*.

He’d learned the hard way over the years that the political system by and large had morphed into a structure largely populated by two types of bad people, precariously held together with too few good people in between. From the county building, the court house, the state house, all the way to Washington there were the glory hounds out to make a name for themselves regardless of the cost to anyone or anything; or worse, to his way of mind, there were those who didn’t care what went on, as long as they got a cut of the action.

His dilemma was with the latter. Drugs were a \$100 billion plus dollar business in the U.S. alone, and it was all in cash and tax free. *Somehow*, the money moved up and down the financial chain with little trouble, and *somehow* only a miniscule amount was every intercepted. The facts as he observed them over the years hardened him like concrete, and he had come to believe that this wasn’t an accident, or an oversight. It was the simple fact that the political government itself was corrupted in process as well as procedure, *and you couldn’t be too careful*.

He had handpicked and trained Carmen to do just what she was doing. If he alerted the Feds, or the state police to the events he’d just learned about from his informant, there was no telling where it would go, or end. The only thing he knew for sure was that Carmen would be expendable. The priorities of the bigger, political agencies would overwhelm the good – and would crush the innocent without mercy.

That was not an option, he reasoned.

He reached for his cell phone and dialed the cell phone number he had for Gus Smith, the Sheriff of Garfield County, Colorado. It was the only secure way he could start the process, mindful of the report Carmen had just given him that someone in Colorado was passing information to the cartel. The two men had spent time together on several occasions during conventions and law enforcement training seminars, and Sheriff Hutson had been one of his biggest supporters during the scandals that led to Gus Smith begin elected Sheriff.

He was sure that Gus would see the wisdom in his thinking.

Chapter 55

It was a cloudless Saturday on the Western Slope of Colorado, with the soft blue sky feathered on the edge with a darker blue. Spread out in the fold created by the Colorado River and bound in by plateaus and mountains, the tiny town of Parachute sat along Interstate 70 between Grand Junction to the west and Glenwood Springs to the east.

Coming from Grand Junction, Daniel and Meriam Patterson's church was off an exit just before town. On one side of the exit at the end of the road was a gas station and deli and sandwich shop, and under the overpass on the other side of I-70 was the *Grand Valley Bible Church* sitting by itself – an oasis for the faithful and a shelter for the broken and weary.

For over twenty years the church had grown in spite of the out of the way location, drawing members from not only the immediate area, but from as far away as Glenwood Springs and Grand Junction. The Pattersons were seasoned and hardened warriors of faith. They had come to Colorado in their twenties, newly married, determined to bloom where they felt planted.

Today would be an unbelievable day even by the standards of the Grand Valley Bible Church, which was accustomed to seeing the incredible things God could do in the life of the church; two couples, forever linked together by the horrific events of three months ago, would be married in a double ceremony.

Jamie Gallagher and Rosario Gomez would seal a promise that Rosario had heard spoken to her on top of the mountain, while surrounded by killers and drug dealers.

Tommy Adkins and Heather Barrington would also be married. The life-changing events on the mountain had rocked Tommy's faith and buried him in skepticism in the weeks that followed the killing of two men. He could intellectually justify what he had done; *he had saved innocent lives and he had deterred evil*, as Sharon Toro had reminded him several times.

But, in bed at night, with the lights out, he could only see the blank face of Henry as the bullet ripped through his head, and the reeling body and panicked face of the Mexican cartel member as he desperately tried to lift his weapon to fire at Tommy. In his memory he could feel the motion of his fingers as they gently pulled the ribbed trigger down once, then again, and the sight of the man crumpling in front of him like a wadded up piece of paper.

Both dead men waited on the edge of his sleep for the opportunity to torment him.

It was Daniel Patterson that brought him back. Tommy and Daniel began taking extended walks where Tommy would talk about his new doubts about God, why bad things happened, his own worth, and his guilt. Daniel would just listen. Finally, when the long silence came, Daniel would remind his young friend that being "*out of bounds*" with God was central to the human condition, and central to pursuing the deep truths of God.

“Tommy, if you don’t question God, if you don’t question what we do or don’t do, then you don’t have real faith. God is never offended by a questioning mind. An untested faith is no faith at all.”

On one walk, Tommy looked at Daniel and softly said, “Thank you, I get it. I’m at peace. God *did* answer me, He just did it through you and Heather.” As they walked on Daniel simply listened. Tommy continued; “Heather and I have been engaged for a long time. I didn’t want to get married until I could get her a fancy ring, and a nice place to live. I was trapped by pride, I guess.” There was a hopeful note in this voice. “Now I realize that being grateful and happy, being faithful and doing the right thing at the right time—you can’t pick and choose those things. They all are part of the same thing, aren’t they?”

Daniel Patterson just smiled.



Gus and Sam had been working nearly non-stop for twenty-four hours, snatching sleep in bits and pieces, while Olivia Sanders managed the headquarters and covered their absence. They had done all of the planning outside of their office and the country building, sitting in their trucks, or on site, to insure there were no security slips. Gus cautioned them both several times, “Not a word about what we’re up to can leak—we have to protect Sheriff Hutson’s source in Arizona and our own people.”

Olivia had quietly moved weapons to an unused exit area in the headquarters, where Gus and Sam met her, and picked them up so that they could preposition them. They had also randomly rented six plain sedans, and made plans to pick up a small bus.

Finally, they felt they were ready. Dressed in civilian clothes they split up. While Gus, driving a borrowed flower delivery van, went to meet with Daniel Patterson, Sam was calling ten of the most seasoned and trusted Deputies in the department, with instructions for them to assemble at an empty parking lot in Glenwood Springs, and wear their best civilian clothes.

Included were the six Deputies who had participated in the raid on the drug camp three months earlier. As each person arrived Sam told them to leave their radios and cell phones in their Sheriff Department vehicles. “Today, we can’t be careful enough,” he told them cryptically.

Sam detailed the operation down to the smallest detail, and then paired the officers. Gus and Sam had determined that wearing portable radios with ear pieces would be too dangerous and too obvious, so there would be no person to person communication devices. Each pair of Deputies would need to be clear on where they were stationed and the final commands for action.

When the operational briefing was over, Sam turned to the Deputies. “If anyone is *uncomfortable* with what we’re doing here today, you just have to say so. This isn’t your normal police operation, and we’re coloring right up to the lines, may a little over, so we understand if some of you might be nervous. There will be no hard feelings—Gus, me—we won’t think a thing about it if you want to pass this up. Some of you have small children, families, we get it.”

Sam looked around the crowd of Deputies and no one moved. "Anyone?" After a prolonged silence, Deputy LaBrash stepped up.

"There isn't one of us who *wouldn't* want to be here right now, Sam. We get a chance to make something right today." Every head in the group was nodding in agreement.

Sam nodded back in unspoken appreciation; "Okay, let's get this show on the road. Remember, no one knows what is going on here but us, no phone calls, no radio traffic."

The SUV's were moved to the back of the lot, and the Deputies split up into five rented sedans and each team received a pre-paid cell phone and a list of cell numbers. Sam had a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic patrol rifle, with extra magazines clips for each Deputy, to augment the standard issue Remington shotguns all prepositioned, he explained. Sam issued one last bit of instruction. "You all have to look causal and natural, don't worry about *them*, worry about going home tonight, safe and sound."

At the same time Gus was in Parachute, laying out his plan to Daniel. When Gus was finished taking Daniel through the plan in detail, he was met with silence. "You okay?"

Daniel looked bewildered. "Well, I've got a couple hundred people coming to this wedding. It's my responsibility to make sure they're safe. But, then again, how can I possibly say no? This is too important. I have to trust you, don't I? Just take me through it on more time."



Palas and his men had spent the night at a house in Grand Junction, owned by *Armada Restoration Systems*, a Fuentes cartel front corporation based in Denver. Food had been provided, with the exception of beer. *Senor Fuentes has a long reach*, Palas thought. *He's nearly a thousand miles away, and we still can't have a beer.*

In the early morning Saturday, Palas had sent out three men to drive to Parachute and look over the church property, pick locations and come back with photos.

Two men returned and enthusiastically reported that they had taken twenty or so photos of the property and passed the camera around for everyone to study. The church property was laid out like a "U," with two wings going back from the church itself, located in the front. The wing on the left contained classrooms and meeting rooms, and a shorter wing on the right was a domestic living area and a large kitchen.

Even better to Palas was seeing the photos of how isolated the property was. Other photos showed that the property could barely be seen from the other side of the freeway or the gas station at the bottom of the I-70 exit on the eastbound side. There were no other businesses or homes on the other side of the underpass—just the church and the entrance to west bound I-70. One of the men explained that, "Even if a car was turning up the ramp to the freeway on that side, it would be very difficult to see what was happening at the church. You'll see a couple of photos showing the view from the west bound entrance."

The other man broke in without a pause. "In front of the property is a large parking lot. We could be in and out and west bound in five minutes and no one would know."

"How do we get in?" Palas wiped the spittle from his chin.

"Since the wedding is in the chapel, *surprise* is on our side, Palas. I can see no entrance to the church except from the front. There may be a passageway inside to the back, but we have to come in the front. You see here," the man brought up a picture of the front door, "this is a double entryway, and inside the doors is a little foyer about six feet deep, with two more doors."

Palas was very pleased. "This is good, very good. Did you see any activity?"

The first presenter spoke again, "We saw a large delivery truck pull onto the property, but we couldn't see what they were dropping off. Nothing unusual. Three men, unloaded stuff, I think it was equipment for catering, maybe food? Then a flower truck came, just one man. The truck wasn't there too long and left."

Palas, trying to wipe his mouth again asked, "Did you see any security?"

"Nothing, nothing at all that we could see. There isn't even a security camera. We left Ricardo there, he's watching from near the underpass, out of sight. He'll call if he sees something."

Palas was perspiring and a little drool found its way onto his chin again, but he didn't stop to wipe it off. "This is excellent, just excellent. It makes the trip worth it. Here's what we do, gather around."

Speaking slowly, so there was no misunderstanding and to keep his slurred speech to a minimum, Palas went step by step through his plan. Finally he ended, "When we get there, you," he pointed to the second presenter, "pick Ricardo up so he doesn't have to be exposed crossing the parking lot. Call him and give him the plan, and make sure there are no police, and that our friends are there."



Guests to the two o'clock wedding began arriving at one o'clock. By Parachute standards it was a big event. The grooms and brides and attendants were all inside the church building early while the Pattersons stationed themselves at the front door and purposely welcomed each guest as they came up to the sanctuary doors, and ushers made sure everyone was escorted inside. Judith and Sam came in, with Sam in his best suit jacket and no tie, which made the Pattersons laugh, recalling the one year memorial service for Richard Murray, where every man succumbed to conspiracy of wives and wore neckties.

Not long afterwards, Gus and Mary showed up, and like Sam, Gus was wearing his best suit coat and slacks and no tie. Parents and friends of Jamie and Rosario, and Tommy and Heather began arriving, and over the next hour guests continued coming, along with the Sheriff's Deputies, trickling in, blending perfectly with the majority of guests.

At two o'clock an unseen bell rang out from the church as a few stragglers were scurrying into the church. Both sets of doors were opened wide. First Tyler came in, beaming like a spotlight was on him, and dressed in the first suit he had ever worn.

After a minute, Rosario and her father, and then Heather and her father came through the doors. Both wore simple white wedding dresses – and both were smiling, radiant and beautiful beyond the words that others would use to describe them that day.

Rosario at first had resisted the idea of a public, big wedding. She felt unworthy of the effort. But with the guidance of the Pattersons, Sharon, and Jamie, she made the first outreach to her father and mother after her long years of absence. To her amazement, there was a reunion of tears and instant reconciliation. Her mother and father had never given up on her, believing that one day she would reach out to them. They both were home when her call came through, and the words were far fewer than the tears.

“I’m so sorry, forgive me please,” she pleaded.

“That you are alive and safe, that is all we have ever wanted to know. We have never stopped praying for you,” her mother told her between the tears.

“I know. I always knew.”

The years on the street and in addiction were washed from her mind like dirt coming out in the wash. She now reveled in gratitude for the ceremony; if this wedding was the stamp of an ancient imprimatur upon her new life, it was also the official death certificate for her old one.

Heather on the other hand had always wanted a perfect, well planned wedding that fit in her mind’s eye the extravagant ceremony she dreamed of as a young girl, and the safety and security that she imagined that secured. Somewhere in the brutal events on the mountain that had changed the man she loved, she saw that she was changed as well. She was grateful that he had come home physically unhurt. But he had come home hurt in his heart, and as Tommy spent time with Daniel Patterson, she realized that she had been hurt on that mountain too. They went through that emotion together, and now, she understood that the God they knew, and the love they shared, were the important and the enduring things that would make their life together whole and nothing else was required.

The doors of the church shut behind the two women.



Gus’s phone buzzed in his pocket, and he could tell by the look on Sam’s face his had as well. Two Deputies in two different cars had remained in their parked cars, in the middle of the packed parking lot. The text was simple: *They are on the move*. Gus then Sam quietly excused themselves.



The two sedans pulled to within fifteen feet of the front doors of the church along the fire lane, as though they’d be letting off passengers. After ten minutes had passed and no last minute guests had arrived, Palas nodded to the men. He watched as all five moved forward, each armed with Army issued M-4 Carbines that had been stolen from a National Guard armory in Worchester, Massachusetts. They were capable of fully automatic fire with a 30 round magazine, and each man carried two additional clips, in addition to a 9mm sidearm, with an extra magazine. Dressed in khakis, with black

Kevlar vests, the men pulled down black ski masks just prior to breaching the doorway to the sanctuary.



Daniel Patterson had finished his opening prayers, and the two fathers had each read a passage from Scripture. Al Morales had read a poem that the grooms had chosen together. When the pianist and a singer were finishing performing a short selection of songs, Daniel gripped the hand of his wife and squeezed it. When the last note softly ended, he stood in front of the gathering and smiled, his silver hair shining in the afternoon sun. He always kept his wedding homilies short and to the point, but they were filled with the *passion of God* for His people. He considered the marriage of believers a divine moment, where a man and a woman came into the union of oneness with God.

“Dear brothers and sisters, today we are gathered in a solemn ceremony that rides the echo of a glorious tradition that reaches thousands of years back – linking one generation to another to another. It is a divine encounter, a Holy moment, where God does for us, that which we cannot do for ourselves...”



Palas’ men turned the knobs and pushed hard going into the church low, then coming to the inner doors, pushed them open in one move, hoping to catch the wedding party unaware. The targets were the two grooms, Jamie and Tommy, Rosario, then Deputy Sharon Toro and her husband, a tall black man. In addition, but less important, they had photos from the Garfield County Sheriff’s Department website of the Sheriff, Gus Smith, and his primary Deputy. Their orders were very clear – kill them all.

Instantaneously, each of the men knew the shuffling of their own feet and the mechanical clicks and clacks of their own gear was echoing off the walls.

The sanctuary was empty.

The five men stood looking at the empty pews and then at each other, and were speechless. With M-4’s shouldered, they scanned the room, one corner to the other. They were alone.

The men relaxed their stances and moved cautiously forward down the center aisle. The box like interior had wooden pews and the side walls had smallish windows, that had inserted in them hand painted scenes from the Bible. Near the front both side walls were obscured by drapes and banners that displayed Scripture quotations. The stage area was utilitarian, a wooden platform and podium, side curtains, and assorted chairs for the choir. A large plain cross captured the center of the rear wall, with solid doors on each side that obviously led to two wings of the building. To either side of the cross were two large round stained glass windows – that almost seemed out of place in the otherwise plain chapel.

A faint voice could be heard from somewhere in the back and one of the men held up his hand for the others to hold their position and he walked up on the stage. Moving to the large window to his left he peered out through the distorted optics of the stained

glass, but could clearly see that there was a center courtyard created by the U shaped buildings. He shook his head in anger at himself for not realizing the possibility of the courtyard, even though the wedding announcement specifically said the chapel. The man moved his head across the glass and caught a glimpse of the very large tent set up, under which there were row after row of folding chairs, with the aisle chairs festooned in ribbon and flowers. There were several hundred people but he couldn't quite see where the voice was coming from, but it sounded like a preacher. He could just see a tiny bit of the white gowns and white veils on the brides sitting in the very front.

He whispered to the waiting men, "There is a courtyard out here, that's where they are."

Seemingly out of nowhere, in a fraction of a second, Gus Smith's towering frame was standing parallel to the man at the stained glass window, with his Remington 870 12 gauge shotgun only twelve inches from his head. The man didn't have even a breath of time to react. "Lay the gun down gently on the floor, *I'll tell you one time only*. Do you understand?" The look of disbelief in the man eyes, turned to fear. Gus could smell it. He bent slowly and set the M-4 on the tile floor. "Now the handgun," Gus ordered.

The four other men had been watching their friend at the window, their weapons relaxed, and in the fraction of a second that Gus had appeared, they found themselves surrounded by six Deputies in plain clothes coming from different directions, each with a weapon pointed at them. The Deputies quickly disarmed the men and had them on their knees and handcuffed, with their ski masks off, when Gus walked off the stage stairs to the main aisle with his handcuffed prisoner, the M-4 slung on his shoulder. Deputy LaBrash nodded to Gus as the Deputies were going pocket to pocket with their captives. Finally one of the Deputies said, "Okay, they're clean now, weapons and magazines secure. You won't believe this, but they had two live grenades in here as well."

The words had not completely registered with Gus when a muffled, but distinct, gunshot went off in the front of the church. "Keep an eye on 'em!" Gus bolted to the door and out to find Sam and another Deputy looking inside a late model sedan.

Sam looked up at the advancing Sheriff. "Driver shot himself as soon as he realized we were on him—we couldn't get to him fast enough to stop him." He shrugged his shoulders. "But look at this."

Gus looked at the grim scene in the front seat. The man had put the gun to the side of his head and fired. But the top of his shaved head had a huge scar and a smaller scar. Gus looked at Sam; "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Found this wallet, and ID, but I can't run it here. But sure seems to fit, I'd say he's the guy Sharon worked over up on the mountain. Why 'ya think he shot himself though?"

"Who knows? But this is a brazen operation, broad daylight, all funded and set up by the Fuentes boys - who lost people and a lot of cocaine up here - my guess is that he was a dead man if he didn't get this done."

Sam thought it sounded about right and nodded. "I think we better put these fine folks on suicide watch too, pull shoe laces, belts—the whole deal." He pointed to the men being led out of the church.

"Not a bad idea." Gus let out a huge breath and slapped Sam on the back. "I'll call the feds tomorrow—assuming they don't get wind of this beforehand. Man, are they ever going to be screaming and yelling." Gus smiled. "How far out is the bus?"

Sam was dialing his cell phone, and repeated the question. Olivia was nothing if not efficient. "Olivia had it parked at the café, coming over right now."

Gus smiled again. "I love it when a plan works Sam. Let's have LaBrash get these guys loaded on the bus and headed downtown, and we need to get this car out of here before the wedding guests start to leave. I'd hate to see the headlines tomorrow."

"Oh yeah," Sam smirked. "May not be too good no matter what."



During his remarks for the two couples he was about to marry, Daniel couldn't help but notice that the two Deputies in street clothes kept their bodies physically against the door to the church building. The ushers had instructions to only let guests use the restrooms in the education wing, to control access to the sanctuary. At one point the two Deputies seemed to be alerted to something, and one of the Deputies left. He came back in only a minute and was smiling. He nodded to the pastor as he was closing his homily.

When Daniel looked up again both men were gone.



While the two couples stood before Daniel Patterson and exchanged the wedding vows they had jointly decided on, Gus, Sam, and their men secured the front parking lot, locked down the five prisoners on a 15 passenger transportation bus that had come from a car rental facility, to deflect attention. It was already on its way to the jail facility in Glenwood Springs, escorted by five Deputies. Several wedding attendees had come and gone and didn't pay the slightest bit of attention to the activities in the parking lot, but Sam couldn't help but keep a wary eye on them until they drove off.

Olivia had alerted the County coroner, who was in route, and the men had taken Palas' car to the far edge of the property, and parked one of the rentals right next to it. A florist's van that Gus had used earlier, pulled up and all of the collected weapons were loaded, and in only minutes a Deputy was driving the van back to Glenwood Springs.

"Wow." Gus looked at his watch then Sam as the last details were finished. "This is unbelievable. Instead of a shootout and bodies lying everywhere, we've got five bad guys to give to someone, and we've got a couple of grooms, brides and Sharon alive and well. Don't think a wedding day can go much better than that!" Both men broke out in nervous laughter.

"Yeah, 'ya think?" Sam waved Gus on to follow him. They entered the courtyard as the ceremony was ending and took their places next to their curious wives. "I was going to send a search team after you," Judith cracked. Sam wiggled uncomfortably. "What's going on?"

Sam's non-answer was left alone.

As the festivities moved inside the education wing for the reception, Daniel grabbed Gus's arm and dragged him to a corner with Miriam close at hand. Daniel looked a bit ashen. "I've never been so scared in my life. What's going on now?"

"All's well." Gus looked around to make sure there was no one in earshot. "We arrested them in the church, totally by surprise. We didn't fire a shot. Be honest, it worked better than I could ever have expected. They had a guy waiting outside in a car, who shot himself when he saw he was going to be caught. But, the parking lot is clear, the bad guys are on their way to lock up." Gus looked around again.

"Thank God," was all Daniel could manage for the moment. "When we were meeting guests at the door and the ushers were shuffling them out the door into the courtyard, I just kept thinking we were letting these murderers into the wedding. I was shaking, honest."

"You did a great job, brother. *A great job.* They had too much firepower to sneak in, believe me, they came ready for a massacre. My Deputies deserve the credit, they had to hold their spaces behind those curtains on the side of the sanctuary and not make a sound. But, it worked."

"Now what?" Miriam looked as pale as her husband.

"Now *nothing*. You don't know anything about anything. No matter what, *this is on me*, not you. You can't ever talk about this - to anyone. Right?"

The three pairs of hands folded over each other in solidarity as Mary came up on them quickly, smiling and chuckling. "Looks like a conspiracy to me." The Pattersons were being hailed by guests and left, leaving Mary to grill her husband. "Okay, what's going on?"

"Nothing, just chatting about how great this has been."

"How would you know, you were gone almost the whole time? Obviously something was going on, and you've been perspiring pretty good." Mary shook her head up and down knowingly.

"Sorry, some issues came up." He looked down at Mary's beat up, frayed Bible. "You brought your Bible, you thinking of sharing that letter today?"

"Hmm, divert the discussion, a not-so-unusual *Gus* trick." Mary stared at her husband for a moment, then followed up on his comment about the letter. "No, I don't think so. I was thinking that it was something I might share with the newlyweds, but then the more I thought about it, the more I thought it wasn't the right time. Maybe it never will be." Mary looked down as though the letter from her former husband, who had written it to her just before he died, could talk.

Floyd Marshall and Sharon Toro walked into the discussion between Gus and Mary. "Interrupting?" Sharon questioned.

"No, not at all," Mary seemed to delight in the diversion, and the two woman immediately fell into an animated discussion over the wedding, while Floyd managed to turn Gus away from the conversation. "What's going on Gus?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean something is going on and you are being very mysterious, cagy."

"Nope. I'm just doing what I have to do Floyd."

"Need to know basis, huh?"

"I am in the same position that you were in three months ago, you remember that, right? I've been dragged into something that I can't really talk about. Maybe in a while. Tell you what, maybe we can sit down and have a beer one day; you can tell me about helicopters and cocaine, and dead guys in barns. I can tell you about bad guys and good kids getting married."

Floyd smiled at his friend. "Fair enough."

Mary and Sharon reengaged the two men, and Sharon's police instincts were on full alert. "So, you gonna to tell us what's going on?" Floyd looked at Gus and smiled.

Gus just shook his head. "Don't know what you mean Sharon."

"I'm a cop Gus. Deputies piling in, all in street clothes. You and Sam disappear. What's up?"

"We're picking up pieces, Sharon, just picking up pieces."

As if on cue, Al Morales walked out of the reception area and joined his friends, looking from person to person. He smiled, "Okay, what's going on? I know something is going on."

The foursome began chuckling.

Epilogue

The days, then weeks melted away and Thanksgiving was close. After the initial shock and excitement of a major crime bust in sleepy Garfield County played itself out in the media, Gus faced withering pressure from the various Federal law enforcement agencies who wanted a lot more answers than Gus would provide. When the Feds identified the five cartel members, they were transferred to the FBI for various outstanding federal charges, and a variety of new charges including the possession of stolen U.S. military equipment, and explosives, with the possibility of terrorist intent.

Gus figured, rightly, that a number of Federal agencies were going to have a crack at draining every last ounce of intelligence they could get from the prisoners concerning the operations of the Fuentes cartel family in Northern Mexico.

The State Police and County Board were asking lots of questions about “the process” in the Sheriff’s Department, and the County Attorney threatened an official investigation, but Gus’s story remained unchanged: He received a credible tip only hours before an impending assault on the church – and there was simply no time to bring in assisting agencies. He was empathic, even defiant. He had worked “outside the box,” perhaps, but he was within the law and the arrests were clean and would hold up in court. The plot involved the assassination attempt on two Deputy Sheriffs who were directly involved in destroying a methamphetamine lab and killing two drug dealers in the mountains (an incident that itself had raised more questions than there were answers for). His consistent lack of detail and the gaps in proper paperwork, Gus explained, was driven by extreme danger to the County and its citizens, nothing more.

All of what he told the various parties was technically correct, and, of course, he reminded himself that the truth was he still had no idea what actually happened with Floyd Marshall and Martin, the ranch and the helicopter – he only had suspicions. The dead man at the barn, Julio Mena, had officially been ruled a suicide. As for the drug bust on the mountain, Deputy Atkins clearly acted in self-defense while in grave danger. Some paperwork seemed to be missing or sketchy, but that didn’t negate the outcome – lives saved and a destroyed drug operation.

When the drug camp on the mountain had been raided, there were only a handful of people still there, none of whom had serious prior arrest records and since the evidence of their direct involvement in the manufacture or distribution of drugs was circumstantial, at best, they were quickly released; it was unfortunate that there was miscommunication between the Sheriff’s Department and the Feds and they were released before the FBI could interview them. The real operators were either dead or captured. A few may have escaped. Who knew? Gus surmised in his official report that there was no way to verify all the events in the chaos surrounding the intense hunt for a kidnapped senior Deputy, in the remote mountains without communications.

The lone survivor of the gun fight involving Deputy Atkins claimed a third party had driven a knife into his leg that put him in the hospital for a month. But the description was determined too vague for further investigation, and there seemed to be

no evidence to support the theory. Likewise, the man's claim that there was a minor child and woman, who worked for an unidentified "boss man" named Martin, was "unsubstantiated" by any evidence or other witnesses, and not included in the official report.

If the questions became too uncomfortable, Gus would stick his chest out; his brilliant blue eyes would narrow and his head would lift in indignation. "I did what I had to do to keep our county and its citizens safe."

It was finally public opinion in the county that forced the issue off the agenda of the politicians. The county's citizens looked very favorably on the Sheriff's actions, based on what they *did* know: two Deputies were heroes, two drug dealers were dead, and a drug operation was run out of the county. As a bonus, the planned attack at the church ended without violence and there was not even a shot fired, other than a suicide of the ring leader.

Even the County Attorney finally suggested publically that his office was "helpful" in the Sheriff's investigations and "approved" of the plan in advance, in an effort to get on the right side of public sentiment and to use the success of the operation in his upcoming re-election.



Only days before Thanksgiving, Gus's cell phone rang with *No Caller ID Available* and the caller spoke without identifying himself; "Can you talk?"

Gus, out an abundance of caution, told the caller that he'd call him right back, which he did on a new pre-paid cell phone, which made him feel a bit uncomfortable he realized.

"It's me," he said to Sheriff Nathan Hutson in Arizona. "I needed to change to a secure phone. I've had a lot of attention, and I'm a bit skittish, honestly. I don't trust anyone right now. No one is too happy with me — *except the people who weren't killed, 'ya know?*"

Sheriff Hutson laughed, "Yeah, funny how that works isn't it? I'm glad you're being extra careful, you should be. I'm on a burner too." Gus was flabbergasted. One of the most respected law enforcement officers in the country was on a throw away phone.

"You okay up there?"

Gus was flattered. "Yes, I'm good, keeping my head down. Things are slowing cooling down."

"I'm just like you, I don't want to be the nail sticking above the board that someone uses a hammer on."

"How's our friend?"

"Good, as a matter of fact that's why I'm calling. Seems the boys down south are in crisis mode. They have five senior guys caught red-handed, and they're afraid they are spilling their guts out to the FBI, DEA and anyone else who can get their hands on them."

"Pretty good guess I'd say."

“Agreed. They’re busy changing personnel, routes, and how they handle finances, just in case. The two gentlemen at the reservation are in time out. Our mutual friend has returned to her job, and she’s fine.”

“Great news.”

“Yeah. I also want to remind you, the bad guys have someone who is giving them information about your Department, so be careful. Right now they all think the leak had to happen in Colorado, or their guys would’ve never made it to the church in the first place. After all, who in their right mind would bait a bunch of killers into a church wedding?”

“Just what I was thinking.”

Hudson snorted out a laugh. “We’ll keep our ears to the ground down here, and if we hear that there is anything coming back your way, we’ll holler, ‘ya hear?”

“I hear, thank you for all you’ve done my friend.”

“No worries, you did good up there. Real good.”



On Thanksgiving Day, Floyd and Sharon hosted a huge meal at the Miner’s Trail. They prepared and served a banquet in the large dining hall and invited everyone who had a part of the ordeal on the mountain, or involved in stopping the massacre before it happened at the church. Gus and Mary, Sam and Judith, all the Deputies, Daniel and Miriam Patterson, Jamie and Rosario with Tyler, Tommy and Heather, and Al Morales were all there.

It was much more than a circle of friends. It was a band of warriors, of various types.

After the feasting and laughing and singing, the cold evening air rolled over the mountain, and the large fireplace was started and soon the room glowed in warmth. Desserts were set out along with coffee, hot chocolate and cider.

The mood changed with the evening. A quiet came over the group. Then little side stories that were discussed between two or three people about the day on the mountain, or the church, became the whole group’s discussion. Floyd and Sharon just listened as they held hands. Gus and Sam were quiet as they listened to pieces of stories they’d not heard, or events they didn’t even know about.

Floyd squeezed his wife’s hand and she leaned into his body. “Listening to all of this makes me feel mighty glad to have you home safe and sound, Deputy Toro.”

Sharon smiled a smile Floyd couldn’t see. “I was kinda thinking I’m glad you took down those helicopter photos in the office, Mr. Marshall.”

The End.

Soli Deo Gloria

The White River Series began with my incredible partner and wife, Colleen, who after reading the draft of my first book, *One Mountain at a Time*, suggested a series. Since I had disregarded her advice to write books for several decades, I didn't dare ignore her this time. I knew she was right, again.

While each of the books are very different, they all share my intention and hope that they are the type of "good reading" that sticks with you like hot chocolate on a cold night; exploring issues that impact our lives and our culture, and sprinkled with personal stories that are authentic, challenging and encouraging.

As always, the great Storyteller leads the way, I only follow.

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Author's note: While the central dramas in *Justice on the Mountain* are drawn from actual events, the locations of those events vary. The characters and their personal stories in this book are entirely fictional, as are all of the names.

About the Author

After decades of writing non-fiction, Mike Giere debuts his first fiction novel, *One Mountain at a Time*, in 2015. His new novel is the first of five in the “White River Series,” that bring together real life adventures on Colorado’s famed Western Slope, with stories of faith, hope and love.

Giere’s extensive non-fiction writing on current affairs, politics, foreign policy and issues of faith have been seen in national publications including *The Washington Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Human Events* among others, as well as numerous national blogs. In addition, he has written major studies and monographs for various federal agencies, including the Department of State (*The Foreign Policy of the People’s Revolutionary Government of Granada*).

Originally from Texas, Giere now lives in Virginia with his wife, Colleen. They have three grown children and three grandchildren.