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Wolves Smile When They Kill

By

Isaac Innes

Chapter One

I had a dream when I was very young. In the dream, I looked down on a sweeping plain of grass that was backlit by a dying sun. That sun had just disappeared over the horizon, leaving the world in that ghostly grey light before total darkness. It was enough to allow me to pick out the thousands of people walking there.

Their faces weren't blank, but had that rather softly determined expression worn by people expecting a long journey. They were neither hostile nor friendly. Their eyes were all on the distance with a distinct lack of anticipation for their intended destination. In modern, drab colored clothing from all walks of life Native American men, women, and children, walked together in near silence.

I remember I felt strange and at a loss as to why so many people were going away.

In my latter years, I often recalled that dream and puzzled over it. Had it been a message of some sort or a warning? It's nice to think yourself that important, and I was no exception, but I couldn't think what, if anything, I was supposed to do. The dream hadn't come with instructions. I never told anyone about it and that was strange considering how often I sat and wondered about whether it had some prophetic meaning I was missing. I suppose I was embarrassed about it. If I had been supposed to spring into action and save the day, I had failed miserably.

It was some comfort to remind myself of the reality of the situation: Why would Native Americans send a dream message to someone like me? I was, after all, a genetic mutt with a list of shaky ancestors connected to the family only by conversations that usually began with, *your great aunt once told me...* If I was Native American then the blood was thinned by a few generations and some sidelining on the genetic ancestry tree. Besides, I was living in the Deep South near the Gulf of Mexico, selling souvenirs to tourists and baking on the beach during my off hours. That made messianic thoughts even more ridiculous.

Don't get me wrong, I did have dreams of writing that big bestselling novel or selling my rather poor water color painting efforts to a famous gallery, but as time wore on, those dreams were becoming less likely every year. Approaching middle age was telling me to settle, become a manager of the souvenir shop, and think about retirement. I wasn't counting on a customer blowing into my shop on a hot southern morning and setting a fire under my ass.

"That isn't the Gulf Coast."

The voice came from the spinner rack containing the *five-for-a dollar* post cards. My reply was the same one it had been for my entire illustrious ten year career at Joe's Souvenirs. "I know."

I didn't look up from my own spinner rack on the register counter. It was filled with little shells attached to cheap key chains. Each shell had a name printed on it; Sandra, Sheila, Shelly, Sherry, Davis, Dermot, Devon.... They were supposed to be in alphabetical order. They weren't. Customers had taken them off and placed them back on the wrong pegs. Shandra was supposed to come before Shelly and Sheila came after Shandra. For some reason, I had made it my mission to make

sure they stayed on their proper pegs. It was an eternal wasted exercise in futility, but it passed the time.

"This is Hawaii," the voice continued testily as our spinner racks turned and competed with each other by making duel squeaking noises. "There aren't any mountains here. Why would they use a photograph of mountains as a representation of this area?"

I thought the question was rhetorical. When he suddenly waved the offending post card in front of me, leaning a bit on my counter to get into my personal space, I was surprised and perturbed. It was annoying hearing the same question all day, every day. It always gave me a fleeting feeling of being dishonest, as if I was selling a bad bootleg of real postcards that depicted the area truthfully. Rarely did customers take it up a level by waving postcards in my face and insisting I admit my dishonesty.

"Do you know how I recognize this photo?" The man's hair thin, but still retaining some blonde amongst the gray. He was wearing designer *resort wear*; shorts, polo shirt, and boat shoes that made him look as if he couldn't decide whether to board a cruise ship or play a round of golf. His stern blue eyes and disgusted expression reminded me of my days in school, when a teacher was warming up to give a good lecture.

The first thing I thought of saying was not something I could allow to pass my lips if I wanted to remain gainfully employed. The tourist would certainly complain and the manager was close at hand to take that complaint. He was somewhere in the back of the store counting boxes of pecan logs and coconut patty confections; the same ones all souvenir shops carry whether they are actually in the south, near

a beach, or even remotely in a tropical zone. I could imagine a souvenir shop in Alaska selling pecan logs and coconut patties next to walrus tusk scrimshaw.

"You've been to Hawaii?" I guessed with a fake smile plastered on my face.

"Absolutely!" the man replied. With a finger, he tapped the post card on the glass countertop and added, "I backpacked all through the Hawaiian islands. I definitely recognize this particular beach."

He didn't look like the type of man to rough it. He looked like a spoiled man with lots of disposable income who had time to complain about the validity of postcards. That implied that he also had time to waste making sure souvenir shop cashiers selling bogus postcards lost their jobs. I chose my next words carefully.

"That must have been some trip!"

I had chosen wisely. The man smiled warmly and leaned even more into my personal space. "Oh, it was!" he replied. "Best six months of my life. I'm a photographer; weddings, bar mitzvahs, baby showers, small events, usually. One day, bored out of my skull, I had a mid-life crisis. I slung on a backpack with all my photography gear and took a flight to the islands with a \$100.00 bill in my pocket and a crazy dream."

I was frowning, not seeing even a hint of the impulsive man he was describing standing before me.

The man winked and nodded. "I know you're thinking that it was a stupid thing to do. When the plane touched down I was starting to have second thoughts myself. It wasn't until I spotted a red 'I'iwi right outside the airport terminal and I took my first photo, that the fear left me completely. I knew without a doubt that I had needed to make that journey. I worked odd jobs and, yes, even begged on occasion, as I traveled. I took the most amazing photographs though, of animals,

plants, and people I would have never seen without walking that place from end to end. Those photos made me a wealthy man. So, when I tell you that is a photo of Hawaii, I'm speaking from the experience of a man who has walked every inch of the place."

"That's impressive!" I replied and actually meant it, even as I wondered what a red 'I'iwi was. Deep down, I suppose there is a gypsy in everyone longing to chuck all responsibility and security and roam the world.

The man put the postcard flat on the counter and smoothed it with one hand as if there were wrinkles. His expression was suddenly vague, as if he was reliving those good old days and maybe longing for their return. He came back to the world a moment later, with a smile and a wink, and said, "Maybe I'll do it again before I'm too old?"

He left the postcard with me and walked out of the shop without buying anything. I blinked, sighed, and left my cash register to put the postcard back in place on the five for a dollar spinner rack.

What was the sigh for? Top of the list was the aggravation of dealing with a difficult customer. I liked my days short and without incident. If I put myself in the right mental zone I could manage not to think about the time I wasted there that would have been better spent on activities that I cared about. Not that I had been doing much of that even on my days off. That would be next on the list of my reasons for a deep sigh. My creativity had taken a vacation to the other side of the moon and it wasn't showing any indication of a return trip. My paints were drying up. My watercolor books were stacked in a closet behind the endless *clothes to be washed* hamper and a few workout dumbbells that haven't been used in an exercise routine in years. My computer, with its unfinished novel forever on page

five, would likely remain on page five indefinitely. I had long ago lost interest in the plot... which if I remembered had been a western in the shades of John Wayne.

"Excuse me."

I turned from the spinner rack, not sure how long I had been standing there with my hand still on the postcard. The edge of the laminated paper caught one of my fingers and gave me a stinging paper cut. I sucked on the injured digit as I found the source of the interruption to my trip into my own personal world of regrets and lost opportunities.

My customer was elderly, but he was one of those men who stood straight and would probably look like he could move mountains until he died at a hundred and two. He was wearing a faded blue, long sleeve, button down shirt. The cloth was sturdy and not exactly factory perfect. His pants were dark gray and his dark brown leather boots were well worn. All of his clothing had that hand-made look I'd only seen in old black and white photos and in movies about pioneers. His skin was lined and browned dark by the sun into something that looked very much like his old boots. His iron gray hair fell to his shoulders and was windblown. His brown eyes were observant, but not critical. He exuded a feeling of calm friendliness. The wolf at his side was far more alarming.

I wasn't an expert, but I had seen the animals in the zoo. Don't let anyone tell you they look like a dog. They look wild, dangerous, and intelligent. This one was reddish, gray and black, and its fur was thick. Its tail was held rigidly, as if it were at attention. Its unusual blue eyes regarded me in a way that caused every primal instinct I possessed to scream, *run! He's going to eat you!* Logic reminded me of all those wise people, documentaries, and books assuring me wolves did not attack people.

"Pets aren't allowed in the store," I said automatically. My fear made my voice an octave higher than it should have been as I backed up and put the cash register counter between me and the big animal.

The man cocked his head a little and looked down at the wolf. "He's not exactly a pet," he replied.

"Is he a service animal?" I guessed doubtfully.

"I'm not certain who he serves," the man replied cryptically and then stepped closer to the counter. He leaned an arm on it and lightly tapped fingers on the glass. Those fingers were short and blunt with cracked nails. They were also as weathered by age as the rest of him. I could smell him now. He had a heavy scent, the kind people who worked outside a great deal tended to accumulate. It was the smell of sun, grass, and a long day working hard.

"Can I help you?" I attempted to fall back on my training, hoping that if I treated the situation normally things might become normal.

The man's expression became embarrassed and his smile was wistful. "I've always wondered what those pecan logs taste like. I see people coming out of here and eating them. They look good."

I had a display on the counter. I took one out of the box and put it on the glass counter top. "It's rolled nuts around a cream center," I replied and then admitted. "I've never eaten one myself."

The man eyed me and gave a little snort. "That's too bad. I can't eat them myself. I just thought you could tell me what they taste like."

The wolf made a small growling noise and brought my attention back to it immediately. I wondered about its temperament. It was still looking right at me in that too intelligent manner. It gave the appearance that it was smiling now: eyes

sparkling and mouth open and stretched back to show a lolling tongue and sharp teeth. I was a rather thin man. I was suddenly hoping that I looked too thin to eat.

I said hopefully, "He looks friendly? Where did you get him?"

The man snorted again. "I forgot I was old and went hunting alone. I fell and broke a leg. He reminds me of my arrogance." He looked up and winked at me as if sharing a joke and then said, as if it explained everything, "He's not being friendly. Wolves smile when they kill." Those words gave me a chill.

"Jack?" my boss called from his office. "Have you seen that box of snow globes with the seashore inside of them?"

I started and turned, replying, "No, haven't seen it!" When I turned back around, intending to ask the man, once again, to remove the wolf from the store, I found that he and the wolf were gone.

I blinked in confusion, looked around the empty store, and then squinted through the glass windows at the front. I could see the street, cars, and people going by, and a glaring sun, but there wasn't a trace of my strange customer and his pet.

"This is turning out to be a weird day," I muttered irritably and went to find that box of snow globes with the beach theme for my boss.

The rest of the day was uneventful. I closed the shop at four and was still in time to take the sunny walk past colorful pastel and loud primary colored shops full of the usual tourist essentials. People passed me wearing everything from business suits to string bikinis and flip flops. When I came to the intersection of sixth and Main Street, there was a definite direction that told anyone watching your financial situation. Turning right led you to the beaches and the expensive cottages and high dollar condominium high rises. Turning left lead you to a rutted road full

of sand, cracked asphalt, cheap housing, and a trailer park full of dilapidated R.V.s and single wide mobile homes. The R.V.s were permanent fixtures there. I hadn't seen one move from its hookups since I had rented my own fixer upper mobile home there.

Rent was cheap and I could walk to work. I couldn't say much else about my place. Someone had painted it a cheerful robin egg blue and made a brick planter around the front, but the inside had cheap wood paneling and a pale yellow linoleum floor. The kitchen was tiny. The green appliances looked straight out of the seventies. The bathroom had an old cabinet, a rusted undersized tub, and a water supply that trickled sporadically out of an old faucet. My furniture was all used and covered with throws designed to cover serious wear marks. When people asked me what my place was like I gave it descriptions like *homey*, *quaint*, and *the usual beach bum shack*. They were all better descriptions than *dive* and *should be condemned*. The reality was that it was one strong wind from being scrap.

When I was younger I had dreams of lazing on the beaches and selling my art. That novel would write itself, get published, and pay all my bills. I'd hook up with a Bohemian wife and she would wear beads in her hair, gypsy skirts, and love everything I did. I had even planned on at least one kid, the kind that raised themselves and became artists as well. That robin egg colored single wide mobile home, with the tiny cement porch under a metal awning, the two beach chairs, and the sandy front yard was supposed to be the beginning of things, not the home that defined my failure every time I took the rusty metal steps up to the front door.

Those kinds of thoughts should have spurred me to change my circumstances. They should have shamed me into pulling out my paints or working on my novel. I

should have at least tried to write page six. Instead, I pulled a can of soda out of the refrigerator, a bag of chips from inside a kitchen cabinet, and sat on the couch. I stared at the blank television, too depressed to even turn it on.

Southern sunsets are beautiful. When the sun begins to dip towards the horizon everything gets painted orange, yellow, and red. The lingering blue of the sky becomes intense and the rays of the sun concentrate and make a person think of miracles about to happen, about light from Heaven itself. Inside my single wide mobile home, that light made everything blood red, the light coming in harshly through old windows. It looked more like judgment day than angels descending from Heaven. It drove me outside to sit on my tiny porch in one of my aluminum beach chairs where things looked less apocalyptic.

My neighbors were not quiet. I could hear television shows, talk radio, different kinds of music, and loud conversations up and down the park. People went by on bicycles, golf carts, and cars that looked held together by duct tape, body repair patch, and wishful thinking. After years of living there, I could tune it all out. I could stare over the roof of my neighbor's RV and concentrate on the sky, the clouds, a seagull gliding over occasionally, and a slight breeze too stubborn to allow the heat of the day to extinguish its coolness.

The chair to my right creaked as someone sat down. I heard the panting of a dog... no, a wolf... and turned my head with trepidation to see the beast settle at the feet of the beach chair and the old man who sat in it.

I sat up straight and put my drink aside on a rickety folding table. "Uh, look. I'm not sure..." I wasn't sure what to say. Was the old man crazy? Demented? Was he a stalker? I couldn't imagine why he had decided to follow me home and sit next

to me. His wolf was smiling at me and I remembered the old man saying, *wolves smile when they kill.*

"Nothing to be worried about," the old man said soothingly as he looked at me and winked. "I just have to set the record straight. I didn't tell the truth back there in your shop."

I mentally scrambled for a reply, but ingrained politeness decided that an inane comment was needed. "That's okay. You didn't have to come and apologize."

"I did," the old man insisted and looked troubled. He nodded to the wolf. "I told you, he reminds me of my arrogance. My pride has kept me silent a long time. People believe a lie about me and they tell it proudly to their children, to their wives, to their friends, to their-"

"I'm sure it's not that bad," I replied, desperate to hasten his departure by curtailing his obvious need to reveal his failings to me.

I thought of standing up, but I wasn't sure how the wolf or the old man would react if I ran into the house and called the police. I thought about shouting for help from my neighbors, but I wasn't sure what I would say. The old man hadn't threatened me in anyway. He was being very friendly. I wasn't certain that trespassing and having a conversation constituted endangerment. Even the wolf was stretching out as if he intended to take a nap. Maybe if I let the old man say what he wanted, he would go away without any trouble?

"I'll tell you the truth," the old man said and nodded as if coming to a hard decision. "You'll write about it and they'll read it. They'll recognize my name. I can put this lie to rest even though I'm replacing it with a truth that will make them ashamed of me."

I swallowed hard, suddenly feeling my own kind of shame. "Did you hear that I was a writer? I really haven't sold anything. In fact, I have an unfinished novel. I haven't found the time to pursue it."

"You'll write it," the old man insisted with another firm nod, as if he were confirming the existence of the universe.

"Okay," I replied, though I didn't really believe him. My goal was to make the old man happy, so that he would leave with the dangerous wolf.

"I was riding my horse," the old man began and looked down at his clasped hands between his knees. His hands gripped each other hard enough that I could see the veins stand out strongly. "I was drunk." He looked sideways at me and shook his head ruefully. "You see? Everyone thinks Indians are drunks. Who wants to say that their ancestor had one too many with his friends, fell off his horse on the way home, broke his leg, and gave the wolves a tough and stringy meal? Much better to say; my ancestor went wolf hunting one night when he was as old as the trees. He was a brave man even though the wolves ate him."

The wolf growled and lifted a lip to show sharp teeth. Its blue eyes rolled to look up at the old man. He looked back and sighed.

"Tell them," the old man said as he stood up and the wolf rose with him. "Tell them Thomas Pane was a foolish old man who died a stupid death."

"Thomas Pane?" I was confused. I had been expecting a hard to pronounce Native American name.

"That's the one that's on paper," the old man said with a tired shrug. "Not many know the tribe names any more. Don't worry. They'll know me when they read it."

"Still, maybe you could just tell me your real name?" I insisted, though I wasn't sure why.

"Chakahtewa," the old man told me with a grimace that made the lines deeper in his face. "That's my last truth."

The wolf yawned, stretched, and trotted away. The old man watched it go, grunted, and turned to me fully. "Write the story," he insisted as he plucked a pecan log seemingly out of thin air from behind my ear. "Before I go, tell me what this tastes like."

It took it with a slightly shaking hand. The wrapper felt cold to the touch, as if it had just come out of the box at the souvenir shop. I wondered if he had stolen it and then didn't care. I just wanted the man to leave. I opened the wrapper with fumbling fingers and took a bite. It was chewy and not bad.

"It's okay," I mumbled around my mouthful. "Peanuts, of course, and a sweet center that tastes like... vanilla and caramel."

"Ah," the man seemed satisfied. He nodded and smiled as if I had imparted long sought after knowledge.

"Jack?"

The feminine voice made me start. I turned with my mouth full of pecan log and saw my girlfriend walking toward me. A full figured blonde, she was dressed in a bikini top and very short shorts. She was frowning in concern.

"Who are you talking to?" she asked.

I turned back toward the old man and found myself looking at my neighbor's RV and the last rays of the setting sun. Solar lights were beginning to come on, including the ones on my small porch. Between the homes, I could see sand, weeds, and the occasional lawn ornament, but nothing of the old man or the wolf.

I didn't feel a second of superstitious unease. My feet were firmly planted in the reality of my life. I was experiencing annoyance, instead. I was irritated that the old man had managed to leave and make me look foolish in front of my girlfriend.

I swallowed my bite of pecan log and replied, "Talking to myself." I tucked the remainder of the pecan log into the breast pocket of my shirt.

She rolled her eyes in a silent comment on the weirdness of artists/authors. She then lifted up a wooden wind chime, the kind my shop sold by the dozens with pink flamingo and blue dolphin toppers. This one had the pink flamingo topper. The wood clattered together in the slight breeze as she tied it to the low awning of my porch.

"Happy Birthday," she said and made a wide motion with her hands as if she had given me a grand piece of art and was proud of her choice. Her expression was saying something different. It was nervous and she was still frowning.

"It's my birthday?" For a moment I thought I had lost a few days, but I checked my mental calendar. "My birthday is three days from now."

"I know that," she replied. She stuck her hands in to the tight pockets of her tight shorts and gave me an apologetic look.

That didn't bode well. I sat back in my chair, knowing that I was about to hear bad news.

I didn't usually think too hard about our relationship and that probably said a lot about what state it was in. We had met at the souvenir shop several years ago when my boss had decided to hire her as a floor clerk. Cynthia had quickly moved onto better things at the Ice cream shop three doors down when she had discovered that our boss was in fact an asshole. She had kept coming to the

shop anyway. She liked my *artistic mystique*, as she had put it. It certainly wasn't for my good looks. I wasn't bad, but I was a bit too thin for my height, had a thatch of straight black hair, and large droopy, dark eyes, that gave me a permanent look of not having slept in far too long. I could look the part of the tormented artist, though, by tying my hair back in a fashionable pony tail and wearing beach bum bead necklaces and woven bracelets. It was inevitable that Cynthia would eventually realize that I wasn't an artist on the verge of breaking into the international scene, but a man who had settled and, for all appearances, given up on those dreams.

"I think we should stay friends," Cynthia announced as she rocked on her heels and stared at the crushed shells and sand under her sandals. Her hair fell softly over her face, but it didn't hide the nervous twist of her lips.

I glared, feeling a stronger sense of annoyance rather than any sort of devastation. "Is this your breakup speech? It could use work. Maybe you should have practiced a little more. I would have started off by saying *you're a great guy, Jack. Any woman would feel lucky to be with you. Maybe something after that about how it's me and not you, Jack...*"

"Well, it *is* kind of you, Jack, and not me," she replied as if it were a joke. She tucked her loose hair behind one ear and looked up at me. Yes, she was smiling now. "I like a lot more... excitement. I didn't think dating an artist would be so... well... boring."

"I'm boring?" I scrubbed at the back of my neck and really glared now. I didn't have a defense. She was right. We never did anything except swim on the beach, watch a movie occasionally, and talk about our respective jobs.

"You *like* that," she stressed, as if that made it all right. Not for her though. "You need someone who's more of a home-body."

I refrained from repeating the phrase even though I wanted a definition. I didn't want to sound like an echo. Instead, I went to the meat of the heart to heart we were having. "So you're breaking up with me? Have you found someone else?"

Her smile broadened and she suddenly had dreamy eyes. She was definitely seeing someone in her mind's eye that I didn't measure up to. "You know him. It's Kurt from The Beach Bum men's clothing shop."

I did know him. He sold shirts and shorts to tourists, along with the usual tourist trinkets like towels with funny pictures, shell jewelry made out of plastic and string, and can huggers with the name of the closest beach on them. I had been under the impression that he was gay, due to the other weight lifting, suntan lotion wearing specimens of manhood that often frequented his shop. My inferiority complex about my own thin body always went up a hundred notches when I had to reach between their rippling biceps to get to the stacks of 3 for \$5.00 t-shirts in small. There was also the name of the shop: The Beach Bum. I'll confess that I had been making the stretch and creating an innuendo based on my own hope that he *was* gay. I hated having that much competition right across from where my girlfriend worked.

"Kurt is more exciting than I am?" I was finding that hard to believe. The man never went further than the beach, the gym, and now, presumably, my girlfriend's house.

I stood up abruptly and said briskly, "Never mind!" That was to stop her from opening up the throttle and traveling top speed down the highway that I had left

wide open for her. Not being exciting could mean two things. One of those meanings that I hadn't considered until that moment was the one having to do with sexual performance. I was not going there and neither was she.

I brushed my hands along my sides as if I needed to get sand off my palms. "This is perfect timing. Really it is. I'm going on a long trip. I probably will be gone most of the year. I'm painting and writing a novel. It's going to be an artist's travelogue of sorts about the country. A relationship just wouldn't work right now. I wasn't sure how I was going to tell you. I'm glad you have Kurt."

I was babbling. I didn't have any intention of going anywhere. The outdoors were for people like Kurt; someone with muscles, stamina, and Neanderthal genes close to the surface. I was a skinny man who hadn't taken a walk longer than the distance between my home and work in far too long.

Cynthia was surprised. "You didn't say anything...." She tucked her hair back behind her ear again, even though it was securely tucked already. She looked uncomfortable. Maybe no one had rejected her before. I could almost feel good about that small dose of revenge, but I was too busy wondering how I was going to explain away the lie when I didn't actually go anywhere.

Cynthia rallied herself and smiled again. She looked relieved. "Well, all right then. I was afraid you might take it hard. I'm glad this all worked out for the best. We are growing as people, moving on with our lives, and finding what we really want."

She wanted Kurt. I wasn't sure what I wanted, but I knew it didn't have anything to do with suffering along a back road with a map, a backpack, and artistic intentions.

"Yes, everything is turning out for the best," I agreed, when I was really thinking that everything was turning out extremely bad for me. "We can stay friends. You can bring Kurt over."

That was more babbling and we both looked uncomfortable at the prospect of the three of us spending any time together.

"But you'll be gone," Cynthia reminded me with the same desperation as someone grabbing a lifeline and pulling themselves out of a pool of sharks. "Months, you said. You probably won't even remember me by the time you come back."

I didn't like how she sounded so hopeful for that outcome.

"You are truly unforgettable, Cynthia," I replied and didn't mean that in a good way.

Maybe she sensed it and realized that it was time for her to make her exit out of my life. She rocked on her heels again, gave me an almost pained look, and said, "I suppose all of your things will be in storage until you get back?"

"I suppose they will," I replied, not knowing anything of the sort.

She reached up and took down my birthday gift. The wood chimes clattered together as she said, "I'll hold onto this for you. No reason to spend money to store it. Have a safe trip, Jack."

"Thanks," I replied as she made her exit, churning sand and crushed seashells in her wake as she left my life, probably for good. The sound of the wood chimes clattering together continued for a few moments after she turned the corner around another trailer and was out of sight.

I sighed and scrubbed hands over my face in disgust. How embarrassing. I looked to see if anyone had witnessed my humiliation. It was then that I saw the old man's wolf. It was standing a long way off, barely visible between trailers, but

it was clear that it was staring right at me. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth and it looked like it was smiling. Between one blink and the next, it was gone.

Wolves smile when they kill.

Chapter Two

I felt like painting. Those four words had been absent from my vocabulary too long. Was depression igniting the deep recesses of my artistic soul? No, because I wasn't really sad that Cynthia had left me. Aside from a vague thought of, *who will go to the movies and hang out at the beach with me now*, and sexual tension that was going to last until I found another girlfriend, she was already out of site out of mind.

As I dragged out a small canvas and tested a few trays of watercolor paint to see if they were still viable, I puzzled over the subject matter I was about to paint. Usually I looked at reference photos, stared at the scenery for hours while drinking a beer, and sometimes took my queue from the numerous tourist type paintings that graced every shop and beach hangout. I was guilty of painting beach scenes, pelicans, and tropical flowers to make a few dollars. Those attempts at making a living as an artist, or selling out as I called it deep down, were still stacked in a closet. I suppose even the tourists had seen my lack of passion for the subject matter.

Here I was, my thoughts blank except for that vague need to paint, and setting up on my old kitchen table. My usual schedule had me eating microwave dinners and watching the news on the television. The small canvas was almost laughable; barely ten inches by twelve inches and hardly enough room to paint a flower. I remembered buying them as a package deal with much larger canvases in a yard sale from an old artist. The man had finally given up becoming a great naturalist artist and gone to live with his family far to the North. I never expected

to use the small canvases and I was completely unsure why I felt the need to dig them out of the closet and use one now.

If someone could attach a bad omen to any project, I felt that using a canvas from a failed artist would be the one.

I put water in an old coffee mug and put it at the edge of my canvas. I put down paper towels close to hand to use as blotters, and then glared skeptically at my brushes. They looked old. A few were stiff and unusable. Deciding that two were all right, I stared down at the little canvas and stirred the better brush in the water.

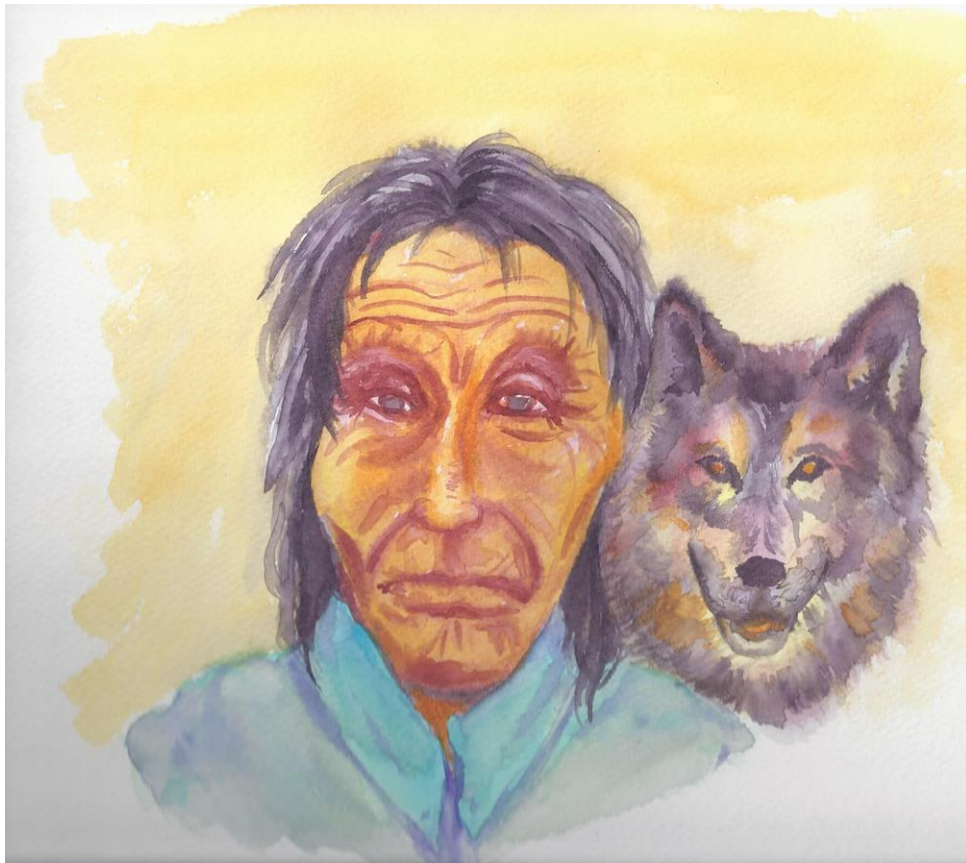
The setting sun was still coming through the windows, but now it was painting my home with more orange than threatening red. Those colors washed over the canvas until the plain white was the color of the sunset. I found myself dipping my paint brush in orange paint and swirling it.

There are people who say that something grips them when they paint. It's almost as if they were channeling a spirit, another artist, someone better than themselves. I've never felt that. I didn't feel it now. My mind was on other things as that brush moved across the canvas. I thought about storage, the rent, the lie of leaving town on an artistic journey of epic proportions... and I thought about whether Kurt was better in bed than I was.

Red joined the orange on the canvas as I envisioned the man over compensating his lack of sexual prowess with bodybuilding.

Suddenly, all thoughts of Kurt left my mind and I thought about the old man and the wolf. I thought about lies and failure. I thought about a bad conscience following me around like a hungry wolf for the rest of my life.

When I blinked and brought the canvas into focus again, I was startled to find that I had painted the old man and the wolf. It wasn't gallery quality. It wasn't even street sale quality. Something about the man's eyes, looking up at me from that canvas, made me think that it should be shared though. I thought of books unwritten and I imagined this picture in one of those as yet unwritten books.



I put the painting aside to dry and put away my paints. Whatever had compelled me to paint was gone. Like an orgasm, I felt drained and yet satisfied.

I started my usual routine after that, ignoring the little painting and trying to regain some sense of normalcy. I was not going on a long journey, I told myself as I microwaved a turkey and dressing frozen dinner with a side of cranberry desert. I

opened a beer and took my drink and my dinner to my usual place in front of the television. My coffee table was scratched and old and covered in beer can rings from too many evenings spent there, alone, and replaying this very same ritual.

Eventually, I was going to have to confess that I had lied, but not soon. I decided to play it out as long as possible. When I did confess, I was certain I could find a good excuse. There were dozens-maybe even hundreds-of reasons why a man wouldn't want to be a traveling artist. I just had to pick the excuse that didn't make me sound like a coward.

I flipped channels on the television and stopped on a nature documentary about the south. I saw live oaks, pine forests, green swamps, and non-threatening wildlife. Trails were clear and well signed. People were smiling and relaxed as they hiked, took award winning photographs, and ended up at well stocked cabins or pitched tents containing all the conveniences of a civilized life at the end of the day. I could see myself doing that and maybe enjoying myself. I warmed to the idea. A three day vacation up state to an easy trail with a guide and some tourist companions might actually be fun.

I finished my dinner and took my trash and dirty dishes to the kitchen. I had to pass the drying painting. I felt compelled to look at it. The eyes of the wolf and the man stared back at me. I didn't experience disgust, condemnation, or even mild interest in those eyes. It was just a small painting that displayed my meager talent. I'm not sure why I felt guilty, why I had checked the painting expecting disapproval. Maybe, I reasoned, as I put the utensils in the sink and tossed the T.V dinner container into the garbage, I was copping out on a dream? I had reduced a grand adventure into a baby hike with training wheels after all. At the very least my sense of manhood should have been embarrassed.

Reality, I told myself, was something I needed to face and come to terms with. Whatever my manhood expected from me, it clearly wasn't taking into account my general lack of exercise, motivation, and physique. I wasn't Kurt. I wasn't the gorilla in the jungle that could live by foraging termites while avoiding killer leopards. I was the lap dog that never left the house and needed to be brushed and fed fancy canned food every day.

I returned to the television and watched the scenery and the people finishing their trek with high fives and satisfied grins. I paid attention to the name of the trail and frowned. I couldn't even pronounce Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. Grabbing a pencil, I looked around in vain for a scrap of paper. The television show was ending and I wasn't sure of my ability to recall a name like that. I ended up grabbing the painting and gingerly holding it while I wrote the name on the back.

I stared at the name for a very long moment. I think they call it *stealing your nerves* before you do something you consider dangerous. I thought *boring Jack is going to do something different and out of the ordinary*. For me that was dangerous. There was a lot of *what if this happens?* It was enough to fill a very large book.

When I opened my little computer tablet and looked up Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, I couldn't say that my fears were calmed, but neither was I considering calling the trip off. The official trails were short and offered guides. Canoe trips were longer and also guided if I wanted it. More intrepid businesses offered unofficial trips into the swamp by foot and canoe. One business advertised excursions lasting one to four days. I bookmarked it and then closed my tablet.

I had to walk away from it. I paced my living room, hands deep in my pockets and my mind finding it hard to deal with a simple vacation. What was I trying to

prove anyway? Was I that intimidated by Kurt? Did I want to prove myself to bring Cynthia back to me? The answer was yes and no. I *was* intimidated by Kurt and I *did* want to prove myself to Cynthia. I didn't want Cynthia back, though. We had never really connected with each other. That had been all right when there wasn't someone else that was better. It was too bad that Cynthia had found someone better before I had.

So what was this really all about? It was about proving my manhood, of course. I could dress it up and pretend it was all about artistic expression and growth, but that would be a boldfaced lie. I needed to pound my chest, grunt, and show Kurt I wasn't boring in bed or out of it. Since I couldn't show him I was good in bed, I was left with showing him that I could hunt for termites and fend off leopards with the best of them. My inner gorilla was trapped inside of a little lap dog and it wanted out.

I still couldn't make the travel reservations yet. I avoided the computer and all thoughts of the vacation. I resumed my seat on the couch and tried to get back into my usual routine. When I finally went to bed that night, I was doing very well with my avoidance behavior. That was how I dealt with anything stressful. I came at the problem slowly, hoping the whole thing would just go away before I had to confront it. In the morning, though, my painting of the old man and his wolf were still there to remind me I was being a coward and that I was still lying. The lie was complicated and it was going to eventually involve everyone I knew. It was a sad state of affairs, but I couldn't see my way out of my situation using anything like the truth.

Work that day turned out to be boring. I wasn't visited by intrepid adventurers or odd Native Americans and their pets. I filled the box of pecan logs,

made sure my *five for a dollar* postcards were neat and tidy, and kept my shell key chains in alphabetical order. My boss chose to sit in his office and kept his demands at a minimum. It was almost time to clock out for the day when Kurt made his appearance.

I was sure that Kurt's muscles were so large they had their own zip code. With his square jaw, blue eyes, blonde beach bum boy hair that looked stylishly disordered, and his award winning body in its tight tank top and tighter white shorts, he could lower my self-esteem a hundred points just by entering the room.

"Kurt," I greeted him with a nod I tried to make pleasant.

"Jack, right?" he replied with a frown that looked like he was attempting advanced algebra.

Kurt wasn't there to buy a pecan log or a shirt with a picture of a smiling shark saying, *bite me*. He also wasn't in my shop to size up a rival for Cynthia's affection. He was there to tell me...

"Cynthia's with me, now," Kurt told me firmly and then made a cutting motion with a beefy hand that was twice the size of one of my hands. "We're not friends. Got that? Don't hang around. She's done with you."

I suspected that she had told him about the three of us becoming friends or said something to the effect that, *Jack's just a friend now, baby. Don't worry about him*. The prospect of someone like me, a pale, skinny artist type hanging out with someone with a reputation to keep up had obviously horrified Kurt. He had felt the need to come and clarify the situation.

"All women give you that speech about staying friends, but we know they don't mean it," I replied after nervously clearing my throat. "Don't worry about it. I won't be hanging around Cynthia or you."

"Good," Kurt said. He sounded disappointed, as if he had expected a fight and had looked forward to putting all of his weight training to good use pounding me into the floor.

I expected him to leave. Like a gorilla Kurt had pounded his chest and grunted his warning. His rival was terrified. There wasn't anything left to say.

I should have given him a respectful nod and pretended to get back to arranging my key chains. I didn't and that gave Kurt an opening for one last shot at kicking the proverbial sand in my face before vacating the premises.

"Cynthia said you were going on a road trip," Kurt said as he looked me over again critically. "She said you were going to hike the entire way and live out of a tent." His lip curled a little and then he said. "She said something about you painting trees."

"Nature," I corrected and then wished I hadn't. You didn't poke gorillas with sticks.

"Nature," Kurt repeated and showed his full contempt for the idea. "You don't seem that kind of guy, someone who could survive a hiking trip."

"I'm full of surprises," I replied.

"Not really," he said and turned to go. "I'm betting with the guys that you're full of shit."

The guys being the other gorillas he hung out with. It was nice to know that my lack of manhood was a topic of their conversation.

I might have defended myself but I *was* full of shit. Kurt was only pointing it out to me. I glared at his back as he left the shop. It wasn't much, but it was all I had to make myself feel less like a wimp.

"Are you going on vacation, Jack?"

Ever hear the phrase *last nail in your coffin*? My boss had decided to make one of his rare appearances outside of his office and he had heard the entire exchange. To my dismay, he turned out to have a secret longing to see the world on foot. He talked about becoming one with nature with a gleam in his eye as he shared his wish that he had been courageous enough to make the hike himself when he was younger.

My boss, Mr. Tarkoff, looked even less like an outdoorsmen than myself. He was ninety years old, frail, and ready to blow away at a slight wind. His skeletal fingers dragged a calendar out from under the cash register and he poised a red marker over the dates.

"When would you like the time off?" Mr. Tarkoff asked me.

I swallowed hard and stared at the calendar with the same enthusiasm as facing a rattlesnake. "I couldn't leave you without any help."

Mr. Tarkoff smiled and shook his head, "Don't worry about that, Jack. My niece can run the register for a month or two. Her mother is always going on about her needing to make some extra money for college." He grimaced and added, "Not that I think she's actually going to one. That girl has other plans with that good for nothing gangster boy that hangs around their house."

Too much information, I thought while I continued to panic. I didn't know how to reply, but he didn't seem interested in one. He tapped the calendar with his marker and it left little red dots.

"Just tell me the dates that you need off, Jack."

"Next week... maybe," I replied and pointed to the calendar. Before I could explain that I would only need a week off, Mr. Tarkoff was already drawing red lines eliminating two months. "No, I- actually-I was planning-"

"If you need more time just call me," Mr. Tarkoff told me with a smile and a little motion with the pen near his ear to mimic a phone. He accidentally drew a red line on his cheek and didn't notice as he closed the calendar and shoved it back under the register. He walked away looking very pleased with himself.

I was horrified. The world seemed to be conspiring to send me on a trip I was fighting against tooth and nail. I stared unseeing at the bright sunlight outside the shops windows, watching tourists in crazy colored resort wear pass by. They were on safe vacations at beaches in walking distance from clean hotel rooms with room service. My finances could handle that for a week, maybe two, but not for months. I couldn't pretend to go on a journey that long without actually roughing it in a tent and living off the land.

I had to admit to lying. I had to come clean with Cynthia, with Kurt, and with my boss. I couldn't go through with this madness. I wasn't a gorilla and it was time for the lap dog to tuck tail.

The door to the shop opened and a very sick looking woman came in dabbing a Kleenex to her nose. Her eyes were bloodshot and her face was puffy. Her nose was red and raw. She blew into her Kleenex, staggered a little, and then made a miserable groaning sound as she spotted me and my counter. She listed my way and asked plaintively, "Do you have anything for the flu?"

"No," I replied. I was ready to back up to avoid contamination, but she had already stopped several feet away. She blew into her wet Kleenex again and

managed to look even more miserable. "There's a pharmacy down the street," I told her, "Dickson's Pharmacy."

She sighed as if I had asked her to walk a hundred miles, but nodded and mumbled thank you as she turned back for the door. "Damned vacation is ruined," I heard her say. "I'll have to cut it short and go home."

I grasped at her last words as if it were a lifeline. I found myself smiling and relaxing. I could still go on my trip to the preserve, I reasoned. I could still take photos and paint enough to satisfy anyone. Then I could come back and pretend that I was ill. I would curse my bad luck and rant and rave about a next time in the far future. Hopefully everyone would forget about it.

I was staring after the woman, giving her some sort of silent thank you for her unconscious suggestion, when something appeared in the corner of my vision. It was a slight movement outside the glass of the front of the shop. That movement warned my subconscious, the primeval instinct in me, that I was in danger. In the barest flash of color, in form, and maybe even in some deep genetic memory my mind said, *that's a wolf!* When I turned my head, even as quickly as I moved, the image was gone and only sunlight and passing traffic greeted my eyes.

I felt a chill and the hairs stood up on my neck. In my mind's eye, I filled in the blanks, painted in that killer smile with the sharp teeth. I was lying to save face, to not look like exactly what I was. I remembered the old man's story. I wasn't any different. I'd rather be known for an artist that had tried to go on a great journey and failed, rather than a loser who had never tried at all; even if I had to lie about it.

Guilt can make a man crazy, I thought. I was doing the right thing, even if I was being stupid about the entire affair. I had to do something fresh if I wanted

to kick start my writing and my art. Getting away from the same old routine and hiking nature trails, even if they were tame ones, was probably just what I needed. I didn't have to apologize for not making a trip down the rugged back roads of the entire country. Maybe I did need to lie about it to soothe my manhood, but it was still worthwhile, I thought.

That was my pep talk to myself and it was somewhat successful. When work ended for the day, I was able to go home, boot up my computer, and make the reservations without my hands shaking or my mind screaming that it was all a terrible idea.

Chapter Three

The website had suggestions about what to bring on my tame trip into the nature preserve. Sunscreen, bug spray, a sleeping bag, trail snacks, water container, a change of clothes, and small toiletries that were environmentally friendly didn't strain my tight budget or alarm me. The small list reassured me that I would be going on an easy hike. When I took the drive upstate and arrived just outside of the preserve at the office of my guide, I wished it seemed more professional and as reassuring.

The porch of the tiny building sagged. The building itself seemed old and slap dashed together. The parking lot wasn't one. It was a rutted clearing in the cypress trees. There was a rack of canoes near a waterway, a few barking hound dogs, and an old pickup truck that had seen better days parked alongside the building.

An older couple had just gotten out of their SUV. They were stretching as if they had been on a very long drive and were looking around with more enthusiasm than I was mustering. There was also a lone woman getting out of a green jeep with several packs that looked expensive and well-traveled. She was middle aged, lanky, sporting a very long brown braid, and wearing enough Khaki outdoor clothing to convince me that she was ready for a safari. Every one of her motions seemed brisk and business-like. I could see her taking charge in an emergency and leading us all to safety. That was reassuring when our guide ambled out of his office looking more like a drunk that had ambled out of the nearest bar, than a competent guide ready to take us safely through wilderness.

He was bow legged, short, and had a beer gut. He wore old jeans, a dirty white shirt, a red scarf tied loosely around his neck, and a worn cowboy hat that sported a wild array of black and brown feathers stuck in the hat band. He was past the halfway mark of middle age, I thought, and his face was taking on that crinkled leather appearance of someone who spent too long in the sun.

"Hiya, folks!" the man held out his hands as if he was giving a great oration and grinned at us. "We're going to be spending a lot of time in close quarters, so let's start by introducing ourselves. I'm Stan *Wild Cat* Claussen."

The older couple seemed just as enthusiastic. The man, balding and with a bit of an overhang over his belt buckle, waved at us and said, "I'm Ken Rachek and this is my wife, Suz."

"Short for Suzanne, of course," the woman interjected with a high pitched laugh. She was a bit over weight as well. Her hair was caught up in a grey bun and her face made me think of pink cheeked Dutch women with wooden shoes and a penchant for gardening tulips. She looked strong, despite her age, and far more capable of a long hike than her husband.

"We're from Tallahassee," Ken continued. "We decided to take two trips a year by sticking a pin in the map of the U.S. This time the pin landed here."

"So *here* we are," Suz said with another laugh that made me wince.

The younger woman was still checking her gear. She seemed to have a great many plastic bags of all sizes. She said in an irritated distracted manner, "I'm June Highman. I'm a botanist."

Wild Cat seemed to find that amusing. "That's great! You can point out the poison ivy to everyone."

June gave a dark glare over her shoulder at the man, but it was just for an instant as she checked a second bag full of expensive camera gear.

The Racheks laughed, but I settled for a polite smile. I didn't want to antagonize June, the person who looked the most capable of saving my life if we ran into trouble on the trail.

Wild Cat rocked on his heels for a moment, as if he needed the momentum, and came down the stairs of the porch. He waved everyone towards the canoes. There was already gear piled in one and enough room for Wild Cat, I presumed. A dog had taken up residence in the bow, but the man waved it off. "Sorry Kisser. We aren't hunting this time."

Wild Cat gave us a long suffering look as he explained, "The dog would just take off hunting anything that moved. We'd never get anywhere."

The dog looked disappointed as it joined the other dogs in the shade under the porch.

"Kisser? Why did you call him that?" My curiosity was spurred by my reluctance to get into one of the empty canoes. I wanted to stall for time. June was already stowing her gear on a canoe and it looked like I was expected to join her. The Racheks were taking the other empty canoe.

"He likes to lick you in the face," Wild Cat replied as he studied me with a squint and a slow up and down motion of his pale blue eyes. "Never been on a canoe?"

"No," I replied truthfully.

"Just get in slow and keep your weight in the center. No sudden moves," Wild Cat explained. "June looks like a pro. I think she'll make sure you'll be all right."

I wasn't that certain. The way she was frowning convinced me she wanted to dump the entire expedition and make the trip alone. It made me wonder why, if she was an expert, she was even bothering with a guide and a band of tourists?

I approached June and our boat cautiously. She glared at me and said just loud enough for me to hear. "He should be shot for taking people without experience anywhere in canoes."

"Well, if you feel that way, maybe I should ride with Wild Cat?" I replied irritably. I turned to rejoin our guide but she stopped me by blocking my path with a well-worn wooden paddle.

"Get in the boat," June growled. "He doesn't have room and he won't leave without at least four people to guide." She pulled back the paddle and gestured with the tip at the canoe. "Put the big gear at the center of the canoe and any smaller bags on the ends. I hope you read your instructions. It's going to get wet at the bottom of the canoe. All your gear needs to be water tight."

"It is," I replied. I felt my temper rising, but I knew it was unjustified. She was the expert. I was the idiot who needed lessons. It was possible I could make this trip miserable for her.

I stowed my gear and gingerly stepped into the canoe. Settling myself nervously at the bow, I took up a paddle without the least notion what to do with it. The first leg of the journey was going to take three hours by water. I had to learn quickly.

"Just tell me what to do," I said.

The water was tea colored and moving gently. The air smelled like old wet wood and that indescribable plant aroma that only a hot sun combined with one hundred percent humidity could generate. There were birds; a white egret stalking

the further bank and looking intently at the water and a myriad of small birds that chirped nonstop as they flitted from place to place. There was also a constant buzz of insects and an occasional low grunt that I decided was a frog. Cypress trees straddled the water with their roots sticking partly out of the water and moss hung from their sparse branches like the beards on old men. Water hyacinths were in bloom, their purple, yellow, and white flowers looking like expensive arrangements. Water lilies vied with them for room, but both kept themselves to the shallow water. It gave the canoes a lot of room to push off from the dock and start their slow way down the river.

June gave me instructions in a clipped irritated fashion. I fumbled, almost lost my paddle several times, and found it hard keeping the canoe moving down the river after the others. The Racheks were doing fine, already laughing, relaxing, and having a good time. Wild Cat glanced back at us often with a worried frown and kept the others from getting too far ahead of us.

"Look at that moron," June said angrily. "He must have needed the money to make us push off just like that. He probably has another tour backed right up against ours. It serves him right if you fall out and drown."

I didn't look forward to the prospect of being on the news as an unfortunate drowning victim just to teach our guide a lesson. Close on that thought was the realization that there weren't any life jackets in the canoes. I almost said something. My manhood stopped me. Ahead of me, Wild Cat was whistling softly, paddling slowly and totally in his element. Four to five feet of river water wasn't dangerous, his relaxed attitude said. Don't be a wuss, Jack.

I concentrated on my paddling. My efforts eventually bore fruit and June gave me a reluctant, "Not bad," comment.

After an hour, the Racheks began taking photos. Our progress slowed. They couldn't paddle and take photos at the same time. June didn't make any move towards her cameras. She was obviously someone who knew when to take photos and I followed her lead. I didn't want to be accused of being a tourist who didn't have an eye for composition or subject. I was an artist and I was going to prove it by not doing the very thing that was going to show Cynthia, Kurt, and my boss that I had taken a trip into the wilds. I felt both ridiculous and stymied by my pride.

June and I drifted along the river doing nothing but looking at the scenery. Or, at least I did. She was glaring at our companions as if she could will them to stop frittering away the time and start paddling in earnest.

Wild Cat seemed happy to drift, but he eyed the sun after a time and straightened in his canoe. "Let's move along, folks. We need to be at the camp site dock soon."

The Racheks were unhappy about that, but they followed orders and we were soon moving with purpose. We startled turtles and they plopped into the water from where they had been sunning on half submerged logs. Wild Cat pointed out some points of interest and talked about the animals, but it was garbled due to the distance between our canoes and a slight wind that was making the trees shiver and the water go opaque.

We reached a dock that had seen better days probably twenty years ago. It listed some boards in the water because of an alarming dip in the gray weathered wood and had rotten ropes hanging off to tie up boats. A path led away from it into the swamp.

Wild Cat was the first to leave his canoe in a graceful move. He unloaded his packs and then yanked the canoe unceremoniously up onto the dock. The metal

bottom of the canoe scraped alarmingly, but he seemed unconcerned. He pulled it off the dock and up a slight rise. When he returned to the dock, he motioned to the Racheks.

They were ungainly and I was afraid, as they awkwardly climbed out of their canoe, that one or both of them was about to be sorry that we didn't have any life vests. Wild Cat was practiced at handling inexperienced people, though, and he had them safely on the dock and hauling their canoe and gear into the swamp in short order.

Returning once again, Wild Cat waited for June and I. June warned me, "Dump my gear into the water and I'll make you pay for it."

I could take that two ways; my bank account was going to hurt or she was actually threatening me with bodily mayhem. Since I didn't want either to happen I let Wild Cat take hold of my arm and carefully haul me to the dock. He helped transfer our gear to dry land and I didn't breathe easy until June's pack of expensive camera equipment left the dock.

We hauled our canoe to join the others. There was an old rusted metal rack and I was the one who helped Wild Cat get each canoe into place. He chained them together through metal loops on each bow and then dropped the key to the lock on its chain over his head. He tucked it under his shirt and nodded to us as he said, "Wouldn't want our ride home to get stolen."

His words made me think of a new possibility that I hadn't even considered. We might meet more than a white tailed deer or a furtive raccoon on our journey. There could be people out in the swamps who had criminal rap sheets and a penchant for robbing hapless tourists. I imagined people like Wild Cat sneaking through the ferns and the cypress knees along our well- traveled trail. June's

camera equipment alone would tempt a poor native of the swamps to consider robbery.

Of course the next step in my overly fertile imagination was to wonder why I had chosen Wild Cat as the template for someone bent on committing crimes. I found myself sneaking looks at him as he organized our gear, helped everyone strap on packs that would have given even a sturdy mule pause for concern, and set us walking down a narrow trail through the swamps.

Common sense kicked me in the ass as I swatted at bugs and tried not to stumble on cypress knees. Wild Cat could hardly run a business if his clients kept getting robbed or murdered. Word would get out if the man kept coming back without his clients or ones with empty pockets.

June still wasn't taking any photographs. The Racheks were taking so many that the clicking of their digital cameras was becoming as annoying as the oppressive heat. Wild Cat ambled along with his feathered hat pulled down low and his pack looking the lightest. He gave some information about our surroundings and pointed at things without looking at them. His speeches sounded memorized as if he didn't actually know what he was talking about. His pointing encouraged more picture taking as the Racheks made digital memories of each minute of our hike.

My inexperience had imagined my journey into the swamps to include many opportunities to stop and paint the landscape as well as moments when I would take award winning photographs. The reality was disappointing. My companions weren't going to wait for me to set up an easel and paint an egret. They weren't going to wait while I stalked in the ferns to get a perfect shot of the local wildlife. The Racheks were only doing what time allowed; quick random shots at whatever caught their interest in hopes that a few pictures would come out perfect.

We found our deluxe cabin in the late afternoon. The website had promised all the accommodations of a hotel. The reality was dilapidated, small, and barely held together by rusty nails.

Wild Cat had his speech ready, of course. He held up hands and made placating motions before anyone could charge him with fraud. "Now, I know what you're thinking. I promised you a deluxe cabin your first night before we roughed it further along the trail. Unfortunately, the last hurricane destroyed it and we are still rebuilding. We'll have to make due with our old cabin. I know she looks bad, but she's sturdy and keeps the bugs and the wet out." I doubted both of those claims and wondered why he used the term *we* as if he were part of a larger organization of travel guides. Maybe it helped to spread the blame, even if his partners were imaginary?

"We love roughing it!" Mr. Rachek assured our guide, as if he spoke for all of us.

Mrs. Rachek agreed with her husband. June didn't have any comment. I was irritated and already planning on filing a grievance. That would be after we returned to civilization. I wasn't going to upset the man who knew the way back by complaining now.

We dragged our gear into the cabin and piled them up in the center. Plain cots were lined up against the wall. They smelled like moldy lawn furniture. The windows didn't have screens, but there was a canvas flap to pull down. It didn't look as if anyone had bothered doing that in ages. We were as good as outside, except if it rained we had some protection.

"Everyone brought their mosquito spray and netting, I hope?" Wild Cat said as if it were a joke instead of a life or death question.

I was already reaching into my pack and pulling out a spray can and my package of mosquito netting as if it they were a lifeline. The Racheks were doing the same. June... I looked around for her and saw that she was still outside with her gear. She was strapping some things together and frowning as if the world annoyed her. I hoped that she had her spray and her netting. I wasn't sure, when the mosquitos began to bite, if I was going to be gallant enough to share.

Wild Cat chose a cot by placing his feathered hat on top of it and then went outside to check a stack of old wood and a fire pit. Without his hat I could see that his hair was thin and he was bald on top of his head. A little rat tail of hair, woven into a thin braid, kept the hair he had left in order.

Wild Cat ambled over to June after his fire pit inspection and I could see them having a conversation that wasn't making either of them happy. June made a cutting motion with one hand and then began to sling her packs onto her shoulders. Wild Cat looked irritated, but he shrugged finally and walked back to the cabin.

June walked off into the swamp with a confident stride.

"Where is she going?" I wondered.

Wild Cat began arranging his packs and taking out some essentials; a lantern for light and some food stored in a small soft sided cooler. "She wants to head off alone. I hate when people use my business as a taxi service. We'll see her again for the ride back."

And there I had the answers to many of my questions about why someone as experienced as June would want to travel with inexperienced hikers. As we sorted ourselves and our gear out and Wild Cat started a fire in the fire pit to presumably cook our dinner, I imagined June confidently moving through the swamp. Now she would take out her cameras and snap world class photos, collect her samples, and

experience nature without that nature being disturbed by the loud antics of tourists. I felt admiration for her and a bit of envy. I knew I was romanticizing the entire situation, but I couldn't help it. I yearned to brave the wild swamp alone and finally get the time to capture it with my paints. I had to firmly remind myself that the swamp was treacherous and that its inhabitants included ravenous swarms of mosquitoes, poisonous snakes, and man eating alligators. Without a guide like Wild Cat, my chances of coming out of the swamp alive weren't very good.

We ate hotdogs and drank warm water for dinner. I wasn't impressed, but the Racheks acted as if we were eating at a five star restaurant. They kept using the phrases rugged, primitive, and backwoods in excited and pleased tones. I would have used the same words to criticize the entire hike thus far.

The Racheks wanted to keep the fire going, probably with the idea of us gathering around it like boy scouts singing songs and toasting marshmallows. Luckily the sun hadn't set yet and Wild Cat didn't seem in the mood to attract more insects or tip the heat index from steamy sauna to depths of hell.

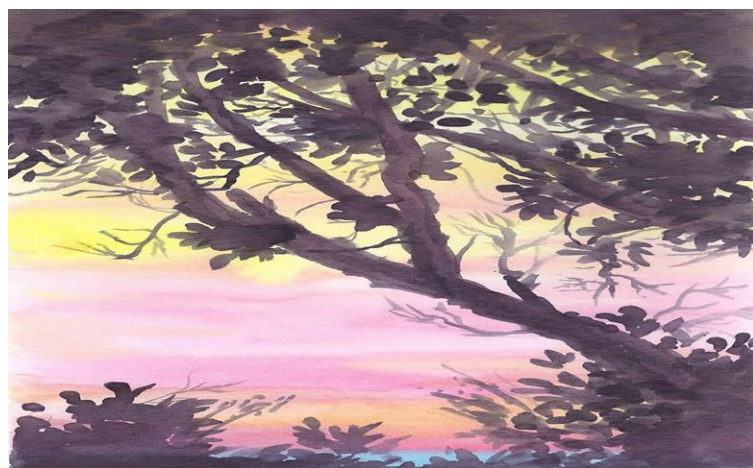
Without the Racheks attempt to gather around the fire, we were left to our own devices. Wild Cat stretched out on his cot and tipped his hat down until it covered his face. In no time I could hear his soft snore. The Racheks seemed intent on taking more photographs and took turns placing themselves in the shots. After the hundredth utterance of, *no, stand there!* I was ready to break from the group and get some quiet alone time.

I slung my pack with my paints and camera over one shoulder, took a steadying breath to steal my nerve, and walked off into the swamp. There was a little trampled path. It made me feel more confident. I intended a short session; twenty minutes at the most, so I wasn't concerned that anyone would miss me.

The swamp was beautiful. As I walked along the edge of a slew and watched the evening colors begin to paint the greens and greys of the water and the trees vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds, I felt the urge to capture it all with paint instead of digital clicks of my camera. I dropped my pack and pulled out a small canvas and a few paint brushes. I used water from the slew in a small cup and took out some rags to help mop up excess paint.

I would do a quick study, I thought. Just some splashes of color and form that would give the impression of the swamp. I didn't want to be there when night fell. I could always finish it up later in safer circumstances.

I remember feeling an intense urge to paint and then I was blinking and realizing that the sun was setting and the colors were turning black. I scrambled up, spilling my cup of water and dropping brushes. I juggled the painting from hand to hand uncertainly and then, with only the briefest of glances, shoved it into my pack. I was more concerned with my safety or lack of it than the fate of what looked like bleeding black paint and an image half formed over a lurid sunset.



"Shit!" My voice seemed muffled, captured and stifled by moss, water, and deep shadows.

I dumped my art supplies into my pack on top of the small canvas and slung the pack onto one shoulder. I turned in the direction of where I thought the path should be. It wasn't there.

My eyes frantically scanned the ground as I slowly turned, but the trail that had seemed so trampled and clear was definitely gone.

I told myself not to panic. Logic said the path hadn't disappeared, that the deepening shadows were just hiding it. I simply needed to orient myself to find it again. The water had been on my left and now it should be on my right. The sun had been in my eyes. That patch of low palmettos had scraped against my left knee.

I stood exactly where logic said the path should be. I didn't find anything. In fact, the swamp seemed impenetrable that way. Logic had a knock down drag out fight with my panic. Panic didn't want to go that way. Panic told me logic was wrong. Panic was already imagining getting eaten by alligators or falling into the mud and water and being sucked under. Panic had watched too many Tarzan movies.

Yes, I could have called out loudly and possibly had someone from the camp hear me. I hadn't walked that damned far. The thought of Wild Cat having to come and lead me back the short distance, as if I was a toddler that had wandered away, kept me silent. I could do this, I told myself firmly. I could use logic and find my way back. I wasn't going to let panic make a fool out of me. I refused to remind myself that it was this sort of thinking that had put me in this situation to begin with.

I started walking, choosing the spot where logic told me the path should be. I swatted bugs, shoved through bushes and palmettos I didn't recall pushing through

before, and finally stopped walking when I entered a clearing where a small lake was gathering the fading light on its shimmering surface like a lamp about to blow out. Dragon flies flitted over that bright surface, already hunting the rising clouds of mosquitos.

I tried to calculate how long I'd been walking. Had it been minutes? Twenty minutes? Maybe it was closer to a half hour? I didn't recognize anything. Sweat was running down my body and I felt exhausted. I was in real danger and it was time for my pride to take a backseat. I opened my mouth to shout for Wild Cat.

"Lost?"

I spun, tangled in grass, and stumbled as I tried not to fall over or lose my pack to gravity. When I straightened, I saw a man leaning back against a tree and calmly watching me.

He was a middle aged man wearing torn jeans, cowboy boots caked in mud, and a long sleeve blue shirt that had the sleeves sloppily rolled up to his elbows. Native American, I thought with confidence. He had a dark tan, black hair woven into two long braids tied off with strips of leather, and eyes that were a deep brown.

The sun was almost behind the trees. He should have been in shadows along with the rest of the landscape fading into night. Instead some break in the leaves allowed the sun to paint him with glowing colors. It reminded me of desert canyons, the way layers of rock made a palette of reds, oranges, coppers, purples, and blues. The colors disappeared between one blink and the next and then he was almost one with the shadows.

"Do you have a light?" he asked.

I felt a flush of embarrassment. Of course I had one. In my panic, I had forgotten the basic supplies Wild Cat had asked us to pack. I dropped my pack and

searched under painting supplies, canvas, and cameras until my fingers closed on the small light. Pulling it out triumphantly I turned it on and was immediately comforted by its bright glow. I aimed the beam around us, picking out the water not too far away and the seemingly impenetrable swamp.

The man grunted as if surprised. "I thought you were going to pull out one of those cell phones and use the light from that. Everyone has one these days."

I had a basic phone that I only used for emergencies. I realized at that moment that it would have been invaluable just then. It was too bad I had left it on the seat of my car. "I guess I'm still old school," I replied. I wasn't going to admit to a stranger that I didn't need it, because I didn't have enough people in my life to make it worthwhile.

"Flashlight's good," the man reassured me. "Now you can see where you're going. You wouldn't want to fall into the water."

"I definitely don't want to be some alligator's dinner," I replied with a shiver.

The man chuckled. "Oh, you wouldn't. Gators don't eat at night; sours in their stomach. In fact, they don't eat much at all even when it's light out. It's a crap shoot whether you catch one on a hungry day or not."

I tried following his logic and then just gave up. I didn't need a lesson on alligator biology; I needed to get back to my group. "I'm lost," I admitted, though I thought it was damned obvious. He was probably amusing himself pretending I actually knew what I was doing out there.

"Yeah?" the man seemed sympathetic. "Were you with that woman who went through here earlier?"

"No. I'm with a tour group," I replied.

I felt mosquitos beginning to bite my arms. I shouldered my pack. The light made crazy patterns in the gloom as I rubbed at my arms to dislodge more.

"The tour guide's name is Wild Cat," I continued. "We were staying at a cabin. You probably know where that is. Could you take me back there?"

His expression was getting lost in shadow. It seemed rude to shine the light on him, so I kept it pointed at the ground between us. "I don't travel much," he replied. "Keep to myself." He sounded bitter.

"Could you please make an exception?" I begged, though he hadn't outright refused to help me yet. I wasn't taking any chances.

He still seemed hesitant. "I could point the way?" he suggested.

I imagined myself trying to follow that kind of direction and saw myself sinking in mud and being eaten alive by mosquitoes within the first few minutes. "I could make it worth your while?" I wasn't sure that I could. I didn't have a lot of money, especially after paying for the excursion. He didn't know that, though, so I was shameless as I offered, "I could pay you the going rate for a personal guide?"

"I have something to do," he replied and I could just make out his head shaking negatively.

"What?" I asked. We were standing in a dark swamp and I couldn't imagine anything the man needed to do except find a camp or a way home for the night. He didn't even have a light, or at least he hadn't produced one yet, and I wasn't the type who believed that he was so in tune with nature that he could find his way in the dark. Like me, the man looked just as likely to end up gator breakfast.

"I'm trying to get my hat back," the man said.

I frowned, trying to keep my rising panic from running away with my tongue. "Hat, you lost your hat?"

I saw shadows of hands rise and then become distinct as they made small motions in the aura of the flashlight. His hands defined the size and general shape of the hat in question. "It was tan," he said. "It was pretty old, too. It had turkey buzzard feathers in the hat band. I've had it for years. It was comfortable and I never went anywhere without it. People knew me by the hat; Indian Joe and his hat. It's part of my legend."

"You call yourself Indian Joe?" I repeated uncomfortably. "Isn't that ... I mean.... It's not really politically correct..."

He chuckled. "Well, my name's Joe and I am an Indian. I named myself, so it's okay. Indian Joe's swamp tours. Everyone knows me. Everyone wants me to be their guide. I was even on a show about the swamp. I took the camera people out here and they put me on film and asked me some questions. I'm a celebrity." He was quiet for a minute as if enjoying the memory and then he added, "That's why I need my hat. Indian Joe needs his hat."

I didn't remember seeing any sign or web page advertising Indian Joe's swamp tours. Even if he was okay with the name, I was still uncomfortable calling him that. "Well, Joe," I replied at last, cleared my throat, and pointed out reasonably, "You can't find anything in the dark. You might as well wait until tomorrow."

"We can use your flashlight," he replied and pointed to our left. "Shine it over there."

I wanted to refuse. I wanted to beg him again to take me back to the cabin. I was battling irritation and fear of the darkness. I was also battling my growing unease with Indian Joe. Was it a coincidence that the hat he was describing matched the one that Wild Cat was wearing? It was surprisingly easy to believe that Wild Cat had stolen it. I already had my doubts about his trustworthiness. He

had already revealed himself as a shyster, promising deluxe accommodations that hadn't materialized and probably never would.

"Over here," Indian Joe directed me deeper into the swamp.

I followed him with my flashlight, keeping the beam a little ahead of us as we walked. I felt like I was breathing mosquitoes now. Their buzz was loud in my ears along with the croak of frogs and the rustling of nightlife all around us. Strange plops sounded in the water and a bird squawked now and again, making me start badly each time. I was being eaten alive and every step was turning into a flailing, twitching movement meant to try and dislodge mosquitos from my body.

I finally wailed, "You're not going to find your hat in the dark. In fact, I think I know where it is."

He turned to me. The light didn't seem to want to pick out his features. His body remained an indistinct shadow. I could feel his excited tension as if it was my own and I couldn't explain that feeling. I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing by turning in Wild Cat. I was half afraid that Indian Joe might decide to take revenge on Wild Cat and leave me and the Racheks without a guide back to civilization.

There was also the possibility that it wasn't Indian Joe's hat. Indian Joe might not find my mistake amusing or forgivable.

"You know where my hat is? Tell me where it is," Indian Joe demanded.

"I..." I swallowed hard in a suddenly dry throat. Another round of mosquito bites gave me courage. "I think Wild Cat has your hat back at the cabin."

"Wild Cat?" he seemed confused.

"Stan Claussen," I explained nervously. "He calls himself Wild Cat."

"Stan?" Indian Joe seemed to be on repeat. He stood silently for what seemed like an eternity and then sighed, saying, "I forgot that I gave it to him."

That didn't make any sense. He had explained how he considered the hat part of his persona, his legend. I could understand his intense search for it. Now I was silently questioning his mental state.

"Indian Joe," I said cautiously, "Since you don't have to look for the hat any longer, could you take me back to the cabin? You can see Wild Cat and the hat there." I was trying not to sound like I was talking a jumper down from a ledge, but I couldn't help it.

He rubbed at his neck as if it pained him. "I gave Stan the hat after I decided to leave the business," he explained. "I come from a long line of guides. I always wanted to do something different, though."

I tried not to think about how I was alone in a swamp with a man I didn't know, who possessed a questionable mental state. I decided that keeping the conversational ball going was probably the best course of action. "What did you want to do instead of being a guide?" I motioned with the flashlight to the right. "Should we go this way while we talk?"

"That way," he agreed.

His voice betrayed that he was lost in thought and I wished I could see him clearly. I wasn't sure if he was really paying attention to the direction I had suggested. I wanted to ask him if he was sure, but he didn't give me the chance.

"I wanted to be a cowboy," Joe admitted. "I wanted to herd cattle on the plains out west, go on long cattle drives, rope steers, ride a good quarter horse, sleep in the bunk house, and watch the sun rise and set on a horizon stretching out forever in front of me."

"Like the Native Americans hunting buffalo?" I interjected as I walked with my light, swatting biting insects and straining my eyes to make out some sort of path while Joe walked behind me.

Joe snorted in disgust. "No, I just said I want to be like a cowboy herding cattle. It's bison, by the way, not buffalo."

I frowned. "I've always heard them called buffalo."

"Bison," he repeated firmly.

"Okay." I mentally kicked myself for arguing. I didn't want to make him angry with me. I just wanted to keep him talking and telling me in which direction to walk. "Is this the right way?"

He made a low sound. I couldn't tell if he was agreeing with me, but he didn't offer to correct my course so I assumed he was.

It was pitch black outside of the beam of my flashlight. I began to worry about the batteries and mentally kicked myself for not putting in fresh ones before I started the hike. How long would they last? The light was very bright at the moment, but I didn't have any idea how long we would be walking.

"My father said I was a dreamer and to wake up to the real world," Joe continued. "Grandfather told me to stick to the business, because it always pays good and it puts food on the table. I listened to them for years."

"It's hard to leave a good paying job for the unknown," I replied sympathetically and thought of my own circumstance. "I want to paint and write, but that takes a great deal of commitment and time. Leaving my job in the hopes that I might find a way to make my talent pay the rent is too much like playing dice when only rolling Snake Eyes will let me win."

"That's good!" Joe said in appreciation. "You should write that down and put it in one of your books."

"Thank you, but a catchy phrase does not a whole novel make," I replied bitterly.

"That's good too!" Joe exclaimed. "You should be a writer."

"Like you're a cowboy?" I winced after I said it. It was a stupid thing to say on so many levels. It not only showcased my defeatist attitude, but made me look like an asshole too. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. I guess I'm feeling sorry for myself; sorry for being a coward."

"I decided to leave the swamp and go west," Joe told me.

I looked back at him, shinning the light towards his face enough to see that his expression was both thoughtful and sad.

"That's why you gave Wild Cat your hat?" I asked. He only nodded, yes, in reply. I cleared my throat, almost certain that I shouldn't continue the conversation, but morbidly curious enough to ask anyway. "You were going to trade it in for a cowboy hat?" he nodded again. "You're still out here, though?"

Joe twitched as if I had stabbed him. He even rubbed a hand in small circles on his chest. He jabbed a thumb back the way we had come. "If you walk through the swamp along the river, you hit the trails. They take you to the main interstate. The interstate takes you into town. I was going to buy a bus ticket and rough it all the way out West to save money. This place makes it hard to leave, though."

"You don't have a car?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Don't need one out here. You just need a boat."

I couldn't imagine not having a car and I traveled very little.

His reason for not leaving was obvious to me. Leaving the familiar and a good paying gig as a guide had been too much to lose in the face of the unknown. When I tossed in the fact that he claimed to be a famous guide, his reluctance to leave it all behind was even more understandable. He already has his fame and people will remember him. I couldn't hope for the same. If I never returned to my home, Cynthia, Kurt, and my boss might wonder what had happened to me, but everyone else would quickly forget who had lived in the old blue trailer on the sand lot across from the beach.

"You can leave the swamp any time you want," I said as I turned back for the path. "It doesn't have to be now." I was shoving down my bitterness at the state of my own life in order to find some comforting words for the man I needed to lead me to safety. I did feel sorry for him, but it was hard to find deep sympathy when I was hurting so much myself.

"I can't go, now. I'm stuck being a guide," Joe said with a lost tone in his voice. I heard his steps through the brush following me and that was comforting. "I want my hat, though. I can't be famous Indian Joe without my famous feathered hat. Indian Joe needs his hat."

He sounded like a child or as if he had repeated those words so much that he had turned it into a mantra. Simple, almost musical, those words seemed to define Joe's life. I couldn't explain the feeling that there was a power behind each syllable. It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

"I need to look for my hat," Joe said and then he was silent.

I turned quickly, alarmed and confused. My flashlight beam illuminated the swamp and nothing else. Indian Joe was gone, as if a swarm of mosquitoes had sucked him out of existence.

"Joe?" I called loudly. "Come on, this isn't funny! I told you that Wild Cat has your hat. You don't need to look for it. Joe? Joe!"

I shinned my light in every direction. I was spinning quickly, my feet catching and twisting in the brush and tall grasses. I stumbled, staggered to my feet, and fell again. On my knees, mud squishing against my skin, I had to finally admit that Indian Joe was gone. He had abandoned me without leaving a track or a bent twig to show in which direction he had gone.

"Joe, don't leave me! I don't know how to get to the cabin!" I screamed into the darkness. "You crazy bastard, where are you?"

I screamed until I was hoarse, but all it accomplished was to force me to face two facts. Joe wasn't coming back for me and Wild Cat wasn't close enough to hear me. Neither made any sudden appearance.

I throttled down panic and tried to think what to do. If I continued going forward, I would be walking blind. I had no idea if Joe had been saving instructions for further along our route. There might be a turn I was unaware of. Taking that chance had an element of terror, but the only other option was to follow his complete set of instructions about how to get to the interstate. Follow the river, I remembered, until I reached the trails through the swamp. The trails would lead me to the interstate. Of course I had no way of knowing just how far away that was. My hazy memory of the park brochure didn't include mile markers on their trails. I only remembered a page full of what appeared to be twisting snakes weaving in and out of blue ovals representing water features and green icons representing trees.

If there was a park maintained trail, I thought, then a ranger station, camping site, or sign markers were probably a part of it. That way was civilization. I was

ready to forget all about Wild Cat's hike at that point. He could keep the money. I was done with swamps.

I prayed the flashlight would keep on shining as I found the river and tried to follow it. That's easier said than done. It was hard to keep track of it when I was constantly presented with thick clumps of brush, dense cypress knees, cypress trees, and the sudden appearance of wildlife. The number of raccoons was startling and they all seemed unafraid, curious, and somewhat threatening.

When I finally found myself free of brush and boot tangling grass it was a moment before I realized that I was actually on a path. Shinning my light up and down the path I could see that it was wide and well maintained.

"Thank God!" I exclaimed.

I was running with sweat, up to my ankles in mud, and covered in bites. The cloud of mosquitos was still following me and it was everything I could do not to breathe them in. I wished, not for the first time, that I had brought my pack with my supplies. I could kill for water and a mosquito net.

I felt as if I had been walking for hours, the trail looking as if it was nearing an end, time after time, but then making a turn and continuing into the blackness of night. When I finally reached a sign, and the dirt trail turned into wood boardwalk covered in forest debris, I almost forgot about pride and broke down sobbing. Shining the light on the sign I was relieved to see that the boardwalk ended after 3.5 miles. I could only hope that end was at a ranger station.

I hurried along the boardwalk, stumbling with weariness, but determined to get the few miles over and done with quickly. The bear sitting at the center of the boardwalk ahead stopped me dead in my tracks so suddenly I almost fell forward

onto my face. I wind milled my arms to get my balance like an old cartoon, my pack swinging wildly, and then I froze.

Liking its chops and sitting in a relaxed posture on the boardwalk, the bear blinked at me and my light. Its eyes glowed as if it were supernatural. There was no scenario that allowed me to get past it. There simply wasn't enough room. Even if there had been, I wasn't ready to risk a bear attack.

I searched my mind for everything I knew about bears and came up empty. Aside from playing dead when attacked, I couldn't remember any advice describing how to get away from a bear in a manner guaranteed to avoid an attack. Even the *playing dead* advice seemed suspect. I couldn't believe that a bear wouldn't take advantage of a meal, even if it did look dead.

The bear didn't look as if it intended to move any time soon. I could stand perfectly still until it did or leave the boardwalk and find a way to circumvent it safely. That meant going far out of my way back into the swamp and hoping that I could find the trail again. I didn't like that idea at all, but it seemed my only option.

Very slowly I moved to the edge of the boardwalk. Shining my light down, I could see that the boardwalk was on pilings above the water and muck of the swamp. Shining my light further out, I saw higher ground and a densely packed wall of vegetation.

The bear moved my way, snuffling the air as if trying to catch my scent. I was off the boardwalk and into the water in the next instant. My heart was pounding and adrenaline was coursing through me. I didn't care about the water and muck seeping into my shoes and trying to pull me down with every step. I didn't care about the unseen things splashing in the water either to escape me or investigate a

potential meal. I only cared about reaching higher ground and getting away from the one danger that was real and present.

I slipped and scrambled madly up onto drier land, contending with treacherous cypress knees and tangles of vines and thick brush. There were even thorns, raking at my hands and legs. I forced my way through, listening intently for the sound of the bear splashing into the water to follow me. Even though I heard nothing of the sort, I didn't slow down until my rush of adrenaline was replaced with exhaustion.

Wet, filthy, covered in bug bites, and breathing hard I stood still at last and tried to orient myself. Even in my panic, I had tried to keep a straight line away from danger. I was confident that turning to my right and making a large loop would get me back onto the boardwalk and past the bear. Deeper down, I was less sure. If the boardwalk curved in another direction, it was possible that I would miss it entirely.

I began walking again. After an hour of fruitless trudging, banging feet and knees on cypress knees, slipping in mud, and seeing my flashlight begin to dim, I had to admit that I was lost again.

Instead of panicking, I sat down where I was. I felt deep depression as I finally gave up. With my light dying, there was nothing I could do until the sun rose again. I huddled into myself, trying to spare my naked arms and face from the mosquitos. Listening to their maddening buzz, I realized that my light was probably drawing them to me. It was time to turn it off.

The click of the off button on my flashlight seemed a final comment on not only my day but my life in general. I had lied. That lie had forced me to do something I had only fantasized about. The reality was cruel, dirty, painful, and possibly deadly. I had proven, without a doubt, that I was a lapdog, not the gorilla

in the jungle. I belonged on soft cushions sitting in front of my T.V. every night. My boring life of work and home was suited to who I really was.

Was there shame in it? I suppose people always want to be a superhero, the top of the chart rock star, or the always in the news celebrity, when in reality most people weren't cut out for that sort of life. Society didn't like mediocrity, though. Society called people like that losers, lazy, or uneducated, when in reality they were just average. I wondered when average had become an undesirable label that so many tried to avoid.

Indian Joe dreamed of being a cowboy. He had given away his hat along with his fame and had taken the long walk through the swamps to find that dream. He had wanted average, the average life of a cowboy scraping from paycheck to paycheck and roping cattle out west. I wasn't sure what had stopped him, what had turned his feet back towards the swamps to regain his hat. Maybe it was madness, or maybe it was just the fear of losing the fame that everyone else valued?

I wasn't any better. I was comfortable, but I was prey to the same peer pressure as the next man. I wasn't supposed to be happy with my meager artistic talent. Painting just to fill my own walls with scenes that I enjoyed was considered a waste. I was supposed to improve myself and try for the equivalent of artistic stardom. It was the same with my writing. Putting down thoughts, or writing a story I enjoyed, wasn't considered worthwhile unless it was shared with the masses and won a prize.

I pulled out my painting from my pack and clicked on my light to give it a critical look. Bugs flittered over the surface. I had smeared the paint here and there in my haste but it was still intact, still the meager product of a meager

artist. I liked the sunset colors, though, and I liked the shadowy forms of the trees. It was good enough for me. It pleased me.

I put the canvas back into my pack and turned off the light. I was having an epiphany sitting in the muck and wondering if I was going to survive until sunrise to appreciate it. I was *settling*, accepting my life for what it was and realizing that it was okay. I wish that I had reached my epiphany back home and that a lie hadn't sent me hundreds of miles away from where I wanted to be.

My laughter was bordering on hysterical and I stopped it, because it made me realize how alone I was in the darkness.

"Hello?" a woman's voice called out. "Who's out there?"

I recognized June's voice. Scrambling to my feet I called back, "June? Thank God! It's Jack. I'm lost out here."

"What the hell?" She sounded annoyed, as if I was crashing her private party. I guess I was. She had left our band of amateurs for a reason.

A light went on. It was bright and welcoming. It slowly bobbed and swung as June made her way to where I was standing. She shinned her lantern in my face and I blinked rapidly against its brightness.

"You look like shit!" she said. "What happened? No, don't tell me. That moron, Wild Cat, wouldn't know how to lead a tour group if you gave him god damn natives to lead the way. Are the Racheks wandering around out here too?"

"No, just me," I replied. "I went down a trail to paint. The sun went down faster than I anticipated. I couldn't find my way back."

"Well, I've already turned in for the night," she explained as she lowered the lantern and began to walk back the way she had come. I followed close on her heels. "And I'm not walking you to a ranger station and interrupting my work. I only have

funding for three days. You can stay in my camp tonight, but tomorrow you're on your own. I'll point you in the right direction. You're not far from one of the boardwalks."

"I was on one, but there was a bear," I explained.

"It probably wouldn't have hurt you, but you never know," she replied.

We reached her camp, a small clearing that was high and dry with a small dome tent set up at the center. A tarp was strung between cypress trees to make a canopy over the tent, giving it a small porch on one side where her gear was stowed. The tent didn't look large enough for more than one person and I was sure I wasn't going to be invited inside.

June glared at me as she placed the lantern on the ground and then kicked off her boots. "I do have a gun, so I suggest you don't try anything *funny*."

She wasn't talking about some stand up humor or juggling. Mention of a gun made me tense just on principal and I wondered if Wild Cat had been carrying one as well. It made sense for a woman alone in a swamp that might have more dangerous things in it than the normal wild creatures. There might be other people like Indian Joe who were looking for more than a hat. At the moment, though, she was talking about me, and I felt the threat of violence keenly.

"Can I sleep next to your gear?" I asked. "I promise I don't have a funny bone in my body."

June backed into her small tent, still glaring at me. She seemed to be digging around her and then she tossed out a mosquito net. "I'm not a heartless bitch. Use that. I want it back in the morning, though."

"Thank you." I said it as if she had given me the key to Heaven, but she was already zipping up her tent.

Her voice said through the material, "Turn out the light once you get settled. Don't waste batteries."

"Right," I replied and tried to find a comfortable spot as I draped the netting over me.

Such a small thing gave blessed relief. I sighed in contentment and even thought I could possibly sleep now. The Human condition never lets us enjoy our happiness for long, though. It was still hot and I could still hear the loud whine of the mosquitoes. I was caked in muck and wet up to my knees. The scratches from thorns and scraping against cypress knees and branches were painful. When I dared turn out the light, I found it impossible to welcome the darkness. I kept thinking about the bear. It might just find us. June had the gun, but her warning that we were being attacked by a bear would be my own screams, of course.

The rumble of thunder let me know that my situation was about to get worse. When the rain began falling, it wasn't hard but it was steady. The tarp kept most of it off but fine drops drifted over me. It both cooled me off and made my night more miserable. It didn't stop until a few hours before dawn.

I was glad when light broke through the trees. I willed it to hurry. I watched with tired eyes as greys turned to light pastels and light pastels broke into shimmering golds over the water and the trees. The dripping cypress trees and the low brush seemed transformed as every drop sparkled. Birds began their calls and I watched them flit from tree to tree looking for breakfast.

I looked and felt a mess, so when the urge to paint over took me it was a shock. I wondered at my sanity. Perhaps it had to do with my night time epiphany, but something needed to be captured in paint on canvas and I couldn't fight the urge despite my bone weariness.

I took out a small canvas and my supplies. I reached out and filled my water cup with rainwater from a small depression in the mud. My boot print I realized. Under my mosquito netting, with the sunrise already painting my white canvas, I wet my brush and lost myself to whatever had taken hold of me.

No, it wasn't a great work of art. I used mainly reds, oranges, and yellows. It was flamboyant and probably inaccurate, considering it seemed to portray a Native American. It wasn't until I began making a large array of feathers as a headdress that I realized who my subject was. It was Indian Joe. Not the plain seeming man, troubled by the wrong decisions in his life, but the heart and soul of the man. Here was the sun touching the rocky plateaus and the sweeping plains. Here was a man who had wanted to feel the wind of the prairie on his face and a horse between his knees. Indian Joe's life wasn't defined by fame or great deeds. It was a growing of his inner self, a realizing that what he really wanted out of life was self-satisfaction and peace.



I finished and then propped the canvas against the side of my pack as I cleaned my brushes and put away my supplies. I could have pointed out any number of mistakes, but I was experiencing my own self-satisfaction at the moment. It didn't matter as long as I enjoyed it.

June didn't wake up until my canvas had dried and I had reluctantly put it in my pack. She unzipped the tent and then came out yawning and stretching. Slipping into her boots, she stared up through the trees to gauge the weather and reached down to take several granola bars out of one of her packs. After I took off my mosquito netting, she tossed one to me and opened and began eating hers.

"I have work to do," she said as she continued to look around at the swamp. "I'm photographing otters today and I have to start early."

I moved out from under the tarp and found my temper. "You can't just leave me out here! I'm completely lost."

She made a disgusted noise. "A baby could get out of here once you get to the boardwalk."

"If the baby knew where that was!" I retorted. My face went red as I realized that I had just called myself a baby, but I wasn't about to let her walk away and leave me. "If you don't show me how to get to the boardwalk I'll still be here when you get back."

"It's that way," she replied and pointed vaguely to our left. She pulled a camera out of her pack and checked it over.

Indian Joe had taught me a valuable lesson. "I don't follow pointing fingers," I replied hotly, "Or general directions."

"And I told you that I don't have time to take you there!" she exclaimed angrily.

I ducked under the tarp and sat back down. "Then I'll be here when you get back."

She frowned, tried to stare me down, and then gave up. "I don't need this. Stay or go. I need to get on with my research."

June grabbed up her pack and strode off into the swamp. I watched her braid swinging and the confidence in her stride. She was gone, then, as if the swamp had swallowed her whole.

I wanted to scream after her and call her choice names, but I bit my lip instead and stayed silent. June would eventually take me back to civilization when she discovered I was stubborn enough to do just what I had threatened: stay there in a contest of wills I intended to win. Getting back under my mosquito netting, I propped my back against my pack and anticipated a long wait.

Chapter Four

The heat of the afternoon sun made the entire swamp oppressive. Even the mosquitos took shelter somewhere presumably darker and cooler. I was able to slip off the mosquito netting at last and pace the confines of June's small camp. The swamp looked the same in every direction and I wondered how she would ever find her way back. There wasn't a bush, a tree, or any visible path that marked it as different from the rest of the thick forest of cypress trees.

Searching through June's dome tent, I found a stash of crackers and cheese. That and water from her large canteen was my impromptu lunch. After that, I found myself staring out into the swamp for a lack of anything better to do.

It was hard to appreciate its beauty under the circumstances. At that moment it was the enemy that was doing its best to make sure I never saw civilization again. It trapped me in June's camp, making me its prisoner. Knowing it was full of terrors that wanted nothing better than to have me for lunch, I didn't even want to contemplate attempting to find the trail June thought was so obviously *just over there*.

Boredom had a way of dulling even the highest level of fear. As the noon day sun began tipping over into early afternoon, I found myself pulling my camera out of my pack. From where I sat very still, trying not to generate even a small amount of extra heat, I could see animals beginning to appear.

A white egret glided through the trees and then dipped down and out of site. I imagined it landing near the water and beginning a search for food in the shallows. Several brown ibis walked through the low bushes as if they had

choreographed their entrance. They were in perfect step with each other, beaks occasionally stabbing downward to get some meal under the mud and small puddles of standing water. I took photos of them. They were unconcerned with my small movements.

I thought about June and wondered if she were taking notes about the antics of her otters along with her photos. They wouldn't be light-hearted notes. She didn't seem the type. Instead, there would be pages of dry scientific observations along with charts and numbers about their basic habits; 20 minnows eaten, 5 trips to relieve themselves, 3 crayfish eaten, 16 swim in a 20 by 40 foot pool of water, etc. I wanted to call it de-humanizing the subjects, but I wondered if I could apply that term to otters?

I took out my sketch pad. It was small and abused already. The bottom edge had soaked up water from a small leak in the pack. The pencil I took out next was definitely damp. Everything would need drying out. That was something I needed to take care of later, though. Now, I felt the need to make notes about my subjects and the sketch pad was perfect for that.

After drawing a small Ibis sketch, I wrote underneath; *the three brown ibis stalked through the low brush with the discipline of soldiers on parade, yet they were as graceful as ballerinas as well. I could easily imagine a concert hall orchestra and soft music playing as they stepped in time and dipped their curved beaks into mud and water. Among the ancient cypress and the quiet only broken by occasional birdsong, it seemed a dance played out only for me; my personal performance from Mother Nature herself.*

I admired the wording, pleased by my attempt to give life to still photographs and an inner experience that couldn't be captured by a digital or artistic medium. I

wanted to write more. I had visions of a book of my own photographs and musings published and winning awards. June could write her dry numbers and observations all she wanted. Her book would end up on some academic's desk, filled with tabs and used to teach a class about otters. Mine might end up in the hands of artists, acclaimed for its originality and beauty. I would be the next Thoreau.

I really didn't have a problem with humility, or stark reality, as a matter of fact. I was only dreaming the big dream, taking it as far as it could go. Didn't people always say to never be afraid to take chances on your dreams? I didn't consider that my photos were probably all blurry and the composition terrible. I didn't consider that my poetic descriptions of Ibis were probably not written well. I was living in the moment and that moment had me accepting awards on a stage in front of thousands of admirers.

Visions of greatness can make a man do incredibly foolish things. The Ibis walked back into the brush and I found myself lacking in subjects to create my great work of photography and literature. I recalled the egret and tried to calculate how far away it had landed. Not far, my mind lied, and convinced me that I could easily find my way back. It was just past a few stands of brush and trees. One bush had small yellow flowers and a cypress tree had a definite bend in its trunk. June's words came back to me and I found myself repeating them to give me courage. With landmarks like those, even a baby could find their way.

I shouldered my pack, hung my camera on its strap around my neck, and put my sketch pad under my arm. With my pencil tucked behind my ear, I allowed the tug of promised greatness to take me away from June's camp and out into the swamp that I feared.

I found the water eventually. Not only was there a white egret hunting frogs and fish in the shallows, but also a great blue heron eying me suspiciously and ready to launch itself into the air.



I crouched down, lowered my pack to the ground, and stayed perfectly still until it settled and decided to hunt for small fish and frogs as well.

I was mesmerized by the size of the blue heron and its coloring of white, bluish grey, silver, brown, and black. There was even a dab of yellow on the shoulder of its wing. I managed to snap many photos of both birds, but I couldn't get enough of the Great Blue. When it came time to write my thoughts the words came much easier than they had with the ibis.

Like a fine work of art, the Great Blue Heron stands tall and majestic in the shallows. With feathers that look like fine brush strokes and colors that astound

against a backdrop of deep greens and browns, its head dress of several long black feathers deserve to be a crown. They are truly the king of wading birds.

It seemed literary genius at the time and I was excited by the project I was outlining in my head. It completely distracted me from the terror of the swamp and the made my trauma of being lost in it fade into the back ground of my drive to create. When I finally decided to pack my camera and sketch book and head back for June's camp, the birds took flight. The great blue heron lifted off the ground with difficulty, its size making gravity a larger issue than with the small white egret. It made a loud croaking call several times in annoyance at having to expend the effort.

I watched it go, smiling to myself at the privilege of seeing the sight, and then turned to find the crooked cypress and the bush with the small yellow flowers. My landmark tree, unfortunately, was not to be found. Even more terrifying was the sight of more than one bush with yellow flowers. They were widely scattered and I hadn't noticed them before.

"Shit!"

My exclamation was swallowed up by the swamp. The birds continued their songs, a few frogs and crickets joined in. Everything about the swamp was the same as when I had thought myself some budding naturalist ready to sign autographs and accept awards. Now it was frightening again, a menacing place where bears, cougars, and alligators waited to eat unwary award winning authors and photographers like me.

The tree had been very distinctive, I told myself. I realized too late that I was probably at an angle where that bend was now invisible. Whether facing away from me, or hidden by the other trees, my only hope was to strike out into the

swamp and try and find it again. I decided that shouting for June was far more preferable.

I shouted until I was hoarse. The sun was setting towards late evening. The air was stifling, but there was a definite feeling that it would soon rain. I could make out dark clouds through the thin top branches of the cypress trees and see them moving in a light breeze that didn't reach down where I was standing. When thunder began to rumble in the distance I knew that standing still and waiting for rescue was out of the question.

June either couldn't hear my calls or she was ignoring them, believing that I could find my way to the boardwalk eventually. The alternative was too harsh to consider. I didn't want to think that she was cold enough not care about my welfare.

I found my courage somewhere in the bottom of my boots and began walking. Either I would find June's camp or the boardwalk trail back to civilization. I refused to believe that I might end up in the deep swamp again. It was too tragic a thought.

I startled a possum mother with her four children hanging onto her back. I almost fell backward in surprise. She hissed at me and then waddled off into the bushes. I ran across a few raccoons who didn't seem disturbed by my presence. They moved away slowly, pausing now and again to look back at me.

I didn't take photos or make notes. That dream was gone like morning fog burning off in the heat of terrifying reality. Now it was all about survival, all about getting the hell out of there and never seeing water, mud, mosquitos, and confusing stands of cypress trees again.

When night fell and rain began falling soon after, I broke down and cried for a short time; perhaps, longer than I would ever admit. Eventually, I pulled myself together and continued to walk. It was a monumental task, but I wasn't ready to collapse like the other night and give up. Even in the darkness and pouring rain, moving forward, one painful step at a time through brush, thorny vines, sharp palmettos, and pools of water seemed better to me than being found in the mud in a fetal position. That's not how you won awards after all.

I laughed at that, but it was brief.

When I bumped into the boardwalk, I could hardly believe it. I leaned against it, my trembling hands moving over the boards in the dark as I confirmed its reality. After dumping my pack on top of it, I clawed my way out of the sucking mud and water to join it. Rolling onto my back on top of the hard boards, all I could do was thank God while the rain washed over me.

I'm not sure how long I lay there, but when I finally sat up I was ready to get the hell out of there. I didn't care if ten bears were sitting in my way. Getting to my feet, I shouldered my pack and decided on a direction at random. I hoped I didn't reach an end that led back into the swamp. I'm not sure I could keep my sanity or my will to turn and back track.

The rain tapered off. Mosquitoes began to swarm again. In the pitch blackness, and with no handrail to keep me on the trail, I was forced to move slowly. The drop into water and mud was several feet and I didn't want to risk a broken leg now.

I felt like crying again when the boardwalk ended and my boots sank in mud again. A faint security light saved me from losing my mind. I saw its flicker just as I was about to sink down and end up in the fetal position I had wanted to avoid.

The light was on the corner of a small building. I walked around it in frustration. It was locked and abandoned for the night. Only the bathrooms were open. I found myself almost crawling into the sink to wash off the mud, the sweat, and to get a drink of water. The water was tepid and it smelled, but at that moment it was water from the Gods and I was happy for every drop.

When I finally left the bathroom, I stood in the light and tried to decide what to do next. There was a gravel road that led off into the darkness and I could hear traffic in that direction. The cars sounded few and far between. I had two choices; stay by the building and hope that a ranger would come there in the morning or walk to the road and try to catch a ride back to where I had parked my car.

The rain had begun to taper off to a fine mist, but the heat was still oppressive. Whatever benefit I had gotten from the water in the bathroom was fast disappearing. I felt as if I was covered in sweat rather than rain and tap water. The bugs loved the light. Moths fluttered against the bulb and the mosquitos seemed to use it as a beacon. I was surrounded by a swarm. It convinced me to try hitchhiking back to my car.

At the end of the gravel road there was a black top highway and a sign for the park. A small light at its base gave some illumination where I was standing, but I wasn't sure it was bright enough to allow anyone driving by to see me.

The road was wet. Cars splashed the water over me in a fine spray as they passed me by. I couldn't blame them, really, but I did anyway. Maybe we were on a lonely stretch of swamp road, and I did look like a lunatic axe murderer at this point, but they could have assumed that I simply needed help.

After an hour of rejection, I was finally ready to turn back for the building in the park and to take my chances waiting for a ranger. That's when a large semi-truck pulled to a stop with a loud sound of air brakes and the smell of diesel fuel. The window rolled down and a friendly round face framed by a brown beard and topped with a hat that read, *truckers do it better*, peered down at me.

"You look like shit! Need a ride?"

"Hell, yes!" I exclaimed and ran to the passenger side door.

It was like trying to get on an elephant. Everything from the door to the first step was heavy, overlarge, and hard to manage. I ended up tossing my pack into the seat first and then using whatever handhold I could manage to get myself inside the cab.

"I'm wet and dirty," I said as I settled my pack at my feet and put on my seatbelt. I was afraid that he would tell me to get out, but the vestiges of some sort of honor urged me to full disclosure.

"And you smell a little," the man noticed with a wrinkle of his nose. His brown eyes remained friendly though as he pulled away from the park and drove the semi down the road into the darkness. "That's okay. Looks like you fell on hard times. Maybe I can get you to a place where you can get taken care of?"

"I just need to get back to my car," I replied. "I was taking a nature hike and I lost the others. I've been wandering around in the swamp since yesterday."

He grunted in sympathy, "You definitely need some help then. Why don't you take that bottle of lemon-lime soda down the side of the seat? I just bought it a few miles back. It's probably still cold. It'll make you feel better. My name's Daniel, by the way."

"Jack," I replied. "Thanks." I found the bottle in a cup holder and it was still cold. I uncapped it and took a long drink. It was wonderful; sugar, caffeine, and cold wetness down my throat. It instantly washed away the taste of swamp that seemed caked on my tongue.

"People are probably looking for you," Daniel said.

I shrugged as I took another long drink. I swallowed and replied despondently, "Not really... well, Wild Cat, the guide on the hike, might worry, but no one else."

"Not even family back home?" Daniels seemed truly sympathetic now.

I shook my head and then replied, as I realized that he had his eyes on the dark road, "Not really, no."

"That's too bad," he said softly. "Everyone should have someone to worry about them."

I felt almost irritated, but then decided I was just tired, hungry, and impatient to get back to my car. I didn't want a stranger to peel back the skin of my life and find a gaping wound, but he had saved me and I owed him some license to have his curiosity satisfied.

I looked around the cab. It was old. Everything was scratched and worn. Behind the seats was a cubby for sleeping. It had a mattress, some blankets, and a few conveniences to make life on the road easier.

Turning back around in my seat, I felt a little dizzy. Daniel turned on a country station and the music almost lulled me to sleep. When he turned up the A.C. and cool air blew over my hot skin, I realized that I couldn't stay awake any longer.

Daniel must have seen my difficulty. He chuckled and asked, "Just give me directions. I'll make sure you get to your car while you take a nap."

"Can't be far," I replied and was surprised when my voice slurred. My tongue seemed thick and unwieldy in mouth.

"If you're going to be driving, you better get some rest," Daniel argued with a smile. "It's okay. Close your eyes and have a few winks."

"Thanks, for everything," I replied and couldn't hold my eyes open any longer.

"Rest easy," Daniel's voice said soothingly. I found myself trusting that voice. It was so friendly it was hard not to.

I gave Daniel directions, though I couldn't swear they were the correct ones. It was so hard to think and everything was feeling very dream-like. In a few minutes I would be back in my own car, I said to myself very convincingly. I could close my eyes for those few minutes. Daniel would take care of me.

"Wolves smile before they kill." It was the voice of the old man from my shop. The words were clear, as if he occupied the same space in the seat as I did. His voice sounded sad and regretful.

If the words were a warning they were a poor one. I couldn't respond to them even if they had triggered an alarm for self-preservation in my brain. My brain could only muster mild curiosity and an instinctive need to know where the old man was sitting in the small cab. I had a conflicting moment where I felt as if the two sides of my brain were having an argument about the reality of the voice. Then both sides came to an unforeseen conclusion about the entire event. I had been drugged.

That thought wasn't as alarming as it should have been, because it was perfectly true. Daniel had slipped me something, possibly in the soda I had drank. It was now wreaking havoc in my body and putting me at a distinct disadvantage. Whatever Daniel intended for me, I was helpless to prevent it. In fact, sleep

seemed far more important at that moment than escaping would be murderers, white slave traders, or rapists. What was left of my consciousness at that point scoffed at the latter. I was a skinny emo artist and, as much as I wanted to be, not on anyone's A list in the looks department. It only occurred to me that perhaps opportunity trumped good looks, as the drug finally took me under and made the world go away for an undetermined amount of time.

Chapter Five

When I woke next I was decidedly uncomfortable. Dust was in my mouth and my eyes felt grainy and reluctant to open. I could hear wind in my ears, a low lonely moan and swishing noise unlike anything I was used to. It sounded as if it had a lot of open ground to roam that didn't involve battering itself against cypress forests and dense thickets. The air smelled different as well and I couldn't identify why.

I fought against the glue that seemed to be holding my eyes shut, blinking and tearing up in the process. Those tears helped, but the vision of a wide open blue sky and the tall grass surrounding me when I finally did get my eyes open, made me blink in confusion.

I wanted to sit up, but my efforts were aborted by something holding my arms and legs together. My arms were aching and my hands were inexplicably behind my back. Flexing my fingers I could feel a tingle and a definite pain that let me know I had been in that position for some time. When the breeze and my movements made something flutter on my chest, I jerked in alarm against whatever held me. My arms didn't budge an inch.

My eyes focused on what turned out to be a piece of paper sloppily duct taped to my chest. As its loose end fluttered, I attempted to read large letters written in red marker upside down. It spelled *loser*. My first thought was that it wasn't a very good letter for a psychopath to leave on his victim. It really should have been more descriptive of his feelings and his motivation. My second thought was that murder hadn't been good enough for Daniel. The man had wanted to insult me as a final flourish.

I had settled on murder very quickly, but there really wasn't any other explanation. I couldn't hear any traffic. I was tied hand and foot with duct tape. There was a note pinned to my chest explaining that I had been judged and sentenced. When I thought about it, I suppose Daniel was just being concise.

Thinking about how stupid I had been was a pointless exercise, but I didn't have anything else to do just then. My self-flagellation lasted for some time while I tested the strength of the duct tape holding my arms together and behind my back. When I finally managed to roll and sit up, I had ended my inner rant with, *never get in the car with strangers*, which sounded childish, even though it had turned out to be a very good warning.

And here was where that childish thought led my mind down a dark alley. As I stared stupidly at the grasslands that seemed to stretch for miles in every direction, a wide open blue sky overhead, and mountains far in the distance, I had to wonder if Daniel had taken liberties with my person. It seemed that he had taken me a hell of a long way from the swamps and I had apparently slept the entire way. There had been ample time.

I was still wearing my clothes and they and my person were still filthy. The skin that was exposed had numerous fading red bug bites and mud. I didn't feel any pain except what a person might feel after being tied for a long while. The pleasing fact that Daniel had been graced with my stinking and filthy person during our long trip was overshadowed by the realization that I had somehow managed to make the man disgusted enough to endure it so he could dispose of my person where no one was likely to ever find it. The note had probably been an after-thought; a *just in case* to let whoever found me know that I had deserved to be murdered.

No one likes to think they can be held hostage by duct tape. I imagined Kurt flexing muscles, grunting like the gorilla he was, and popping out of his bonds in true super hero fashion. Unfortunately, I was far more mortal. As the wind ruffled my dark hair and made the tall grass *sing* and the sun moved slowly overhead, I struggled to get free.

I fell over several times in my struggles. The fifth time I rolled onto my back in exhaustion and wondered if anyone would find my bones. I rested with that morbid thought for some times, probably far longer than I should have. It was almost a declaration of defeat.

It was the cows that spurred me to greater efforts. I heard breath near the top of my head and then a brown steer mottled in white spots looked down at me curiously and chewed his cud. He wasn't alone. I was suddenly surrounded by cattle that didn't show any fear of a man in the middle of nowhere taking a nap in the tall grass. It didn't speak well for their survival instincts. It did speak to me about the fact that cattle meant ranchers. Somewhere out there a rancher had a ranch. Rescue couldn't be that far away.

When I began to struggle harder, the steer closest to me started a little, drooled, and moved away. It promptly dropped a stinking cow patty that doubled the unpleasant situation I found myself in. In fact, the herd seemed to be a continually defecating group of animals who weren't the slightest bit embarrassed about passing gas either.

The duct tape began to stretch, but it clung to my skin with the properties that had made it famous. By the time I managed to jerk a hand free of its powerful grip, the sun was moving towards late afternoon. I felt a sun burn stinging my skin and I would have given anything for cold water. My mouth was bone dry.

That was a warning. I wasn't sure how long I had been asleep, but my body was informing me it had been deprived for some time. That could be as equally dangerous as being tied up in the middle of nowhere if a ranch didn't materialize in short order.

I pulled at the duct tape with my free hand, leaving skin and a couple of fingernails as it slowly gave up its determination to keep my arms behind my back at a painful angle. My antics of rolling and heaving like a landed fish, made the cattle think better of their chosen grazing spot. They moved off, leaving their stinking piles of dung to remember them by.

Finally my arms came free and I sat up. I bowed forward and rested, enjoying the sensation of having both hands back. That brought to my attention that my pack was open near my feet and its contents were scattered everywhere. David hadn't missed an opportunity to rob me.

It was obvious that he wasn't an art lover. My supplies and my canvases, finished and unfinished, had been left behind. He had seen the potential to pawn my camera, though. It was conspicuously missing. So was my wallet.

So much for proof of my adventure; Cynthia, Kurt, and my boss were going to have to take my word for it. It was sad to think that only Cynthia might buy a good story. She had, after all, been buying my story of trying to become a famous artist/author through our entire relationship. There wasn't any reason to believe that she wouldn't buy it now.

I finally removed the duct tape from my lower legs, hating how the gum on the tape was being left behind on my skin and how that tape was becoming a painful depilation technique. When I was finally done and throwing the remnants of the tape in the pile that I had peeled off of my arms, I had gained an audience.

I can't blame vultures for taking advantage of every opportunity that presented itself. I didn't imagine that place had many of them. If something stayed on the ground for too long they instinctively assumed that it was injured and hopefully about to present them with a meal.

Five of these birds drifted in on the breeze warily to circle low and investigate me. The flap of their wings was setting off an entire set of my own instinctive reactions: fear foremost. I scrambled unsteadily to my feet and waved my arms to prove to them I was alive and kicking and they veered away, squawking and giving me ugly looks. Since they were very close, I could see their ugly looks encompassed most of their upper body.

The cattle were grazing off to my right and looking back at me in alarm. One made a loud bellowing noise and then they all began walking away from me. I wasn't sure if that suited me. As I bent to gather up my canvases and supplies to put back in my pack, I had a vision of following the cattle in hopes of a rancher showing up to check on them.

What little I knew about range cattle could be written on a postage stamp. Looking around as I shouldered my pack had me rethinking my vision. It was possible that these animals ranged for days, weeks, maybe even months before someone needed to come way out there to take a head count. I didn't relish sidestepping cow patties and trying to survive without any supplies until then. I certainly wasn't going to butcher and eat raw cow to survive... at least not yet.

The thought of supplies reminded me about my terrible thirst. Cattle had to drink as well. There had to be water somewhere in that vast expanse and I didn't think they would go an entire day without it. I decided to follow them at least that far.

A breeze swept over the grasslands, making the grass swish as if it was an ocean with waves. That same breeze rustled the paper taped to my chest. I had forgotten all about it. Ripping it off, I stared down at the word written there. Angrily I tore the thing into pieces and let the wind take those pieces and scatter them like snowflakes. It didn't matter that I agreed with the sentiment written there. I didn't need anyone pointing it out to me. The pieces scattered over the grass and it was then that I noticed that the white pieces were also showing red from the marker. It made me think of splattered blood and I felt disturbed by the unsettling imagery. I was glad to leave them behind and follow my new guides.

Unfortunately, following cattle was mostly not following cattle. They moved in a sedate group, munching, pausing often, and staring off into space while they chewed. They flicked at flies, defecated, and farted incessantly. They gave me alarmed looks when I moved too much, but after a while they seemed to accept me as part of the herd.

I sat often while I waited for the animals to move on and aborted the urge, again and again, to *make* them move. If I spooked them, I might interrupt any thoughts going through their heads that had to do with getting a drink of water. While I couldn't imagine the fat lumbering animals stampeding, like in the old cowboy movies, I couldn't really be sure.

One spotted steer with large crooked horns licked its nose with a broad drooling tongue and then seemed to come to a decision. Letting out a loud bellow that elicited lackluster attention from the herd as a whole, he seemed to be attempting to communicate some command. With a flick of its tail, it turned to its right and began to walk with more alacrity than I had witnessed yet. After watching his retreat for a full minute with blank stares and swishing tails, a cow

began to follow. This seemed to be the deciding vote on whether to stay or follow. The rest of the herd slowly began to follow its other two members.

Finally we were at a steady walking pace and I felt sure we were heading towards something that was important to these animals. Water, I prayed silently and then out loud as if a steady mantra of the word *water* could put the idea into their heads. I was getting desperate.

We didn't walk long and when I saw our goal I was surprised I hadn't noticed it before. A tall wooden windmill with rusted metal blades cranked a pump that kept water in a very large oval metal tank. I pushed the cattle aside and my thirst made me bold and determined to drink first before they put their slobbering faces into it.

I can't say I was proud of myself for putting my own face in and drinking like the dying man I was or for jerking off my boots and socks afterward, dropping my pack, and climbing bodily into the tank. As I submerged my burned, filthy, and abused body, I felt blessed cool relief at last. The cattle stared at me for long moments, as if they were questioning my sanity, and then they began their own push and shove to the water source. They didn't care about the strange human taking a bath, they ringed the container of water and began drinking.

I didn't want to get out. Whatever drug Daniel had used was making me feel both nauseated and exhausted. My body wanted more sleep and to stay cooled off, while my mind told it firmly that it had slept enough and turning into a prune wasn't going to help my situation. I still needed food and I wasn't going to be able to bring down a steer and gnaw it to death with the only weapon I had: my teeth. Later, when I was desperate, I might try, but not now.

I dipped my entire head under the water, shook it to get mud and sweat off, and then broke the water with renewed purpose. It startled the cattle and they jerked and moved aside as I climbed out and sloshed water everywhere. Grabbing my pack, I had to tug it free from under a cow's hoof before I could sling it over one shoulder. I looked ruefully at the dirty hoof imprint on one side and wondered about the state of my supplies as I walked away from the precious water and my new cattle friends.

I didn't know where I was going. I vaguely remembered hearing that water came down from mountains and people generally lived near water. That was all I had to go on as the large expanse of grass stretched in all directions and became my world as the herd faded in the distance. I turned to look back at them at one point and couldn't see the tall windmill any longer. It had disappeared between land and bright sky as if it had never existed. Fleeting thoughts of going back had to be squashed. My goal was the far away line of mountains. I convinced myself that I knew what I was doing.

As afternoon stretched into evening, the setting sun made the grass a deep brown and orange color. Tinges of violent pink, dark blue, orange and beat red lit up the blue sky. The temperature was still comfortable, but I knew it could get very cold at night whatever the season... or was that the desert? My mind tried to decide. It passed the time until I realized that it didn't make any difference. I couldn't take shelter and I didn't have any warm clothes. I could only endure whatever happened.

I heard them before I saw them; a pounding noise that blended with the swishing sound of the grass. I thought it was thunder at first and cringed at the

thought of being out there in a thunderstorm, but after a while the source of the noise appeared out of the grass.

They were vague shapes at first, seemingly galloping out of thin air where grasslands met the sky. A herd of wild horses was coming towards me, their brown and multicolored hides turned to reds and oranges by the setting sun. Tails and manes flying, they looked scruffy, sturdy, and completely wild. They stopped ahead of me, milled around, and then spread out to graze as if that particular patch of grass was better than all the rest and worth a long journey at breakneck speed. It did look healthier somehow and when I move warily closer, keeping low in the grass, I spotted a low impression that had managed to retain some water. They drank, their small foals splashing in fun, and then they all went back to grazing.

I half hoped they were tame, but the small fights that erupted, the wild eyes and flared nostrils of the stallion always on the alert, and the lack of any sort of harness or brand killed any thought about catching one and riding it for help. Not that I would have known how. When I was a child, I had been afraid of the pony rides at the carnival.

They had their fill of water and grass and then the stallion charged among them and made them leave. He severely bullied the ones who tried to avoid him and stay. When he finally had them all moving in one direction, they broke into a gallop and disappeared into the tall grass and the distance where the dark of night was beginning to gather. I wondered where they were going and why they didn't stay the night where there was plenty for them to enjoy. Maybe the stallion had sensed me at last, or maybe it was afraid that less savory characters might be drawn to the water once night fell? It made me think of my own safety.

I was thirsty and hungry. Food wasn't forthcoming, but the water was there. I decided to take a long drink and then move on as far as I could before I couldn't see to walk any longer. I crouched, making a face when I saw horse hooves and smelled horse dung. I wondered if it was even safe to drink. I cupped some in both hands and examined it as best I could.

"You're not too smart." The voice was a woman's.

I almost jumped out of my skin in surprise, the double handful of water blowing in all directions as I let out a violent breath, straightened, and turned to see who had spoken.

I blinked at the woman standing before me and wondered if I was hallucinating now.

"There's better water that way." She pointed off into the grass as if she had an instinctual compass. "You don't want the water horses have just pissed in."

Her matter of fact tone was sharp and rough with an age she didn't show on her face. Her black, straight hair was braided on one side and her cheeks were high and her nose straight and long. Her dark eyes looked down at me along that nose as if she needed that line to see me properly.

She was wearing old men's clothes of monotone colors of blue, gray, and brown that didn't quite fit and looked dusty, a worn tan cowboy hat with a colored beaded trim, and deep brown cowboy boots that seemed over large, but just as well used as the rest of her clothing. She seemed lost in all the folds, but her strong features and her firm, tall stance gave her an aura of automatic command often reserved for great grandmothers who had become tough as nails living through hard times.

I straightened slowly and shook the water off of my hands. "There is?" I sounded frightened in my own ears, but she seemed ghostly in the evening light and part of my brain was wondering if she was real or part of a dream.

She nodded, once, and still seemed intimidating even though she had to look up at me now. She squinted as if assessing me thoroughly and then asked, "Mind if I know why you're out here?"

The explanation flitted through my brain in seconds and was rejected just as quickly. It was simply too overwhelming at the moment to recount, especially since I wasn't sure of the details myself. How do you explain that you had taken a simple swamp tour and ended up in the open plains of... where ever we were? I was still half in shock. I needed to find the local authorities and tell it once, not make my only chance of getting to those authorities think I was short a full deck of cards.

"Painting," I lied. "I decided to hike and paint the local... wildlife. I didn't realize that everything would look so much the same. I'm turned around."

"Town is that way," she nodded to our right. "Not much of a place, but they can get you situated, I'm sure."

She held out a brown hand and I took it and gave it a light shake. I was reassured that she was real when I felt her strength, warmth, and very real callouses.

"Winona," she said and it took me a moment to realize she was telling me her name.

"Jack," I replied.

"Well, Jack," she said as she looked down at my pack and gave it a small nudge of her booted toe. "Gonna paint? Good time for it. We can go after."

I blinked, caught off guard. "Are you going my way?" That was a nice way of asking her what the hell *she* was doing way out there on foot.

"Don't see why not," she replied, which didn't explain anything. When she saw my confusion, she chuckled, "Because I'm stuck out here too. My truck broke down."

"It did?" I looked around us as if the vehicle would appear out of the grass. "Maybe I can take a look at it?"

She chuckled again, laugh lines crinkling at the corners of her eyes. "If I can't fix it, can't be fixed. I know that truck, as well as I know anything. I need to get a few parts from town and get a ride back."

"You don't have a cell phone?" I asked hopefully.

"Would have used it if I had one," she replied a bit sharply and then shrugged in embarrassment. "I left the damn thing on the charger at home; was only going to check on the water. I didn't expect that scrap on wheels to break down, though I should have. It does it all the time. That's how I know how to fix it good. Usually some tape, water, oil, or a good kick in the ass gets it going again, though."

"This is your place?" I was impressed.

She laughed outright now. "No, no, not mine. I just check on the water, look for downed cattle, and make sure the wild horses don't get into things. I get some pay. Not much. Don't need much to get by around here, though."

Her head tilted upward and she surveyed the darkening sky with a keen eye shaded by her hat brim. She muttered what sounded like a curse under her breath and then sighed. "I don't want to spend the night out here, but it looks like we're both stuck. I used to walk a lot faster before that horse gave me a kick back when." Her head tilted down and now it was me she was studying. "Wild horses are

a good thing to paint. People like them. They'll pay money for that. I can stick a bit if you want to put some dabs down; isn't far to the shack."

"But they're gone-" I started to say in bewilderment and then understood. I could say I was a painter, but she had some doubt. Like my friendly trucker, it was possible that I was out there for nefarious reasons. Those reasons might include molesting confident women walking in the middle of nowhere.

I didn't want to stay the night in some shack. I wanted to reach the authorities and sleep clean and in a real bed. It didn't look like I had much choice and that also included not having any choice about dragging out my paints and proving to Winona that I was a harmless artist. I suppose that should have irritated me, but it was a stereotype that stuck to men who were artists. In my case, at least it was true.

"Won't someone come looking for you?" I asked as I pulled out paint and canvas.

"They might," she replied guardedly. "Nothing for it, but to sleep out here, though; walking around in the dark under the stars sounds romantic, but it's the shit when you walk into a hole, a gulley, or a cactus."

I didn't remember seeing any cactus, but there probably were and I didn't like the thought of having my feet or lower legs punctured even more than she did.

I must have been looking unsure as I bent to get water because when I turned she was patting something under her folds of clothing and giving me a wink that wasn't exactly friendly. "Don't worry about the wildlife. I have my pistol and I'm a dead shot."

I believed her and I did feel both threatened and comforted. I didn't have to be frightened of her gun because I intended to keep her vision of a harmless artist

a true one. "That's good," I replied and settled cross-legged on the ground and put my canvases in my lap. My supplies were by my knee and I sat for long minutes trying to remember the details of the band of wild horses.

Winona cleared her throat and said impatiently, "Don't take too long at it."

She obviously thought art was just an exercise and not something more inspired. I told myself to paint anything just to appease her, but I couldn't help getting thoughtful about it. Art was never a simple exercise for me. It was always a hard won fight with my muse when I could manage to find the inspiration for anything to put on canvas. The few times I had tried to force it had turned into disasters. Since I was trying to convince her I was a real artist, some effort had to be put into making the attempt a real one as well.

"You should try taking pictures and painting things later, if it takes you that long," Winona piped in as if silence and being still wasn't a part of her nature.

"I do—did." I still didn't want to explain my predicament. "My camera was stolen."

"Oh," she replied. "People are shit sometimes."

I nodded. "They are."

I thought of the sunset colors moving over the hides of the horses, their restlessness, and their stillness as well. When they were grazing some of them had looked very content.

"They look like Indian ponies," Winona commented as she looked over my shoulder. "Pretty."

I blinked down at what had started as sloshing water and color on canvas and found a herd of horses galloping with the wind and the sunset through the tall grass. As if her suggestion had given my muse a life of its own, I had painted

markings on the horses as well, as if they were running free, but ready for their native owners to claim them when they were finished.



The muse wasn't done. I pulled out my beaten and stained sketchbook and a pencil. My hand went quickly over a blank page and sketched out some horses and their foals getting buffeted by an evening wind. Dabbing water color in reds and browns, it bled with the pencil and created an interesting effect. Where the first painting was wild and free, the second was peaceful and quiet.



"Another good one," Winona commented, but then her patience was fading. "If you're done we can get going. The shack isn't that far, but it isn't particularly close either."

I looked over my paintings and felt pleased, instead of my usual critical dissatisfaction. Maybe I was learning to judge them by a different standard now? I wasn't worrying about the technical aspects. I liked the emotions they generated in me.

"Like the grazing ponies," Winona told me. "Might take that one, if it's not too much? Maybe payment for the guided tour back?"

She sounded hopeful and that pleased me. I handed it over. "If you have any food you could share, it's a deal. Hold it until it dries."

She smiled and nodded as she took a few wrapped bars out of a pocket and handed them to me. They were caramel crème nougat rolled in honey and nuts and I recognized them right away.

I had to ask, "Where did you get these?"

"They're good," she replied as I handed her the painting and she gingerly took the canvas and admired it, "Gas station sells them."

I laughed, unwrapped one, and bit into it. The stupid snack that I had been avoiding for so long was now a lifeline. My stomach was overjoyed and I juggled trying to pack my supplies back into my duffel while trying to eat it.

"Hungry?" Winona sounded sympathetic. "Sorry I don't have more."

I felt suddenly guilty. "Are you going to be all right without food until tomorrow?" I asked as I slung my duffel onto my shoulder and balanced my own drying painting on one hand.

"Well... I could use a bite... later," she hedged uncertainly. "It doesn't seem right, since I just used them to pay you."

I reluctantly handed back one roll, silently reminding my stomach that we were civilized and that it wasn't going to die without that roll of peanuts and sugar; at least not by tomorrow.

"Thanks," Winona said and seemed a little embarrassed. Still holding her painting gingerly she said, "Let's get going." She apparently wanted us both out of that awkward situation.

As we walked together towards what was left of the evening light and a horizon that didn't show the promised shack, I was able to look at our two paintings. They couldn't have been more different, but they each had merit. Even if I had just sold one for two pecan rolls and a guide, I was still pleased.

Chapter Six

The shack appeared out of the grass between one blink and the next. I felt uncertain about its reality and realized I was beginning to doubt the reality of things far more often than I liked. It was very small, squat, and situated by another tub of water and a far older looking windmill that made a clanking noise as it spun. There was a small pen made out of sturdy metal and some ropes that were tied off there ready for use. The shack had a rusted metal roof, boards that were gray and old enough to look petrified, and a door with a bar latch over its center. A few cattle were nosing around it as if they could smell something they liked.

"Get goin'!" Winona shouted at them. She handed me her painting and clapped her hands so that the cattle scattered away from the door.

The smell of dung was strong. It was hot inside the building and obviously used for storage. Winona left the door open and began hefting heavy bags of grain, salt blocks, and various piles of equipment that I couldn't identify. She pounded open a back window that was stuck to its old frame and propped it up with a broken stick that looked as if it had been doing that duty for years.

I looked around for a place to put down the paintings and found it on top of a roll of fence wire. After putting them down carefully, and dropping my pack, I turned to help Winona. She gave me a cross look as she dusted off her hands. She was already done moving things.

Winona explained, "This isn't a good place to sleep. We use this place to treat cattle and take care of repairs. It's going to be a rough night."

"How far from here is the town?" I wanted to know as I looked for a way to arrange some bags of grain into a bed.

Winona was clearing her space, grimacing as she picked up nails and a rusted hammer and moved them. "Not far. I'm not used to walking it, though. It might take longer than I remember."

I went to drink water from the tub. The cattle took this as their queue that the inside of the shed now belonged to them. Winona shouted at them from inside though and they started and trotted away in disappointment.

I almost asked if the water was safe, but it was a ridiculous question when she had brought me here herself. I wasn't getting sick from my last drink and that gave me confidence to drink a few handfuls. When I returned to the shed, Winona had just drunk from a canteen. She tipped it at me and gave me a look that told me she wasn't sharing unless it was necessary.

"Always carry one of these out here," she said wisely.

"A cell phone to call someone for help should be essential too," I retorted.

She laughed. "Yeah, I was stupid."

The light finally faded as if someone had breathed darkness over our shack. Winona turned on a battery powered lantern and placed it next to her. The modern light seemed out of place in that rustic shack, but I was glad she had found it. The light wind came in through the door and it began to cool off.

"We should close the door," I suggested. I was thinking of cattle, snakes, and other less pleasant things getting in while we slept, but she shook her head and took her hat off. She seemed younger and more Native American now. Her hair was very straight and even though it was braided down one side she had parted it sharply down the middle. There were some gray hairs there, but not many.

"Air's good," she told me simply. "Cattle will stay out there."

I wasn't convinced of the last part, but the air was good. If she wanted the door open because she was in a shack with a strange man and wanted a quick way out, we didn't discuss it.

I ate my candy. My stomach wasn't as happy with the second one. It wanted real food. Whatever Daniel had given me to make me unconscious that long was still making me feel less than one hundred percent as well.

Winona ate her candy and then observed, "You don't look too good. You got any trouble I should know about?"

"What kind of trouble?" I was trying to get comfortable on my makeshift bed. Lumpy things were trying to gouge divots into my skin.

"You know; heart, diabetes... low testosterone...?" she chuckled.

"Oh... well... Life's been a little rough lately," I hedged. "I'll be okay if I can manage some sleep and get a good meal tomorrow."

"Got money, then?" she wondered.

I didn't. Daniel had stolen anything valuable. I must have looked troubled. She was sympathetic. "Make a few more paintings tomorrow and sell them," she suggested. "Gas station will probably take a few for their souvenir stand. Better than them damned key chains with the names and the postcards that aren't even from around here."

I nodded, but I was still hoping that the police would save me and send me back home. In reality, I didn't know if that was true. Maybe I was expected to file a report and then find a way to prove who I was to a bank, so they could get access to my funds? Maybe I was supposed to find and finance my own way home? Maybe I wasn't even going to get a decent meal or a check at the local doctor's office?

There were too many maybe's. I felt more confident in a large city, or even a small one. I wasn't sure the same rules applied to a small place that barely passed as a town.

Winona crossed her ankles and stretched out on her hard bed. She was using a sack of something as a support. "So, you travel from place to place painting and make money when you can? That's a free-wheeling kind of life. You probably starve a lot."

I frowned. "Am I that bad of an artist?"

"No, didn't say that!" she assured me. "Just... not spot perfect, you know? People are picky when it comes to parting with cash."

I knew that from experience.

"Now, me, I like a steady pay and a steady job," she told me with a firmness that let me know that she meant every word. She didn't have any regrets. "I get to work alone, see the sights, and take care of things. I get paid regularly and I get a bonus when I save one of the boss's cows."

"You like being alone?" I wondered.

She smiled and shrugged. "I guess as far as working. When I'm done for the day, I hang out at the local watering hole and sit with my friends. We have dinner, drink a bit, and shoot the shit. Sunday, we all go to church like good folk, have lunch together potluck style, and have fun with the families."

"You don't have a family?" I was getting personal, but so was she. Like the painting, we were trading. I was sorry that my trade wasn't the truth.

"Some boyfriends, but family never happened for me," she admitted. She looked a little sad, but not much. She shrugged again. "I've outlived everyone in my family, except a niece. She has two dogs so far; no kids. I suppose I'm someone

who's happy with what life brings. I don't go looking for more. When my grandfather was alive he would say I was a sunflower. I stood in the sun and was pretty, but everyone ate my seeds, so I was never going to spread." She grunted. "He was a sour bastard, but kind of right too."

"I don't have anyone either," I admitted. "I always think I'll settle down with someone later, but I don't really go looking for that kind of life. I had a girlfriend recently. She told me I was boring. I think she was hoping I would be a famous artist or an author at some point. We never talked about a family."

"So she was eating your seeds and trying to stand in your sunlight," Winona said in disgust. "Some women only think about what they can get, not what they can give."

I rubbed at my forehead and felt a headache coming on. The air seemed charged now and I thought I could hear the rumbling of a storm in the distance. "She just wanted something different. I can't blame her for that. "

"Bet she blames you, though," Winona scoffed.

She blamed me for not being what she wanted and I blamed myself too. She made me want to prove that I could be different, that I could be that exciting man of adventure, even though I didn't want to be that person.

"You're out here because of her, aren't you?" Winona guessed. "Trying to be some big artist, right?"

"No," I corrected her. "I wanted to be an adventurous alpha gorilla." I didn't check to see if she understood. "But, yeah, she was rethinking wanting an artist in her life."

"Men are stupid. Always trying to prove dumb shit," Winona chuckled. "Did you even look to see what you needed to make it out here? You have a pack full of art stuff, but no supplies, no vehicle, and no plan, looks like."

Again I opened my mouth to tell her my sad tale, but nothing came out. It still seemed so out of the ordinary, I could hardly believe it. I still wanted to save it for a police officer who needed his routine shaken up.

Winona sighed. "Don't want to waste fuel. Get some sleep and we'll rise and shine early tomorrow."

I could agree with that. I closed my eyes and listened to the sound of approaching rain and the sounds of the cattle outside. I imagined them plotting to break into the shack to get the grain and tried to decide who the ringleader would be as I fell asleep.

I would have bet whatever I had left that I wouldn't have been able to sleep a minute perched on hard bags of grain. As soon as the sun cut through the door to the shack at dawn, though, I was blinking awake feeling stiff, sore, but well rested.

Winona was still fast asleep, hat over her face, and a small snore emanating from underneath. I left her in the shack and went outside, dragging my pack, to watch the sun shoot across the open land like sparkling gold on the water droplets from the night before. Everything smelled green and vibrant. Yellow and red flowers were everywhere, as if someone had strewn them across the landscape while we slept. The cattle were close by, watching me and chewing cud, probably hoping that I would give them something to eat. The sky was going from red, to pink, and then to blue.

My stomach grumbled for food, but I gave it some water from the tub instead. I thought about how I was soon going to be back in what passed for

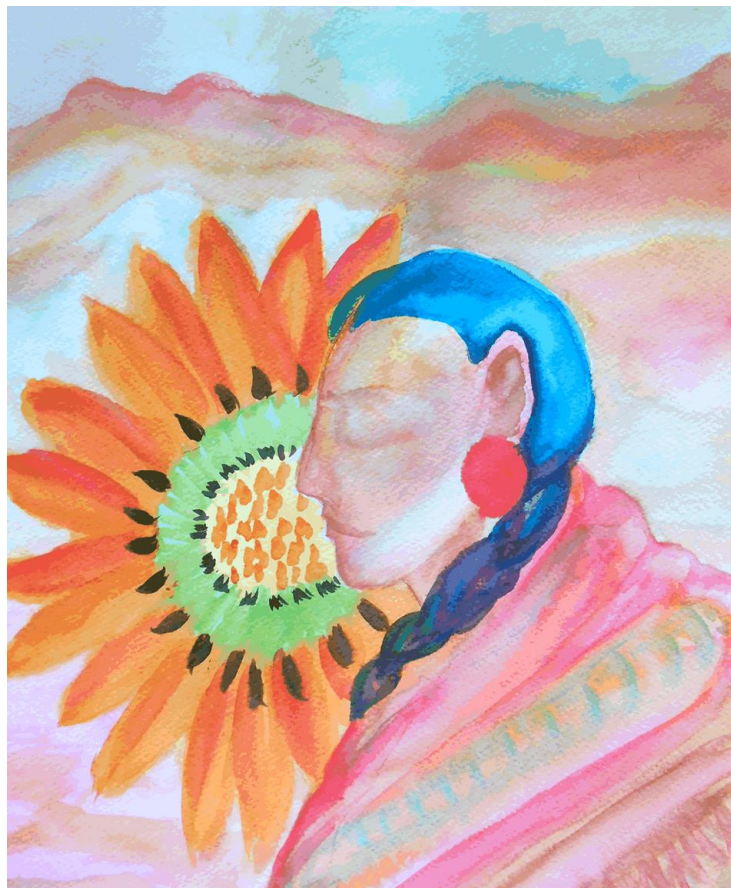
civilization there and it was very possible I would soon be on my way home. Yesterday, Winona had given me the unshakeable impression that she would confidently lead me to safety and I didn't find myself doubting that now. I owed her more than a painting of some sketchy wild horses.

After having gone so long trying to tame my muse and create something meaningful it was almost frightening the way it took over, now. It was as if it had been sleeping too and now it was wide awake and hyperactive. It wanted that brush and those colors. It was ready to spread them and make form out of dreams and ideas.

It was easy to see why in that great expanse of artistic inspiration. I could see the truth in the oft heard expression, *only new experiences create new art*. Maybe there were people who could stay in one place and find infinite artistic possibilities, but I haven't been one. It took facing possible death and a long trek through difficulties to inspire me. I couldn't see myself willingly wanting to repeat those experiences, though, even to further my artistic career.

As I opened my pack and took out my supplies, I was thinking, *this is the last one*. That should have depressed me, but it didn't. I wasn't cut out to suffer for my art. I was happier sitting at the beach and dabbling like a child playing with mud patties instead of making real cakes. Some people would judge that as laziness or cowardice, but I was finding peace with it. My aspirations had been based on a sense of worth fostered on me by society and my associates, I realized. It had never been based on what actually made me happy. If I looked at it closely, I had been living the dream that many tourists had expressed to me; a life with few worries in a small house at the beach. It was all in your perspective, I thought, and wanted to laugh that I had traveled so far to discover that truth.

I sat and painted. The colors flowed long before I realized I was painting Winona. Again, it wasn't Winona as she appeared to me. It was Winona in spirit; confident, happy with who she was, and radiating her inner peace. The sunflower behind her was a statement and I wasn't sure about it at first. When it was finished, though, I was more confident. It was who she was. People had eaten her seeds, but she was still beautiful and standing in the sun with purpose and grace.



I thought it was my best painting yet.

When Winona finally awoke and came out of the shack, stretching and yawning, she frowned and then smiled when she saw me painting. "Artists never sleep, I guess."

I began putting away my supplies, leaving the painting on the ground to dry. She studied it carefully.

"Someone will pay good money for that one," she finally said. "Better than your other stuff, if you don't mind me saying. Save it for when you get to a bigger town to sell it."

"It's yours," I said cautiously. "That horse picture wasn't good enough."

I kept packing, shaking out my water cup and then putting it at the bottom to make sure it wouldn't make my abused sketchpad any worse. I went into the shack to retrieve the other two paintings. When I came out Winona was shaking her head.

"Don't really know what I would do with a painting like that one," she admitted.

"It's a portrait," I told her, disappointed that she didn't recognize herself. I moved to stand beside her as I settled my pack on my shoulder. "Of you," I supplied when she still seemed mystified.

She looked at me and snorted in amusement, her dark eyes dancing. She looked like a very young girl paid a compliment that she knew was bullshit and then some. Disbelief was her foremost expression.

"That's not me," she finally chuckled. "I'm dirt plain and I like it that way."

"Inside you're...." I searched for the right word and then shrugged. "Sunshine, rain, and the wild horses all rolled into one."

"Don't understand why you couldn't keep a girlfriend with a slick tongue like that one," Winona chuckled. "Come on! You take the thing and make some pocket change. I'll keep the ponies."

I wanted to argue, but she had set her mind and I was certain it was as unmovable as the mountains when she did that. She seemed to be a woman of firm decisions made.

Winona closed up the shack and we began walking. We each carried our artwork and set an easy pace across the grass. The cattle followed for a short distance, but we lost them when they paused to graze. The sun finished rising and the heat of the day began drying up the rain from the previous night. The air became thick with moisture.

The wild horses made an appearance, galloping across the distance once or twice. They seemed surreal in the heat haze, seeming to float over tall grass and flowers.

"There it is," Winona finally announced after a few hours of comfortable silence.

I narrowed eyes under the shade of my hand and saw the dots that must have been a town. As I watched, dust kicked up from some dirt road and a dot that must have been a vehicle took off across the horizon.

"That'll be Patch checking the fence line," Winona said. "Like a clock. Don't get up too early, but still gets the job done by four in the afternoon. He's probably cussing, too, and wanting to know where I am. I'm usually there with a report for him to give to the boss."

"He'll look for you?" I wondered.

"No, not until he gets back." She was in the lead, making sure she earned her painting as my guide. She looked back at me, the brim of her hat shading her expression. "You doin' all right?"

I was and that surprised me considering what I'd been put through. "I'm fine."

"Good," she said, though she didn't look convinced entirely. "Sun's bad for folks who aren't used to it. You talk big about traveling and all, but you are pale as milk and burning pink. "You can't be much of an outdoors kind of person."

"I'm not," I admitted. "Like I told you before, I did it because of my girlfriend- ex-girlfriend."

"Why do I get the feeling that's not all that's going on?" she said with a snort and then turned to start walking again. "Not that it matters. Everyone's business isn't my business."

I sighed, weighed my pride against the truth, and decided that it really wasn't worth protecting any longer. The truth was going to come out. I might as well start with someone I had already decided to trust.

"It was only supposed to be a small trip in the Okefenokee Swamp Preserve," I told her. "I was going to paint a few pictures and take some photographs to show the ex-girlfriend. I was going to prove to her new boyfriend that I was... I'm not sure... a real man? It was a stupid idea; that man could snap me like a twig and clean his teeth with me."

"That swamp doesn't sound anywhere near here," Winona commented as if I hadn't said any of the last part. She was still walking, not looking back and eyes intent on the growing line of buildings ahead of us.

"It's not," I replied. "I became lost. I wandered around, found my way out eventually, and hitched a ride to where my car was parked. Only the semi-truck driver drugged me and drove me out here."

Winona hadn't cared about my pride or my male posturing reasons for going on a trip. She did care about someone kidnapping me. She looked back, startled, but

didn't slow her walk. She tipped her hat back so I could see her shocked expression.

"What did this guy do to you?" Winona wanted to know. "Was he a pervert?"

I didn't want to think too hard about that. As far as I knew he hadn't done more than tape me up and dump me in the middle of nowhere. "I think he just wanted to leave me where I would die," I explained. "He taped a note on me that said *loser*. He might have thought I was homeless?"

"Maybe..." Winona shook her head in sympathy. "People are getting crazier by the day. You need a doctor? We only have the one that comes from the city once a week. Otherwise, you either truck yourself to his clinic or you call the ambulance and have them charge you an arm and a leg to get there. Most people get by with the vet. He's handy on some people things too."

"I just need the police," I told her quickly. I wasn't about to trust a vet.

"That would be Deputy Carson," she told me. "He's a good guy. Not much for him to do, except break up bar fights, so you should make his day."

Winona shook her head again and faced forward with a frown. "You look okay for all of that happening to you," Winona told me. She didn't doubt my story. Her next words were a surprise. "Maybe you're more macho-man than you think?"

I smiled and felt a weird sense of validation. "Thanks," I replied simply.

"Been interesting, that's for sure." Winona told me in amusement. "I'll be glad to offload you and get back to my routine."

I wanted back to my routine as well and I could completely empathize.

Chapter Seven

In the end, the town really wasn't one. It looked like a collection of warehouses, the backend contents of a few backyards, a dilapidated cattle pen, a rundown bar of uncovered cinder block and old wood, and a gas station that had two pumps, and a general store that looked more like a large shed with its doors open. There were more horses than vehicles and those vehicles were all old trucks.

The Deputy had an office in an old motor home. The cheap sign on the door read, *police*, and a sign in one window read *notary*. I had a feeling he officiated weddings as well.

"His truck's here," Winona told me unnecessarily. The truck that must have been white, but was covered in dirt from the roads, was parked beside the office. She shook my hand firmly. "Good knowing you, Jack. Thing's don't turn out with the police getting you home, I can find you an odd job or two. Might get you bus fare."

"Thanks. I appreciate everything, Winona," I told her.

She tipped her hat at me, nodded, and then left me standing there. She was headed for the bar with her painting of the horses. The hand painted sign on the wall of the bar read *Fat Bull Bar and Grille*. My mouth watered at the thought of food and I felt envious.

I almost expected Winona to disappear in a puff of smoke, or simply cease to exist. My expectation, of course, was based on the odd happenings in my life of late. When she opened a screen door, stepped inside the bar, and let the door slam shut behind her, it was reassuringly mundane.

I had my paintings stuffed in my pack, now, but I found myself unzipping that pack so that someone could easily see that I was an artist. Holding the pack in one hand, I knocked on the office door. It opened and I found myself staring up at a tall man in a gray police officer's uniform. He had a blonde crew cut, blue eyes, and a suntanned complexion already becoming full of lines. Young, but hard working, I thought. He hadn't spent his time sitting in a chair waiting for things to happen.

He turned without a word. I heard papers rustling and then he re-appeared in a doorway with a piece of paper with my photo printed on it and a description. He held it next to my face. "Jack?" he asked, making it almost sound like a grunt. "How the hell did you get way out here?"

When he finally let me in and sat me down in his tiny office, and I began to explain my situation while he used his kitchenette to pour me water and offer me some of his lunch, I felt, finally, that I was safe and that my ordeal was over.

The man listened patiently, made some notes on a laptop with the *two finger* method, and then admitted when I was done, "Your picture came over the fax. I tossed it in the garbage, because I never thought you'd actually show up this far out. I thought you were gator food, for sure. I even joked about it last night at the Fat Bull."

My picture on his desk, crumpled and stained with coffee grounds, told me how close I had come to being a missing person file forever categorized in a system full of them. In his garbage, I could see a large stack of them; people of all types and ages. It made me shiver and then shake with reaction. I had come so close to staying in that stack of the lost.

The Deputy became concerned and took me to the vet, a nice, older man with a good bedside manner. After the doctor proclaimed me sound, just in need of a

few feeds and some real rest, the Deputy dipped into his expense fund and gave me some cash to buy something to eat. While he made arrangements for my return to my home, I found myself out on the dirt street and ready to cross over to the bar and grille. I paused, keenly feeling the moment when my danger and my adventure seemed finally over.

Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw the old man's wolf again, standing half in and half out of the shade of the gas station. He was staring at me intently and he wasn't smiling any longer. As I turned my head quickly to get a better look, it turned and was gone, avoiding my direct gaze. I felt a weight lift off my shoulders even while a few hairs prickled at the back of my neck; instinctive reaction to the unknown and unknowable. Like the old man, I wasn't lying any more. The wolf didn't need to shadow my steps. I felt ridiculous for thinking that, logic telling me it was a wild place and probably full of wild animals living on the fringes of town, but I couldn't convince my more primitive deeper psyche completely. It wanted to believe in redemption, in not lying to one's self; in turning my life into something a man might enjoy living. It wanted to believe in the un-knowable, too, in shadow wolves that made a man face himself.

I began to walk again, but my progress was immediately halted by a soft, but immovable presence. We both stepped back, me apologizing and she cursing me under her breath as we sized each other up as if we might be called upon to defend our right to cross the street.

Time stood still. All existence held its breath as every part of my being said, *yes!* I wasn't sure what the question was, but it knew that this woman was the answer. I was engulfed in a sense of *Deja vu*, of recognizing someone I had

dreamed of, written about, maybe even painted. She was the embodiment of my deepest yearnings for that elusive other half of me.

"Watch where you're going, dumb shit!" she finally growled and walked past me.

She looked like a younger version of Winona, but without that bitter set to her features that had spoken of hard times and harsh sun. Her black hair was in two long braids tied off with leather. She wore a khaki colored cowboy hat that had seen a lot of wear and weather, a tan, button down blouse, a red broadcloth skirt, a gray duster coat, and boots that seemed too big and looked as if they had seen better days ten years ago. Her eyes were wells of black and her face had the high cheekbones and straight, long nose of a Native American. She wore silver turquoise earrings, large necklaces, and bracelets that jangled together as she strode away, her boots making clomping sounds in the packed dirt.

I felt as if time stood still for the barest second, a second in which I needed to decide the path that my life would take. I teetered on a mental head of a pin, possible futures spread all around me. In the end, the decision felt easy. She pulled at my soul like a magnet. I turned and followed her.

Epilogue

I had the dream again. Native Americans walked across an endless plain at dusk. They were of all types, all backgrounds, yet their clothes were reduced to a color palette of grays, blues, and muted browns in the lack of light. I had pondered over that dream for long years, always trying to decipher the meaning, always trying to place myself into some messianic place within it. Now, through the lens of my new experiences, I could see a completely different facet of the dream. It wasn't a leave taking from the world, an abandoning of everything in sadness, anger,

or regret. They were looking ahead with keen eyes. They were heading towards something new and facing it with the same emotions as anyone else; a bit of trepidation, hope, and even muted anticipation.

They didn't need me to save them. Maybe they only needed me to write it down and to paint it on canvas. That *is* messianic, of course, but everyone always hopes for a moment of glory in their lives, that moment when they can stand out from the crowd and make their mark. Most people want to be remembered for hunting the wolves, not for being the drunk who broke his neck one night. I wasn't any different.

There wasn't any glory, unfortunately, not even an interview in some obscure magazine publication. My book *was* published, but not in the conventional manner. Mainstream big publishers wouldn't touch it, citing the lack of relevant topic to what was popular that year. That was code for; *the book has a topic that we think will make people uncomfortable*. They turned out to be correct. Even when I convinced a small press that specialized in edgy, controversial titles, to publish the book, it never managed to sell more than a handful of copies. The image of Native Americans as spiritual, magical, and one with nature entities possessing unfailing realms of wisdom, was an image everyone loved and promoted. No one wanted to see the realities, the day to day struggles, tears, and complexities of people just like everyone else. Perhaps, if I can be truthful in my own way, my writing wasn't up to literary standards and my art *was* sub-par. I was wrong to think that people would see the importance of the message enough to ignore those faults.

Like Winona, I had to learn to be happy with who I was and to accept that I really did love a comfortable life not doing much of anything. That woman I had met in the dusty road was named Sheridan. We married after a very rocky

courtship. It was hard to convince a no-nonsense cattle woman that a stranger from Florida, with failed aspirations of being a great artist and writer, was the other half of her soul. I discovered a love for life in a small house overlooking the windswept plains and under a sky that seemed endless. I realized the roots of that love sprang from my love for Sheridan.

I won't say that I'm not restless at times. I think it's the human condition. I still have a few copies of my book to show off on my book shelf, some wonderful memories, and, once in a while, I'll dream of traveling back roads on foot, writing that great novel, or painting that masterpiece. I think it will always remain a dream, but at least I can stand in a souvenir shop one day, wave a post card at some young cashier, and say, *I know where this is because I walked every inch of that place.*

The End