

THE JOURNEY BEGINS WITHIN OURSELVES AND...

# THURSDAYS IN THE GROTTO

The background of the cover is a photograph of a rocky, forested hillside shrouded in mist. The rocks are grey and jagged, with patches of brown and orange vegetation. Several trees, including pines and deciduous trees with some autumn-colored leaves, are scattered across the slope. On the left side, there is a faint, ethereal, light-green figure of an angel with wings, appearing to be in a state of flight or standing on a cloud. The overall atmosphere is serene and spiritual.

AN INSPIRATIONAL STORY OF COMING THROUGH THE FIRE

R. GLENN KELLY

THE JOURNEY BEGINS WITHIN OURSELVES AND...

**T**HURSDAYS  
IN THE  
**G**ROTTO

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R. GLENN KELLY

THURSDAYS  
IN THE GROTTO

For my late son, Jonathan Taylor Kelly.

For many years your loving spirit has played out *Thursdays in the Grotto* within my heart and mind. Finally, I put heart to paper when you came to me and spoke:

*“My words are like a ship, and the sea is their meaning.  
Come to me and I will take you to the depths of spirit.  
I will meet you there.”*

*- Rumi*

## GATHERING NO MOSS

*“The world is a mountain, in which your words are echoed back to you.”*

*~ Jalal al-Din Rumi*

It's 12:24 a.m. on a Thursday morning and Doctor Rajeesh Rawat can't sleep. He's a little anxious about work in the morning and, hoping to cure his insomnia, he scans through some newly released medical journals on the netpad in his hand. Scooting forward to the edge of his recliner, he grumbles a bit under his breath. It seems his internet-dependent reader is starved by weak reception as it struggles to bring the next page into view. He absolutely enjoys living in the mountains. It's peaceful here, and well in-line with his more spiritual side. But isolation comes with costs, such as the almost non-existent data connection with the outside world. The doctor knows he needs to get some sleep, though. His hospital administrators have loaned him out to the nearby federal prison for the next two weeks and he must be there by 7:00 a.m. At least his temporary assignment comes with a handsome stipend. If only it didn't also come with one horrible task that's totally against his beliefs, it wouldn't be so bad.

In increasing aggravation, Rajeesh sets his reader on the arm of the chair, rises, and makes his way across the room. He opens the door to the outside porch and walks to the railing. Feeling the slightly cool air as it surrounds his face on this windless night, he takes in a much-needed breath. The moon's full and illuminates the thick canopy of

trees in the downslope view below his home. It's so silent. Quiet. No hustle and bustle that once was his urban life. Intuitively, the calming little voice inside his head tells him to just chill. It reminds him that he's living in his own little Shangri-La and he should remain appreciative of what life has given him. The doctor would listen, too, if it weren't for the two loud and earth-shaking explosions that suddenly tear through the silence of the night. As his gaze instinctively jerks toward the sound of the quickly fading blasts, Rajeesh becomes aware of a low rumbling noise that's growing ever louder in his ears.

Only moments before, on the highest mountain crest above the doctor's property, bits of earth had worked free from beneath two massive boulders. These giant stones, each roughly the size of George Washington's Mount Rushmore head, have majestically rested side by side on the peak since the mountains first burst to the sky. This morning, however, their supporting soil and rocks clattered somewhat noisily down the steep hillside and disappeared into the dark tree line below. Only seconds later, a large slab of foundational clay let go from beneath the two boulders. It broke apart and began a somewhat large and momentarily impressive slide downhill, creating a sound more like rushing water than that of moving, tumbling earth. Like the soil and rocks before, the avalanche of clay disappeared into the lower tree line and was subdued by the thick underbrush. Once again, silence returned.

Silence remained on the mountain peak for only a moment. The remaining earth below the two hunks of stone was no longer enough to support the massive weight of the boulders. Like thunderous cannon reports, the weak underlayment exploded from beneath each behemoth and great chunks of soil, rock, and clay shot out and rained down the slope in descending arcs. The moonlight enhanced the trails of dust behind the earthen projectiles, making it look as if a thousand small missiles had been launched at tiny targets below. In unison, the



twin boulders then simply dropped several feet into their new voids with mighty, ground shaking thumps. Oddly, a Great Horned Owl, unphased at all by nature's commotion, sat perched on a nearby limb and watched in interest. There, she observed both boulders slowly teeter forward, inch by inch, and stop right at their very tipping point. Abruptly, the owl took flight as an odd rush of wind lifted the winged spectator into the air. The isolated gust also brushed across the back of the precarious boulders, creating just enough force to push the stones beyond their limit of balance, and their destructive race down the steep mountain slope began. With the stones and wind gone, the curious owl returned to her previous roost, swiveled her head to look down the mountainside and blinked twice.

Transfixed by the growing rumble, Rajeesh is frozen in place. He's not very experienced in living in the mountains. When he accepted a position at the nearby Mountain View Medical Center, he certainly expected some culture shock. Picking a house on a mountainside, he even expected some unpleasant interactions with the local wildlife. What he did not anticipate, however, were the two huge rocks he spots heading downhill in his direction. From his vantage point below, he watches as two parallel paths are being carved through the tree canopy by the rolling boulders. The bright glow of the moon makes it all seem so surreal. His mind oddly turns to thoughts of a movie he once watched where a T-Rex mowed down tall trees as it chased its unlucky prey through the jungle.

When he witnesses one of the great boulders go airborne above the trees, all surrealism and thoughts of dinosaurs instantly leave Rajeesh's mind. The rolling stone had struck some object on the forest floor and arched skyward for several hundred feet before coming back down to earth. There, it takes a rogue path and begins to move away from a direct aim at the good doctor's house. Still, the other stone remains on point and is almost upon him. He's frozen in fear. Although

unable to move, his brain is still in gear. He hastily estimates that on its new course, the one boulder should miss him entirely. The other, however, will probably hit right at the garage door on the side of his house. Regardless, he figures the boulder will certainly bulldoze its way through his entire home and just continue its trek down to the very base of the mountain. His thoughts then turn to himself. Should he jump over the rail to certain injury from the high deck? Should he bolt down the porch stairs in the direction of the oncoming rock in hopes of jumping clear at the last second? Does he have time?

For Rajeesh, the time to choose has come and gone, as the high-speed descent of the boulder is just too fast. The rumble of the giant stone has become deafening. He watches as trees, only yards up the hill, snap and drop like wheat stalks under a harvest combine. As the ensuing hunk of certain death emerges from the wood line, the doctor takes a white-knuckle grip on the porch railing. He closes his eyes as the stone crashes through the stockade fence first, and then flattens an old outbuilding as it just keeps coming. Now, he can only wait for the inevitable. Suddenly, all the rumbling noise stops. Silence, albeit for a few limbs falling from some bent but not broken trees. He drops his tensed shoulders and begins to slowly, cautiously, open his eyes to take in the situation at hand. Just as he does, however, another ground-shaking thump causes him to instinctively run for safety through his back door. After a few seconds of silence indicates no further impending threat, the doctor peeks out from the door for another look around. When satisfied of no danger, he emerges onto the porch in a slightly crouched stance that shows his readiness to leap, if necessary, back to cover.

With an audible sigh of anguish, Rajeesh works his way across the porch and down the stairway to his yard. A perfect ray of light from the full moon shows the area where his now-demolished outbuilding lies in ruin. Any wonder in his mind that this had all been a bad dream is

now gone. Each step he takes downward brings the side yard and his driveway into view. He sees that raw wood from the trees and milled timber are equally splintered and spread in a perfect line from the forest edge to his garage. As he reaches the bottom of the stairs and walks around the corner of the house, he takes in a truly miraculous sight. There, before him, is the once life-threatening boulder now perfectly parked in front of his garage door. Under the driveway lights, the doctor walks up and places his hand against the stone. It's real, alright. In wonderment, he looks at his garage door and realizes the gap between it and the rock is less than an inch.

While studying the one stone, Rajeesh remembers the second and wonders what became of it. Scanning the surrounding landscape, he sees nothing in the glow of the moonlight. He walks to the end of his driveway and peers up and down the steeply inclined pavement. To his left, just a bit down the steep road, he spots the second boulder deeply embedded in the asphalt like an errant golf ball in a sand trap. This seems a bit much. Raising his arms and gripping wads of hair in both hands, he turns and slowly walks back up his driveway. As he does, his eyes take in the carnage. Tossed and splintered trees litter the area. The stockade fence on that side of his property now has a gaping hole perfectly matching the girth of the rolling stone. The rustic, two-story outbuilding that stood in the rock's path looks as if some mythical giant simply stomped on it. Lastly, his gaze is drawn back to the boulder that entirely blocks the door of his car garage.

Walking to the boulder, Rajeesh first reaches out to touch the large stone and then oddly stretches his arms around it as far as he can. Slowly looking up to the heavens, he loudly shouts, **"DO NOT GET ME WRONG, PLEASE. I AM INDEED VERY GRATEFUL. BUT I HAD NOT ASKED FOR ALL OF THIS. I ASKED ONLY FOR AN EARLY SNOWFALL!"**

# JAILS ARE FULL OF THE INNOCENT

*“Be totally empty, embrace the tranquility of peace. Watch the workings of all creation, observe how endings become beginnings.”*

*~ Lao Tzu*

**I**t's 12:24 a.m. on a Thursday morning in U.S. Prison *Polk*; a federal maximum-security facility located just outside of Norton, Virginia. As the guard assigned to roving night patrol nears the cell door of sleeping inmate 1311997, he awakens with a start. Even before his eyes completely open, the convict jerks upright in his bunk and loudly shouts, “SALVATION!”

Startled by the sudden outburst, the adrenaline surged guard shoves a can of pepper spray through the gray bars of the cell. “Hey, dead turd walking,” he says, with spit, anger, and a little fear spewing from his lips. “I don’t care if this *is* your last frickin’ day on earth. It’s long past quiet time, ya filthy animal.”

Dismayed by his own abrupt awakening, Inmate 1311997 takes a few moments to look around. His eyes slowly scan the cell and go down to his own massive, rough hands. He raises one to his face and runs it up over his jawline, nose, and up to the top of his head. His fingers move backward over long, flat hair flowing down beyond his neck. He pulls the mane forward in his fingers and, for a brief moment, eyes his silky, black ponytail. Remembering the guard at the cell door,

he stutters, “My apologies, sir. I do not know what came over me. It, uh, must have been a dream. I am very sorry”

“Sorry?” the guard snaps back. “Scum like you ain’t sorry ‘bout nothing. But tell ya what, if I hear so much as a rat fart from inside this jug, I’ll mace ya like a taco. You got me, dead man?” The guard never expected or wanted an answer from his attempts at intimidation. Nervously pulling the pepper spray back through the bars, he makes one more indignant glare in the direction of the convict and resumes his foot patrol of the prison floor.

Known only as Dano to the other convicts, Inmate 1311997 certainly earned his way on death row. There were dozens of eyewitnesses to the gruesome murder he committed outside a Norfolk, Virginia nightclub just over three years ago. His past is rife with theft, drug, and assault convictions that earned him previous stays in several other local, state, and federal prisons. Mainly a drifter, he had no money. That dropped the defense of his murder case into the lap of a young, inexperienced Public Defender who had yet to take any case to trial. The two would face a hardnosed Commonwealth’s Attorney who won a swift conviction and then fast-tracked the appeal denials in record time. Clemency was not on the table, and Dano was scheduled for execution by lethal injection this very day. With his pending death only hours away, he smiles as the night watch guard walks away, lays back down on the hard prison bunk, and peacefully falls back to sleep.

Sleep only lasts until the prison lights blast on at 6:00 a.m. Dano is delivered his last meal but passes it up. As scheduled at 7:00 a.m., four guards enter his cell to place him in restraints. They expect, and actually look forward to, the typical resistance always offered. Not this morning, however. Instead, they are met with nothing but compliance and Dano’s offer of assistance in fitting his shackles and chains. Just as the guards finish the restraints, however, a prison chaplain casually saunters through the open cell door.

“Boys, give us a minute please,” the chaplain says as he motions toward the door with a nod of his head.

The more senior guard snaps back, “Are you kidding me, Chaplain? This Indian’s two hundred and fifty pounds of pure, mean killer. He’s put six other inmates in the infirmary just since he’s been here. And, you know the rules.”

“I think it’ll be okay this time, Corporal Franks. And I’ll fix it with the captain if he finds out. Now, don’t you worry none. We’ll be fine.”

Of course, the corporal is already aware of the chaplain’s true motives. He’s well known among the staff for using religious remorse to pull confessions from convicts who pled innocence for their crimes. In the social circles of prison chaplains, any admissions of guilt during incarceration will earn varying degrees of respect. Obviously, a murder confession from a death row inmate would bring years of bragging rights for a boastful chaplain.

“Yeah? Suit yourself then, Chappy,” the corporal dryly replies. “But we’re stayin’ right outside. Good luck savin’ *that* soul, huh?”

With the guards out, Chaplain O’Malley motions a hand toward the bunk, inviting Dano to sit. Maintaining his distance, he turns and perches himself on the very edge of the stainless-steel toilet. It’s uncomfortable and awkward getting his balance on the rim, but it’s the only other horizontal surface in the maximum-security cell.

“Tell me, son,” the chaplain begins, “are you ready to confess your sins?”

“Thank you, Chaplain,” Dano replies with a stoic tone. “But I have no sins to confess.”

The chaplain trades his compassionate look for a frown and peers down at the floor before coming back, “Now, I understand you pled not guilty to your crimes, son. But, that aside, wouldn’t you like to confess your sins before me, an ordained man of God? It’s never too

late to be absolved of your earthly burdens by a man of the Lord, you know?”

Speaking in a collected tone, Dano coolly replies, “Absolution does not come through a chain of command, Chaplain. Nothing I say here can alter my relationship with the Father.”

Although taken aback by the direct tone in the convict’s words, the chaplain still wants his confession, “Son, I know the word of the Lord and I know the wrath of God All-Mighty. Now *is* the time to come clean and tell me what happened the horrible night that led you here to die, boy. Led you here to die for your sins.”

“You have read the files, Chaplain. Would you please tell me what you understand led me here to die, as you say?”

“You brutally murdered a young woman in a bar, son! Killed her because she wouldn’t have sex with you. You beat that dear child to death with your bare hands, sinner. *Now* seek redemption and admit it to a man of God.”

“That is truly a tragedy. May the young woman find peace in the Lord.”

“Yes. Yes, my son. Help her have peace. Admit what you’ve done to her.”

Dano only lifts his gaze and replies, “I can tell you in good faith, sir, I cannot recall doing such an act.”

“Come on, son. You did it in front of others. In public. Now’s not a time to claim amnesia.”

“Chaplain,” Dano says as he raises his shackled wrists, “it was not me who used these hands to do what you have said.”

“Dammit, boy, you carried that poor girl’s body in those hands to a highway overpass and tossed her down like a sack of feed onto a cop car. You damned sure can’t play this *it wasn’t me* game. That’s horse crap right there. Now, dammit, grow a pair and confess your sins right now or you’re goin’ straight to hell.”

Dano slightly leans forward and responds in a hushed, calm voice, “We are all sinners, Timothy Martin O’Malley. Are we not? Do you not sin against man’s law when you trade illegal drugs for currency here with the inmates? Do you not sin against God’s law when you have carnal knowledge of your neighbor’s wife? These things you have done, yet *you* have not confessed to be judged for your transgressions. Are you waiting until the end nears to seek absolution for *your* sins?”

Suddenly, a commotion builds just outside the cell, but the chaplain and Dano remain tensely locked in eye contact. The gaze is not broken until Prison Captain Jessie Swain bursts into the cell with the four prison guards in tow.

“Pack it up, Jesus,” barks the captain, “Your disciple here is being transferred out.”

“Yes,” the nervous but relieved chaplain answers. “Yes, indeed.” He rises and moves towards the cell door, quickly turning back to give a hasty, “May God forgive you of your sins, my son. Go in peace. *Please!*” With that, Chaplain Timothy Martin O’Malley scurries off to some unknown location within the bowels of the prison.

“Corporal Franks,” calls out the captain as he points to Dano. “Get our guest here prepped for transport and have him in the sally-port in ten minutes. Got it?”

“Aye. Ten minutes, Cap,” the guard responds before asking, “But, hey? I thought he was supposed to be juiced this morning. Did the Governor grant a stay or somethin’?”

“Are you kidding me? The Governor wants this man stiff, pronto! But only a doc licensed in lethal injections can push the button, and we don’t have one right now. Our doc’s out for two weeks and the temp from Mountain View Med can’t make it in today?”

“Then just call in one of the docs from another shift. Lord knows I get called in on my days off like nobody gives a damn.”



“Stop whinin’, Franks. Like I said, they gotta have training in lethal injections. The replacement is certified but no other docs here fit the bill.”

“For the love of Pete,” moans the corporal. “Docs don’t do nothin’. A bunch of techies set up the cocktail and poke ‘em with the needle. Why’s a doc gotta push the button?”

“Laws, son. We don’t make ‘em. We just follow ‘em.”

“So, what’s up with the replacement guy, anyway?”

“Says a divine hand shook his mountain up this mornin’ and he can’t get out of the house,” answers the captain. “He does live up in the hills, though, and I did a quick check with the park service boys this morning. Seems some big rocks actually *did* come down around ‘em last night, so, whatever.”

“Well, hell,” replies the corporal as he points to Dano. “Where we bussin’ this one off to, then?”

“The state prison in Chilhowie. It *was* the fed prison before they built this place, but it still has a workin’ lethal lab and the doc there’s actually certified. He can’t get away, though, so the governor and warden want this garbage shipped over there for the job. The paperwork’s in the mix now, so let’s get ‘em moving already.”

After being refit with proper transport restraints, Dano shuffles his steps as he’s led from his prison cell. An elite Mobile Transport Team of six men meet Captain Swain, the four escort guards, and the death row inmate in the sally-port. Hurried onto a black prison bus, Dano is securely shackled to a seat inside a thick iron cage. Like clockwork, one transport guard armed with a heavy gauge shotgun moves to take a seat behind the enclosure, while another takes a position in front of it. The driver then sits behind the wheel, while yet another takes the rear-facing seat beside him. Of the two remaining guards, one moves to drive the lead escort cruiser, while the last man gets into the chase cruiser behind the bus.

When Dano and the transport personnel are set, the captain looks to the prison bus driver and gives him a questioning thumbs up. He returns an exaggerated hand salute and the captain motions toward the overhead closed-circuit camera with a nod of his head. Taking his cue, the monitoring guard in the control center pushes a big, red button and the huge sally-port door begins to open. When there's enough clearance, the lead vehicle moves forward with the transport bus immediately in tow. Finally, as the chase cruiser clears, the captain gives another nod to the camera and the big door begins to close.

Leaving the sally-port, the captain is thinking of that first cup of coffee he poured just as pressing matters got in his way. He's no longer in a rush, though, since today's execution of Inmate 1311997 has been outsourced. Instead, he can resign himself to more mundane but welcome admin duties and happily sets to it. As he begins reviewing yesterday's reports, however, he's interrupted by the sound of rapid footsteps and an out of breath guard appearing at his door. Before speaking, the guard takes a moment to bend forward with his hands on his thighs and sucks in several deep breaths.

"Well, what is it, Washington?" asks the annoyed captain.

"There's...there's a problem, sir."

"Spill it, son."

"We've lost contact with the mobile team, Cap. We can't get 'em on the radio. We called Control over at Chillhowie, but they can't raise 'em either."

With an agitated tone, the captain barks, "GPS, Washington. Tell me where the satellite puts 'em."

"That's just it, sir. There's no GPS signal from the bus or from any of the guys."

"Move, kid," the captain snaps as he lurches from his desk and sprints out the door. "SERGEANT," he bellows as he enters the prison

Control Center, “Impress me with updates on this soup sandwich you got goin’ on, son. Tell me you’re all over this like ugly on an ape.”

“Yessir,” the sergeant responds. “State boys have a helo in the area and I took the liberty of using your name to request their help.”

“Well, kid, you may be the first person I decorate and fire at the same time. Now, stop using my name and get that whirlybird on the horn, already.”

The captain takes his attention off the sergeant and yells out, “NERD!”

“Yessir,” answers another guard from across the room.

“What in the Sam Hill is going on with my GPS, son? I got ghosts out there, for chrissake. Why can’t I see ‘em?”

“Maintenance says our data and internet signals just dropped out ‘bout twenty minutes ago, Cap. No reason why. They’re in contact with the providers now to see what’s up.”

“Keep me posted kid,” orders the captain before swiftly turning and asking, “Sergeant, where’s my chopper pilot?”

“I’ve got ‘em on the horn, sir. He’s over the coordinates from the team’s last reading and says there’s nothin’ but open road and a coupla twelve-point bucks. I’m about to give him the planned route.”

“I want that transport found, people,” the captain bellows as he heads toward the door. “I’ll be in my office briefing the warden. You come get me if you get news before I get back.”

“Roger that,” replies the sergeant. “Give my best to the warden.”

Already walking down the hall, the captain snarls back, “Put a plug in it, Sergeant, or you’ll be drawing private’s pay before the day’s out.”

The warden, of course, had signed the order for Dano’s transfer just a short time earlier, and his only instructions for Captain Swain were to make it all goes off without a hitch. Now, the captain is on the phone informing him of a *hitch*. When he hears enough, the warden

announces he's headed to the Control Center and abruptly hangs up. Before Captain Swain can place the phone back in its cradle, however, he once again hears hasty footsteps approaching his door. This time, it's the sergeant who appears.

"State's got our transport, Cap," says the out of breath sergeant. "But it doesn't sound good."

"Where and what, Sergeant. Tell!"

"An isolated stretch of Route 58 between a coupla mountains just south of Hansonville."

"*Gooooood*," the captain replies, stretching out the word to express his impatience for the rest. "Now, what about the *doesn't sound good* part, son?"

"The pilot says it's a real mess, Cap. Said the lead car is flipped over. The bus is on its side, and the chase car looks like it slid up under it. He says there's no movement on the ground, but he's got troopers and locals comin'. Oh! And he's setting his bird down now to get a look himself."

"Let's get back to the Control Center then, son. The warden's on his way and I wanna be there when updates come in."

The captain and sergeant burst into the Control Center just as the warden also enters from a private door across the room. Before anyone can speak, however, Nerd announces, "I've got the pilot in my headset. He wants to talk to the boss."

Not wanting to overstep his authority, the captain looks over at the warden and says, "Sir?"

With a simple nod toward Nerd, the warden indicates that the captain should take the lead. Nerd then removes his wireless headset and holds it up for his captain. Adjusting the setup, the captain speaks into the mic, "This is Captain Swain. Who's this?"

“Trooper Mike Thomas here, Captain. Listen, all your boys are gonna be okay. Nobody hurt too bad. Just minor cuts and bruises stuff. I got a med unit in route.”

“Fantastic, Trooper. Listen. I really appreciate you being there. How’s the prisoner?”

“Prisoner? I know nothin’ about a prisoner. Hang on and let me go find out.”

While waiting, Captain Swain briefs the warden on the condition of the transport team. He also tells him that with everything going on, the pilot didn’t initially know to check on a prisoner but is doing so now. The warden only gives an acknowledging nod.

“IT’S BACK, CAP,” Nerd suddenly blurts out from across the room. “GPS is back up, but it’s all screwy. It’s not showing our team in Hansonville. It’s got ‘em back here in the sally port.”

“Yeah. Must be a catch-up glitch,” replies the captain. “Call the tech boys back and have ‘em look at it.”

Just then, the captain catches the sound of the pilot picking up his headset on the other end and quickly puts his hand in the air, signaling for everyone to be quiet.

“Captain? You there?”

“Yeah, I’m with ya, Trooper. Whatcha got?”

“Well, your boys here don’t know a darn thing about a prisoner. Now, I think all of ‘em were knocked out for a bit and still loopy, but a few of ‘em think they were on a training run. The others say they got no idea why they’re out here at all. And I made a run through the bus, Captain. There’s no one in there.”

“Wait. What? Come again.”

“There’s shackles in the cage, but the cuffs are locked closed. So’s the cage door. It’s a little damaged from the wreck, but I can’t really tell if someone was in there or not. You sure you don’t have some bad intel about a prisoner on your end?”

Captain Jesse Swain doesn't respond. Instead, he uses both hands to lower his headset as he slowly turns his gaze toward the warden.

“What is it, Captain? Am I calling the governor about a dead death row prisoner?”

“No, Warden,” says the captain. “Call the U.S. Marshals. We've got a monster on the run.”

## NEW FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES

*“The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers and cities; but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant, is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden.”*

*~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

Its 12:24 a.m. on a Thursday morning and Aiden Huff suddenly snaps awake from sleep. He bolts upright in bed and is covered in sweat. While heavily panting, his hands come up to rub tears across his face as he mutters aloud, “I’m so sorry, son. I’m so, so very sorry.”

As is typical with bad dreams, Aiden’s sudden exodus comes right at the peak of terror. For this nightmare, it’s when he envisions his son, Ian, meeting his death. He wasn’t there when it happened, but from all reports, the moment was viciously brutal. He throws aside his sheets and rises to make his way to the adjoining bathroom. A cold splash of water in the face just seems like a good idea. Stopping at a bedroom window, he stares upward into the illuminating glow of a full moon before his sight is suddenly pulled back down to the ground. His well-trained vision, even in the night, has picked up on slight movement in the nearby wood line. Scanning the encroaching forest’s edge, he abruptly locks onto something only a dozen or so yards away. There, slightly above the ground, and just beyond the first line of trees, is a pair of glowing amber eyes that seem to be looking straight back at him. A

slight bit of terror starts his heart pumping, but his deep-seated anger quickly wins over. Swinging open the big window before him, he screams as loud as he can scream, “GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME, DEMON! GO ON, OR I SWEAR I’LL KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF YA TONIGHT!”

Although it takes several seconds, the glowing amber eyes slowly draw back into the darkness of the forest and fade away. Aiden takes a deep breath and closes the window but remains at the watch for several more minutes. He begins to wonder if the owner of those evil eyes backed away out of fear, or simply because its message had been delivered? Convincing himself of the latter, he gives up his watch, closes the window, and heads back to bed. He’d best try to get some sleep. He has plans to get up in the morning and face a day that might change his life. Things were bad. His life was bad. But growing up in the Appalachians since birth, he knew nothing helps sort out life better than connecting with the spirit of Mother Mountain. He slowly falls back asleep while hoping his nightmares don’t return. Like the majority of his time awake, he prefers to avoid thoughts of Ian as much as possible. It just makes it so much easier to get by these days.

Morning dawns on Aiden’s mountainside home. He rises with first light and robotically dresses before making his routine path for the kitchen coffee maker. Once he gets a brew going, he continues his morning norms by heading to the bathroom. There, in the medicine cabinet mirror, he actually takes notice of some routines he’s recently let go. Unfortunately, that includes shaving and haircuts. Aiden was a strikingly handsome man not long ago. At six foot three and coming in at nearly two-hundred and fifty pounds of mountain muscle, he has one of those chiseled but trusted faces that makes any stranger want to be his friend. But what he sees in the mirror this morning is a tired old man with long, stringy hair, and an untamed beard. While he certainly notices, he easily shrugs it off. He just can’t find a reason to care



anymore. Instead, he turns to swing the bathroom door partially closed and pulls an old ball cap off the attached hook. Putting it on his head and pulling it down in place, he takes in a mouthful of water from a cup, spits it back into the sink, and leaves the bathroom.

On his way back to the kitchen, Aiden picks up his hand-drawn maps of mountain trails from the coffee table. He also detours into the front closet and grabs his backpack before making his way back to the kitchen. Laying both on the counter, he heads out the back door to the barn. It's morning feed time for Hannah, his Buckskin mare. He spends a bit of time with his girl as she eats and takes the time to brush her down and check her shoes. When all seems fine, he opens the stall door so she can freely roam the four acres of field he'd cleared and fenced for her many years ago.

Returning to the house and that first cup of coffee he's been anticipating, Aiden's mobile phone rings. Pulling it from his pocket and looking down at the Caller ID, he sees that it's Polly Jordan, chief of the town's volunteer fire department. Once good friends, it's been months since he and Polly have even spoken to one another.

"Chief Jordan," Aiden dryly says as he answers. "Long time. What can I do for ya?"

There's a brief moment of silence before Polly responds, "Aiden. Hey, uh, listen, I know it's been a while. Sorry I haven't come by or called on ya. You doin' okay?"

"Doin' fine here, Chief, thanks. But my gut says you're not really callin' to check on my welfare, right? What do ya need?"

There's another awkward pause before Polly speaks again, "Right to it then, huh? Well, I do need a favor, Aiden, if you can help, of course. We've got a guy all alone a few ridgelines over from you. He's had some hillside come down around his property earlier this morning. It took out the road below him too."

"Is he hurt?"

“I don’t believe so. But he’s being a royal pain in the you-know-what. He’s blowin’ up the phones down here demanding someone come help him out. I told him no one could get by until his road was reopened, and unless he’s hurt, he needs to give us some time. Now he’s wised up and claiming he needs medical attention. He refuses to say what’s wrong, of course, but I got no choice now but to check on him.”

“Why me? Why aren’t your guys all over this?”

“Again, road’s out to his place, Aiden. I believe you’ve got trails between you and him, right? If he’s really hurt, someone should get to him. If not, tell him to shut the heck up.”

“I’m not a medic, Polly, and damned sure not the law around here anymore. Get hold of that gal that took my place. Or, how about that drunken police chief of yours? If he’s still pukin’ in the can this mornin’, then call the sergeant over at the state barracks.”

“Well. I’m not a fan of the young lady that took your place, Aiden. She’s a serious smart aleck I wouldn’t trust to watch my dog. And Fred Dooley’s gone as police chief. The town council finally booted ‘em and haven’t picked a new one yet. As for the troopers, well, they’re busy with some big bus wreck near Hansonville. Real hush-hush stuff right now, they tell me?”

Agitated and impatient, Aiden says, “Fine. Just send the coordinates to my phone then.”

“Done,” Polly says after a brief delay. “You should have them now.”

Aiden pulls the phone from his ear and punches a few keys on the screen. Making a skewed face, he puts the phone back to his ear and speaks, “Damn it, Polly. I was just gearing up to get in the woods myself, but not in that direction.”

“Do us this favor, Aiden. Do me the favor, actually, and I’ll owe ya. It’ll be a quick welfare check to shut this guy up if he’s not really hurt. If he is, let me know. I’ll think of something.”

“No. This’ll be a knock and go. Promise ya. I’ll call ya when I’m clear.”

Aiden abruptly ends the call without waiting for another word from Polly. Moving back toward the barn, he whistles loudly and Hannah sprints inside and into her open stall. Once he’s saddled his girl, he briefly returns to the house to grab his gun belt and neglected cup of now cold coffee. Deeply drinking from it as he reenters the barn, he slams the empty cup on top of a wooden barrel and buckles his gun belt around his waist. Finding Hannah waiting patiently in the breezeway, he slips a boot toe in her stirrup, grabs the saddle horn, and launches himself up and over in one fluid motion. Leaning forward in the saddle, he tightens his leg muscles and whispers into Hannah’s ear, “It’s a good morning for a run, girl.” With that, she’s in full sprint even before they reach the open barn doors. Aiden might be a lot to carry, but Hannah’s also a lot of horse. At sixteen and a half hands, she’s tall for a Buckskin, but also carries more weight and muscle than most. Besides, it’s been far too long since she’s been able to break it wide open. For the moment, and until she hits the steeper terrain, man and horse are in the wind.

Eventually slowed by the difficult but manageable hillsides, Aiden and Hannah take only an hour or so before nearing the property of Doctor Rajeesh Rawat. Approaching from the pass behind the home, he guides Hannah through the gap in the stockade fence created by this morning’s boulder. As they navigate the mess of smaller rocks, split trees, and lumber, they spot the doctor in his driveway, where his attention remains on the giant stone in front of his garage door. As if announcing their presence, Hannah whinnies and breaks into a loud,

stomping gait that quickly grabs the doctor's attention. Startled, he spins to face a horse and rider only a few feet away.

"Howdy," says Aiden. "I see you had some troubles."

With a hand to his now heaving chest, Rajeesh replies, "Yes, but I do not wish for anymore. Who are you?"

"Aiden Huff. The fire chief sent me to check on ya. Says ya been botherin' her all morning."

"Bothering, yes. I'm bothering her simply because I am in need of help."

Dismounting Hannah, Aiden responds, "Well, all the help you're gonna get today, mister, is here."

"I must say that I prayed to Ganesh for help, but you look as if you could use some yourself. You certainly don't look like the authorities."

"Nope," answers Aiden as he pulls his wallet out and holds out his retirement badge for Rajeesh. "Retired Game Warden from a few hills over. Afraid I'm all you've got right now, though, at least until the highway department opens your road back up."

"What about all the damage to my property? It is not my mountain. I only own a small parcel of it. Who will help me take care of this mess?"

"Well, I'm afraid that's between you and your insurance company, fella. Give 'em a call. I'm sure they'll help ya find the right crew once the road's been cleared up."

Aiden grabs the horn on Hannah's saddle and places a boot in the stirrup for a quick exit. However, he pauses for a moment and turns back to question Rajeesh, "Who did you say you prayed to for help?"

"Ganesh. In my faith, Ganesh is a god I pray to whenever I need help. But I see I must be a bit more careful in my prayers."

"Why's that?"

“I was to do something for work today that I did not want to do. It was against my beliefs. So, for the past week, I prayed to Ganesh to get me out of the task. Well, Ganesh surely found a way to do so, but I did not expect all of this.”

“Friend, if *this* is what happens when ya talk to this Ganesh fella, don’t go prayin’ for water the next time you’re thirsty. Anyway, this was just the mountain lettin’ go some. Not an answer to a prayer.”

Rajeesh gives Aiden a long look before pointing a finger at him and announcing, “Ah, but Ganesh does heed my prayers. After all, that is why you are here, my new friend. Ganesh has sent you to assist me.”

“Oh? And just what is it I’m assisting with?”

Pointing to the huge stone at his garage door, Rajeesh answers, “Well, when they clear the boulder that blocks the road, it will take even more time before someone can remove this one. Yet I wish to leave as soon as the road is clear. Ganesh certainly sent you to help me move it. We shall do it together, my big, strong friend.”

“Well, my *friend*, your Ganesh missed on this one. You need a bulldozer, or better yet, a stick of dynamite to move that. It’s tons of solid granite and I see the bottom’s sittin’ square on a flat spot. It’s not gonna just levitate out of the way.”

“Can we not try, Retired Game Warden? If we combine our will with Ganesh, I believe we can do it.”

Aiden mockingly laughs before responding, “Mister, we can combine our will with an entire football team and we still ain’t moving that rock.”

“Come and let us say we tried,” Rajeesh says as he walks to one side of the stone and naively begins pushing.

Watching Rajeesh put his shoulder to the rock and make several fruitless efforts, Aiden shakes his head but joins him at the boulder, where they push in unison with all their might. After several attempts against the immovable object, however, both men step back to study the

hunk. “Dammit,” Aiden says to himself. He knows they aren’t moving this rock, but when it’s over he wants there to be no doubt. Walking over to Hannah, he removes the coiled utility rope he keeps on her saddle skirt. Tossing the looped end up and around the narrower top of the boulder, he ties the other to the horse’s saddle horn. Walking around to her front, he grabs her by the bridle with both hands and moves in close to her face. Looking into her eyes, he tells her, “We go when I yell *pull*, girl. Got it? *Pull*.”

Hannah drops her head with a loud snort and clomps her hoof on the ground several times to signal her understanding. Aiden walks back to the boulder and takes his place. Rajeesh then resumes his spot, with the backs of both men against the garage door. Although on the same side, the round girth of the great stone is so large that they can barely see one another.

“You know somethin’, buddy?” Aiden speaks up while shaking his head again, “We’ve got no chance of making this happen, but we’re darn sure gonna give it a shot, huh? Now, I’m gonna count to three and give Hannah the command to pull. As soon as her rope goes tight, you push wi...”

“Wait,” interrupts Rajeesh. “You named your horse Hannah? *A gift from God?* I am well versed in your beliefs, Retired Game Warden. Her name means gift from God, yet you have no faith we can move this boulder?”

“Afraid this one’s gonna take a little more than faith, friend.”

Broadly smiling, Rajeesh replies with rising elation, “But I *am* inspired to move this rock, my friend. And when I am inspired, I am *in spirit*. My spirit is with me. And when my spirit is with me, there is nothing I cannot accomplish. After all, it was through my spirit that I called to Ganesh, who willed you to be here with me today.”

Lightly laughing, Aiden responds, “*Inspired* and *in spirit*, huh? Doesn’t that just make a nice bedtime story. You think you’re so

inspired that you, me, and your god's gonna move this rock? Well, friend, I'll believe it when I see it."

Hearing Aiden's cynicism, Rajeesh briskly walks around the boulder and says, "If we are to move this stone, my friend, you need to look at your world in a whole new way. You should no longer think *I will believe it when I see it*. Instead, you must change your view to *I will see it when I believe it*. Believe it *first*, and only then shall you *see* it. Change the way you look at your world, Retired Game Warden, and the world you look will change."

As a practical thinker, Aiden would normally laugh off such musings. Yet, something deep inside makes him take pause, and like a looped recording, the phrase *I will see it when I believe it* plays repeatedly through his mind. It is not *I will believe it when I see it*, but *I will see it when I believe it*.

"Huh?" Aiden mutters aloud before turning to Rajeesh. "Okay, already. I'll bite. I believe it. Now let's go for the *I'll see it* part. Take your place, neighbor."

While Rajeesh walks back around the boulder, Aiden shakes his head side to side and exhales several lip sputtering breathes in preparation for the efforts to come. Looking over to his partner, he gives him a questioning head nod. When Rajeesh nods back, they both brace their hands and chests against the huge hunk of stone.

"One. Two. Three! PULL, HANNAH. PULL."

The rope between the rock and Hannah's saddle immediately goes taut, as do the long, muscular legs of the strong mare. Without seeing the other, both men push with all they have. Yet, even with the tremendous amounts of combined energy, there is no movement of the boulder. Just as Aiden is beginning to consider how much longer he can go on, the word BELIEVE suddenly flashes through his mind.

As if Rajeesh can read his thoughts, he loudly grunts out while pushing, "BELIEVE, MY FRIEND. BELIEVE."

With this encouragement, Aiden trades his chest and two-hands against the great rock for a shoulder and bent-knee stance. Then, just as he's making his adjustments, Hannah changes her own leg posture for even more power.

Looking to find a way to muster yet more strength, Aiden loudly growls out his new words, "I BELIEVE."

"I BELIEVE," comes a guttural response from Rajeesh as he finds more strength.

"I BELIEVE," screams Aiden again as his face twists with his efforts.

"I BELIEVE," Rajeesh repeats through his gritted teeth.

Both men suddenly feel movement in the stone. There's not much, but it *is* movement, nonetheless. Encouraged, they instinctively scream out with half grunt, half growls as they push with all they have, and the top of the boulder moves a bit farther. It's only an inch, maybe, followed by two inches that ever so sluggishly moves to three. Slowly, surely, the top of the stone tilts to a point where the great weight of the almost egg-shaped mass rolls over on the asphalt with loud, gravelly, crunching sounds. As the top of it comes forward, the rope slips from its narrow hold and a free Hannah clears the way. It continues to topple forward to teeter-tottering once before beginning a slow, sideways roll toward Rajeesh. Quickly escaping the new direction of travel, he joins Aiden as they both watch the massive boulder leisurely travel sideways across the driveway and into the grass, where Rajeesh can only watch in despair as it comes to rest by crashing into his large, ornate gazebo.

Without saying a word, Rajeesh abruptly turns to run around the back of his house and up the patio stairs. Giving only a questioning glance his way, Aiden whistles for Hannah and mounts her saddle before coiling and securing the utility rope. As he's about to get underway, he hears the sound of the garage door motor engage and, as



the large door lifts, sees Rajeesh pointing to his car with a huge smile beaming across his face.

“Do you believe now, Mr. Retired Game Warden? Do you believe?” Rajeesh asks with glee.

“Yep. I believe alright. I believe your gonna have one busy insurance adjuster,” Aiden says as he lightly pulls Hannah’s reins to the right and she turns with a nicker. With that, he looks back at the good doctor with the tip of his hat and man and horse are again in the wind.

Back in his barn a short time later, Aiden removes the tack from Hannah and fills her water trough. He leaves the stall door open, as well as the back gate to the field. He still intends on journeying into the mountains today, but it’ll be on foot and not on horseback. Before leaving the barn, he pulls his phone from his pocket and dials Polly.

“Aiden,” the chief answers. “How’d it go?”

“Not a problem. He’s not hurt, and he’s got the attention he wanted for now.”

“I owe ya, Aiden. I truly do. If I can do anything for you, I hope you know you just have to ask.”

Aiden pauses for a moment, eyes Hannah out in the field and the responds, “Well, I guess I could use one favor, Polly.”

“Say it.”

“I’m gonna head up in the hills for a while, and I’m getting a late start. It might be an overnighter and cell service is bad where I’m goin’. If I don’t get back to ya before then, would you come by my place startin’ tomorrow and check on my horse? Her feed’s in a barrel by her stall and the water hose is there if she’s low.”

“This isn’t the Aiden I know making contingency plans. Everything okay, buddy?”

“She’s my horse, Polly. Just takin’ you up on your offer. That’s all.”

Concerned with Aiden's resigned tone, Polly asks, "Hey? Why don't you just hop on that ole' swayback and ride down the mountain? Come have dinner with Glen and me tonight. I'll bet he hasn't seen you in a month of Sundays. It'll do him good. And you too. You sound like friends would be good about now."

"Friends," Aiden angrily snaps back without warning. "You? Are you my friend, Polly? It's been a year to the day since my boy got killed and have you even said a word? Nah. Not one. I'll bet ya don't even remember it's today, do ya? And you and me have known each since grade school, for chrissakes."

Polly tries to break in, "Aiden, of course, I remember. And you've got lots of frie..."

"Friends, Polly?" Aiden stops her. "Friends like the guys at work? How 'bout best friends like Molly? The mother of my child who says she's scared of me? Nah, Polly. I don't have friends, and I don't need 'em right now. What I need is to get in the woods. But thanks for the offer. Just keep your end of the deal and look in on my horse if I don't call ya back, okay?"

Without waiting for an answer, Aiden abruptly ends the call and slips the phone into his pocket. Swiftly barging through the back door, he almost sprints to grab his maps and backpack off the table. Like someone suffering a panic attack, he runs back through the kitchen and out the door before stopping on the porch and taking in several much-needed gulps of air. After a moment to catch his breath, he slowly, oddly, looks down to the pistol on his right hip. He moves his hand there, slowly releases the holster's safety latch and wraps his palm around the grip. Raising the weapon to eye level, he intensely studies it for several long seconds before placing his index finger on the trigger. Extending his arm out and aiming toward the adjacent wood line, he closes his left eye and moves the pistol further right. Once he's found

the spot where he saw the glowing amber eyes so early this morning, he mouths the word **BOOM** and mocks the backward recoil of the pistol.

Once he's slain his imaginary prey, Aiden sets the pistol on the porch railing, unbuckles his gun belt and hangs it on a nearby post rail. He knows he can't snap the large backpack's hip belt around his waist while wearing it, so, as he's done many times in the past, he zips his pistol in a rear pocket of the pack. Slipping his arms through its shoulder straps, he buckles the hip belt and tells himself it's time to hit the woods and change his life. Aiden knows he's in trouble. There are so many confusing emotions and hatred in his heart. His anger and guilt for his son's death only seem to be getting worse as another year begins. Deep inside, he knows he can't go on this way. The one thing he does know, however, is that the spirit of Mother Mountain can make or break a man.

## SHARING AND BEARING THE TRAILS

*“Beyond the rightness or wrongness of things there is a field. I’ll meet you there.”*

*~ Jalal al-Din Rumi*

**I**t’s a lot later in the day than Aiden wanted, but he’ll still begin his journey through Mother Mountain today as a man seeking transformation. Taking his own worn pathway from his property into the forest, he soon comes to the intersection with a well-maintained park trail. He came here so often in the past with Molly and Ian, as these trails are relatively close to home and easy to walk. They also offer plenty of beautiful overlooks of the valleys below. Picking up the ascending trail to his right, Aiden’s mind turns to thoughts of his son. He pictures his young toddler reaching up to hold Daddy’s hand while gleefully stomping along the path. He recalls his second-grade son sitting next to him on a fallen log, intently listening while Daddy talks of oaks and elms. He hears the voice of his twelve-year-old boy preaching back to his father of the majestic animals of the forest. He sees his adolescent man-child turn and laugh from well ahead on the trail while shouting, “COME ON POPS. I TOLD YOU THOSE CIGARS WOULD GET YA ONE DAY.”

The memories of his son bring a myriad of emotional thoughts as Aiden plods the trail for several hours. Unfortunately, they’re all painful, and each brings exhausting attempts by Aiden to make them

stop. He feels the hurt of Ian's memory and wants it to go away. It's just too much on his mind and on his heart. Even so, he manages to ascend to the highest peak of the mountain ridge, somehow making the entire trek while really only looking down at the ground in anguished ruminations. Suddenly, however, he pulls away from his daze when his mind senses danger. Brain-fog or not, nothing trumps instinct. Looking up, Aiden is faced with the stark reality that a freakishly large black bear is now standing up on its two hind legs only twenty-five feet in front of him. Worse yet, the giant animal is looking directly at him. He may know almost every bear in a hundred-mile radius, but not this big boy. He's never seen him before. He's never even imagined a black bear this disturbingly large, either. His mind hastily rationalizes that the big fellow must have recently migrated onto the Virginia side of the mountains while courting a pretty sow or seeking better food.

Because of Aiden's dazed hiking, the big bear knew of his presence long before he knew of the bear. Now, each has their eyes locked on the other. Remaining upright, the beast takes in several deep snorts of air before letting out a single, loud grunt. It's not an aggressive grunt at all, but more like an acknowledgment of Aiden's presence. Aggressive or not, Aiden has no intention of challenging the huge animal's right-of-way. He knows that unless threatened or injured, most bears want nothing to do with humans. When an incidental encounter like this does happen, the best thing one can do is to slowly back out of the area. So, Aiden calmly takes one slow step backward and begins to take another. Just as he does, however, the big fellow drops down to all fours with a noticeable thud and takes two steps forward. That's it. He stops after only two steps. Aiden takes another step backward and the bear again matches that with two of his own. He makes a third step, and another two steps are taken by the bear. When Aiden stops backing up and places both feet firmly on the ground, the bear casually stands back up on his two hind legs and continues to just stare at him.

Still somewhat calm and collected, Aiden's mind moves to *Step Two* in the wilderness survival guide that permanently resides in his brain. This next step calls for loud noises that often frighten away most wild animals. He's not an idiot, though. He knows that if this big, bull bear is trying to establish territory, or worse yet, looking for a mate, screaming and waving his arms is only going to tick the old boy off. No. He knows he's going to need the big noise of his pistol, and mechanically reaches to his right hip to retrieve it. It's not there, of course. His pistol's in a pocket on his backpack. Since that's currently residing on his back, it's definitely not within immediate reach. He wants it though. He needs it. Moving slowly and deliberately, he moves his hand forward to unbuckle the pack's hip belt. He then pulls the straps from around his shoulders and slowly bends forward to lay the pack on the ground. No quick, sudden moves. Keeping one watchful eye on the bear, he unzips the pocket, pulls out his pistol, and holds it high in the air. Still intently locked in on Aiden, the big bear lets out one long, low-pitched groan. If his mind weren't otherwise occupied, Aiden might think the bear was groaning in disappointment. His mind, however, is occupied.

Raising the pistol above his head and pointing it skyward, Aiden unceremoniously fires off two quick rounds into the air. Loud, echoing blasts from the weapon leaves his own ears ringing. Before his eyes reopen from the reactive blinks, he instinctively lowers the pistol in the direction of the bear, anticipating a possible attack charge. As his eyes fully open, however, he sees that the bear has absolutely no reaction to the shots. *Okay*, Aiden thinks to himself and shoots three more successive rounds in the air that explode through the silence of the mountains. Again, no response, although he believes he hears a slightly annoyed snort come from the bear's direction. It's hard to tell with the ringing in his ears. Regardless, with no success, he decides to try to back out of the area again, hoping the loud discharges from the pistol at least

disoriented the big fellow. It's worth a try, anyway. With his weapon trained on the bear just in case, he bends down to pick up his pack, stands again, and takes a single step backward. No good. The bear drops back to all fours and takes two steps in his direction. This time, however, the great beast lets loose with a tremendously loud, jowl-flapping growl that makes every hair on Aiden's neck stand up. He seems highly, highly annoyed.

Frozen in place, adrenaline begins marinating through Aiden's body, causing his heart to thump like a jackhammer. What's happening just isn't normal. He can't back away and he can't frighten the bear. He damned sure knows he can't shoot it. First and foremost, the small caliber bullets in his pistol would probably only wound this oversized beast. More likely, it would only enrage him and force an attack. Second, he can't stand the thought of killing an animal for simply doing what it naturally does. It was he who encroached on the bear, after all. But truth be told, there's also the thought in the back of his mind that he'd never live down killing another mountain predator. It wouldn't matter if it was for survival. There would surely be talk by others about not only this kill but also about the one that forced him to retire from his career as a Game Warden.

So, his mind made, Aiden stands his ground, raises the muzzle of the pistol well above his head, and five more rounds shatter the air. When he can see through the smoke, it's not surprising that he finds the bear still standing on its hind legs and stoically looking in his direction. Out of near desperation, Aiden fires his final five rounds and the pistol's slide locks home. He's out of rounds now and didn't bring another magazine. But the great bear couldn't care less. He indignantly snorts as Aiden slowly, nervously stows the empty firearm in his jacket pocket.

Thinking that it's only a matter of time before the bear tires of toying with a pesky human, Aiden knows he must immediately do

something. Adjacent to the trail, he sees that the woods are thick with low tree limbs and underbrush. It's going to be tough to run through it, but he sees no other choice. He takes a quick look left and then right before determining that the left tree line, with its thinner underbrush, is the slightly better option. In anticipation of leaping from the trail, he gently turns his body in that direction and slowly moves his right foot over his left foot and plants it on the ground. The observing bear does nothing in response. Aiden then moves his left foot behind his right and puts it down. Now he turns his shoulders parallel to the trail's edge and still the bear does nothing. He's now within just four feet of the wood line.

Sucking in air like a sponge diver prepping for a deep plunge, Aiden is really only building his courage to leap. Not quite mentally ready, he begins a whispered countdown from ten to one in order to steel his nerves and create a definitive go-time. But the great bear has other plans. While Aiden is still in mid-count, the bear angrily slaps his giant paw across the trail. Gouging large amounts of the ground in his pad, he launches leaves, wood chips, dirt, and small rocks in Aiden's direction. Before the tiny projectiles arrive, however, Aiden notices that the resulting plume of dust completely blocks him from the big bear's view. His mind tells him it's time to go now and he makes a jump from the trail and into the woods. As his feet hit the ground, he holds the backpack up in front of his face to bulldoze his way through the low hanging limbs. His two legs churn like peddling a bicycle as he pumps his feet to keep from tripping through the thick underbrush. Then, after trekking a few hundred yards into the forest, Aiden stops for a quick look behind him. He sees and hears nothing. Still, he breaks back into a near sprint in hopes of gaining even more distance between himself and the huge beast.

After another few minutes of running full speed through the thick forest, Aiden is completely spent and out of breath. He thinks that



maybe he should've listened to his son back then and curtailed his habit of smoking the *occasional* cigar. Regardless, he spots a large oak tree just ahead and decides to pause his escape, at least for now, by hiding behind it. There, he puts his backpack on properly and slowly peeks his head around in the direction from where he came. With great relief, he sees no grotesquely huge bear but decides to stay behind the tree for at least a few more minutes. *Maybe the bear is methodical and slow*, Aiden thinks to himself. A methodical, slow, stalking killer bear. Soon, however, he begins to catch his breath and take in his surroundings. He thought he knew every inch of these mountains, but now nothing around him seems familiar. Yet, for a man like Aiden, that's never a problem. He quickly spots an almost invisible pathway he knows will eventually take him toward home. Someone without his experience would've never picked up on it, but he easily recognizes a faint trail through the underbrush that's used by local wildlife to get to and from fresh water. A water source in the mountains usually means, at least, a running creek. Creeks run to streams, and streams run to rivers and lakes. And no one knows the streams, rivers, and lakes in these mountains better than him.

Following the trail, Aiden eventually comes to a long stretch of ridgeline where the land sharply drops off on either side of the faint path. He stops and peers down each slope in search of any landmarks he might recognize. While his eyes are busy scanning below, however, he catches something out of the corner of his eye that makes him silently gasp. Aiden once again knows that danger is nearby. As he slowly begins to lift his head to look around, he's frozen in fear when a low, deep growl causes every fiber in his body to freeze. It's close. Too damned close. Overcoming the fear, he snaps his head in the direction of the noise and finds what his mind already knows. There, only ten feet ahead on the narrow ridge, the freakishly large black bear sits back on his haunches.

“Well, well, well,” Aiden quietly but defiantly says aloud. “If your job today is to lead me to my maker, I got news for ya, pal. You’re gonna have to work for it.”

The huge bear suddenly rises to all fours, loudly growls, and begins a lumbering sprint toward Aiden. With no time to consider options, Aiden swiftly leaps down the hillside to his left. For several seconds he feels airborne as his body drops almost parallel to the steep grade of his escape. Having witnessed the man’s plunge off the path, the big bear stops his run and looks down the slope. Bobbing his head and snorting once, he casually turns and ambles back along the ridgeline trail to wherever it is that bears go in the woods.

# THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US

*“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.”*

*~ Friedrich Nietzsche*

It was 12:24 a.m. one year ago today when Aiden and Molly Huff were abruptly woken from their peaceful night’s sleep. A lone bolt of lightning had destroyed their slumber when it loudly ripped across the sky above their mountain home. The sound of raw electricity stabbing through the air was intense enough, but the tremendous thunderclap that followed shook the ground, the house, and the very bed where they slept. Aiden sat upright with a start, and even through his sleep-fogged brain, was still able to deduce what had roused him. After all, the sound of thunder still echoed across the surrounding mountainsides, although weakening gradually as it moved away in the distance.

Rising to his feet, Aiden walked to the bedroom window and peered upward toward the sky. He saw only stars from his vantage point, however. Thinking it may be an oncoming storm, he left the window and walked to the French doors that lead out to a large patio. He stopped and looked back at Molly, who was still peacefully lying in their bed. Even in the dark, there was enough light in the room to see that she was already working on getting back to sleep.

Sensing as only a wife can that her husband had stopped to look at her, Molly smiled weakly with closed eyes. In a sleepy voice she knew would reach his ears, she said, “Thank God I have a big, bad, brave husband to check out the bumps in the night.”

Smiling, Aiden replied, “Big, bad, and brave. Yep. And that’s why you hired me, ma’am.” Resuming his walk, Aiden changed to a somewhat serious tone, “Hey, I checked the weather reports before I left the station. There was nothin’ about bad weather. Did you hear anything?”

“Nope. I don’t keep track of bad weather. Draughts, famine, forty days and forty nights of rain and stuff like that all fall on you, stud muffin. But feel free to keep me posted, huh?”

Opening the patio door, Aiden walked outside to get a better look at the sky. He saw nothing but stars. He had a good view, too. His large, cabin style home is situated high on the Catawba Knob at an elevation of over twelve hundred feet. Although higher peaks scatter the mountain ranges, he could still see far across the night’s cloudless sky. Scratching the day’s growth of stubble on his face, he spun around in his underwear-clad body searching for even the remotest hint of bad weather. Nothing. Walking back into the bedroom, he picked up his mobile phone from the nightstand and dialed his son’s phone number before heading back out to the patio. Listening to the constant ring, he wasn’t a bit surprised that his son, Ian, didn’t answer. Cellular service in his mountain range has always been spotty. Many areas, including the region he believed Ian had set up camp for the night, remain even today as notorious for poor signal strength. With that in mind, he ended the unanswered call and walked back into the bedroom.

“Well, Noah,” quipped a still awake and teasing Molly, “are we gathering the animals two by two yet?”

“Nah. We’re good for now, anyway. Might be it was just a fast-moving storm or something, but damn if it didn’t give me the willies.”

“Are you telling me my big, bad, brave man got scared?” Molly said in a child-like voice.

“Scared? Me?” replied Aiden as he stretched back out in the bed. “I’ll only admit that my butt sucked up a foot of this damn bedsheet when that thunder hit. That’d make anyone feel weird. But I think I’ll ride out on Hannah in the morning to see if I can make contact with Ian. It’ll make me feel better, anyway.”

“Sure,” Molly whispered into Aiden’s ear before moving her lips down to kiss his. “Listen,” she continued after her goodnight peck, “Ian is fine, Aiden. He’s a mountain man like his dad. But do whatever makes you feel good, big fella.”

Aiden eventually dropped back off to sleep while thinking of how proud he was of his son. An only child and recent high school graduate, Ian wanted nothing more than to follow in his old man’s footsteps. For the time being, he delayed college to enlist in the United States Marine Corps. Also like his dad, Ian planned to do a three-year stint and come out to work in law enforcement as soon as he hit twenty-one years of age. To Aiden, unfortunately, Ian didn’t want to be a Game Warden, or what Virginia renamed as a Conservation Police Officer. CPOs had jurisdiction to enforce all of Virginia’s criminal laws throughout the state, however, they were expected to focus exclusively on violations of fish, game, and wildlife laws. Ian, however, saw federal law enforcement as his way of more directly serving others and, as he put it, leaving the welfare of the forest and its critters to his dad. With his report date for Boot Camp still over a month away, he had some precious time to hang out and hike with his childhood friends he’d soon leave behind. They all grew up together in the hills, and each was as capable of hunting, tracking, climbing, and surviving as anyone Aiden had ever met. He’d made sure of that. Yes, Aiden was proud of Ian and fell back asleep with that thought foremost in his mind.

Sleep would only last a few more hours for Aiden and Molly Huff. At just after 4 a.m. that morning, Aiden's head would again snap up from his pillow. In his ear, he heard the sounds of car tires rolling up the long dirt driveway to his home. Not just the tires of one car, but many cars. Jumping from his bed, he grabbed his blue jeans from a nearby chair and quickly pulled them on. Next, he instinctively opened his nightstand drawer and removed his holstered weapon and CPO badge. Before he could make it through the bedroom door to the stairs, however, his mobile phone rang. Moving back to the nightstand and looking down at the Caller ID, his mind began to spin. It was Captain Levi Stone. He couldn't think of a single reason why Captain Stone from the CPO Division Office would be calling him. He did know, however, that any phone call at that time of the morning was rarely, if ever, good. Picking up the phone, he moved to the front bedroom window and looked outside to his drive. As he looked, he saw not one, but a dozen CPO and other assorted police-style vehicles parked along the single dirt lane.

Pushing the answer button on the phone, Aiden raised it and anxiously answered, "Sergeant Huff here, Captain. What the heck's going on?"

"Aiden," the captain quietly replied. "Yeah, it's Levi Stone here, son. Listen. Somethings happened. Something bad. I need you to come to the door and talk."

Aiden shut off the phone without response and swiftly headed for the bedroom door. Not lost in all the commotion, an awakened Molly had sat up in bed, moved to look out the window and asked, "What's going on honey? Why are they all here?"

"I don't know, baby," Aiden quickly answers. "But I'm gonna find out. You'd better get dressed but stay up here until I know it's okay."

Leaving Molly in the bedroom, Aiden ran down the stairs. It's amazing how fast the mind works when flooded with adrenaline. Before he had hit the bottom step, he had already run a hundred scenarios through his mind. He knew whatever it was probably wouldn't be work-related, though. He'd be glad if it was, but the tone in his captain's voice was too soft. It was too compassionate. He was trying to sound more like a friend, or maybe even a father. And just what was with all the other cops out front? Aiden had spotted several marked CPO trucks, as well as state police cruisers, and a couple of unmarked sedans he didn't even recognize. In the half-second it took Aiden to move from the bottom stair to the front door, his mind rationalized that all the conjecture was about to come to an end just as soon as he opened it. And it did.

"Captain Stone," Aiden started. "What the -?"

Captain Stone stepped up into the door frame. While he placed one hand on Aiden's shoulder, he slowly moved his other down to take the pistol from Aiden's drooped hand. Aiden didn't notice. He was scanning his front yard where cops he knew and didn't know were just standing and looking up at him on the porch. Some had their hands clasped in front of them. Some in back. Others had them in their pockets. One, CPO Rodney White, had his two hands on top of his head and, to Aiden, looked to be crying.

"Captain?" Aiden said in a questioning manner.

"I'm afraid it's your son, Aiden. He was attacked by an animal outside his tent a few hours back. Just after midnight. They were set up not too far from Tim Wilson's place, so one of the other boys ran and got Tim's truck. They took Ian straight to the hospital. We didn't even know, Aiden, until the doctor called the trooper barracks."

"What hospital? Where is he? How's he doing now?"

"He...well, he...I'm afraid he didn't make it, Aiden," the captain stuttered as his hand tightly gripped Aiden's shoulder.

And with that news, Aiden Huff fell to his knees.

Over the next several days, Aiden would be busy arranging the services for his late son. Molly was inconsolable and spent the majority of her time crying in bed. So, Aiden did what he thought was best in honoring the life and love of his child. He was a doer. His mind urged him to keep busy. In self-compliance, he went about the tasks of meeting alone with Pastor Abrams at the church. He also made arrangements between the hospital and the funeral home for the transfer of Ian's remains, and arranged the burial plot, all by day two. He couldn't really recall when, or if, he phoned his brother and sister with the tragic news. Someone had to have done it, though. Neither of them was local, as both had left the mountains long ago for the lure of the big cities. On just the second day after the loss, however, there they were, descending on his home with their spouses and kids, and their kid's kids. If there were a few camels and farm animals thrown in, it would have struck Aiden as the movie scene where Moses lead his people out of Egypt. Only now, the masses of Aiden's people were arriving on his front porch steps.

Along with the arrival of family, Aiden was also heartened by the flood of neighbors and townsfolk who frequently came by. For the most part, Aiden remained busy with preparations, but was well aware of the baskets of food piling up on the kitchen table and was grateful. Molly wasn't faring so well, though. The one thing Aiden couldn't seem to do was help her. She cried almost non-stop and constantly asked Aiden to sit down and talk with her. He would, but only from time to time. There were things to be done, and if taking care of Molly was one of them, he would certainly do it. But he would soon become frustrated that his wife, his love, was hurting so badly and nothing he said or did seemed to fix her. And since he couldn't do that, he would move to the pressing matters of assuring Ian was laid to rest properly, with or without her help.



Aiden followed his urges to keep busy over the next several days. When Ian's burial service neared, he knew he could not have made it through without the loving support of family and friends that constantly surrounded him. Then, his only child was laid to rest on a Sunday afternoon, and sadly, he awoke on Monday morning to realize that everyone was gone. Not only was Ian gone, but his brother and sister, along with their families, had returned to the responsibilities of their own life. Suddenly, no friends were stopping by to check on them anymore. And Molly was no support. At a time when he could've used the mutual support from his wife and best friend, he felt that support would only be a one-way street. He would have to take some time to figure out how to fix things for her. He, however, now had time on his hands and the opportunities of coming face-to-face with the painful feelings surrounding the loss of his son. Grief is painful, and Aiden was not prepared for it. No one ever is. Many of the emotions that began to flow through him were ones that he'd never experienced before. And those that he'd felt in the past were now at levels of intensity he'd never imagined even possible. Of all, anger was, of course, the number one emotion that ripped at his heart.

Captain Stone had escorted Aiden and Molly to the hospital that dreadful morning he delivered the news of Ian's death. Once there, he took Aiden aside and laid out as much as he knew about the animal attack. That included the emergency room doctor's initial indication that the lethal marks on Ian's neck and body were most likely those of a big, predatory cat.

Aiden jerked his face up toward the captain when he gave him that news and asked, "A cougar?"

"No. I don't see how," answered the captain. "You know the Eastern Mountain Lion was completely hunted out of these hills years ago. The Fish and Wildlife folks even pulled 'em off the endangered

species list a few years back, Aiden, and officially classified ‘em as extinct.”

“No. I’ve seen ‘em, Captain. Plenty of hikers and residents have reported ‘em too. I don’t give a crap what the feds say.”

“Son, most of those sightings can be marked off as a runaway coon dog or an oversized bobcat. Or maybe, Aiden, an oversized imagination.”

“I don’t *imagine*, Captain,” Aiden smugly responded as he abruptly stood up. “I know what I’ve seen. Now, I’d like to go see my boy please.”

The captain stood as well and responded, “The doc says they still need to work on making Ian a little more presentable to family, Aiden. There’s no easy way to say it, but it’s just not good for you right now.”

“The only thing not good for me now is my son’s death,” Aiden barked back at the captain and moved down the hospital corridor.

The captain followed behind and allowed Aiden to look through the window of door after door in search of his son. He abruptly stopped at a ward door that the captain already knew was the one. There, Aiden spent several moments only peering through the glass at a lone, sheet-covered body on a bed in an otherwise empty, sterile hospital room. With a questioning look on his face, he very slowly turned his eyes to the captain, who dropped his own, bit his lower lip, and nodded his head. After a moment’s pause, Aiden mustered up the courage to walk into the room and stood beside the bed that held his deceased child. The captain then entered, took a place at his side, and watched as he pulled the sheet from behind the head, across the face, and then down over the body. Aiden didn’t take noticeable shock at the sight of Ian’s mutilated throat. He was too focused on staring deeply at his son’s pale face.

Placing the palm of his hand on Ian's cheek, Aiden stroked it tenderly with his thumb. Bringing his face down close, he put his forehead gently against his son's closed eyes, and whispered, "I'm so sorry, son. I'm so, so very sorry."

After a few moments of lovingly touching his dear child, Aiden lifted and finally began methodically looking at the wounds on the body. There, he found claw marks that deeply raked the flesh in several places and instantly knew they could only come from a cougar. They were too deep and spread too wide for a bobcat, and nowhere near the pattern of a big wolf or bear. He had no doubt what killed his son. Next, he noticed something else that made him cock his head to one side and look closer. Each of the areas where the cat swiped at Ian's body only showed three deep gouges. The depth of the wounds meant the fourth claw of the cat would have certainly left its mark as well, but just wasn't there. As he went from wound to wound, he confirmed to himself that Ian had definitely been attacked by a cougar, and that killer cat was missing a fourth front claw.

Aiden had not only been granted bereavement leave from his job but was also told by the captain to take as much paid time off as he needed. Yet, things still weren't going well with Molly, nor with handling his own emotions from the loss. For him, it was all so confusing. There would be moments of anger, followed by moments of guilt. There would be other times when he felt afraid, and that would bring him back to feeling angry. He wasn't a man prone to being scared, and the anger brewed inside him. All interactions with Molly were tough, too. She cried so often, and at one point accused Aiden of not loving their late child. If he did, she would tell him, he would certainly be more emotional and spend more time talking it. This confused and enraged Aiden even more. Of course, he loved his son. Or did he? If he wasn't crying as much as his wife, was there a chance he'd only convinced himself over the years that he did?

That was enough for Aiden. He loved his son, and no one, including himself, could convince him otherwise. The rage grew inside even more and, as he was apt to do, he knew he had to take some sort of action. His mind turned to his son's killer, who was at fault for all of this, after all. If that cougar killed his child, it needed to die as well. No, he quickly thought better. He wasn't raised to seek revenge. But, as he rationalized, what was to stop it from killing another human? What if someone else was attacked and Aiden had done nothing to stop it? To him, the three-clawed beast was a dangerous animal that had to be eliminated. So, over the next several days, he would leave his house in the morning and hit the forest either on foot or on horseback. It wouldn't take long for the experienced woodsman to narrow the hunt. By the end of the week, Aiden found fresh marks on a tree where a big cat had recently sharpened its claws. Looking closer, he found the marks made by the right paw had only three claws. He was close, and it was time to lure his son's killer to its death.

Making short work of it, Aiden would trap a wild rabbit from his property to use as bait. Each evening before dusk he would set out by horseback to the area where he earlier found the claw marks. Once there, he would pull the live rabbit from his saddlebag and tie one end of thin hemp twine around the animal's torso. He would secure the other to a log that he placed in the center of the nearby meadow, with enough length for the rabbit to almost reach the surrounding tree line. He would then climb a tree, find a sturdy limb, and scan the baited field with the scope of his rifle. For three straight evenings, however, dusk would turn to darkness with no appearance of the cat.

On the fourth evening, just as dusk fell, Aiden would spot two glowing amber eyes through the scope of his high-powered rifle. They were just inside the darkening tree line, low to the ground, and locked in on its prey. Aiden took a deep breath, held it in, aimed in on his target, and waited for that savage killer to attack. Yet, as the seconds

went by, the predator made no move toward the prey. Exhaling a breath he'd held too long, he lifted his head from the scope to make sure the rabbit hadn't escaped its tether. Once he saw that it was still snared, he returned his eye to the scope and trained it back on his target. What he saw through the magnified lens, however, sent instant chills down his spine. The glowing amber eyes were no longer locked in on the rabbit but instead locked directly on him. Aggravated from being startled, Aiden took another deep breath, held it, brought the reticle of his scope to rest between the ears of the big cat and fired. The explosive sound loudly echoed time and again across the nearby mountains as he recovered from the recoil of the powerful gun. Using the scope to resurvey the area, he no longer saw the glowing amber eyes of the cat. Even through the darkness, however, he could make out the shadowy form of a prone and lifeless cougar on the ground. His round had hit its mark.

Swiftly jumping from his tree branch, Aiden drew a knife from his belt and sprinted across the open field, cutting the rabbit's twine and releasing the bait as he went. As he neared the wood line, rifle muzzle out front, he slowed to a careful approach and stopped several feet before the fallen beast. Pulling a small flashlight from his jacket, Aiden pointed the light at the cat and saw no movement. He slowly moved closer and watched the limp cougar until he was near enough to see the bullet's devastating carnage to the animal's skull. Without further hesitation, he impatiently reached forward and grabbed the cougar's right paw and hit it with his flashlight. In the beam, however, he saw four long and distinct claws. He dropped the right and quickly grabbed and lifted the cat's left paw. There, again, he found four claws. To Aiden's dismay, this was not the cougar that killed his son.

Falling to his knees, Aiden needed a moment to take it in. He thought he had gotten his revenge, as his own mind *finally* admitted that revenge was truly what he sought. No matter, he reasoned to himself.

Maybe the cat was the mate of three-claws? Maybe he took out something the killer loved, after all, just as it had taken out someone he loved. With that thought, he slowly stood and took three steps backward. He then aimed the barrel of his rifle down at the carcass of the cougar, put his finger on the trigger, and fired. He deftly reached down to the bolt action of the weapon and worked it rapidly to chamber another round, and this time with a malevolent grin on his lips, fired again. He worked the bolt action one more time, loudly chuckled as he pulled the trigger and sent a final bullet into the already dead carcass of the cat. Pumping rounds into the beast left him emotionally spent but, as the final echoes faded off in the distant hillside, he knew inside that vengeance had still not been served.

Aiden would whistle for Hannah and use all his strength to hoist the big cat up and across the front of her saddle. Once he'd ridden back to his home, he tossed the dead cougar in an empty barn stall and quickly cared for his horse. His face and clothing splattered with the dead animal's blood, he walked through the back door of his house, into the kitchen, and come face-to-face with Captain Levi Stone.

"Aiden," Molly anxiously stammered from behind the captain. "I called Captain Stone to see if he could come by and just, ya know, talk. I've been so worried about us lately."

"Aiden," the captain spoke up. "Where ya been, son? You guttin' a hog or something out in that barn?"

Aiden, never one for hiding the truth, responded, "No, Captain. Tonight, I got revenge on a monster."

What would follow for Aiden were more life-changing events that left him feeling stripped of all he thought he was. Within just a few days he would be ordered to the CPO Division Office by Captain Stone. The captain would regrettably inform Aiden that he was to immediately retire his position as a Conservation Police Officer. It seemed that those in higher offices than the captain, as well as a few

elected officials of the state, wanted him criminally charged for his unauthorized killing an endangered species. The captain couldn't have that, however. It was more than just sympathy for Aiden's tragic loss. He had been the best officer Levi had worked with in his thirty-five years as a game warden. The two men had developed a respectful and caring relationship over time, although it rarely carried on beyond the job. The captain would spin some yarns to his own superiors of how Aiden couldn't be charged with illegally killing an endangered animal since the Eastern Mountain Lion had officially been classified as *extinct*. That, and calling in more favors than Levi knew he had, would save Aiden from termination, or worse yet, a criminal record. Instead, he would immediately retire, but with full pension and benefits.

Molly would also be devastated by Aiden's forced retirement but deeply grateful for the captain's actions. Regardless of what happened, Aiden had over twenty-six years of loyal service and she had twenty-six years of being married to a man who was highly dedicated to the sanctity of the mountains. She had certainly invested in some lonely times over the years. On top of Ian's death, Aiden would be further heartbroken, confused, and angered by his department's actions. Molly would beg him to talk with her about it, and about Ian, but he only turned more inward. He would begin spending his days alone in the barn, tinkering with anything he could get his hands on. His nights would be spent rocking on the back porch with a few more glasses of bourbon than were once his norm. Conversations between the two suddenly ended each time in arguments and hurtful words. Unable to get support from her husband, Molly would seek help outside the home. She found a therapist a few towns over and became involved with a church group that allowed her to openly speak of her grief. Throughout it all, she tried to get Aiden to join her, explaining how good it felt to just talk to others about her pain. He would have none of it, though.

One evening, Molly returned home rather late from a meeting with her social group. They had met at a local restaurant and the conversational support carried them further into the evening than usual. She would open the front door to find Aiden sitting in the recliner, empty bourbon glass in hand, angrily scowling at her. He accused her of trying to run away from Ian's death by flitting around with other people who couldn't even cope with their own problems. He called her, and them, weak and announced that she was unfit to be the mother of their son. For her own good, he told her, she wasn't to meet with those losers in the support group ever again. When Molly scoffed at his orders and began to walk away, Aiden leaped from his recliner and blocked her path. Both heatedly stared into each other's eyes for several seconds before she became, for the first time ever, afraid of her husband.

The following day, Molly snuck out for a scheduled therapy appointment. When she later returned home, Aiden met her in the driveway before she even brought her car to a stop. With rage on his face, he swiftly walked to the driver's side and kicked the front fender with such force that Molly feared the car might actually tip over. She needed no further thought. Putting the car in reverse, she rolled down the driver's window, looked at Aiden and said, "If you ever find yourself, Aiden Huff, you let me know. You'll never be able to feel my love until you love yourself again."

Stomping on the gas pedal, Molly sped the car in reverse for a short distance before jerking the wheel and backing onto the front lawn. Before even coming to a stop, she slammed the gearshift into drive and stomped the accelerator hard, spinning the tires and sending rocks, dirt and grass clumps clattering against the front of their home. As the car fishtailed several times before making it back to the dirt lane, Aiden could only watch as Molly's car, and Molly disappeared from his life around the slight bend in their picturesque, tree-lined driveway.



## LOOKING BEYOND THE ILLUSION

*“Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing. And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall claim your limbs...then shall you truly dance.”*

*~ Kahlil Gibran*

**W**ith no time to brace for landing, Aiden’s rump hits the steeply inclined slope well before his feet come down in front of him. The hill’s drop is so sharp, in fact, that if not for his pack, he’d probably be sliding down on his back instead of his butt. He tries desperately to dig his heels into the earth to stop his slide, while grasping at tree trunks and limbs that pass by with increasing velocity. Just below, and coming up fast, he sees nothing. There are no trees and no more hillside in his path. He knows this means he’s approaching a drop-off. How much of a drop is unknown at the time, but unless he can stop himself, he’s about to find out. Just as his legs go over the edge, he manages to spin onto his stomach. Digging his boots into the vertical wall below, he grabs for anything that might stop the rest of his body from going over. Unable to get a good hold, however, he free falls twenty-five feet to the hard surface below and lands with a heavy thud on his backpack.

Dazed but alive, Aiden lies still for a few minutes while the air re-enters his lungs. As his thoughts also begin to return, he does a little

injury evaluation by moving his arms and legs about. Grateful and satisfied, he slowly stands, removes his pack and looks around. He's on a level stone that juts out from the mountainside in an almost perfect semicircle. Walking out to the edge, he looks down to find there's no cliffside wall below. He's landed on a table rock and realizes there's no climbing down. Not only that, the climb back up the sheer cliff behind him requires a rope, at least, which he doesn't exactly have at the moment. Nor is there any viable chance a wayward hiker might come along in such a remote area. Pulling his mobile phone from his pocket, he's not surprised to find the *No Signal* message on his screen, and Aiden realizes he's in trouble. But he's been in trouble a lot lately. That's why he came to Mother Mountain, after all. It was time for a transformation and one way or another she's going to give it to him.

While still at the rock's edge, Aiden takes another look down. He wonders if he'd have to jump if that big old beast of a bear finds him and is dumb enough to blindly plunge over the upper cliff in hot pursuit? He's certainly not going out by being eaten by a bear. No sir! Maybe he'd be able to grab the attacking bear and pull them both over the ledge to their mutual deaths below? At least when their remains were discovered, people would know Aiden Huff died in a fight, right? But what if he just took a step forward right now? Would it really be so bad? The only other option, it seems, is to hang out on this barren rock, exposed to the high mountain elements, and eventually starve to death. No! He's not going out that way either. If it came to that, he might just have to take a little slip over the edge and leave everyone believing it was nothing more than a hiking accident. But, if it came to that, at least there would be no more pain and grief, and no one would think he was a weak coward. It was an accident. If it came to that, at least he wouldn't be missing his wife and son anymore, would he? Nor would he be angry any longer about losing his job if it came to that. If it came to that, he wonders, would it really be so bad?

**“TAKE THE STEP, AIDEN HUFF. IF THAT IS THY WILL,”** suddenly erupts a deep, loud, echoey voice that seems to come from everywhere around Aiden.

Startled, Aiden spins around. When he does, his left foot slides off the edge and he falls to his face with his legs precariously dangling over the table rock’s rim. Furiously pumping his knees and clawing with his hands, he pulls himself to a safe distance and stands. Looking around and up the cliffside, he sees no one and turns back to the edge.

**“IF YOU ARE READY TO TAKE THE STEP, AIDEN HUFF, THEN IT IS THINE OWN WILL,”** again comes the loud, commanding voice from nowhere and everywhere.

Wondering if the fall had knocked some silliness into his head, Aiden decides to sarcastically answer the voice by yelling back, **“SO, YOU WANT ME TO END IT, HUH? YOU WANT ME TO STOP MY PAIN? I’LL DO IT, YOU KNOW? IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT? ARE YOU HERE TO HELP ME DIE?”**

“No, Aiden Huff,” comes the same voice, minus the deep, echoing tone. “I am here to help you live.”

Scanning the area for the source of the voice, Aiden notices the limbs of several bushes and vines at the base of the cliff wall behind him separating on their own. As they do, the figure of a large man steps forth from the dark opening and deliberately walks forward to stand beside him. Looking down over the ledge for just a moment and then back to Aiden, the man matter-of-factly states, “That is a rather long drop. I am delighted your will was not to take the step. I am afraid, Aiden Huff, your body would not have survived such a fall.”

Still confused by the appearance, Aiden intently studies the man before him on the rock. He’s about as big, if not slightly bigger than he is, and from his fervent studies of American heritage, distinctly of Cherokee Indian lineage. What momentarily piques his curiosity is the man’s attire, or lack thereof. He’s shirtless, with only a bright red and

white checkered cloth wrapped around his waist that's almost long enough to hide his bare feet.

"And just who are you?" asks Aiden.

"I am life. I am essence. I am spirit made in the image of the Creator."

"You mean, like an angel?" Aiden smugly asks while brushing dirt and pebbles off his sleeves.

"No. However, I could be an angel if I so desired. But for now, my chosen path is to exist and grow in unconditional love simply as spirit."

Aiden slightly chuckles, points at the man's legs, and says, "So, I guess spirits are really Native Americans dressed in Italian restaurant tablecloths. Who knew? Do you have a name, spirit?"

"No. I am a part of the One who has only briefly departed. Names are only necessary when we incarnate in human form. However, as that is somewhat the case now, you may use the name Dan if that is your will."

"Dan, huh? *And* you don't find that name to be just a little, well, lame for a spirit who could be an angel if he wanted? You couldn't come up with something just a bit more ethereal than that, *Dan*?"

Dan softly smiles and replies, "I offer you the customary name of the mortal man who stands before you now. Through God's grace and consent, I have temporarily subdued the spirit that manifests within and embodied myself for divine purposes."

With more sarcasm than skepticism, Aiden says, "Look. I didn't think I hit my head when I fell, fella, but I musta, huh? This is crazy. I'm not even sure where I am right now. But how 'bout you just tell me how I can climb my happy butt up outta here?"

"You are not sure if my words are true, Aiden Huff. But I understand how you do not yet believe."

As hysterical laughter mixes with words, Aiden answers, “Believe? You’re kiddin’ me right now, right? Wouldn’t you agree this is all just a bit, uh, what’s the word? Crazy? Yeah? That’s it. Crazy. Well, you *could* do something to move me, brother. Make it rain. No? Manifest me a step ladder up that cliff, then. Too easy? How ‘bout beaming down a band of angels to play Stairway to Heaven? Now that right there might just make a believer outta me, pal!”

“Calm yourself, Aiden Huff. You have a tendency to become excited when faced with that which you believe is not possible. You must work on expanding your beliefs. Or at least your patience.”

Aiden turns away and scoffs before turning back to say, “You gotta give me something here, pal. This is way beyond believable.”

“Your name is Aiden John Huff, son of Quinn and Margarete Huff, who have both rejoined me in spirit. Wonderful souls, both of them. You have a younger brother and sister. Twins. Teddy and Jessica. Your given name, Aiden, was your father’s homage to Aiden Joseph Huff, a German immigrant who, long ago, first settled your family in these mountains. You married your high-school sweetheart, Molly Anne Kilgore, and she would give birth to a wonderful child you would name Ian Taylor Huff.”

“That’s it?” snaps Aiden in an exasperated tone. “You spend a little time in the county record hall and you wanna spew that garbage to get over on me? It ain’t gonna happen, spirit-man. This’s gotta end. Now! So, get on with it and tell me what your deal is here. Whaddya want?”

Dan looks to the ground for several seconds, looks back at Aiden with a gentle smile and compassionately responds, “You wet your bed until you were seven years of age. Your dear mother helped you hide your bedsheets, and your shame, from your father. You killed an innocent robin with your new pellet rifle when you were eleven and became physically sickened from taking a life just for the purpose of

killing. At fourteen, you went to the large retail centers in the town of Abingdon with Frankie Jones and his mother. There, you concealed a cigar lighter you thought would please your father as a gift. However, you would hold such guilt, fear, and anxiety in the theft that you eventually threw the item into a pond and made a pledge to never break the law again. At eighteen, you enlisted in the armed services after you backed down from a fight with two vulgar and intoxicated farmhands in the town feed store. When you found out that they molested a young woman later that same day, you vowed to become a *fighter for good*, as you have often referred to yourself privately throughout adulthood.”

Having been struck by the deeply personal and secret insights coming from this strange man, Aiden had already dropped to his knees before Dan finished and is beginning to feel tears welling in his eyes. “Enough, please. Enough,” he pleads as he painfully looks up at Dan. “If you know all this, then you know *all* the shameful things about me I’ve always kept from others.”

“No, Aiden Huff. These things and others are not at all shameful. You have truly lived a life where your past has positively shaped your future. And your choices, both noble and poor, shaped a virtuous life where you are the same man when alone as when with others in a crowd.”

“Well, I’m sorry for bein’ so snarky before,” Aiden says with true sincerity before a lightbulb suddenly fires up in his head. “But, hey, I gotta ask...well, heck, if you are who you say you are, then you probably already know what I’m gonna ask anyway, right?”

Dan reaches down and takes Aiden by the shoulders to help him to his feet and responds, “Yes, Aiden Huff. If I am spirit and can depart from the One and come before you, can Ian do the same? The answer is yes. Ian is actually before you now. But you, Aiden Huff, are not ready to see or even recognize the spirit of your son. When you are ready, you will see him.”

“And you’re here to help me see him? Is that it?”

“No. I am here to help you see *yourself*. If you can see yourself, then you will see that Ian exists before you, around you, and always within you.”

Without announcement, Dan abruptly turns back to the cliffside wall and walks toward the opening he earlier came through. Without turning back to Aiden, he says, “Come, Aiden Huff. You are ready to begin?”

“Begin? Begin what? And where? Inside a cave?”

Without stopping his passage into the opening, Dan replies, “Yes. Inside this grotto. I know it is not the Bald Knob Lodge, Aiden Huff, but it will do. Take your time and enter when you are ready.” With that, Dan disappears into the darkness of the grotto.

Picking up his backpack, Aiden walks slowly toward the nearly round, eight-foot-tall opening and bends forward to peer inside from a discerning distance. Unable to see anything, he turns and looks around the table rock in deep thought. His mind battles between the uncertainty of an urge to follow the strange man inside versus rational disbelief in the whole affair. As he makes mental checkmarks of the pros and cons, the winning thought comes from recognizing that there’s no way off the rock ledge he now finds himself stranded on. But, if all this is bunk, he thinks to himself, then at least Spirit-Man Dan’s grotto might offer a way off this isolated shelf. The possibility of a way home pushes Aiden’s decision over the fence, and he steps through the grotto entrance. The light from the opening slightly illuminates the cave floor just enough for him to walk several feet inside. Suddenly, however, that precious light begins to quickly fade behind him. Turning, he watches as the bushes and vines outside the wall start to mystifyingly intertwine again. In short order, the quilt patch of vegetation becomes so thick that it blocks all light from outside the grotto.

Nervous instinct causes Aiden to crouch while digging in a jacket pocket for his small flashlight. Just as he finds it, however, sunlight from above begins to illuminate the cave. He looks up and observes a long, narrow crack along the ceiling where blue skies are becoming visible. In a similar manner to the cave entrance, thick patches of bushes and vines outside the grotto ceiling are separating across the entire split in the rock. Within mere moments the chamber is filled with just enough light for him to examine the cave. He finds that water drips down from the walls and every stone surface seems slimy and wet. A mossy growth covers much of the chamber, as well as the sides of many large boulders that randomly litter the floor. The ground slopes down before him for several yards before flattening out to a more level stone floor that's spotted with puddles of stagnant, smelly water. At any other time, he would be in his explorer element, but he came into this cave to follow a mysterious man who calls himself a spirit. Now, that man, or spirit, is nowhere to be found, and that makes him anxious.

“OKAY! OLLIE, OLLIE, OXEN FREE,” Aiden disdainfully shouts. And shout he does. The grotto's acoustics magnify his voice like he's speaking through a bullhorn.

Dan immediately answers, but without the aural enhancements, “I am waiting, Aiden Huff. Come. Let us begin.”

Hearing the voice but still not seeing Dan, Aiden walks from side to side and end to end of the cave. Slipping and sliding along the way, he looks behind every possible hiding place, but Dan is nowhere to be found.

“ENOUGH,” yells Aiden. “SHOW YOURSELF OR TELL ME HOW TO GET OUT OF THIS CAVE.”

“You can exit through this next room, Aiden Huff. I am here. You only have to come inside.”

“COME INSIDE WHERE? I'M NOT A SPIRIT LIKE YOU. I CAN'T WALK THROUGH WALLS, YA KNOW?”



Suddenly, Dan appears against the far wall of the grotto, and in a purposely lowered voice says, “Here, Aiden Huff. The door is right here before you.”

Walking through the pools of water and approaching Dan, Aiden whispers to avoid the acoustics, “I don’t believe you. There’s no door. Where were you hiding?”

Dan puts out a hand, signaling Aiden to remain for the moment. He then takes three steps back before shuffling his steps to Aiden’s left and disappearing from view. He abruptly reappears with the same shuffle, takes another three steps toward Aiden and motions for him to now come forward. Obeying mostly from curiosity, Aiden raises his two hands as he walks forward, where his left hand almost immediately finds a rock wall. His right hand finds nothing and continues forward. Allowing his body to follow, he walks just beyond Dan before finding another solid surface. An optical illusion, he discovers. The left and right walls overlap, with a gap that forms a narrow passage between them. Looking from any distance away gives the false impression of one solid wall. He looks to Dan and weakly smiles at his discovery.

“The entrance to the next step in your journey will often be right before you, Aiden Huff. I thought perhaps you had learned from an earlier lesson today. Any journey forward will always be difficult for those who do not believe. Come now, Aiden Huff. We go inside to begin.”

## A STREAM IS PUREST AT ITS SOURCE

*"If you could get rid of yourself just once, the secret of secrets would open to you. The face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe would appear on the mirror of your perception."*

*~ Jalal al-Din Rumi*

Aiden walks through the narrow passage between the two grotto walls and steps into the next chamber. He feels a coolness to the air and finds no mossy growth or stagnated pools of water on the stone ground. It's much smaller than the outer cave, with walls that appear to have been sculpted smooth by tools. Light brightly enters the room through several almost perfectly round ports in the ceiling. Looking through them, Aiden can see the sky, although lightly shaded by large tree branches that seem to be well above the ground. This brings him hope that the cave might offer an alternate route to the forest above, and to a trail that leads home.

"Come," says Dan, startling Aiden in his deep thought. "Let us sit and talk here in this meditation room before we even consider an exit strategy."

Dan crosses the cave and takes a seat on a flat stone surface that protrudes from the wall. Motioning his hand toward a similar perch on the opposing wall, he invites Aiden to sit as well.

"Now, Aiden Huff," Dan says with a smile, "I would like what you have brought for me before we begin."

Puzzled, Aiden responds, “Brought for *you*?”

“Yes. In the backpack that you carry.”

“Fella. I’ve got lots of things in this pack. Most of it’s been in here since I don’t know when, but I can’t think of one thing I packed for you.”

“You did, Aiden Huff. There are many items inside that are intended for me at this time. However, the most welcome of those at the moment are the articles of clothing.”

Aiden chuckles, points down to Dan’s legs, and says, “Sorry. If your lookin’ for a clean skirt, pal, I’m afraid you’re out of luck.”

“Oh,” Dan says as he stands to look down to the red and white checkered cloth he wears. “The clothing this mortal wore when we enjoined was not suitable for me. I obtained this from a wooden table behind a quaint hillside home while journeying to this grotto. I may ask that you later return it to the rightful owner.”

Looking down at his backpack, Aiden’s head quickly pops back up with Dan’s comments and he responds, “Well, at least now I know you’re gonna show me a way out of this cave and back to woods, right?”

“Of course, Aiden Huff,” Dan says as he walks toward Aiden. “Please? May I now have the clothing?”

“Alright, already. Geez. Not real patient for a spirit fella, are ya?”

Removing a vacuum-sealed bag of emergency clothing from within his pack, Aiden hands it to Dan and says, “Dry pants and a shirt. There’s socks and some lightweight running shoes in there, too. Oh! And a clean pair of underwear. I assume spirits know what underwear is, right? I’d hate to think you’ve been swingin’ free under that tablecloth this whole time.”

Dan takes the bag from Aiden without acknowledging his attempt at humor. He then holds out an open hand and says, “The bar of soap as well, please. And the towel, if you will?”

“Yeah, okay,” Aiden responds while digging back through his pack. “But if you’re gonna tug on your ear and make a shower appear, at least do it back in the other cave please.”

“There are many rooms here that provide what I need,” Dan coolly says as he turns and walks toward a back wall in the chamber.

Looking past Dan, Aiden eyes a doorway-sized opening in the far wall that he hadn’t noticed before.

Not bothering to turn around, Dan walks through the opening and, with a fading voice, says, “You are going to become amazed in what you see when only you believe, Aiden Huff. And I do hope you are learning to believe.”

“Would everyone just stop for a while with this *believe* stuff, already? Believe. Believe. Believe. I believe, alright. I believe I’ll be happy when I see you’re wearing pants. How’s that?”

Now left alone in the small grotto chamber, Aiden’s curiosity, as well as his need to know there’s a way out, gets to him. He rises and gazes intently at the nearby wall for several moments, squinting and widely opening and closing his eyes several times. He then tilts his head from side to side as he approaches and pushes areas of the stone with both hands. Spending several minutes finding no other unseen openings, he begins crossing to the opposite wall when Dan reenters the chamber. He’s dressed only in Aiden’s blue jeans while using one hand to towel off the water that drips from his face and carrying the remainder of the clothing in his other.

“Did you really just spirit up a shower back there?” Aiden genuinely asks.

“No. There is a most wonderful grotto stream here. You will enjoy it. But, for now, Aiden Huff, where do you think we should begin?”

“Begin? Begin what? I don’t have the first clue where I am or what I’m doing here.”

Dan puts on the flannel shirt, buttons it, and as he tucks it in, bluntly asks “You do not refer to *here* as just in this cave. Do you, Aiden Huff?”

“In this cave or out there, buddy,” Aiden says as he drops his head in a sudden onset of despair. “It doesn’t matter. I don’t know where I’m going, what’s left for me, or for that matter, who the heck I am right now.”

Pausing only a moment, Dan responds, “Yes. Who you are, Aiden Huff? Who you have always been, and you will always be? That is where you must begin.”

“Where I must begin?” Aiden snaps back angrily and continues with increasing agitation, “I can’t begin anywhere, sport. I’m at the end. As far as I can see, I’m done. I lost my kid. I got no wife. No job. No friends. I highly doubt if there’s a beginning out there for me. I’m alone, Dan, and I’m pissed. Not only that, but I don’t mind tellin’ ya that for the first time in my life I’m really, really scared.”

Dan takes a few steps toward Aiden and compassionately replies, “Aiden Huff, if you truly knew who has walked by your side throughout your entire life, you would never again question or fear your journey.”

Aiden takes a moment to take that thought in before responding, “Yeah, that all sounds good on a greeting card, friend, but this is real life. I lost my son and I miss him big time. I miss being a father. His father. But that’s been taken from me, hasn’t it? And by who, Dan? Huh? Who?”

“Tell me who, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden closes the gap with Dan, locks eyes and continues in a deeply disdainful voice, “God! Right, Dan? God took my son and I thought I knew God. So, *if I truly knew* doesn’t do me a damned bit of good right now, does it? I guess I’ve never truly known or understood. But I’ll go out on a limb here and guess you’re gonna tell me I’m not

supposed to understand it all. Nobody can fully understand God, right?”

“No, Aiden Huff. You are supposed to understand. You understand through faith.”

Aiden scoffs loudly in Dan’s face before questioning, “Faith? You want me to have faith? In the lousy snap of God’s finger, my life’s gone, fella. I’ve got no identity anymore and you want me to have faith?”

Dan allows a long pause before placing a hand on Aiden’s arm and serenely replying, “You are, before all else, Aiden Huff, a child of God. And that will always remain your true identity. And faith lies within the very foundation of that which *makes* up your identity. It is your self-worth, and unlike all else in life, self-worth can never be taken from you. It is the knowledge from within that you are a cherished creation of The Father who chose to come together in body and spirit to experience and grow in unconditional love.”

With his agitation waning only slightly from Dan’s gentle, soothing voice, Aiden drops his head and asks, “I really don’t see any way you can stand there and talk to me about unconditional love, Dan, when the bottom has completely dropped out of my life.”

“Ah, yes, Aiden Huff. *The bottom has dropped out.* You have used that phrase many times in your past, have you not? When your father passed away in your teen years. When Molly turned down your first marriage proposal. When a wildfire burned down your home and consumed all your worldly possessions, the bottom dropped out of your life, yes? But tell me, Aiden Huff, when the bottom dropped out, just where did you fall?”

Aiden turns his gaze upward at Dan and almost sarcastically answers, “Well, a long way to the ground, I suppose, pal. I don’t know. But yeah, each time I guess I survived the fall and started over because I’m tough, right? Is that where you’re going with all this?”

“In a sense, yes, Aiden Huff. When the bottom dropped out, you had no other choice but to fall into your own self-worth. Your true self. Do you see? And in your fall, you let go of all that was false. Only truth was left, and that freedom of truth eased your journey back to a life of peace and purpose each time.”

Without knowing why, anger rises again in Aiden as he comes back at Dan, “Well, right now, magic man, I don’t know about a journey. I don’t exactly know what truth is. And I darn sure don’t know who the real me is.”

“Rage and self-condemnation are clouding the vision of your own spirit, Aiden Huff. You have false anger and guilt for your son’s death, which lies deep within your thoughts. That smothers your ability to live as your true self. You must immediately find clarity in self. And you must do that through faith.” With that, Dan reaches forward and lightly touches Aiden on the forehead with the very tip of his index finger. Although his initial instinct is to move his head away, Aiden cannot, and only reflexively blinks his eyes. With the touch of Dan’s finger, however, his shoulders drop, and the tight muscles of his face slowly relax.

“What did you just do?” a much calmer Aiden asks.

“I have done something that you should have done yourself, Aiden Huff. I have sparked your faith just a little, although I am sure I will hear about doing so later. Nevertheless, it is necessary.” Dan then turns from Aiden and walks to the far grotto opening. “Come, Aiden Huff,” he says. “It is a good time to immerse yourself in the stream.”

Aiden chuckles and replies, “What? You’re gonna baptize me now or somethin’, Dan?”

“No, Aiden Huff. I want you to enter alone and cleanse yourself in the stream. Perhaps the purifying water, along with your new spark of faith, will allow you to rediscover some of what you believe has been lost to you. Perhaps even your connection with Ian.”

Aiden skeptically looks at Dan and says, “Are you saying I can go see my son in the stream?”

“No. Yet, through faith and belief, you will find there is more to connecting with spirit than can be seen with the eyes. If you can allow the unconditional love you feel for Ian to quiet your mind and use the faith you now feel inside your heart, then you may very well connect with him on some level. Come now, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden wonders if there really could be a possibility of connecting with his son. Suddenly, however, wonder in his mind is replaced by an odd sensation. It’s one of warm thought. It’s a thought of conviction. It’s a magnificent belief that he can indeed connect with Ian through his love if only he has faith. And acting on this wonderful, new sensation, Aiden walks to the passage but stops to give Dan a nervous look.

Understanding the concern on Aiden’s face, Dan softly remarks, “Remember this, Aiden Huff. All spirit is a part of the One, and the One will never come to a mind in chaos. You must quiet your troubled thoughts to be as One. Do you understand?”

“Like meditation, right? But I’m not sure how to do that?”

“The stream, Aiden Huff. Surrender yourself in the waters and allow your thoughts to come. But then allow them to flow through you and flow out of you again. Everything in existence that enters must be allowed to exit. With thoughts, doing so will quiet the mind and facilitate a conduit across the thin, divine veil. Believe you can quiet the troubled mind and have faith.”

Nodding to Dan, Aiden then steps into a passageway lit only by the chamber behind him. He climbs six large steps that are cut into the stone floor before entering a small, roundish room. As his eyes are adjusting, he notices the sharp increase of humidity in the air and hears the sound of a burbling stream and a gentle waterfall. There are no cracks or holes above to let in light, but he lightly gasps in awe when



recognizing just what casts the chamber in a dim, green glow. It's the bioluminescence of rare Fiery Moss that grows over much of the upper cave. Looking around more, he notices several other passages leading off to somewhere unknown. He wonders where, of course, but his thoughts quickly return to the stream. There, he sees misty steam rising in the center of the room from a natural hot spring that flows across the cave floor. The stream had apparently formed long ago when the water cut a channel right through the hard granite mountain. A small, stone ledge just above the stream spills down a separate flow of water. As he holds out his hand to feel it, he finds it cold to the touch and knows it must come from a separate upper mountain source.

Stripping down to his boxer shorts, Aiden climbs into the hot, flowing stream. The water comes up to just above his waist and it takes him only a moment to bend forward and submerge his head under the comforting surface. He pops back up and moves over to the shower of water that falls from above. The cold contrast against his skin is too much at first and he quickly kneels back into the warmth below. Standing again, he doesn't feel the same cold shock in the shower. In fact, the coolness that cascades over his body now feels refreshing. He places his head directly under the falls and, after a few short moments, begins to sense a calmness he's not felt in some time.

Kneeling again, Aiden submerges himself down into the hot water as his thoughts wander. Feelings of his dear Molly immediately come to mind. She is his first and only love, and he is her husband. How could she leave him? How could she say she's afraid of him? He's never physically harmed her, and never would. He feels the anger over her loss, but just acknowledges this and lets it go for now. Then come thoughts of his job. He was a game warden. He's been one all his adult life and it's the only job he's ever wanted. How could he be pushed out by bureaucrats who've never even stepped foot in the forest? He feels the anger for this too, and for so many other things that he's become

enraged over in the recent past. And, just as with the angry thoughts of Molly, he recognizes each and just surprisingly lets them go. For several minutes, he quietly remains in the comforting flow of the stream as he lets all his anger come in, and then simply flow back out.

Without warning, however, thoughts of Ian suddenly bombard Aiden's mind. Initially, he wants to push them away. They're just too painful. He tries to go back to thoughts of Molly, his job, or his lost friends, but his mind just keeps coming back to Ian. They soon become overwhelming and he can't stop the flood that's slamming into his mind. Like clips from a movie, visual flashes of Ian as a child begin playing through his head. He sees infant Ian peddling his legs in a baby walker but going nowhere. He watches toddler Ian running naked out the back door and onto the porch. Another burst shows Ian blowing out a dozen candles on a birthday cake his mother has set before him. These scenes and many more continue to play freely in Aiden's mind as a broad smile begins to beam across his face. This is the first moment in a very long time that memories of Ian don't bring anguish. There is still pain, of course, but it's now mixed with welcome feelings of love, and he's missed that for so long. It feels so good to open up and let the memories just come now. And they come with tears of joy.

Lifting himself to his feet, Aiden stands under the shower of the cold spring water. After several quiet moments of just feeling it wash over him, he perceives an odd warmth spread across his body. It's not the water, but it does seem to be something outside him. Yet, it's something inside as well. It's everywhere. Suddenly, there in the shower of the waterfall, Aiden Huff sharply gasps. He feels the spirit of his son. Ian is there with him. Right there in the grotto stream. He opens his eyes but doesn't see him. But he really doesn't expect to, either. He's there though. He's everywhere in and around his father. Aiden strongly senses him. Overwhelmed, he drops to his knees in the water. Slowly lifting his face upward, Aiden can only mutter the words, "Hi, Baby."

While he wishes he could say more, these are the only two words his heart brings to his lips. Although he has no idea how Ian will respond, he certainly doesn't expect to be admonished.

"HOW DARE YOU, DAD?" comes the thunderous, scolding voice of Ian.

Ian's voice rings through Aiden's head, but he isn't hearing it through his ears. Instead, he absorbs it as it vibrates through every cell in his body and comes to his mind as intelligible thought. Regardless, he doesn't answer. He can't. He has no idea what to say in response to his son's incensed question.

Ian comes again, but this time in a more soft and loving voice, "Dad? How can you believe you're not still my father?"

Aiden pauses for thought but weakly sobs in response, "I'm so, so very sorry, son. I've just lost it all. And losing you, I don't even know if I can say I'm still a father anymore. I just don't know who I am anymore, I guess."

"Hey, Dad? Are you still a Marine?" Ian asks with a sudden and unexpected upbeat voice.

A slight smile comes to Aiden with this familiar tease in his son's tone as he responds, "Yeah. I get it, son. Everyone says *once a Marine, always a Marine*. It's true, I guess."

"And why's that, Dad?"

Aiden's manner turns slightly more serious as he thinks for a moment before answering, "Well, because I'll never forget the experiences or the growth and pride I lived while I was in, I suppose. I don't know if I'd be the man I am without what the Corps left in me."

"Will you always be a game warden, Dad?" Ian quickly continues to question.

Aiden grimaces at the sting of losing his job but answers, "Yeah, Ian. Whether or not I wear the badge. These hills, the people, and the animals will always be in my blood. "

“Because your experiences, caring, and love for them makes up a part of who you are now, right, Dad?” questions the vibrations of Ian. Not waiting for an answer, he promptly asks another, “Dad? Are you still the son of Quinn and Margarete Huff?”

“Oh, gosh yes, son. I carry the love of your grandparents with me every day. I wouldn’t be me today without everything good they instilled in me.”

With his voice oddly fading away in Aiden’s head, Ian asks, “Then, Dad, are you still my father?”

Suddenly, the water hitting Aiden feels much colder again, and he immediately knows Ian’s spirit was pulling away as he asked that final, rhetorical, question. Although he’s aware the spirit of his son is no longer with him, Aiden drops his head in the cold shower and whispers aloud, “Yes, baby. You also make me who I am now and will live in me forever. I am the loving father of Ian Taylor Huff!”

Aiden then begins crying in a way that he’s never cried before. He openly wails and then angrily shouts out unintelligible words while repeatedly striking the water’s surface with his fists. He screams vile curses at unknown persons so intensely that the echo within the small chamber makes all his words seem like a single, droning noise. Then, finally spent, he takes a few more minutes to just kneel in the water, bow his head, and think of his son. As time passes, he stands and steps out of the stream. When he finally lifts his sight upward, he’s not surprised to see Dan standing only a few feet away with a towel in his outstretched hand.

“Here. You need this, Aiden Huff,” says Dan as his other hand begins making circling motions around his own face. “Up here. Near your eyes. You seem, uh, rather wet here.”

“So, you do have a sense of humor,” Aiden says, stepping out of the water and snatching the towel from Dan. “Everyone’s a comedian, I guess.”

Then, very dryly, Dan announces, "It is time for you to go, Aiden Huff."

"Hey, I'm sorry I lost it after Ian left, Dan. Let me get back in the water and I'll do better with that. Don't kick me out."

Broadly smiling, Dan replies, "No, Aiden Huff. It was wonderful. Your connection to Ian left a brief conduit that allowed some very deep emotions to flow out. We shall discuss this further at another time. Your time here, however, must end for this day."

"Fine, I'll go," Aiden responds. Pointing back at the stream, he says, "But before I do, you gotta make me so I can do that whenever I want."

"I have done more than is proper at this point. Yet, I have faith it will serve you well as you move forward. Now, you must spend time alone to consider your journey thus far. You still have much within you that you believe is lost, Aiden Huff. You must have faith that we shall find it again."

"We? So, you're not giving up on me? We're not done?"

"No. I am here for you. Return to the grotto next Thursday if it is your will."

"Next Thursday?" Aiden surprisingly questions while beginning to pull on his jeans. "Listen, if I need that much work, then I'm already here, Dan. But hey, I get it. You need some alone time too, right? I'll just come back tomorrow, then."

Dan picks up Aiden's shirt and hands it to him before replying, "No, Aiden Huff. We shall meet here again next Thursday."

"But that's a whole week from now," Aiden responds like an impatient child.

"Indeed, Aiden Huff. I also have much to do with the spirit who normally embodies this mortal. And is it not a wonderful coincidence that your backpack holds enough food to nourish his body for the week I will do so? Now, come. I will show you the way home."

Dan walks past Aiden and enters one of the many passages that lead out from the stream chamber. Aiden pulls on his second boot and then hurriedly follows. As he enters the passageway, he finds his mostly empty backpack leaning against the wall and, without questioning how it got there, pulls the straps around his shoulders. In the dim light from behind, he can see a carved stone stairway ahead that spirals upwards and into darkness. Suddenly, however, the entire passage is flooded with bright sunlight. Fighting against the glare, Aiden looks up to see Dan using a single hand to lift and slide a hefty boulder aside. He climbs up through the hole it creates and turns to give a hand to Aiden, pulling him up the final few feet to the forest floor.

Dan points a hand east and says to Aiden, “You will find a path that is familiar to you in that direction.”

“And I’ll find my way back here okay next Thursday?”

“You have always said you were the best tracker in these mountains, have you not, Aiden Huff?”

Aiden ignores the sarcasm, but looks behind Dan and says, “That’s quite a back door ya got there. You wanna climb back in and I’ll help ya cover it up?”

“No, thank you. But there *are* some things I will need upon your return.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Aiden responds, and then continues in his earlier impatient childish manner, “Heck, if ya let me, I can bring stuff by tomorrow.”

Dan places a hand on Aiden’s shoulder and says, “No, Aiden Huff. Allow yourself the time to truly feel what you have experienced here today. Exercise patience and you will soon discover that the journey is the true destination in your life travels.”

Looking up and chuckling once, Aiden replies, “The journey is the destination. Boy, if stuff on this journey gets any deeper, I’m gonna need hip waders, huh?”

“Everyone is a comedian, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden starts to step toward the eastern path but turns his body while walking to say, “Yeah. I just hope the joke’s not on me. Anyway, what was it you wanted me to bring you.”

“Nourishment that does not taste like the dehydrated cardboard I removed from your pack. Some pizza and chips would be very nice. Oh, and a mobile phone, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden stops in his tracks and completely turns to ask, “A mobile phone? You want a phone? What in the world are you gonna do with it? There’s no cell service out here and no way to charge the battery.”

“I do not need a phone to make the type of calls I do, Aiden Huff,” Dan quips. He then continues in a somewhat teasing tone, “These marvelous phone devices are truly useful inventions. I may want to use the camera to capture the wonders of nature. Or, I might use the sound recorder to amuse myself with my own voice. Who knows, as you might say.”

“Well, you’ll have it for a maybe a day or two before the battery dies.”

Dan gives a chuckle before replying, “Someday, when mankind chooses to *believe*, Aiden Huff, you will *see* that all the energy ever required has been right at your fingertips all along.”

“Yeah, well, anyway, I’d give ya my phone, but I need it. And I only have one other phone at home. That belonged to Ian and I just couldn’t bring myself to part with it. I really don’t know if I’m thrilled about trustin’ it to a grotto-haunting spirit, either.”

“Have faith in me, Aiden Huff,” Dan replies as he animatedly raises his eyes upward and continues, “Do not ask me to swear to *Him*.”

“Fine! I’ll bring the phone, already. I’ll bring the phone.”

As Aiden starts his walk toward the eastern trail, he goes about thirty yards before he stops again, turns, and watches Dan climb back into the grotto hole.

“Hey?” Aiden says loudly. “What about your dress? Or, your tablecloth, I mean? You want me to return it to its rightful owner?”

Almost chest-deep in the ground, Dan turns to Aiden and loudly answers, “No, thank you, Aiden Huff. I have become very good friends with a rather large bear who gratefully likes to perform errands for me. You may cross paths with him in your travels home. If you do, kindly ask him to stop by for it later, please.”

Aiden turns back to the east and mutters to himself, “Why you sonofa...,” allowing the word to drop off as he walks toward the trail that will lead him away until next Thursday in the grotto.



## OF GOOD CUTS AND BAD STYLE

*“Time is too slow for those who wait, too swift for those who fear, too long for those who grieve, too short for those who rejoice, but for those who love, time is eternity.”*

*~ Henry van Dyke*

**M**orning dawns over Aiden’s mountainside home on Friday morning. He rises with the first light while still within the confusing emotions of a weird dream. As dreams are meant to do, Aiden doesn’t remember much about it. The feeling, however, remains and he really isn’t sure what it is. As he lies awake in bed, he recalls being in a home during the dream, yet not this home. But it felt like home, anyway. Molly was there and just doing this or that. And his brother and sister were there, as were their kids. He didn’t see the kids in the dream, but somehow knew they were just outside, or perhaps in another room. Aiden really has no idea what went on. The images he’s recalling bring only strange yet warm sensations with no real storyline. As he continues to reflect, however, it suddenly strikes him that Ian was there. He was young, Aiden figures, at maybe seven or eight years old, and not really doing anything in particular. He was just with the family in the odd but familiar dream house.

Running his fingers through his hair, Aiden’s eyes rapidly shift back and forth as his mind considers Ian’s presence in his dream. He knows that every dream since his death has been the horribly recurring

nightmare that he tries so hard to avoid. It's of a savage, three-clawed beast tearing at his son's body and viciously clamping its huge jaws around his throat. And it's always been, in part, a major reason he constantly pushes every thought of his son back inside when he's awake. It's too hard. It's too painful. And the thoughts just might make the unbearable nightmares go on forever. This dream, however, was some run-of-the-mill dream, except with Ian and a wonderful sensation of love.

Climbing out of bed, Aiden tries to push thoughts of the dream aside as he dresses and prepares to go about his day. He can't shake the feeling, however. It's actually a good feeling and strikes him that it's one of contentment. He thinks that maybe the dream was just his own mind seeking the warmth of being in a home again that's filled with loving family. Or, better yet, he wonders if Ian might've purposely brought the dream to him as a gift? He doesn't know. And with no way *to* know, Aiden smiles as he makes his way to the kitchen to start his morning coffee. With the brew going, he takes his routine morning route to the bathroom. Squeezing toothpaste from the tube, he's just about to begin brushing his teeth when he looks up in the mirror to see that grizzled and tired man staring back at him. He turns his head from side to side and looks at the long, stringy hair that reaches just below his shoulders. Then, peering at the months of growth on his face, he opens the medicine cabinet and pulls out a pair of scissors. Snip by snip, he cuts handfuls of beard from his face, stopping only when he's close enough to finish the job with a razor. When the whole task is complete, he towels off the remaining shave cream and looks in the mirror again. Rubbing his smooth face with his hand, he finishes brushing his teeth and walks out of the bathroom feeling a little better about himself.

Grabbing a cup of hot coffee, Aiden heads out to the barn to care for Hannah. Seeing him come across the backyard, she sprints from the field to the barn and stops in the narrow breezeway just

outside her open stall. As he enters through the main barn door, she takes several slow steps toward him before coming to an abrupt halt. He stops as well. She then seems to lock eyes with him for several moments before raising her head high and softly nickering. She walks the remaining distance to him, lowers her long head and lightly pushes it against his chest. Never having done this before, he's momentarily surprised by her actions, but lovingly wraps his arms around her muscled neck and puts his own head down against hers. For several long moments, the two remain this way before she finally pulls back, turns, and walks into her stall. Watching her do so, he contently chuckles while scooping feed from the barrel for his precious mare.

Having fed and groomed his girl, Aiden opens a nearby cabinet in the wall and grabs the keys to his Wagoneer. Leaving the barn for the driveway, he starts the old Jeep, heads down the mountain for town, and drives through Main Street. He passes by folks on the sidewalk he's known for so long but not seen in some time before coming to a stop at the volunteer fire station. Once in front of the open bay door, he parks the Jeep and walks inside to find several young volunteers doing busy work. A few seem to be unrolling and then rerolling fire hoses. Another group looks to be inventorying and stocking medical items in an ambulance.

One young man near where Aiden walks says to him, "Hey mister. You do realize you're parked right in front of my pumper, right? I'd hate to have to push that old clunker out of the way if we get a call."

"I'll only be a sec, kid. Where's the chief?"

"In her office. Ya better hurry though, dude. Never know when the bell's gonna ring, ya know?"

"I'll do my best, *dude*," Aiden mocks as he brushes past the kid toward Chief Jordan's office.

Aiden approaches Polly Jordan's door and sees her inside through the framed glass. He knocks and she looks up from her desk,

motioning for him to come in while she also moves to the door. He enters and there's an awkward moment between life-long friends where neither knows whether to shake hands or hug. The handshake wins over as Polly gives Aiden's face the once over.

"No more beard, mountain man?" Polly rhetorically asks.

"Fads come and go, Polly. Mine's gone."

"Now, the hair?"

"Next stop is Zeke's."

Polly sits back down in her chair and invites Aiden to take the other before saying, "Hey, thanks again for taking care of our pest on the mountain yesterday. I haven't heard a word from him since."

"No problem. I was headin' to Zeke's and thought I'd pop in and tell ya not to worry about checkin' in on Hannah."

Aiden looks down at the floor as he finishes and Polly can tell there's more on his mind, so she remains quiet. Aiden looks back up and continues, "And I wanna tell you something else, Polly."

"Tell, Aiden. Please."

Pensively looking up to the ceiling first and then back down to Polly, Aiden says, "Its nothing big, Polly. Really. I just wanted to tell ya how sorry I am for the way I've been actin'. I know I've been a real piece of work lately."

"Oh, Aiden. You've got a lot goin' on. I know that."

A big grin forms on Aiden's face as he looks directly into Polly's eyes and says, "I appreciate that, Polly. But there's somethin' else I figured out too, and gotta tell ya. Guess what? I'm still Ian's father. Me! Still a dad. Ain't that cool?"

Polly pauses for several moments as her mind rolls over the meaning of Aiden's announcement. It doesn't take her long, however, to enthusiastically reply, "Aiden, that's fantastic. But you'll always be his dad."

An almost giddy Aiden replies, "I know, Polly. I know. It just took some things to get me there." As Aiden finishes his words, he abruptly stands and makes his way to the door.

"Hey?" Polly snaps behind him.

"Yeah?"

Without getting up from the chair, Polly gives Aiden her most sincere look and says, "You know you've always been my friend and always will be, right?"

"I do, Polly. I do."

"Then how 'bout that dinner I promised? Come on by one night and break some bread with me and Glen."

"Tell ya what...do you still do that spaghetti bake thing a lot?"

"Yessir. Sundays. Every Sunday night."

Aiden loudly laughs once, turns, and responds as he walks away, "Good. I'll be by on Monday then."

"Cute, Aiden. Real cute!" Polly shouts as Aiden walks down the hallway and out into the station squad bay.

When Aiden walks out the open bay door, he finds the same kid he'd spoken to earlier now running an index finger down the front fender of his Wagoneer. Startling the kid, Aiden says, "Tell me ya didn't scratch my baby with your big ole' pumper, dude."

"No, sir. I was just looking at her. I dig old four-wheel drives and this one's in great shape."

"Yeah. Body's redone top to bottom. New engine, tranny, and all new suspension. It'll probably outlast me."

"You do this yourself?"

"No. My son did it all. He spent a whole lotta time hiding it in a warehouse down here in town. He'd come work on it nights and weekends so he could surprise me with it on my birthday a few years back."

"You think I can get 'em to do one for me? This thing rocks."

Aiden still smiles as he replies, “No. Afraid he’s away now.”

“Is he coming back, man?”

“From time to time,” Aiden answers as he opens the door and jumps behind the wheel. “But he probably won’t stay long when he does. Tell ya what. I gotta run. When I get too old to drive her, I might just sell her to ya. How’s that?”

The kid cocks his head to one side and asks, “You don’t think he’ll want her? Your boy?”

“Nope,” answers Aiden through the open window as he backs out. “Where he is, there’s other ways of getting around. Maybe better.”

With that, Aiden leaves the kid and the fire station in his rearview mirror before turning onto Court Street and parking in front of Zeke Byron’s barbershop. Walking in, the bell above the door clangs and Aiden sees old man Byron sitting in the only barber chair in the shop. He’s obviously just chatting with a few old men from town who occupy a couple of his nearby waiting chairs.

Seeing Aiden enter, Zeke stands, brushes the chair with a towel a few times, and says, “Well, it’s clear as shine I ain’t seen you in a piece, Aiden Huff. How ya been doin’, son?”

Aiden takes a quick second for a respectful nod and pleasantries to the other gentleman in the shop, “Donald. James. Hope you’re well?”

After the men nod back, Aiden looks to Zeke and says, “Yeah, Zeke, I’m doin’ good, I reckon. Thanks. You got time for a cut?”

“Well, I ain’t got no weed-whacker, son, but I’ll do ya good anyways,” answers Zeke as he points over to Donald and James. “Besides, gabbin’ with these two freeloaders ain’t payin’ my light bills, so you might as well sit yourself on down.”

Aiden sits in the chair as Zeke drapes and ties the barber’s cloth over him. There’s an uncomfortableness in the air, though. The two old men stoically gaze down into their magazines and old Zeke seems a bit nervous as he lays out the scissors, combs, and other items he might

need. Aiden decides, however, that maybe the uncomfortableness is only in his own mind.

“Well, what’s it gonna be, Aiden? We goin’ for the usual, or ya wanna go way back to that mullet thing you used to want?”

Aiden tightly smiles and replies, “No, Zeke. I don’t think I’ll do the mullet today. But speakin’ of going back, you still remember the old fade cut you used to give me when I first got back from the Marines?”

“Sure, sure. Ain’t gave one ‘round here in a bit, but it’s about the easiest thing I can do with that mop ya got goin’ on up there.”

Aiden nods and says, “Good. Fade it is, sir. Please”

Zeke starts in with cutting and after a few minutes of silence, Aiden senses the same uncomfortableness in the air. It doesn’t last much longer before Zeke starts in with what he feels is idle barbershop conversation. “So, son,” he begins with a slightly nervous stammer. “I ain’t seen ya since you lost yer boy. You know Eva and I would’ve come to the service if we could, but we was real busy. I think my oldest girl’s youngins was down from Luray or something that weekend. And them little fleas can be a handful on Eva, ya know?”

“That’s fine, Zeke. I appreciate you would’ve been there if ya could. It’s the thought, right?”

Zeke doesn’t answer before Donald speaks up from his chair, “Sorrowful thing, there, son. I heard about your boy. You and that missus of yours ain’t spring chickens no more, either. Y’all got no time now to have another child, I reckon. Not sure why folks would have just the one, anyways. A family’s supposed to be big. Why, there’s always a chance ya might lose one or two along the way.”

With those words, Zeke stops cutting and turns to give an ugly look intended only for Donald. Donald, on the other hand, never raises his eyes from his magazine and misses the admonishing glare. Aiden’s mind, absorbing the statements, urges him to leap from the barber chair

and give ole' Donald a quick throat punch, but he doesn't. Instead, he closes his eyes and takes a breath.

"Thanks, Donald," replies Aiden. "I'm sure I'd miss him as much even if I had more, though."

Donald responds with only a grunting, "Humph."

Peering over his magazine, James chimes in, "My kid brother lost a child a ways back, son. He only had the one, but seems he got over it quick enough. I think him and his wife got a dog, or a cat, or somethin'. Kept 'em company, I figure."

Donald jumps back in. "Hey. I heard yer boy was going in the service, Aiden."

Aiden turns to Donald while forcing a weak smile and answers, "Yeah, he was. He enlisted in the Marine Corps like me and wasn't too far off from going to boot camp."

"Don't say?" Donald quickly shoots back. "You know, a lotta kids his age got killed in a bunch a wars. Shame he didn't make it in. That woulda been a better way to go, I reckon. He'd been a hero. Probably wouldda been in papers for somethin' other than getting killed by a critter, too."

James immediately follows with, "And, if he hadn't gone into the service, Aiden, he'd probably gone off to one of them fancy colleges, right? They all do that nowadays, don't they? And that woulda cost ya a pretty penny ya ain't gotta worry 'bout now, ya know?"

Keeping an eye on Aiden's face the whole time, Zeke finally barks, "Enough. You two stop flappin' your gums and let me cut this man's hair."

Reaching near anger overload, it takes all Aiden can muster to hold back at least a well-deserved verbal barrage of insults on both Donald and James. His mind, however, is fighting for a more tactful way to respond when the door shop suddenly opens and Clay Marshal steps



inside. If nothing else, the opening door sucks the air out of the very tense atmosphere inside the room.

“Mornin’ Zeke,” Clay calls out. “Am I next or are these two squatters in line?”

“Nah, Clay. You’re next. These two Romeos are just waitin’ for the breakfast crowd to clear out over at Norma’s Diner so they can go flirt with the new waitress.”

While the small talk in the shop continues, Aiden thinks back to four years ago when Clay Marshal lost his wife to a nasty cancer. He and Molly had stopped by their home several times to bring food but didn’t stay long. Nor did they ever get the chance to speak directly to him at the time. Whether at the house or the funeral service, he seemed to either be surrounded by close family or involved with preparations. Three years later, Aiden would notice Clay bringing food to their home as he was too busy preparing to bury his son to give thanks. At the service, Aiden would look across the pews to find Clay sitting alone in the congregation. The two never spoke but he remembers being comforted by Clay’s presence. He hasn’t seen him until today and now he’s walking right up to Aiden as he sits in Zeke’s barber chair.

“Aiden,” says Clay as he nods, “Good to see ya. You and Molly have been in my prayers, son.”

“Same here, Clay. Much appreciated. And it’s good to see you. Afraid I never got a chance to really give you my condolences for Leona’s passing.”

“But you did, Aiden. There’s not a whole lot I needed to know other than you were thinking of Leona and me. And you two bein’ there told me that.”

“Well, I saw you there for us last year, Clay. I know we didn’t get a chance to talk but thanks for coming.”

“Not a whole lot I could’ve said to you, son,” Clay states as he holds out a hand. “Not much now, either, other than you remain in my thoughts and prayers. Just know that.”

Bringing his arms up from under the barber’s cloth to shake hands, Aiden replies, “And you remain in mine, Clay. Thank you, sir.”

As Clay moves to sit in a waiting chair, Zeke pulls the cloth off Aiden with a final brush of the towel across the back of his neck. He holds up a small mirror before Aiden’s eyes, who runs a hand through his now short-trimmed hair. Smiling his approval at Zeke, he stands, and they walk together to the cash register as he pulls his wallet from his pocket.

“This one’s on me, son,” says Zeke as he holds up a hand.

“No, Zeke. You got light bills, remember?”

“Yeah, and friends with more money than sense,” answers Zeke as he opens the door for Aiden. “And I know about Molly, son. It’s a damned shame. I hear lots of gossip in these chairs, ya know? My understanding is that when a couple loses a child, it’s almost a sure thing that the marriage falls apart. I ain’t seen it myself ‘til you and Molly, but I hear it’s like that all the time. Anyway, these old buzzards don’t need to know what goes on in another man’s home, so I’ll keep that to myself.”

Nodding thanks to Zeke and turning to wave to the others inside, Aiden leaves the barbershop and starts the Wagoneer to drive back to his mountain home. It’s still mid-morning and he has much more on his mind than a few insensitive town folks. Yesterday’s bizarre meeting with Dan and the surreal encounter he had with Ian, or the spirit of Ian, makes him hunger for more. But next Thursday in the grotto seems so far away, and he wonders why Dan wants him to just sit and think until then? Aiden is a doer. He’s an organizer, systemizer, and problem solver. He must do something and, in his mind, sitting around thinking about things is not doing him any good. Trying to

justify going back to the grotto sooner, he remembers the mobile phone Dan had asked for. *Yes*, he thinks. Maybe just a brief visit to the grotto to drop off the phone would be alright. After all, he rationalizes, Dan acted as if he wanted it bad enough. If it's in Aiden's power to help the man out, then, by golly, he's darn sure going to do it.

## LEADING A HORSE TO WATER

*"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."*

*~Heraclitus*

**R**eturning from his visit to town, Aiden parks the Wagoneer in his drive and runs inside the house to grab Ian's mobile phone. Heading back out to the barn, he hurriedly saddles Hannah and walks her out by the reins. He knows where he's going now, although not by the trails he inadvertently took to the grotto yesterday morning. Instead, he'll backtrack the paths he'd hiked home last evening. Fortunately, the trek from the big rock where he'd exited the cave was only a few hours walk to his property and a short ride back today by horse. He'll make his way to that capstone and track west to the cliff that drops to the table rock. There, he'll rope down the wall to give Dan the phone and ask to stay for a short visit. Hopefully, it'll be one that includes a quick dip in the stream and a reconnection with Ian. That's it. That's the simple plan. And with the simple plan set, he mounts Hannah and, once again, man and horse are in the wind.

Within a short ride, Aiden comes to the area of the forest where yesterday he left Dan. Today's search should be relatively easy since the terrain here is flat, the woods not so dense, and the ground mostly covered by a beautiful growth of wildflowers. Search as he might, however, he has no luck in finding the capstone that covers the exit from the grotto. So many other landmarks that he'd taken notice of the day

before are here, but not the one large rock that protruded from the ground. Knowing he's at least in the right area, he decides to ride due west in search of the cliff that drops to the main grotto entrance.

As they go, Hannah oddly comes to an abrupt stop in her steady walk. For just a moment, she gazes straight ahead before jutting her large nose out for several inquisitive snuffles of the air. Knowing it wise to heed her instincts, Aiden begins scanning the woods. He sees nothing, so he lightly squeezes his legs to urge her on. She doesn't budge. A firmer squeeze. Still no response. Just as he leans forward to command her attention, she abruptly rises on her hind legs, loudly whinnies, and surprisingly leaps headlong into a full sprint. The unexpected bolt almost throws Aiden back off the saddle, but he holds fast with the strong grip of his legs. He rights himself and pulls back hard on the reins but has no influence on her uncontrolled will to run. He desperately tries to rein her right and then left, to get her attention off whatever drives her, but it does no good. He might muscle her head to one side or the other, but her legs continue to propel her body straight forward. Aiden, feeling like a passenger on his trusted horse for the first time ever, decides it best to just ride her out as he looks ahead to spot any possible hazards in their path. And he immediately spots something. No. He spots someone. It's the figure of a man standing in the forest that's coming into view. Within seconds, it becomes obvious that the figure of a man is Dan, and Hannah is running right at him.

From the start, Dan has been watching Hannah cross the wildflower covered forest and calmly stands still as she races right at him. When she gets within mere feet, she lets out a high-pitched squeal, slightly turns, and brushes by his left side at full speed. She almost throws Aiden from her saddle as she sharply cuts around a tree and reverses direction. Dan remains frozen as she thunderously gallops by on his right this time, raising and lowering her muzzle while letting out rapid whinnies of excitement in her run. She does another brisk barrel turn at the nearest tree and charges straight back at him. This time, however,

Dan casually raises a hand in the air and she immediately slows to circle him in a high-stepping prance, snorting and snapping her muzzle side to side as she goes. Finally quieting, she walks directly to Dan, Aiden still in her saddle, and slowly drops her long, slender head as if to bow. Dan reaches over to place a hand between her ears, and she lifts to meet his eyes. Bringing those tall ears forward, she softly nickers and bobs her head once before backing away several paces.

“Well,” a bewildered and panting Aiden says as he dismounts the saddle, “that’s somethin’ new. Never lost control of my horse before.”

Looking from Hannah to Aiden, Dan says, “Forgive her, Aiden Huff. Hannah is only happy to see me.”

“How’d you know her name, Dan? We didn’t talk about her yesterday.”

Dan looks over at Hannah and responds with a smile, “She simply told me.”

“So, my horse speaks to you, huh? Funny I didn’t hear her say anything.”

“Did you not hear Ian yesterday, Aiden Huff? Did you not hear him speak although he offered no spoken words?”

Aiden looks down and quickly back up to Dan before answering, “You really don’t waste a minute with your little lessons, do ya?”

“Walk with me, Aiden Huff,” says Dan as he turns to move through the woods. “And, please tell me why you are here today. I thought we had discussed only Thursdays in the grotto?”

Aiden takes Hannah by the reins and falls in step before answering, “To be honest, Dan, I was hopin’ to get another chance to sit in the stream and connect with my boy. I thought maybe if I brought the phone you wanted real quick, you might just let me get in there for a few minutes.”

“A bribe, then? May I have the phone, please?”

Aiden digs the phone from his back pocket and pushes the power button. “I’m afraid the battery’s dead,” he says as he hands it over to

Dan. "I ran out so quick I didn't think to charge it. But it's the same as mine, so I'll just switch the batteries out and you'll pretty much have a full charge."

Still walking, Dan hits the phone's power button again and the screen illuminates. He pushes several numbers on the security screen and the phone opens to its full menu of functions.

"Let me see that," says Aiden as he almost rips the phone from Dan's hand. "How'd you know the security code?"

Smiling again, Dan replies, "Secret codes are of no use to spirit, Aiden Huff." He then points his finger to the full battery symbol at the top of the screen and says, "Nor are there concerns for charged batteries. Now, I would like for you to take a picture of me with my dear friend Hannah."

"Sure. I mean, why not?" answers a still befuddled Aiden.

Posing next to Hannah, Dan pats her neck and smiles an overly exaggerated smile while waiting for Aiden to line up the shot. When he hears the sound of the phone's simulated camera shutter, he steps forward to Aiden's side and looks down at the screen.

"Wonderful photo. Dan and the beautiful Hannah."

Aiden quickly looks up from the screen at Dan and then back down again before saying, "We gotta take another. You don't show up in the shot at all."

"Please allow me," says Dan as he takes the phone back. Looking at the screen again, he smirks and replies, "Oh, there are none so blind, Aiden Huff. I see we have much to do."

Dan tucks the phone in his pants pocket and begins quietly walking through the woods with Aiden. After several minutes, they come upon a creek that cuts through the forest. The creek bank walls span four feet across from where the men stand and over the years it has carved a three-foot gully down into the forest floor. Although relatively deep, there are only a few inches of water slowly trickling over its pebble-covered bed. Without a word, Dan jumps down into the water, pulls a

large rock from one of the dirt banks and simply plops it down into the stream.

“So, in the grand scheme of you spirits, was that rock in the wrong spot or somethin’?”

As he looks for more rocks in the walls, Dan answers, “No, Aiden Huff. I am simply curious about nature. With your Mother Mountain’s blessing, I am damming the water at this place within the forest. And as long as you and Hannah are here, I would ask that you grace me with your assistance.”

Aiden scratches his head for a moment before tying Hannah’s reins around a nearby branch and jumping down into the creek. As both men search and pull out more large stones, Aiden revisits the earlier conversation with some suspicion, “Ya know, I’ve only seen my horse get that excited over me or Ian. That’s it! And that’s only if we’ve been gone for a good while.” He pauses for a moment as if unsure how to approach the next question, but goes on, “So, look, I gotta ask ya, is he here with you, Dan? Is Ian near us right now?”

“Ian is everywhere, Aiden Huff. As for Hannah, she is just a magnificent animal who can see with all of her senses as well as her eyes. She simply observes me as strong spirit, and that excites her.”

The conversation pauses for a moment while Dan places two newly extracted rocks beside his first. Aiden then follows with two that he’s just removed and they both go back to searching and talking.

“So, you’re tellin’ me Hannah’s spirit can see your spirit inside Dan, whose spirit just happens to be on hold by you at the moment, right?” asks Aiden in honest confusion.

“No, Aiden Huff. Animals are truly cherished creations of God, but Hannah is not blessed with spirit. Nor are any beasts within this dominion.”

Both men continue to eye the creek banks for rocks large enough to use. For the next few minutes, the process is repeated as big stones are



plucked from the dirt walls, walked to the growing structure, and placed in strategic locations to stem the flow of water.

Wanting to continue his response, Dan goes on to add, “Hannah may not have spirit, Aiden Huff, but a benefit of not being human is that she is unclouded by emotions. Anger, guilt, remorse, and such have no long-term meaning for her.”

“But I’ve seen her mad before,” Aiden comes back. “Heck, she got all snitty with me just last week when the vet came by for some shots she needed. It took her twenty minutes before she’d even look at me after that.”

“Yes, but emotions do not steer Hannah for long, do they, Aiden Huff? She allows emotions to enter her thoughts, incite the appropriate response, and then quickly flow away again. Humans, on the other hand, often hold emotions for some time, particularly the more negative ones, such as anger or resentment toward another.”

“Well look, Dan, sometimes a feeling might be too strong to just let roll right off your back, ya know?”

“Strong indeed, Aiden Huff. And therein lies the danger. When you hold to such caustic emotions, it is as if you drink a deadly poison yourself in hopes that it will harm another. Do you see?”

Aiden lets out a deep sigh and responds, “Yeah. I guess I never thought of it like that. But Hannah here seems like a happy girl most of the time. Shouldn’t happiness just come in and go out like her other feelings?”

“Happiness is a fundamental predisposition in all of God’s creations, Aiden Huff. Being happy, or emotionally content, really, is the natural state of mind for both man and beast. It is your default being, if you will?”

“So, when something makes us unhappy, we naturally wanna go back to bein’ happy?”

Dan steps out of the gully, turns to extend a helping hand to Aiden, and answers, “Yes, Aiden Huff. Contentment. You see, outside

influences, such as the loss of a loved one, are what creates unhappiness in mortals. When injured by unhappiness, the human mind will always seek to heal and return to the natural state. And it shall do so in proper time unless influenced by that which delays or halts the healing.”

“So, it should just fix itself if left to heal?” Asks Aiden.

“Over time, and often with scars left behind, but, yes, Aiden Huff. It is much like your body mending when the skin is cut. It shall heal unless the biological processes are disturbed in some way, such as allowing foreign matter to infect the injury. Unfortunately, in your mind’s healing processes, disturbing infections can often be introduced from within.”

“Yeah. Seems I’ve pretty much got an infection, huh? But comin’ from me is one thing, Dan. How do I deal with the infections comin’ from others?”

“What do you mean, Aiden Huff?”

Aiden grimaces slightly and replies, “Oh, I was down in town earlier talkin’ with some folks at the barbershop when —”

Dan quickly cuts him off by pointing to Aiden’s newly shaven face and short hair as he quips, “When you wisely allowed your outer appearance to heal?”

“Yeah, something like that, comedian. Anyway, there was a lotta talk about me losing Ian and it’s just that some of the stuff they said really rubbed me wrong. I went in feeling pretty good after yesterday but not so much coming out. It’s probably just me, but I really thought people would know better what to say to someone who’s lost a child.”

Dan returns to watching the creek water rise but abruptly turns and asks, “Have they experienced it?”

“Have they experienced what, Dan?”

“Have they experienced the tragic loss of a child or someone dearly loved?”

“No. Well, I don’t know. A wife, but no one lost a kid, I don’t think.”

Turning his head to Aiden, Dan asks, “Tell me, Aiden Huff, before your Ian transitioned, how many people had you met who experienced the passing of a loved one?”

“Well, a few along the way, I’m sure.”

Dan then turns back to the dam before continuing, “And where did you learn your inspirational talent for healing those poor, grieving souls with your wise words?”

“Whaddaya mean?”

Dan turns back and sarcastically replies, “Well, it would seem you have always been quite adept at giving the fitting words of comfort to any sufferer, unlike those men you encountered in your town.”

“Oh, come on, Dan,” responds Aiden with an agitated tone. “This stuff was horrible. One guy told me that Molly and I were wrong for only having one child. According to him, I guess we shoulda had a baker’s dozen so we could afford to lose a few along the way. One of the whack jobs even talked about how I’m gonna save myself a whole pile of money with my boy bein’ gone now. How’s that for comfort, huh?”

Dan gives Aiden a moment to calm before responding, “You must understand, Aiden Huff, that they do not speak out of malice. They may, indeed, speak with little forethought, and with words that may seem insensitive to the bereft, but rarely are the words offered with cruel intent.”

“Then why do they say anything at all?” Aiden asks with a little contempt.

“Human empathy urges one to come to the aid of another in pain. In this case, emotional pain. For many, that means expressing words that are intended to bring comfort. Unfortunately, mortals are very uncomfortable with mortality. The thought of what you consider death makes you very anxious. More so, most have little or no experience in consoling another who has experienced such a traumatic personal event.”

“So, folks feel like they gotta say somethin’ but don’t know what to say, so they just say somethin’ anyway. Is that where you’re goin’ with this?”

Before answering, Dan jumps back down into the gully and begins using his feet to kick and tightly pack the piled rocks. Acknowledging the intent, Aiden jumps in to do the same. “That is indeed where I am *going*, Aiden Huff. For most mortals, death is believed to be the end of life, and that can be very upsetting. Yet, that is by His divine plan. He desires for you to grow in faith during your journey away from the One. And faith in God includes coming to no longer fear that which is beyond life on this domain.”

“So, we just don’t get that there’s more to life than here on Earth?”

“Sadly, even your more *enlightened* humans, as they call themselves, believe that if they try hard enough, they can actually experience a temporary spiritual existence. How much fear and anxiety would be gone, Aiden Huff, if all mortals understood they actually *are* spiritual beings existing only in a temporary *human* experience?”

Taking a moment to let Dan’s words soak in, Aiden silently stands over the creek and looks down at their work. After a few seconds of arm-crossed scrutiny, he looks over and asks, “So, I should actually be grateful for the stupid things others blurt out because they have no idea how to deal with death?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. Hold no ill-will for the misguided well-wishers. Even when faced with fear and uncertainty, he or she has still mustered the courage to overcome and offer you comfort. Yet, know that in your travels, you will come to recognize those who have, indeed, experienced the profound loss of a loved one, and rarely will they offer such impulsive words in attempts at comfort.”

“Yeah. I guess like Clay Marshal, huh?”

“Yes, Clay Marshal. A very good man who has experienced the transition of his beloved spouse.”

“Yep. He was in the barbershop this morning and said there was nothing he could say to me other than I was in his thoughts and prayers. That actually took my steam down a few notches before I got outta there.”

“Know that Clay Marshal speaks the truth, Aiden Huff. When he often suffers the agony of his wife’s passing, he also thinks of your loss and finds solace in knowing that he is not alone in grief. Perhaps you two shall spend more time together in the future.”

Both Dan and Aiden continue to watch the water rapidly rise behind the dam. Unfortunately for Dan’s plans, it doesn’t take long before it rises enough to spill over the top and trickle downstream across the stony creek bed. Seeing this, he turns to Hannah and with an excited voice, says, “We dig, Hannah. *We dig.*”

Hearing the words, Hannah sharply flips her muzzle, which twirls her reins in the air and easily releases the loose knot holding her to the tree branch. With a gleeful nicker, a free Hannah walks over to stand between the two men.

“Okay. Come on,” Aiden says with a chuckle of slight disbelief. “You two definitely got somethin’ goin’ on here. But okay, what’s this about diggin’?”

Dan lightly pats Hannah’s neck a few times and says, “We must think like the beaver, Aiden Huff. We shall construct the dam to rise above the top of the banks. To do so, we need to add earth, and perhaps some wood. Yes! You and I shall gather fallen branches from the ground and Hannah shall help by piling the earth.”

Looking to Hannah, Aiden finds that she’s almost giddy with anticipation. Seeing this, he looks to Dan and says, “Well, you’d better lead her on then. I never trained her to be a digger. Didn’t know a horse could dig, actually.”

“DIG, HANNAH. DIG,” Dan abruptly yells and slaps the skirt of her saddle. With his command, Hannah jumps down in front of the dam and rears up to place her front legs well above the opposing bank.

With great speed and strength, she begins pummeling down on top of the dirt wall with her large hooves, sending soil, clay, and rocks cascading down into the creek bed.

“She’s already late for her next shoes, Dan. If she throws one doin’ this, you’ll need to take over the spirit of ole’ Abe Kiser for me. He’s the only blacksmith for miles and it takes him forever to get by when I call.”

Without biting on Aiden’s wit, Dan turns to gather fallen limbs from the forest floor. Aiden joins and soon they each carry an armload of branches back to the dam. As if understanding the design, Hannah moves down from the bank to use her rear legs in kicking back loads of dirt onto the front of the growing structure. With each new deposit from her, Dan and Aiden toss in their branches. When their supply runs out, they promptly turn to retrieve more.

Walking together, Aiden turns back to look at Hannah and then to Dan while asking, “What about Hannah, Dan? Does Hannah feel love?”

“Oh, yes, Aiden Huff. Hannah feels a great deal of love for you. And for Ian. She feels love for Molly, as well. She wishes Molly would not find the barn and her stall so unappealing. She would like to spend more time with her. Like you, Molly fills her with happiness.”

“So, love is happiness?” asks Aiden while stacking more limbs in his arms.

Dan quickly stands from his gathering crouch and answers, “Oh, no, Aiden Huff. The love I speak of for spirit and mortal is *unconditional* love. Regrettably, many of you humans falsely consider love to come only when another makes *you* happy. Yet, that is not love at all. Any relationship built upon only *receiving* is doomed. Love is unconditional when you freely *give* without expecting anything in return. Love is unconditional when you are truly willing to sacrifice all for another.”

“Well, that makes it sound kinda wrong for me *wantin’* to be loved, then,” Aiden answers.

Having returned to picking up branches, Dan turns only his face as he responds, “Do not misunderstand, Aiden Huff. Love is the divine goal and glory of existence, both here on Earth and in Heaven above. Unconditional love is what God wants you to experience in both giving and receiving. Love is truth.”

“Then all I had in life wasn’t really true then, was it?” Aiden suddenly snaps back. “I’ve always believed that truth lasts forever. But Ian and Molly are gone now. Was love true with them? It sure didn’t last forever.”

Dan feels the confusion rising in Aiden and very softly responds, “You are allowing your inner rage to speak for you, Aiden Huff. You do not doubt your unconditional love for Ian, as you would surely sacrifice all if you knew it would bring him back.”

“Yeah, Dan. I absolutely would.”

Dan pauses for a moment and asks, “And Molly?”

“Yeah, Molly. We just moved in different directions, I guess. She has no idea how much I love her. I tried to show her, but she acts like she just doesn’t want it anymore. Not from me, anyway.”

“Oh, but she does want it. She greatly misses your love. And equally, Molly greatly misses giving her unconditional love to you. She truly loves you, as she loves Ian. She is even now learning that her love for him never ends in *this* world or in his.”

“That must make her happy. She’s a very loving woman, ya know?”

“Indeed, Aiden Huff. But you must recognize by now that your difficulties with Molly’s love exist only through your difficulties in loving yourself.”

“Loving myself?” an agitated Aiden sharply responds again. “How the hell do I have love myself right now? I get that I’m still Ian’s dad, alright, but no one sees me as the man they thought I was. I spent my whole life being someone others could count on, Dan. But I let Ian

die. Molly's gone too, huh? And I've got everyone else sayin' bad stuff about me all the time."

"And just what *are* others saying about you, Aiden Huff?"

"Well, I've been told folks say I can't be a real man if I couldn't keep my family together. How's that? I also heard the guys I worked with were talkin' how I couldn't even teach my own boy to survive in the woods. And shoot, I just know everybody's laughin' at me for losin' my job, right? No one thinks I'm a good man anymore, Dan. How am I supposed to love myself when everybody else thinks I'm a loser?"

Dan puts a hand on Aiden's shoulder and asks, "Do you *think* you are a *loser*, Aiden Huff?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. My reputation used to mean a lot to those people. And to me!"

"We still have much to accomplish with your self-worth, Aiden Huff. Your anger and rage continue to cloud your vision of true self."

"I don't understand."

Dan turns back to the creek where the pile of rocks, dirt, and limbs now reaches above its banks. With a quick smile and nod from him, Hannah leaps from the gully and proudly prances by the men as she flicks her head and lets out a giddy neigh.

Patting Hannah's rump as she walks by, Dan continues with Aiden, "Your perception of your true self mistakenly lies within what you believe others think of you. For the most part, you only feel good about yourself if you perceive others feel good about you. This is an unhealthy ego, Aiden Huff. It is an intoxicating way of falsely maintaining self-esteem when all is well. Yet, it clouds you from self-worth when all is not."

Trying to take it all in, Aiden sighs and asks, "So, self-esteem and self-worth? I always figured they were the same thing. I guess not, then, huh?"

"No, Aiden Huff. Remember that self-worth is your foundational awareness of being a child of God. It is your knowledge that you are



good and decent, and always worthy of The Father's love. It is your essence and can never be changed or be taken from you."

"And self-esteem?"

"Self-esteem serves to measure your current state of mind, Aiden Huff. It is fluid and ever-changing along a broad spectrum between pride and shame."

"I don't get it."

"Do you recall your most recent purchase of oats for Hannah?"

"Sure. Over at Powell's Co-op a few weeks back. Why?"

"There, the new cashier, a rather attractive young woman, unexpectedly stated that she found you to be a very handsome man, did she not? And, oh, how your chest swelled with pride, Aiden Huff. Instantly, her words lifted your perception of self."

"Yeah, I guess it just felt good to hear that."

"Indeed. But you are making my point. What *she* said filled you with pride. And you embraced that prideful feeling, did you not? You did indeed, until she finished by saying how much you reminded her of her dear, handsome grandfather? I might say your puffed-out chest deflated rather quickly with those words, Aiden Huff."

"Okay, okay. I'll admit that stung a bit."

"You see, self-esteem is a present-moment appraisal of self. If it is poor, or closer to shame on the spectrum, you should always take action to lift yourself, or at the very least, look inward to self-worth and God to help bring yourself back toward pride."

"And we don't always do that, huh?"

"Certainly not all. Many will use an unhealthy ego to avoid the internal struggles of self-assessment. Instead, you turn outward to others, not inward toward God given self-worth. In fact, when living with an unhealthy ego, Aiden Huff, you are actually edging God out of your life. E.G.O. *Edging God Out*. Do you see?"

There's no answer from Aiden. For several minutes, he can only stand beside the creek with Dan, ponder, and watch the water build

behind the dam. Finally breaking the silence, he asks, “What about me and Molly, Dan? Is there any way for me to get back to helpin’ her? She deserves to feel love and be happy again like you said.”

“Your love for yourself is clouded, Aiden Huff. Blocked. Therefore, you are not currently capable of receiving Molly’s love, and that is the unhappiness she now feels. If you truly wish to help her, you must first help yourself.”

Aiden slowly nods his head a few times and rhetorically asks, “Put the oxygen mask on me first, right?”

“Can you repeat for me the final words that Molly spoke to you the last day you were together?”

“Every word. She said I could never feel her love until I love myself again.”

Dan takes Aiden by the elbow and responds, “Her view of you is unclouded, Aiden Huff. You are wise to keep her words in your heart. You cannot give love or receive love unless you love yourself. Remove the cloud from your essence and experience the love of self again. When you do, you will once again feel the love of Molly.”

Removing his hand from Aiden’s arm, Dan turns, gathers Hannah’s reins and holds them out for Aiden.

“Time for me to go, huh? I guess the phone bribe didn’t work?”

“Indeed not, Aiden Huff. Until next Thursday in the grotto, then?”

“Wait,” Aiden implores. “One more question?”

“Of course, Aiden Huff.”

“So, putting it all together,” Aiden begins as he strokes a hand down along Hannah’s nose, “animals don’t have a spirit, but they feel happiness and love. Do they feel unconditional love like spirits and humans?”

Dan’s eyes look questionably skyward for a moment before he takes a deep breath and answers, “Yes, Aiden Huff. Some species of beast, both wild and tame, have unexpectedly developed an ability to

know unconditional love. The Father has witnessed many animals sacrifice all for the benefit of another. Yet, this was not in His divine plan. Love, however, is just miraculous, is it not?"

"I guess so, Dan. I hope so, anyway."

"And who knows, Aiden Huff, perhaps the Creator will someday permit a curious spirit to journey this domain while embodied within an elephant, or an eagle, or even such magnificent creatures as our Hannah."

Aiden smiles at Hannah and moves to mount her saddle. When he does, he looks at the dam's structure that now spans outside the height and width of the creek banks. He has no idea why they stopped up the water today, but sure Dan has his reasons. So sure, in fact, that he's not even going to ask him why. Reining Hannah left and away from the water, Aiden starts to urge her forward with the usual squeeze of his legs but then stops. Instead, he leans forward in the saddle and softly whispers in her ears, "Let's go home, girl."

As Hannah minds Aiden's words, they start east for the trail home. After walking only a few steps, however, Dan snidely remarks from behind, "It seems that Hannah remains well-shod, Aiden Huff. Abe Kiser shall sleep well tonight."

Only Hannah turns her head back toward Dan to give one long whinny and a bob of her head. When she turns forward again, Aiden tightens his legs and says, "I tell ya what. I've got a few green apples hidden in the barn, girlie. What's say we go get 'em?" Without another word, man and horse are once again in the wind.

## A PAUSE BETWEEN THE NOTES

*“Of all the music that reached farthest into heaven, it is the beating of a loving heart.”*

*~ Henry Ward Beecher*

**A**s Aiden and Hannah break from the tree line, she automatically cuts right on the familiar trail for the ride home. Almost immediately, Aiden catches a glimpse of something that strikes him as odd and reins left to turn his girl around. At Hannah’s now easy pace, his eyes are on the ground searching for what he might’ve seen. In only a moment, he discovers what caught his eye. It’s a white and silver chewing gum wrapper lying just off the trail. Dismounting, he picks up the wrapper, holds it to his nose and takes in the strong smell of spearmint. The smell is fresh, and the paper is clean. Obviously, it’s been carelessly discarded not long ago. Looking both up and down the trail, he sees no one and shoves the wrapper down into his front pants pocket. Mounting Hannah, he turns her toward home but decides on keeping to a slow and steady pace. Careless visitors in the woods are a warning to him that they’re probably inexperienced as well. It may no longer be his job, but he’ll keep a sharp eye and ear out for green hikers as he heads for home.

Within just a short ride, however, Aiden spots something else unusual. There on the trail, in a large patch not covered by leaves and

mulch, are hoof prints in the damp ground. Horses, and several of them. He can't remember the last time he saw anyone else on horseback in the area. Like the gum wrapper, these prints are recent and most likely related. At least, neither were there earlier when he came up the trail. Looking at the tracks, he can tell that the riders were heading down the ridge in the same direction. Further, the space and depth of the hooves tell him the horses were trotting, and he wonders if he can catch up. For no other reason than curiosity, he can at least see if they're the type to throw trash around his mountain and ask them to be more prudent, right? With that justification in mind, he urges Hannah into a moderate run.

Suddenly, Aiden hears the loud roar of gas engines coming up fast from behind. Turning to look, he sees two small, four-wheel-drive utility carts, and his mind instantly calculates that they're running at speeds much faster than standard models. At the same time, his ears pick up on the sound of spinning helicopter blades. As he watches a plain, black copter strafe by over the treetops, the carts on the trail separate and pass him by on either side. The high-powered roar from the exhausts would have spooked most horses, but not Hannah. She continues a steady gallop straight ahead. As they pass, Aiden looks into the cart on his left and, in the split-second offered, recognizes an M4 carbine rifle mounted between the seats. He knows this to be a popular weapon used by most police SWAT teams and illegal in the hands of the average Joe. As the carts get well ahead, one rider slows to a stop, turns in the seat and looks back at Aiden through a dark-tinted visor. After only a brief moment, the rider turns forward again and accelerates to catch up with the other. Without Aiden even giving the command, Hannah's gallop turns to a full sprint. It doesn't take long, however, for the differences in speed to leave horse and rider in the dust. Bringing his agitated girl back to a slower trot, he listens for more sounds of gas engines and helicopter blades. All seems quiet now.

Shortly arriving at a point where the trail intersects with a powerline service road, Aiden spots fresh tire tracks in the dirt. He stops Hannah to examine the area and clearly sees several fresh ruts that were obviously made by large vehicles. Dismounting, he's able to gather that two trucks, each pulling trailers of some sort, had recently driven up the narrow dirt road. The drivers then used the trail crossing to turn their long rigs around. Now, all trucks and trailers were nowhere to be seen. If he was a gambling man, he'd bet the high-powered carts, as well as the horses, came and went in the trailers. He'd also lay money on the helicopter being tied in with the whole lot, as well. But who were they? The chopper was moving fast, and Aiden saw no markings on its dark fuselage. The speedy utility carts were all black as well, as was the attire of their heavily armed riders. While way beyond curious, he reins Hannah back in the direction of home, and she breaks into her own slow, observant walk.

Evening is falling as Aiden finishes caring for Hannah and heads inside the house to reflect on the day. After a quick sandwich, he grabs his tumbler and bottle of bourbon from the cupboards to head for his easy chair as he's done so many times of late. As he loosens the bottlecap, his mind begins to think about the last two days. When a content smile comes, he decides to retighten the cap, set the bottle down on the coffee table, and pull his phone from his pocket. Apprehensively, almost shaking as he pushes the numbers on his screen, he enters Molly's mobile phone number and hits the dial button. The phone rings several times before he hears her voice. His heart thumps and crawls up inside his throat. What's he going to say? What's she going to say? It doesn't matter. It only takes him another second to realize he's just hearing Molly's recorded voice mail announcement and he quickly shuts down the call. He wasn't really sure what he was going to say, anyway. And there's absolutely no way he was going to put together a coherent message before the beep came. But it's

too late, he realizes. At some point, Molly will check her phone and it'll show that he called her. There's no going back now. He's opened the bridge. Looking down at the phone, he dials another number and hears the ringing.

"Well, hello son," comes the surprisingly pleasant voice of Molly's father, Jack Kilgore.

Aiden pauses for a moment before responding, "Hey, Jack. Sorry to bother ya during the evenin' hours, but I was lookin' for Molly and couldn't get her on her phone. Is she around?"

"No, son. She and her mom went to town for a meeting and won't be back for a while." There's a brief pause before Jack begins again, "Ya know, I've been really thinking about ya a lot lately, Aiden. You doin' okay?"

"Yeah, Jack. That's kind of ya. Doin' okay for a man who made a mess of things. How's things goin' on your end?"

"We'll make it, I reckon. We got each other here. Wish you were part of that. You're like a son to me, Aiden, and I could've used ya."

Taken back a bit, Aiden responds, "I figured you wouldn't want me around much, Jack, with Molly being afraid of me and all. But I gotta tell ya, that's not how I was raised, and you know that."

"Good Lord, son. No one here, including Molly, believes you'd ever lay a hand on her. I know my girl, and I can tell ya that isn't the fear she goin' through, or you and me wouldn't be talkin' right now. But this nonsense has gotta end soon, ya know? Listen, they're headed out again early in the mornin'. They're settin' up a support booth over at the Heritage Festival here in Bristol and I got out of it by sayin' I had too much to do in the barn tomorrow. Now, I know it's a bit of a drive for ya, but they're outta here before nine. Why not come by after that and we'll just talk? You and me."

With a quick response that even surprises himself, Aiden answers, “Sounds like an offer I shouldn’t refuse, Jack. Thanks. I’ll see ya just after nine, then.”

The night’s sleep for Aiden is uneventful. There are no nightmares. As a matter of fact, there are no dreams that he can recall, either. But that’s so typical of dreams. He might’ve had another with Ian just being there, but he doesn’t remember. Dreams are fickle.

Regardless, he wakes to make the drive to the outskirts of Bristol and arrives at the home of Jack and Shirley Kilgore shortly after nine in the morning. Knowing Jack’s an early riser and probably already in the barn, Aiden steers the Jeep past the house and follows the tractor path behind the big, red building. As he thought, Jack’s already inside and comes out when he hears the sound of the Jeep. There are a few long moments when Aiden steps from the Wagoneer when he and Jack only look at each other. This, however, ends when Jack walks toward him with his arms wide open and the two men embrace with several sharp pats across each other’s backs.

“Sure am glad ya came, son,” starts Jack. “Drive was okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah. Drive was good. I hate fightin’ the eighteen-wheelers out on the interstate, but other than that, it was okay. It’s good to see ya, Jack. How ya doin’?”

“Good. Aiden. Good as can be, anyways.”

Placing an arm on Aiden’s shoulder, Jack begins to escort him in through the back doors of the barn.

“Aiden, listen. Don’t tell anyone but I don’t really have much I’m doin’ out here today,” says Jack as he turns and walks over to an old, wooden workbench. There, he easily pries up the unnailed end of the benchtop with one hand and reaches underneath with the other. He leans way back from the bench and takes a long look at the front barn doors as if checking to make sure the coast is clear before pulling out as small, wooden cigar humidior.



“Mainly, I was lookin’ for some time alone so I could get my hands on one of these,” says Jack with a big smile as he opens the small case and pulls out two large, imported cigars. “I know you’ll join me, son. And like always, keep it between us, won’t ya?”

With a smile already forming, Aiden takes a cigar from the outstretched hand before Jack turns back and takes out a cutter and box of wooden matches. Once both men have cut and lit their cigars, Jack sits back on an old wooden bench. He pulls Aiden by the arm to sit down beside him and blows out a large cloud of inhaled smoke.

“Oh, heavens to Betsy, that’s good,” Jack exclaims and pauses for just a moment before continuing, “I’m glad to get the chance to see ya, Aiden. I’ve missed ya, son. But somehow ya look better than I thought ya would. Seems you’re taking care of yourself, huh?”

“Yeah, but you might say I’m a mess in progress,” Aiden replies as he enjoys a deep draw on his own cigar. “To be honest, though, you wouldn’t recognize me before yesterday. I let myself go pretty bad. But I’m workin’ through things. Startin’ to, anyway.”

“One step starts the journey, my boy. One step. And I’m glad one step included a call to Molly last night, even if ya didn’t talk.”

“How is she, Jack?”

“Oh, she can be a mess from time to time,” Jack responds while staring at the cigar in his fingers. “Her mom tries to keep her busy, but like me, Shirley’s still hurtin’ too. We lost our beautiful grandson, ya know? Don’t matter none if it’s your child or your grandchild, it’s just not the natural order of life, is it, now? He’s supposed to bury us, right?”

Looking over to Jack, Aiden’s eyes begin to water as he replies, “Yeah. And that’s one of the big issues I’m really fightin’ with. Don’t get me wrong, Jack, ‘cause I’m broken-hearted as can be for Ian. My God, there’s just so much more of life he had to live yet. But I gotta tell ya, I’m really hurtin’ bad for me too. You think that’s messed up?”

Jack looks over to Aiden and replies, “No, son. No. That’s not wrong. A big part of your life was snatched away. I imagine you had plans with Ian for the rest of your life, just as I have with Molly. Ian would’ve come home from the service, got a job, married some pretty thing and had grandkids you’d spoil just like we did him. After that, you’d just fade into the sunset knowing you left behind your mark on the world. That’s the order right there!”

“You’re right about plans, Jack,” Aiden responds. “Molly and I had all the other parts of the plan playin’ out too. We had the life. A great marriage, good home, wonderful kid, and retirement coming up where we could go do things together. Ian and Molly were supposed to be in my life until I was called home, ya know?” Aiden takes a pause and another big draw on his cigar before going on, “But just like that, it’s all gone, Jack. And I don’t mind tellin’ ya I’m scared as hell. I don’t like bein’ scared, either. It makes me mad inside. And when I think that I couldn’t do a damned thing to stop my plans from getting’ snatched away, I get even madder.”

The two men sit in silence for a moment as the hazy cigar smoke rises before Jack speaks up, “I heard a man talk about this a few weeks back, Aiden. He said we all make plans for our life like a builder draws out blueprints for a house. It’s like ya sketch out your future on paper, but really only in your heart, ya know? Anyways, you know exactly what ya want and what pieces ya need to get the project done *just* the way ya want it. Then, something bad happens along the way and a big piece of your project, something you really don’t think you can do without, is taken away forever. The only way to finish your project, then, is to resign yourself to redraw your plans.” Jack pauses for a moment before looking to Aiden and going on, “And you, Aiden, have to redraw and finish your project. My Molly’s invested in you too, ya know?”

Aiden takes a moment to think about Jack’s words before replying, “Yeah, I know. I don’t think I really even started drawin’ my

blueprints until I met Molly. But now I'm wonderin' if we'll ever plan out anything again, Jack. I'm hearin' a lot of marriages don't survive something like this."

"Bull hockey," Jack almost growls back. "I've read a lot of stuff since Ian's loss 'cause I got time on my hands and concern for my little girl. And after you and Molly started having troubles, that's one area I wanted to know more about."

"Yeah, I wish I'd read more about all this, too, Jack. My brother and sister both sent me books, but I didn't see anything in 'em that dealt with me as a man. I guess everyone thinks men'll just get over this stuff on their own and move on, huh?"

"Yeah," says Jack after pulling another long draw of his cigar. "We men just suck it up, right? Well, anyways, all the stuff I read says there's no proof that child loss causes divorce. The feds keep records on it too, ya know? And they've got all kinds of reports showin' divorce rates that come from cheatin', drinkin', abuse, and even playin' the ponies too much. Well, they got nothin' on losing a child, Aiden. Nothin'. Heck, the fact that it doesn't even show up on the radar should tell most folks it ain't true."

Aiden leans forward and places his elbows on his knees, turns to Jack and asks, "Then how'd it get out there as gospel, Jack?"

"Because some damned fools read it in a book," answers Jack as he irritably shifts his weight on the bench and takes another deep draw on his cigar.

Aiden chuckles once and looks over at Jack to ask, "Well, if what they read in books is wrong, Jack, how is it you're believin' what *you* read?"

"No, no, no, son," Jacks comes back quickly. "You just gotta pay attention to what you read, is all. See, a ways back, a reporter woman lost a child and wrote a book about the horrors she went through. But she never mentioned divorce, see? She just said that you

had to be careful because the loss of a child will put a strain on the relationship. That's all. Well, of course, losin' a child's gonna be a strain. We're not talkin' about losin' a tractor here, for Pete's sake. But anyways, the book became a best-seller and suddenly every counselor, preacher and so-called grief expert started talking about how divorce was almost a given for a bereaved couple. But don't you believe 'em, Aiden. I don't, 'cause it's just not so."

Grimacing, Aiden sits back on the bench and replies, "Well, I guess ya gotta be real careful with what you read *and* hear from folks, huh?"

"Your tellin' me. I hear folks talkin' about how people are supposed to go through grief in stages. Heck, I hear it even now in these dangd support meetings I go to with Molly and her mother. You know what's wrong with that *stages* bull stuff, Aiden?"

Almost amused at Jack's rising passion, Aiden answers, "No, Jack. What?"

"Learning to live again after someone you love dies just doesn't know any stages," says Jack as he puts his free hand on Aiden's shoulder. "There's no chronological order to it. There's no linear timelines where you progress from one stage to another in some nice, orderly fashion. Why, I'm just the child's grandfather and I'll bet I've been through dozens of different *stages* in just one day. And hell, gone back through 'em the next day all over again."

Even Jack knows that his own dander's getting up a bit, so he puts the cigar between his teeth and uses his hands to raise himself up off the bench. Aiden stands as well and follows his lead back over to the workbench where Jack hides the cigar humidor in its home under the loose top.

Turning aside, Jack continues, "I'll tell you this though, I keep hearin' some of these smart folks say that acceptance is the last stage of this mess. Now that's just plain wrong too, Aiden. If there were stages,

acceptance would have to be the first or we'd never get through this nasty business. It's a shame, but folks just don't know what they're talkin' about sometimes."

Looking down at the shortening cigar in his fingers, Aiden replies, "Yeah. Well, still, there's some *good* people out there willin' to help, right? I know Molly's been reachin' out to some from the start and it makes me think I'm really screwed up because that's not me. I just can't bring myself to go talkin' about my feelings with others."

"Going to see someone's not always a thing ya *gotta* do, Aiden. That's up to you if and when ya think it'll help. But even if ya do, you'd better remember that no one can own your pain. You have to own it yourself and not let anyone else tell ya there's a right way and a wrong way for *you* to go through this cursed stuff. No stages. No timelines. Unless you're harmin' yourself or someone else, then there *is* no wrong way." Jack then walks to within a foot of Aiden and looks directly into his eyes before adding, "But listen, you're hurtin' my little girl right now, so maybe you'll forgive me if I *try* to own a little of your grief here. You're goin' about it wrong with her right now, son. Just plain wrong."

"Yeah. I'm feelin' wrong about a lotta things lately, Jack. But I've had a few, uh, really mind openin' days, to say the least. I feel like I'm seein' stuff I didn't believe I'd see before, ya know? And I'm really thinkin' now that Molly and me should be going through all this together, right?"

"Absolutely. But as I see it, you've got a couple real roadblocks holdin' ya up, son."

"Roadblocks? Like what?"

"Well, first, I'm not so sure you understand that men and women are different, my boy. And I don't just mean how we look, neither. We don't walk, talk, think, or respond to life the same, ya know?"

"Yeah, I'm learning that, Jack."

Looking down and flicking the ashes from his cigar, Jack goes on, “Good. It’s by God’s design, too. He made us different on purpose, so we’d complement each other, ya know? Now, you’ve read your good book, right? Tell me what God said in the Garden of Eden about why He created Eve?”

“I believe He said that no man should be alone, right?”

Jack grins, points his cigar holding fingers at Aiden and says, “Ah, but you forget the more important part there, son. God said he made Eve because He wanted to give Adam a *helper*. A helper, Aiden. And He didn’t just make another Adam, did He? In His infinite wisdom, God created Eve different in many ways so she could do things Adam couldn’t do. And Adam could do things Eve couldn’t do. They complimented each other. You see?”

“Yeah,” replies Aiden as his memories go back through times with Molly. Smiling, he continues, “You know, I’ve leaned on Molly so much over the years to be who I can’t be, and I’ve tried to do that for her, too.” Aiden’s smile fades and he drops his vision to the ground before softly asking, “So what’s keepin’ me from being her Adam in all this, Jack?”

Rubbing his chin with his free hand, Jack answers, “Well, this grief stuff’s really ugly business, son. You’re lookin’ at yourself, and like you said, you can’t even fix *you* right now. You’re angry and lost. Then, you look at her and you think all she’s doin’ is cryin’. Now, you try to fix her, but you can’t, and that makes you confused and angry, right? And that’s on top of all your other anger for yourself already, huh?”

“Wow, Jack. I’m not sure how you know all of this about me and her.”

“My little girl’s a woman, Aiden. And you’re a man. It’s nature. But let me ask ya a question here son, real blunt like. When you’re lookin’ to fix Molly, is it only because you need her to fix things for you?”

“She’s always fixes me, Jack,” answers Aiden as tears begin to well in his eyes again. “Molly’s always been the one who makes everything right when all’s gone to hell.”

Jack chuckles once and continues, “Yeah. So, your lookin’ to get love from her but not willin’ to give it, son. Is that it?”

“That’s not fair, Jack,” says Aiden with a bit of hushed anger. “I’ve learned what unconditional love is, and there’s nothin’ I wouldn’t give Molly. Nothin’ I wouldn’t do to help her.”

Patting more ashes from his cigar, Jack says, “Ya wanna help Molly, son? Ya wanna give her this unconditional love ya talk about? Then just shut the heck up and listen to her. Sit with her when she cries, Aiden, whenever she needs it. See, she’s a woman, Aiden, and women cry. They’re just wired that way. And they talk about their feelings a bunch, too. Now, are *you* prepared to give by just listening and not tryin’ to fix everything for her?”

“Sure, Jack. I mean, I get it, I guess. I just have a hard time seein’ where sittin’ and listenin’ is gonna fix things, ya know? But I get what you mean.”

Smiling broadly again, Jack responds, “No, ya don’t, son. You’re still stuck on fixin’ things. You gotta get it through your thick skull that Molly doesn’t want you to fix a darn thing for her. No woman does. They wanna fix their own problems. But by golly, they want to talk about it. And you’re her man, Aiden. She’d rather talk to you than anybody. But if you won’t be around, she’ll go find a doc or a group of others that’ll listen. But heck, son, you’ve got the easy part here and don’t even know it. If she wants to talk, guess what? You don’t need to do a danged thing but listen. And how tough is that, huh?”

“So, if I just listen, she’ll feel better?”

“Yessir. And doin’ that, really just doin’ nothing at all, shows a woman that ya love her. Don’t that just beat all?”

Aiden laughs and says, “I guess I’ve got a lot to learn about women, huh, Jack?”

“Yeah. But good luck with that, son. Women are complex critters that’ll never be figured out. For this mess, though, all you gotta do is shut up, put your face in that hurricane, and hold on ‘til she’s done a blowing.”

Aiden gives a deep laugh before responding, “You seem to do pretty good with all this time on your hands, Jack. I don’t really wanna ask what the other roadblock is.”

“Well, you know me, son,” Jack begins after another draw on his cigar. “Whether you want it or not, I’m gonna give it to ya.”

“I do know ya, Jack. And I guess I’m all ears here.”

“Now, this divorce thing we were talkin’ about? You see, most couples who lose a child actually become stronger after it happens. You didn’t know that, did ya? The differences that brought ‘em together in the first place is what holds ‘em together when the horrible happens. Adam and Eve stuff, right? Then, you have those few who do end up divorced. Well, it turns out they always have some other underlying issues around before the loss. And son, my gut tells me *you’ve* got underlying stuff that’s just been eatin’ at the core of who ya are.”

Leaning heavily to his side of the bench, Aiden reaches over to put a hand on Jack’s shoulder and says, “You’ve got an amazing gift there, Jack. It was only a few days ago that I wasn’t even sure who I was anymore. But I’ve had a few inspirations lately, you included now, that’s got me startin’ to change how I think.”

Just as Aiden finishes his words, Molly unexpectedly walks through the front doors of the barn and stops in her tracks at the sight of her husband.

“Aiden! What are you doing here?” asks a surprised Molly.



Aiden looks at Molly as both he and Jack, almost in unison, hide their cigars behind their backs and let them drop to the barn floor. Aiden then turns quickly to look at Jack with raised eyebrows.

“Don’t look at me,” says Jack.

Looking back at his wife, Aiden says, “Sorry, Molly. I tried to call ya last night, ya know, just to talk. When I couldn’t get ya, I called your Dad. He and I got to talking and he said I should come by this mornin’, ya know, because we could talk more while you and your mom were off in Bristol.”

“Did you find the table, Molly? I think it’s back in th...,” says Shirley Kilgore as she walks through the front barn doors and freezes in place when she spots Aiden.

Feeling a bit like an errant child who’s just been caught, Aiden politely smiles and says, “Good mornin’, ma’am. It’s good to see you.”

“Aiden Huff. What a sight you are, son,” Shirley says with a genuine and welcoming smile.

With Shirley’s attention on Aiden, Jack quickly scuffs his feet in a veiled attempt at burying the cigar butts under the loose hay and dirt of the barn floor.

Stepping to Aiden, Shirley puts her hands on his shoulders and says, “Oh, I imagine my busy body husband has something to do with this. Why, it seems I just can’t leave him alone for a minute.”

“Now, now, Shirley,” rebukes Jack.

Slowly turning her smiling face to her husband, Shirley responds, “Don’t you *now, now* me, you overgrown child. It smells like burnt gym socks out here. Why don’t you just be a dear and put those nasty cigars in a bucket of water? You’re going to burn the barn down again.”

Letting out a loud and purposeful groan, Jack bends to pick up the cigar butts and tosses them in a nearby galvanized bucket.

“Don’t forget the water, dear,” says Shirley as she turns her attention back to Aiden. “Now then, honey. Are you here to talk to Molly this fine morning?”

Aiden looks to Molly before replying, “Well, truth is, I came by to see Jack and we’ve just been talking. But yeah, if Molly would give me a minute, I’d sure like that.”

“Well, young man, I’m afraid she doesn’t have a minute for you here. We’ve got a booth to run in town, and since someone in this barn forgot to load our table in the car trunk last night, it seems we’re well beyond fashionably late now. But you come on down to the festival and help us get things up and running. Bring this old goat with ya too, since it doesn’t look like he’s doin’ much of anything out here in the barn. He can sit with me while you and Molly take a little break and enjoy the festival.”

Molly jumps in to say, “Mom, I really don’t think it’s a good time. If Aiden came here to talk to Dad, we should give ‘em some space. Maybe a festival’s not the break he needs right now.”

“Oh, fiddle-faddle, child,” says Shirley as she locks her arm around Aiden’s and walks beside him through the barn doors. “There’s always a time to take a little pause in everything, good or bad. Why, even the most cherished works of music would be nothing more than hideous noise without a pause between the notes. I should know. I was a grade school music teacher. Now come along, everyone.”

Molly looks to her dad and gives him a weak smile. She feels partly apologetic for him being pulled into the festival, as well as somewhat concerned about her own imminent time alone with Aiden.

“Hey, you old goat,” yells Shirley to Jack from outside the barn. “Grab the card table and hop in with Aiden. You two can follow us to the festival. That’s if you can keep up.”

At the festival, Aiden and Molly do take the opportunity for a pause to walk the fairgrounds. Having agreed to just roam without talk

of the obvious, both feel a welcome sense of ease together. As they stop under the many tents of vendors selling crafts and homewares, they point out items to each other that they like. But both secretly acknowledge to themselves that nothing delighted over this morning would be purchased and taken home. It doesn't stop the childish joy, however, as Aiden tosses six rings over six milk bottle necks to win Molly a plastic tiara. He's always been good at carnival games, and she dons the tiara on her head with joy. Nor does it dampen their smiles when they stop under a big tent and join others in dancing to live bluegrass music. Their pause together also makes its way past the funnel cake trailer and along the banks of the small park lake.

Taking a seat in the grass by the water, Molly reaches across Aiden several times to steal pinches of his funnel cake, since hers is long gone. While doing so, she strays from the rules a bit by telling him of the many wonderful people she's met in her support groups there in Bristol. She tells him of the things she's learned from others about moving forward after a profound tragedy. She tells him about the wonderful resources she's found. She begins to cry as she tells Aiden how she feels about her pains for Ian and her anger over it all. She leans over as she speaks and puts her face against his chest while he wraps his arms around her shoulders and just listens. They remain sitting in the grass, embraced together, for several long minutes after Molly finishes talking and crying.

When Aiden hears her relaxed sigh, he offers Molly the funnel cake plate but playfully pulls it away when she starts to take a pinch. Her tickling fingers then go straight to his ribcage and, suddenly, the cake is back within her reach. When the cake is all pinched away, however, it seems to be a trigger for both that playtime is over.

"It's been a good morning, Aiden," says Molly with her face looking down to the ground. She looks up with a slight smile and continues, "Best morning in a long, long time for me." Molly reaches

her fingers up to his face, rubs his cheek, and says, “You look better, Aiden. More relaxed. How you doin’ with all this?”

“Oh, I’m workin’ through some things. I know I got a ways to go, but, hey, I discovered that I’m still Ian’s father. That’s a big start, huh? And I’m still your husband. I know we’re not together right now, but I can say I love you unconditionally. I would give it all for you, Molly Huff.”

Molly smiles again but then looks down and quickly back up at Aiden before asking, “Yeah, I know you would. But would you give it all for yourself, Aiden?”

“Honestly? Not yet, Molly. I’ve got a ways to go there yet. Seems I still got anger and guilt blocking me from seein’ my own self-worth and I gotta work on that.”

With eyes opening wide in surprise, Molly asks, “Wow! Where did that come from? Are you seeing someone that’s helping you with all this?”

“Yeah. Kinda. The guy’s really, really out there, though. A real spiritual type of fella I ran into by accident. But he’s been helping me with Ian, and with me and you too.”

“If this was a girl, I’d be jealous. I might still be. I mean, someone that helped you get rid of that mangy beard and stringy hair might be better for you than me.”

“That wasn’t him. That was Ian, Molly. He helped me connect with Ian. He came to me, I swear. It’s hard to explain but I felt him inside me for a minute. Then he came to me in a dream. But you know what, honey?”

“What, baby?” asks Molly as she puts her hands around his upper arm and lays the side of her face against it.

“It wasn’t the nightmare this time. It was a regular dream. Ian wasn’t doing anything. He was just in the house with you and me and I felt love.”

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful, Aiden. I feel our baby every day. I dream of him, too. But no nightmares, thank God. I talk to him, though. Sometimes out loud. I ask him the stupidest questions and he answers if I listen real hard. Some people say it’s just me answering myself in my mind, but I don’t care. I know it’s him and it makes me feel good.”

Laying the funnel cake plate on the ground, Aiden’s look is sincere as he asks, “Where do you and I go from here, Molly?”

“Well, funny you should ask, Aiden. I was just asking Ian that very same question.”

“Yeah? So, what’s our boy got to say?”

“He’s sayin’ it’s been a long time since his big, bad, brave dad just sat and listened to his momma.”

With a look of cautious hope, Aiden softly says, “Come home with me, Molly.”

“No, Aiden,” replies Molly as her smile softens. “Not now. Not yet, anyway. It feels good. You feel good. But you and I were so much better than good, and I don’t want it to be just okay. I have faith in you, my love, and I believe in you even more now after today. But I also believe you need just a little more time to find yourself before we can find great together again.”

“I’ve heard an awful lot about faith lately, Molly. And weren’t you the one who always went around talking about taking a leap of faith? If you believe in me, believe in us, then why not take that leap?”

“Silly man,” Molly comes back with a slight grin. “I already did. I took a leap of faith in being here with you now. I took a leap of faith when I said you needed more time to find yourself. My gosh, Aiden. Every bone in my body cries to be home with you right now, but something’s telling me to just wait a bit. I don’t know what it is, but I believe it. So, I’m taking a leap of faith that it’ll take us way beyond good to great again.”

“But you have no idea how much I wanna go through all of this with you.”

“Oh, I do, Aiden. There’s nothin’ I wanted more than to talk with you, or have you go talk to others with me. But maybe it was for the good. I’ve learned I didn’t give you the chance to go through this your way, too. You’re not me. You need your cave and you’re not gonna just sit around and cry. I get that, and so much more now. So maybe, just maybe, each of us is being guided to fix a little of ourselves before we can move forward together?”

Hearing Molly’s words comfort Aiden and he forces a slight smile as he says to her, “Well, still, Molly, what I wouldn’t give to have you beside me right now.”

“Well, tell ya what, A-Man,” says Molly as she pulls out of Aiden’s arms and spins on the ground to face him. “When do you meet with this guy again that’s been helping you out.”

“Thursday, why?”

Molly pokes Aiden’s chest with her index finger and says, “Well, how ‘bout I go with you this Thursday so we can start doing little bits of this together?”

“No, Molly. I told ya this guy’s out there. I don’t mean just the stuff he says, but it’s a hike up the mountain to get to him.”

With her eyes opening wide again, Molly asks, “You mean he’s some old coot livin’ in a shack up the woods?”

“No. Not exactly, Molly. But I’ll be honest if ya promise not to think I’m insane. And you can’t tell anyone. Not even your mom or dad. I don’t want anyone thinkin’ I’ve gone over the deep end.”

Molly replies with laughter, “Oh, do go on. If anyone knows a nut job up in the hills, it’s gonna be you, right? He must be harmless, though, if you haven’t tossed him off a cliff yet.”

“Stop jokin’ around and I’ll tell you everything,” Aiden says before pausing for a deep breath. “See, I went for a long walk on the

trails Thursday to clear my head and found this strange guy holed up in a hidden grotto. Now listen, and don't think I'm nuts, it turns out he's really a spirit from Heaven who's taken over the livin' body of a guy named Dan. He's the one helpin' me out with all this."

With a skewed smile and speaking really slow, Molly says, "You met a spirit livin' in the body of some guy named Dan who lives in a cave? Okay."

"I'm not crazy, Molly," says Aiden. "The guy told me stuff about me that nobody else could know. Not you. Not anyone. Not even my mom and dad. Well, at least while they were alive, anyway. And he can connect with Ian's spirit. Says they're all connected on the other side. And Molly, get this. He let me sit in a special stream inside the grotto and Ian's spirit came to me. I talked to Ian, honey!"

Dropping her skeptical tone, Molly earnestly asks, "And what did Ian say when you talked to him?"

"Oh, it was wonderful, Molly. He asked me why I thought I wasn't his father anymore and talked to me about all the things in my past that are gone now but make me who I am today, including him."

"Okay!" Molly quickly says back.

Not sure what she meant, Aiden asks, "Okay? Okay what, Molly?"

"Okay, I'm in. If my big, bad, brave man went up the mountain with a spirit and talked to Ian, heck, I wanna go too."

Aiden grins and says, "You're not much on hikin', little lady. You sure about this."

"Oh, no. You hike. Hannah and I will walk right beside ya, mister. Now, we'd better get back to the booth and get you and Dad out of here. I know he's gotta be losin' his mind."

Aiden and Molly walk back to the booth where they find Jack and Shirley talking with several of the town folk. Surprisingly, Jack tells Aiden he's gonna stay for the rest of the day but hopes he'll get to see

him again real soon. With hugs and kisses from all, Aiden walks away from the booth with one last look back at Molly, hands in her jeans pockets, head cocked to one side, and smiling back at him. He just can't wait for Thursday in the grotto with his love.



## FOR THE SAKE OF GOOD NEIGHBORS

*"Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, sleep in peace. God is awake."*

*~ Victor Hugo*

Leaving the Heritage Festival, Aiden drives off the interstate highway, through the town, and up the mountainside road to his home. As he steers the Wagoneer onto his long, dirt driveway, he stops to check the mailbox. When he gets out of the Jeep, he sees that his usually filled box is empty and, as he turns back, eyes something odd on the ground. Spotting a familiar white and silver gum wrapper lying by his right front tire, he picks it up to find that it smells of fresh spearmint. He balls it up, puts it in his pocket, and quickly climbs back behind the wheel of his Wagoneer. As he hastily drives up and nears his house, he sees a large black pickup truck with dark tinted windows and an attached horse trailer parked out front. Inside the trailer, he spots the tail ends of two Tennessee Walkers and immediately thinks of the horse's preferred use in law enforcement, as their higher step gives less bounce in the saddle for the mounted officer. Looking to the house, he sees two men overdressed in camouflage clothing who casually sit on his front porch swing. Bringing the Jeep to a sliding stop, he slams it into

park, jumps from behind the wheel, and assertively approaches his unknown visitors.

“I don’t know who ya are, but if ya don’t un-ass my wife’s swing before I get there, I’m gonna do it for ya!”

Both men rise and move to the top of the porch stairs where they defiantly stand shoulder to shoulder. As Aiden reaches the bottom step, the men simultaneously pull out their wallets and flip them open to display their U.S. Marshal badges for him to see.

“Aiden Huff,” says the man on the right, “I’m Deputy Marshal Cassell and this is Deputy Marshal Kerns. We –”

“Yeah. You got badges. So, what? So do I,” Aiden breaks in.

“Yeah, but ours don’t say *retired*, Huff,” Kerns sarcastically responds.

Sneering, Aiden points to a pile of envelopes left lying on the porch swing and says, “Yeah, but mine never said I can go through another man’s mail without cause.”

“We’re just being neighborly here, Huff,” Kerns replies, smacking his lips as he chews his gum and speaks. “We thought we’d do ya the favor, ya know? As long as we were coming up to see ya and all.”

Aiden digs in his pocket, pulls out the wadded gum wrapper and says, “Neighbors I know don’t throw their trash all over my mountain, mister.”

Holding the balled-up wrapper between his thumb and forefinger, Aiden shoves it toward Kerns, who takes a quick, evasive jump back. Then, looking down into Aiden’s fingers and seeing only the trash, he sheepishly puts out his hand to take it.

“Ya left some up on the high trails yesterday, too. And ya know, all that gum chewin’ and you bein’ jumpy like this kinda stinks of a man with lots of bad habits, if ya ask me.”

Pushing the wrapper down into his front pocket, Kerns replies, “Well, I ain’t askin’ ya, am I? And my habits ain’t none of your damned business.”

“Whaddya want?” asks Aiden as he brushes between the two men, opens his screen porch door, and walks inside his house.

Kerns quickly moves over to the swing to grab Aiden’s mail, as well as a large manila folder the men had brought with them. With all in hand, they both enter the house and see Aiden already back in the kitchen pouring lemonade from a pitcher into three ice-filled glasses. He takes two to the kitchen table, turns to grab the third, and then motions with mocked grace for the men to come and sit down.

“Now, again, whaddya want?” asks Aiden as he sits. “Wait. First, I gotta say if you’re here looking for advice on undercover attire, well, you fellas look like a military surplus store just threw up on ya.”

Looking over to Kerns, Cassell replies, “Yeah. I gotta partner here who likes to go all in. But never mind that. Let’s get down to it.”

“Yeah, let’s,” says Aiden in a clearly disdainful tone.

Kerns jumps in, “Look, Huff. We need your help.” Flipping open the manila folder, he throws it on the tabletop for Aiden to see. Looking down, Aiden immediately recognizes the face of Dan in the large photograph paperclipped to the front page, and a flush goes through his whole body.

“We gotta real bad fugitive that went rabbit on us a few days back and we gotta take this guy down,” says Cassell. “If you go back to his juvie file, this monster’s rap sheet starts when he’s about eight.”

“Like what?”

“Violent crimes, drugs, grand theft. And that’s the light stuff. Our boy here was put on death row for killin’ a girl a few years back.”

“So, how’d you fellas lose him?”

Kerns jumps in, “We don’t lose ‘em, Huff. We bring ‘em in when someone else does.”

“He was due for execution but got loose in a prison bus crash this Thursday morning,” says Cassell. “From what we can figure, he high tailed it up in these hills where he’s layin’ low now.”

Looking over to Aiden, Kerns notices a far-off look in the man’s eyes and rapidly snaps his fingers twice before saying, “You okay there, Huff? I know this ain’t no poacher, but come on, mister. We need ya to man up with us here.”

Aiden pulls away from his own questioning thoughts of Dan and responds, “No. Sorry. It’s just these trails are filled with hikers and campers this time of year. Not good!”

“Yeah,” says Kerns. “Just think what an animal like him could do out here.”

Aiden turns to Cassell, “Anyway, you got any leads on what area he might be in, if he’s up here at all?”

“Yeah. One good one,” Cassell begins. “We thought it was bull at first. Some woman named Lena at the bottom of the mountain called the locals and said she saw a naked Indian steal the tablecloth off her picnic table -”

“In her back yard,” Kerns excitedly butts in. “But before anyone could check her out, she calls back sayin’ never mind, ‘cause she just, get this, watched a huge bear bring it back. Said it spent a good five minutes tuggin’ and pullin’ with its teeth before it got it nice and neat like on the table. Then it just walked off into the woods.”

Cassell then breaks back in, “So, we go check this lady out anyway and about a quarter-mile between her and the main road we find our fugitive’s orange jumpsuit shoved under a fallen tree. Now ain’t that a hoot?”

“Yeah. A real hoot,” says Aiden as his mind tries to stay focused on the federal agents in his kitchen and off of Dan in the grotto. “So, anyway, what do you guys need out of me? You think I’ve got time to lead you around these trails by the ears?”

Cassell leans forward in his chair, locks eyes with Aiden and says, “You’ve had time to be all over these trails the past coupla days, Aiden.”

“Yeah, I did. And I saw your pretend ninjas out there, too. Ridin’ their little go-carts and stinkin’ up the woods.”

“Resources, Aiden. We got ‘em and we’re not afraid to use ‘em.”

“I’m sure you’re not. But you don’t need someone who knows the trails. You need yourself a good tracker.”

Leaning forward to match his partner’s stance, Kerns says, “We got one, Huff. Hell, man, you tracked and killed an animal that’s been a ghost in these mountains for decades. Damned cougars are supposed to be extinct here, for cryin’ out loud.”

Cassell adds, “The way I see it, Aiden, if you can go out in those woods and find something that isn’t even supposed to exist anymore, you can darn sure help us find our guy.”

“We know ya hit a bad deal, Huff,” Kerns chimes back in again. “You took down that killer ‘cause of yer boy, and it got ya burned. Hell, I’d do the same thing in a heartbeat. But now *we* got a killer in your mountains. We either track him down and drag him back or we put him down. He’s already slated to die, so either way’s good. We’d do it quicker here, too, if you’d jump in with us. And hey, maybe you or none of your neighbors get dead in the meantime, right?”

Aiden looks down at the table and rubs the back of his neck before responding, “Well, I found out the supposed killer I tracked and *put down* wasn’t really guilty of anything at all, deputy. Now, I’m sorry here guys, but I’m not gonna be part of doin’ it again, especially if it means puttin’ someone *down*.”

“Dammit, man,” says Kerns in a highly agitated tone. “This ain’t no animal and he’s not some *supposed* killer! This savage was tried and convicted in a court of law, for Pete’s sake.”

Cassell jumps back in, “Now, listen. We’re not talkin’ about going all Rambo on this guy and just takin’ him out, Aiden. It has its risks, though. And, look, we do what we have to, right? That’s all was meant here.”

“Either way, guys, I *will* do somethin’ for ya. If I’m out there on the trails and I see something on this guy, I’ll call ya, okay? Just leave me your cards so I’ve got your number.”

Kerns quickly stands from his kitchen chair and angrily snaps, “Your kiddin’ me, right? You’ll call us if you see something? That’s it? A coupla decades on the job and you’ll just let a bad guy run loose in your back yard, Huff?”

“Heck, I got faith in you fellas. I mean, ya got yer little go-carts, whirly-birds, and a few good nags out there in the trailer. Heck, you’ll have this guy wrapped up in a heartbeat, I’m sure.”

Cassell stands a little slower than Kerns did before and calmly states the name, “Danuwoa.”

“Come again?”

“His name is Danuwoa, Aiden. Danuwoa Ross. A big, nasty Cherokee Indian. You know, Danuwoa means Great Wolf in Cherokee.”

“Why you tellin’ me this?”

“I just thought you should know his name, Aiden. He’s a wolf, and wolves are pure killers.”

Stoically, but with a slight snarl, Aiden comes back, “Maybe you should know *your* animals, deputy. Wolves only kill to survive. No animal kills outta hate, except man.”

Cassell shakes his head and simply responds, “Well, either way, we got a man out there who kills outta hate, Aiden. But, hey, you said you’d let us know if you see something, right? So, do, huh? We’ll be around.”

“I’m sure you will.”

“We’ll just see ourselves out,” Cassell says as both men turn to leave. Feeling a sudden sense of sincerity, Cassell turns back to say, “And hey, sorry about your boy. You’re in my thoughts, huh?”

“Much appreciated,” Aiden answers with a slight snippiness as the men head for the front door. “It’s always the thought that counts, right?”

With the federal agents now gone, Aiden’s mind has a lot to process. The man hiding in the grotto is a fugitive killer on the run from a death sentence. He wonders if everything he’s already been through with Dan has been a ruse. It couldn’t be, though. The spirit in Dan knew too much about him to be faking it. Or did he? Did Killer-Dan only say things that a broken and desperate man wanted to hear? One thing is for sure, Aiden is going to go find out, and he’s going to find out now. Out in the barn, he straps on his gun belt, hastily saddles Hannah and the two shoot out the barn doors in full gallop.

Turning his horse off the trail and into the wildflower covered forest, Aiden searches for the boulder that caps the grotto where he exited on Thursday. And, as was the case when he rode in on Friday, he finds all the other nearby landmarks, but not the capstone. Not giving up, he rides due west in search of the cliff that drops to the table rock. As they move, however, the way begins to thicken with low hanging tree limbs and heavier underbrush. Soon, it becomes impossible to ride while mounted in the saddle. Feeling sure that he’s headed in the right direction, he dismounts and leads Hannah by the reins as they both push through a mesh of limbs and brush.

Suddenly, the thick trees open and Aiden views a beautiful vista of rolling mountain ridges off in the distance. Only ten steps ahead, however, the ground drops straight down over a cliff. Looking over the ledge, he sees the table rock below that he’s been searching for. Peering right, he can also see the steep incline that he slid off of only a few days before. After looping Hannah’s reins securely around a branch, he ties

one end of his utility rope around a tree trunk and climbs down the cliff. Once safely on the rock surface, he tries in vain to gain entry to the grotto by separating the dense vegetation that covers the hidden entrance. For several long minutes, he pulls and tugs, and even kicks at the vines and bush limbs, but is still unable to spread them apart. When completely spent from his efforts, he stands back a few feet and loudly calls out to Dan. After several attempts with no response, he quickly walks out to the ledge of the table rock.

Turning only his upper body back to the grotto entrance, Aiden yells, **“WILL YOU COME OUT IF I TELL YOU I’M GONNA TAKE A STEP, DAN? DANUWOA ROSS?”**

There’s no response.

**“I’LL DO IT. I’LL STEP OFF RIGHT NOW.”**

Silence, except for the sound of the trees above swaying in the high mountain breezes.

**“YOU SAID YOU DIDN’T COME HERE TO HELP ME DIE, DAN. SHOW YOURSELF OR YOUR SICK GAME ENDS NOW!”**

Still, Aiden gets no response. Growling aloud, he turns impatiently to walk back to the rope, where he looks back down at the table rock several times while climbing to the ledge above. Dan never appears. When he’s secured the rope and taken Hannah by the reins, he walks back over to the cliff’s edge and shouts, **“I’LL BE BACK, DAN. AND I’LL GET TO YOU ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. COUNT ON IT!”**

Aiden hastily rides Hannah home and into the barn. When he dismounts to remove her tack, he notices a business card nailed to the frame around her stall door. Pulling the nail from the board, he holds the card and reads the printed information of Deputy Marshal S. Cassell. Flipping the card over, he finds handwritten words on the back that read *We see you hit the woods again - Remember to call us.*



Pulling his wallet from his pocket, Aiden slips the business card inside, finishes caring for Hannah, and goes inside the house. There, as the sun begins to fall, he pulls a tumbler from a kitchen cupboard, his bottle of bourbon from a lower cabinet, and finds his favorite easy chair in the living room. Tomorrow will be another day and he *will* get to Dan inside that grotto.

## WHEN THE LEVY BREAKS

*We are all visitors to this time, this place. We are just passing through.  
Our purpose here is to observe, to learn, to grow, to LOVE...  
and then we return home.*

*~ Aboriginal Philosophy*

Purposely rising well before Sunday morning's dawn, Aiden prepares himself for the day before moving out to the barn, where he hastily feeds and saddles Hannah. He takes a moment to toss a small propane cutting torch in her saddlebag and slips a machete into a sheath that's tied to her skirt. He's headed for the grotto to find Dan today, and nothing's going to get in his way. That includes unyielding, cave concealing foliage or pesky federal agents. He knows the two U.S. Marshals, or at least their type, and there's little chance they'll be out and about before light. Yet, he suspects a few of their *resources* may well be in place throughout the woods.

Aiden and Hannah make a slow go of their early morning trek. Not only must they heed the darkness on the trails, but Aiden wants to listen carefully for anyone or anything that might be in hiding along the way. The sun is beginning to rise and cut through the trees just as he arrives in the area where the wildflowers blanket the forest floor. Before reining his girl to the left, however, instinct tells him to turn around. When he does, he spots the figures of three unknown men walking about a quarter of a mile behind him. As the men draw closer, he sees

they're all dressed in typical camouflage clothing and wearing heavy coats. Aiden mentally notes that even in these higher elevations, it'll be weeks before winter weather gear is needed. When the men notice that he's spotted them, they each unzip their coats and reach a hand inside while still pushing forward. Aiden assumes they're going for their firearms, and never one to shy from confrontation, urges Hannah forward to close the distance between them.

Suddenly, Aiden hears a loud, bellowing roar and immediately recognizes the sound. With no further warning, the freakishly large black bear he'd encountered days before comes crashing out of the wood line. The three men stop. Aiden and Hannah stop. And right in between Aiden and the men on the trail, the bear stops. While the next few seconds seem an eternity, the bear turns to Aiden for just a moment and seems to oddly nod his head. Turning back toward the three men, he promptly jumps into a lumbering run straight at them while grunting and growling along the way. The screaming men immediately turn and run back down the trail, quickly disappearing into the dim morning light with their pursuer close behind. No matter what questions of Dan go through his mind now, Aiden convinces himself that these government *resources* will probably be just fine. With that, he turns Hannah around to ride back up the trail before reining her left into the wildflower covered forest.

When neither Dan nor the rear grotto capstone are found, Aiden and Hannah begin traveling unmounted through the back area of low, thick branches and underbrush. Soon, they arrive at the cliff above the table rock. In short order, he secures Hannah's reins, ties off one end of his rope to a tree trunk and ties the other end to his propane torch and machete. After first lowering these items over the side, he climbs down the rope until he's standing on the solid rock plate. Just as he bends down to untie the gear, however, he surprisingly spots Dan casually walking toward him.

“This is a very early morning for you, Aiden Huff,” exclaims Dan.

More than just a little on the defense, Aiden stands and takes a few steps back before bluntly replying, “Dan! Or should I say Danuwoa? Danuwoa Ross?”

“You may call me as you like. Names are not what makes a man.”

Aiden scoffs, “You’re right. What makes a man are his actions. And you, sir, are a murderer.”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. Danuwoa has strayed. That is, in part, why I am h...”

“Strayed?” Aiden angrily cuts him off. “You’ve strayed? Not going to church is straying, pal. Cheating on your wife is straying. Bein’ a filthy murderer is going way, way off the reservation, I’d think.”

“Calm yourself, Aiden Huff. Let us go inside the grotto and talk further.”

Aiden laughs and responds, “Go inside? With you? How do I know I’m not some patsy you’ve lured here for whatever reason? Bring you food, maybe? I don’t know. Maybe this is some kinda sick cat and mouse game you’re playin’ until you kill me too, huh?”

Dan holds up the palm of his hand and calmly replies, “Ian has lovingly come to you in a dream, Aiden Huff. Your father-in-law has given you wise advice to help clear your heart and your mind, as well as a mutual indulgence to cloud your lungs. Molly has indeed taken a leap of faith in your relationship, and you have agreed to bring her here Thursday to the grotto so she may share in your move forward.”

Somewhat renewed in his faith, Aiden looks down for several thoughtful moments before looking up to Dan and replying, “Jeez! I don’t know who’s worse at stalkin’ me here? If it isn’t you, it’s those damned feds following me around all the time now.”

“Ah, I am pleased you brought that up,” says Dan. Turning to the cliff wall, he shouts, “HANNAH!”

Instantly, Hannah’s long face appears above them as she looks down at the two men on the rock.

“How does she keep undoing her...?” starts Aiden.

Dan turns to Aiden and smiles as he answers, “Just as love can be the tie that binds, it can also unbind the needless ones.”

With that, Dan looks back up to Hannah, raises a hand high in the air and only softly whispers, “Home, Hannah. Home.” With that quiet command, she quickly turns and disappears from the cliff’s edge.

“Whaddya think you’re doin’?” Aiden sharply asks.

Walking to the rope dangling down the cliff wall, Dan answers, “We do not need those who search to come by that which should not be found.” Placing his hand on the rope, he gives it a sharp tug and Aiden watches the entire length fall to a loose coil at his feet.

Ignoring the rope for a moment, Aiden asks, “She’s gonna be okay, right? She’ll go back to the barn? There’s men in the woods, ya know?”

“She will go home undetected. Now come, Aiden Huff. It is time for the privacy of the grotto. Please collect your needless gardening tools and come inside.”

The two men walk through the outer chamber of the grotto as the light fades from behind and slowly illuminates above. They move through the passage between the cave walls and into the meditation chamber, where Dan immediately sits on the flat stone outcrop. Aiden crosses the chamber to do the same, setting his gear down beside him.

“I can see many things, Aiden Huff. Yet, I was anticipating more time with Danuwoa before you and I were to meet again on Thursday.”

Aiden nervously chuckles and responds, “Yeah, sorry to blow your plans, buddy, but I had concerns about who I’ve been hookin’ up with here.”

“You and I have been *hooking up*, Aiden Huff. I am spirit. I am essence. I am life -”

“You’re a murderer, Dan,” an agitated Aiden breaks in. “Or at least you’re strollin’ around in the body of one. There’s feds out there lookin’ for ya, dammit. They’re all over me like ticks on a hound. And I know you’re here. You know what that means, Dan? It means, by law, I’m harborin’ a fugitive. That makes me a criminal too!”

“There are good reasons that I have embodied within this mortal. And this man that you have discovered to be immoral and murderous shall indeed answer in ways that will satisfy both the judgment of God and the laws of mankind. I ask only that you have faith as I seek his salvation. And I ask that you have faith while we seek *your* salvation as well, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden stands and walks a little closer to Dan before saying, “That’s a lot to ask, Dan. It’s not your butt on the line here. I’ve already lost everything and *was* actually just beginning to have faith again. Landing in jail’s a few more steps back than I think I can handle right now.”

“There is no incarceration in your future, Aiden Huff.”

“Oh, you’ve seen this?”

“Yes.”

“You can see into the future too?”

“In some very limited ways, Aiden Huff.”

“Then tell me how I’m gonna turn out. Am I gonna be alright?”

“Yes.”

“You can see that in the future.”

“No. I see it in my faith. I see the true man and spirit that dwells within you. It is my belief that for you to be *alright*, as you say, we need only remove that which is not you.”

“Come again?”

“Michelangelo and his statue of David, Aiden Huff.”

“Still not getting’ it, buddy.”

Dan leans back against the chamber wall and explains, “On the very first viewing of his magnificent statue, an admirer asked Michelangelo how he possessed the talent to carve such a beautiful and perfect David from a mere block of stone. Do you know how Michelangelo replied, Aiden Huff?”

“He had faith and could see David like you see me?”

Leaning forward, Dan points a finger at Aiden’s body and says, “No. Michelangelo answered by saying a beautiful and perfect David already existed within the marble, and he need only remove that which was not David to set him free. Do you see? You are David and together we shall chisel away that which is not you.”

“How long do ya think we’re gonna be chiselin’, Dan?” asks Aiden with his head down. “Don’t get me wrong, now. I might not always act it, but I believe what we’re doin’ is good here. Still, I’ve never had the heat on me before. We talkin’ weeks now? Months? What?”

“Patience, Aiden Huff. I am sure David did not reveal himself to the world with only a few strikes of the mallet. Come. Let us walk and chip away more marble.”

Dan rises from his flat stone and motions for Aiden to follow. They walk together through the next chamber and Aiden stops when he sees the flowing hot spring again.

“Dan? Will I get another chance to sit in the stream and connect with Ian?”

Without stopping his walk, Dan responds, “Perhaps. But if all goes as intended, you will no longer require aid to know a connection with the spirit of your son. Come, Aiden Huff. Our destination today is for another stream.”

“Still, it would be great to see him sooner than later, Dan. You gotta know that, right?”

With no response from Dan, they take the familiar passage and ascend the steps that lead to the forest grounds above. Dan then moves the capstone boulder aside and climbs from the hole with Aiden right behind him.

“We need to be real careful out in the open, Dan,” Aiden cautions. “The feds have people crawling all of the place.”

“We will not be disturbed, Aiden Huff.”

“Ah, that’s right. You have the vision.”

“Yes. And a very helpful bear who remains at the watch.”

Chuckling, Aiden says, “Yeah, I gotta get me one of those.”

“Well, perhaps the two of you can talk when I am finished with his services?”

After a short walk, the two men come to the area in the forest where they had dammed the small creek just the day before. Behind the dam, the obstructed water has formed a wide and deep pool. Below the dam, only a slight trickle of murky, muddy water squeezes out from the earthen structure to run down the dry, stony creek bed.

Dan comes to a stop several feet from the water and asks, “Do you see what we have done, Aiden Huff?”

“Sure,” Aiden almost gleefully answers. “We did a darned good job of stopping up the creek from what I can see. Why, I don’t know.”

Dan walks Aiden to the water’s edge and says, “What we have done here is not unlike what you have done to yourself.”

“What do you mean, what I’ve done to myself?”

“At one time this stream flowed in and then flowed out of this forest in ease,” begins Dan. “And the forest took from it the energy it required to exist in a state of ease. And not unlike the creek flowing through this forest, everything that flows into the human essence must flow out as well, either as energy used or unrequired waste. It all must return to source. Air, water, food, sunlight, *and*, Aiden Huff, emotions.



If it flows in, you take the energy it offers and allow it to flow back out. Do you see?”

“I think so. Makes sense, I guess.”

“Your unhealthy ego has slowly stemmed your flow of emotions over the years, Aiden Huff. Very much like this dam, it purposely blocks your feelings not only from others but from yourself.” Pointing down the creek bed below the dam, Dan continues, “Now, look there at the beautiful shrubs and berried vines that grow along the banks.”

“I see ‘em.”

“Soon they will wither and perish as they no longer receive the nourishment beyond the blockage,” says Dan before pointing back up the creek to the pooling water. “And look behind the blockage, Aiden Huff. What do you see?”

“Well, I see water that’s dammed up pretty deep now.”

“Yes! And the blocked water from the once flowing stream has flooded inside the dam, choking the very life that exists there. The beautiful flora is drowning, and the majestic trees will eventually uproot and fall as the earth softens. The still water stagnates and will soon foul with a stench about it from rotting death. The forest here, like you, Aiden Huff, is no longer in the state of ease it once was.”

“All because we stopped the natural flow. I get it.”

“This is you, Aiden Huff,” says Dan as he moves his hand toward the water. “This is your emotional stream. Like everything else that flows into you, it must flow out or it destroys life inside and out. And long ago, bit by bit, your unhealthy ego began building your dam and repressing your emotional flow.”

Abruptly turning, Dan looks back upstream and slowly raises his outstretched hand to the sky. Together with Aiden, both watch as a great mass of dark clouds swiftly gather at a distance above the creek. There are sharp flashes of lightning and tremendous claps of thunder

that follow as a developing storm far upstream opens up in a heavy deluge of rain.

Pointing a hand to the clouds, Dan turns only his face back to Aiden and loudly, intensely yells over the thunder, “AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A STORM COMES, AIDEN HUFF?”

Thinking for a moment as a strong gust of wind blows against him, Aiden replies, “YOU MEAN THE STORM OF IAN’S DEATH, DON’T YOU?”

“YES. YOU ARE UNDERSTANDING, I SEE,” Dan shouts as he turns back to brace himself against the same wind.

Within just a few moment, the rain, lightning, and wind stop and the distant clouds part. For just another moment there is silence before a growing, rumbling sound is heard. Looking toward the noise, the two men observe a large wall of creek water swiftly cascading downstream toward them, frothing and roiling, and filled with forest debris. When the oncoming torrent meets the stagnant pool at the dam, the wave of muddy water breaks across the still surface, crashing hard into the wall, only to wash back in the opposite direction. As it does, it meets its own downstream surge with a loud, sloshing resonance, and the obstructed pool of water quickly rises to even deeper depths.

“Do you see, Aiden Huff?” Dan says above the din. “The flood of water from the unexpected storm rises higher behind the blockage and spreads out even farther across the forest grounds. It will now drown out so much more of the beautiful life inside. Do you see?”

Aiden doesn’t answer. Instead, his attention is drawn to the front of the earthen dam. There, he sees the rocks and mud and tree limbs that make up the structure begin to give way under the water’s growing pressure. He can’t turn away from what he knows is coming.

“Yes, Aiden Huff!” says Dan as he sees Aiden’s eyes fixed on the structure. “The dam. What will happen when it -?”

Just as Dan's words purposely drop off, the dam bursts forth with a tremendously loud downstream explosion. Both men are forced to move to higher ground while the muddy torrent rushes past them. As it easily overcomes the banks below the dam, the churning flow of water picks up even more loose branches and small boulders. It submerges the wildflowers in its path, and the debris-filled tsunami gouges huge chunks of bark from the bases of mighty trees as the water bourn rocks violently slam against them.

Almost as quickly as it began, however, the noise abates, and the water recedes back into the eroded banks of the creek. Dan begins walking toward the gully and turns his head along the way, signaling for Aiden to follow.

As they walk together, Dan points to the destroyed dam and says, "Your stream was indeed dammed, Aiden Huff, dis-easing your life both inside and out. Then the storm of Ian came, and yes, your dam held back the flood of heavy, new emotions for some time, did it not? Yet, that only caused more dis-ease and more rot inside. And when your dam finally gave way, it burst forth with such uncontrolled force that it destroyed what ease you had left with your loved ones, your friends, your profession, and your self-esteem."

Looking around for several moments of deep thought, Aiden asks, "The damage is done, but I can regrow like the forest, right?"

"Yes, Aiden Huff. You can indeed return to a state of ease."

"I guess it goes without sayin' I'll never be the same, though, right?"

"You will not be the same. But there can be beautiful ease and harmony, nonetheless. If the stream flows freely, there will no longer be dis-ease."

"You keep sayin' dis-ease. You mean like a disease in my body?"

“It can very well come to that, Aiden Huff, as the mind and body are one. You see, when a mind is not at ease, it is dis-eased. And when in a persistent state of dis-ease, physical illness of some manner often manifests in the form of what you indeed term as a *disease* within the human body.”

Aiden slowly nods his head, looks over to Dan and asks, “So, emotions, huh? Emotional flow? What comes in must go out, right? But men don’t generally show a lotta emotions where I’m from, Dan.”

“Why is that, Aiden Huff?”

“Well, for me, it’s what I was taught since I was a boy, I guess,” says Aiden, who pauses for a moment of thought before continuing, “And if it’s about me talkin’ or cryin’ in front of others over Ian’s death or Molly bein’ gone, I’m afraid I’m still gonna have a hard time with that.”

“Perhaps you misunderstood your youthful teachings, Aiden Huff.”

“How’s that?”

“Emotions, such as those within your losses, are internal. You feel them only in your conscious mind. To acknowledge and healthfully address your difficult feelings, you do not need to express them outwardly.”

“Well, Molly said I was a heartless monster because I wasn’t cryin’. To her, that meant I wasn’t grieving the death of our son, and maybe I didn’t really love him. And I wasn’t far off from believin’ her, either.”

“No, Aiden Huff. She should not equate acknowledging and addressing your emotions with the need to express them before others. Nor should you. Again, emotions are internal, and if you are giving your feeling appropriate attention, it is not unhealthy to only do so internally.”

Thinking through the events of the last year, Aiden asks, “What about people like her who break down a lot and always wanna talk about their feelings? Is that just somethin’ they need to help ‘em get through the bad stuff?”

“Absolutely, Aiden Huff. No two mortals are alike, however. For some, the internal processing of emotions becomes overwhelming and must flow outward. Others may desire the many therapeutic benefits that come with expressing their painful feelings before others. Both are wonderfully helpful, yet not at all required for moving forward. The only true requirement lies in confronting your emotions. If addressing those feelings remains a healthful, internal process alone, then that is fine as well.”

“So, I was okay not bein’ balled up in a fetal position when Ian died, right? And I’m okay now because I have no desire to talk to folks about what hurts?”

“That is yet to be seen, Aiden Huff. At this time, you do not know the answer to that question. Your dam has broken, yet your unhealthy ego continues to throw stones upon your stream.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“Your unhealthy ego fears that if you do display your emotions before others, they will discover that you are not the man you would have them believe you are,” Dan tersely answers.

“So, I’m afraid if I tell others how much it hurts, they’ll think I’m weak. I get that.”

“Correct, Aiden Huff. But there is more that blocks your stream. Your ego also fears that should *you* even acknowledge your own painful emotions, you may indeed find that you are not the man *you* believe you are.”

Aiden drops his head and says, “So, your sayin’ that I’m scared I’m not really who I tell myself I am? If I face my own pains, I might just find out I’m not the man I wanna pretend to be, even to myself.”

“Ah! But what if you are that man, Aiden Huff?”

Aiden nods his head a few times and asks, “So, what can I do to get this ego problem in check? Just tell it to go away? Force myself to shut it down? What?”

Dan turns from the stream and starts to walk away as he says, “We must remove that which clouds your vision of self-worth, Aiden Huff. You must rediscover your true self and a healthy ego.”

“How’ m I gonna do that, Dan?” asks Aiden as he stands still in thought.

Dan continues to walk, turning only his head back to Aiden to say “Come. There are many steps, but first, we must confront a very difficult element that clouds your judgment.”

As Aiden jogs to catch up with Dan, his ears pick up the far-off roar of the familiar bear, followed by the screams of several men.

“Hey! You gotta tell me if those guys are gonna be okay, Dan?”

“Of course, Aiden Huff. My friend means only to teach those young men a valuable life lesson.”

Grinning widely, Aiden asks, “And just what lesson is that, Dan?”

“No man need run faster than the bear, Aiden Huff,” answers Dan with his own smile. “He need only run faster than those beside him.” With that, Dan politely waves his arm toward the capstone entrance to the grotto and says, “Come, Aiden Huff. We go to confront your false anger and rage!”

## JUDGE ME BY MY ENEMIES

*“Everything that happens to us leaves some trace behind; everything contributes imperceptibly to make us what we are.”*

*~ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

**D**escending the carved stone steps from the forest above, Dan turns and moves the large rock back in place as Aiden continues down into the hot spring chamber below. When Dan rejoins him, he finds Aiden kneeling at the stream’s edge with his fingertips just skimming the water’s surface. At the same time, he’s looking up in continued awe at the Fiery Moss that provides the only dim light in the room.

When Dan reaches his side, Aiden half-jokingly asks, “What is it with you and water, Dan? Is it something you spirits just get into or somethin’?”

“Aside from man, Aiden Huff, water is one of God’s most magnificent elements in this dominion. It makes up the majority of your human body as well as the majority of your planet. It exists both in the sky above and the ground below. It can create life, sustain life, and extinguish life.”

Aiden looks up to Dan and cynically says, “Yeah. Like how forty days and forty nights once extinguished life, huh?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. Yet, it is His word that water shall not be used in such ways again.”

Still trailing his fingertips across the stream, Aiden says, "From what I learned, the grottos in these hills were actually carved out by water."

"Yes. It is very powerful, Aiden Huff. In fact, one of your most discerning ancient philosophers, Lao-Tzu, understood the influences of water very well. He taught that nothing in your world is softer than water. It is so soft, in fact, that it cannot ever be damaged or destroyed. Yet, for overcoming the hard and unyielding, such as the stone that is this mountain, nothing is greater. And you, Aiden Huff, would do well to be as water."

Puzzled, Aiden stands and asks, "Me be as water? How's that?"

"Water is gentle, Aiden Huff. Soft. Even so, it does much to transform the hardness around it. To be as water, however, you must first understand it."

"It's water, Dan. What's to understand?"

Dan wryly smiles and says, "I would like you, Aiden Huff, to quickly reach your hand into the stream and grasp a handful of water."

Aiden looks over to Dan with a sarcastic grin, yet kneels to obediently plunge his hand into the stream.

"Grab it now, Aiden Huff. Clinch your hand tightly around the water and bring it to me, please."

Pulling his hand from the stream, Aiden holds his closed fist up before Dan. Bringing his own two hands over, Dan gently pries open Aiden's fingers and together they look at his wet, empty hand.

"It appears you do not hold any water in your tight grasp, Aiden Huff. Now then, leave your hand loose. Be soft like the water and place your open hand into the stream."

Aiden looks at Dan with a smirk and says, "Yeah, Dan. I know I can scoop out water in the cup of my hand."

"Continue to amuse me, Aiden Huff."



Aiden shrugs and reaches down in the water once again to submerge his hand. Removing it and balancing the water in his palm, he lifts his cupped hand for Dan to see.

“Thank you. Drink from it now, Aiden Huff. Take of the energy that the water freely offers.”

After Aiden complies by sipping a bit of the water, Dan instructs, “Now, discard the remainder here on the ground at my feet.”

“Why not just pour it back in the stream?”

“You may, but it does not matter, Aiden Huff. The water will return to source regardless of what you do to it.” Dan then points to the flowing stream and continues, “You see it there, heated to steam which rises and floats away. You have taken water from the stream and consumed it within your body. And, if it is your will, you may carelessly throw the water to the ground. It does not matter. Regardless of what virtues or ills come to pass, water, like spirit, shall always return to source and shall always be.”

Looking at his hand, Aiden tilts it sideways and pours the remaining water back into the stream. Standing, he says, “So, Ian’s gone from here, but he returned to what you say is source, then?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. Ian returned to source.”

“Does he remember what happened to him?”

“Of course. He remembers and cherishes all of his experiences here.”

“How he died?”

“Yes.”

“Was he scared?”

“Only for a brief moment before his spirit was released.”

“Was he in pain?”

“All fear and pain instantly vanished even before Ian transitioned.”

With his eyes beginning to tear, Aiden walks away from the stream and, while looking up to the stone ceiling, says “It hurts me I wasn’t there for him, Dan. Did he know I love him?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. And your unconditional love creates exponential growth in his spirit.”

“Will we be together again?”

“When you transition, Aiden Huff, you will not know a separation with the spirit of Ian.”

“How about here, Dan? Can Ian come back as someone else I’ll know?”

“Perhaps Ian’s spirit shall return in the future, Aiden Huff. The Spirit has free will. Yet, he will not know you in the manner of past incarnations.”

“But you said I’ll be able to connect with Ian’s spirit, right?”

“If you are soft, Aiden Huff. If you do not try to hold him tightly in your grasp.”

With tears freely running down his cheeks, Aiden asks, “Tell me this, Dan. Is Ian happy right now?”

“Joyously. And beyond your means of measure.”

“I miss him bad, though. It hurts. Just being his dad and being there for him, ya know? I guess there’s not a lot I can do for him down here, huh?”

Placing an arm around Aiden’s shoulders, Dan turns and begins to escort him back across the chamber as he replies, “There is something Ian’s spirit would like for you to do, Aiden Huff.”

“What, Dan? Anything!”

Dan stretches out his other arm to direct Aiden around the stream and into an upwardly sloping tunnel. The passage walls are rough as if never touched by tools, but the ceiling is rounded and just high enough to comfortably accommodate the men as they walk single file. The little light from behind the men slowly fades away, and there

are a few footsteps made in the dark before light again appears at the approaching end of the tunnel.

“What is it, Dan?” Aiden impatiently asks as he emerges into a new chamber. “What does Ian want me to do?”

As Dan enters, he stoically replies, “Ian wants you to release your false anger and rage. And we shall do so together, Aiden Huff. We shall do so here in this den.”

Quickly scanning the cave, Aiden finds it lit in similar fashion to some others, with sunlight leaking through brush-covered gaps in the stone ceiling above. It’s a moderately sized, roundish room, with several small boulders strewn across the floor. It doesn’t have the sculptured texture, but to his left, Aiden sees several long and deep cubbies cut into the stone wall. Two of the recessed nooks are layered with pine straw, small tree branches, and leaves, leaving Aiden to believe this to be where Dan sleeps. Spotting the lit screen of Ian’s mobile phone in the lower nook only furthers his hunch.

Moving to the nook, Aiden picks up the phone, points the screen toward Dan and somewhat teasingly says, “I see you’ve been makin’ real good use of my kid’s phone here, Dan. You’re playin’ the Ghosts and Goldmines game, huh? Just how enlightening is that?”

“Yes. I find the challenges to be a pleasing pastime, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden points down at the screen, softly laughs, and says, “This goofy game was Ian’s favorite, ya know? I had to get on him all the time for playin’ this stupid thing and not doin’ his chores or homework.”

“Please do not disturb the device, Aiden Huff,” Dan says in a very anxious tone. “I have achieved levels of completion not reached before and do not wish to begin anew.”

“Okay. Okay,” says Aiden as he lays the phone back down in the cubby.

Moving to sit on a boulder near the center of the chamber, Dan motions for Aiden to sit on another across from him.

Getting down to matters at hand, Dan begins, “You must remove the shroud that blocks your vision of self-worth, Aiden Huff. Only then will you be able to grow in unconditional love. Only then may you move to the next task and thereby forward to a life of peace and purpose.”

Looking down, Aiden rubs the back of his neck and says, “This whole moving forward thing, Dan? I don’t wanna move forward if it means I’ve gotta get over Ian. I don’t wanna leave him behind and forget about him.”

“You do not get over, forget, or leave Ian behind in moving forward. But you cannot go back, Aiden Huff. There is only moving forward in your journey. And you do so while knowing that Ian is a treasured facet of who you were, who you are, and who you will become.”

Somewhat appeased, Aiden looks to Dan and asks, “So, how do we get rid of whatever blocks me from bein’ me?”

“We begin with your anger, Aiden Huff.”

“But there’s so much in me, Dan. Too many things have got me mad. And it seems like I gotta right to be, ya know?”

“Anger is a natural and healthy reaction to loss, Aiden Huff. But it is the false anger that leads to the rage we confront inside you now.”

“I don’t get this false anger thing. I’ve got a lot of things goin’ on that anyone would be mad about, ya know? And for good reason.”

“Tell me of them then, Aiden Huff.”

“Well, hell. You know, Dan, Ian’s gone. That’s a start, *ya think?*” Aiden says with a little anguish beginning to come through.

Feigning an anxious tone to purposely incite Aiden to more anger, Dan quickly replies, “Yes. And the death of Ian has created so many other losses in your life, has it not, Aiden Huff?”

“Yeah. I lost my job, and then Molly. I lost myself too. All I was and all I was gonna be.” Aiden lets out even more angst as he finishes with, “Gone, Dan. Just like that. *So, yeah. It pisses me off, alright?*”

Unnoticed by Aiden, the light in the cave slowly dims as Dan aggressively comes back, “And all of your tragedy was caused by one thing. Was it not, Aiden Huff?”

“*Yeah! Ian’s death, okay?*” an even angrier Aiden responds as the cave light dims even more.

“And Ian’s death was an unfortunate accident, Aiden Huff?”

“*No. It was no accident.*”

“So, Ian did this purposely.”

“*Oh, no. He had nothing to do with this. Don’t you dare say that.*”

“If this was no accident, Aiden Huff, and Ian did not do so purposely, then tell me now what caused his death?”

Standing and pointing at Dan, a now enraged Aiden yells out, “**AN ABOMINATION OF GOD, DAN! A RUTHLESS, HEARTLESS, THREE CLAWED MONSTER THAT TORE MY BOY AND MY WORLD APART FOR NO DAMNED REASON!**”

Except for Aiden’s heavy breathing, there are several seconds of silence in the cave. As he slightly calms, he takes his first notice that the room is now completely dark and finds it best to sit back down on the boulder he knows is behind him. Speaking slowly, and just above a whisper in the darkness, he still adds, “And I promise ya, Dan, I’m gonna hunt that demon down and kill it if it’s the last thing I do.”

Suddenly, a loud, shrieking scream rips through the air in the pitch-black chamber, and Aiden instantly knows what’s making the blood-chilling sound. It’s a female cougar and she’s there in the cave with him. She’s close. Too close. But try as he might, he can’t see her in the dark. Instinctively, he unholsters his pistol and draws it out in front, although he has no idea where to aim. Then, as if someone suddenly

flipped a switch, light rapidly refills the chamber and Aiden's heart skips a beat. He's now staring across the cave at two cougars standing on either side of the boulder where Dan sits. Neither cat is advancing, but the one on the left locks in on Aiden, lowers its front legs and lets out another loud screech. Even in the anxiety of the moment, he knows from the scream-like sound that she's female. He can also tell the other is male, and no more than a yearling. Although slightly larger than her, this one can't muster much more than a loud purr-like sound in his growl as he aggressively swipes a paw in the air toward Aiden.

After just a moment of screeching, growling and pawing, Dan leans forward on the boulder and lowers the palm of his hands before the face of each cat. They both instantly go quiet and sit back on their haunches as the female serenely looks over at Dan. The young male calms but keeps his amber eyes deftly locked on Aiden. Looking across the chamber, Dan swiftly raises a hand toward Aiden, who oddly feels compelled to holster his pistol. Peering down at the female by his side, he lightly pats his thigh and she responds by standing and slowly stretching her right leg out across his lap.

"Here is your anger, Aiden Huff," Dan coolly says as he holds the cat's paw up to show Aiden that she only has three claws. "Here is your rage."

Seeing the three claws, fury instantly drives Aiden to rise and go for his pistol again. In response, the young cat snaps to all fours and lowers his front legs to pounce. Neither has a chance to act, however, before Dan swiftly raises a hand in the air and both are strangely swayed to sit back down. Aiden's sight, though, remains fixed with hatred on the female cougar.

"What the hell, Dan? This is the cat. This is the filthy beast that slaughtered my boy. Did you bring it here?"

Dan allows the female to sit back on her haunches before he replies, “No, Aiden Huff. We are in her den here within the grotto. And I brought you here to make peace with your anger.”

“Oh, no, buddy,” Aiden angrily snaps back. “I’m not makin’ peace here. Not with that thing. I’m not the one who kills for no reason.”

“But you kill for the *wrong* reasons. Is that correct, Aiden Huff?”

“You mean that cougar I took out? Yeah. I wish it’d been her. But I damn sure hope it was someone she loved, at least.”

“It was, indeed, Aiden Huff. It was her mate,” Dan answers and then points to the other cougar as he continues, “And this young lion’s father.”

With his rage not sated, Aiden quickly responds, “You better get on with this, spirit man. Whatever hocus-pocus you got goin’ on in my mind ain’t gonna last forever, *and then I’m takin’ this evil, hate-filled bitch out.*”

Casually stroking between the female’s ears, Dan asks, “Was it not you, Aiden Huff, who recently informed another that animals do not kill out of hate? I recall that you said animals kill only to survive, correct?”

“Yeah. So?” Aiden snarls back. “Maybe this one got sick. Went nuts. I don’t know. Maybe she’s done it before and has a taste for it now. Chances are, she’ll do it again and kill someone else’s helpless kid.”

Looking down at the yearling, Dan says, “She had another female cub along with this youngster, Aiden Huff. However, she would lose that precious child on the very same morning that you would lose yours.”

“She’s an animal, Dan. I don’t give a damn if we share a birthday. We ain’t bonding here, her and me!”

Dan stands, walks slowly toward Aiden and speaks in a quiet, yet animated manner, “On that early morning, Aiden Huff, this new mother was teaching her young cubs to hunt for food in the darkness. As journeys may sometimes intersect, a great horned owl was also hunting the forest at the same time. Perhaps mistaking the small cub for his usual prey, he dove at the moment the young one strayed only slightly from her mother. With nothing more than the sound of rushing wind, the owl sank his long talons deep into the innocent cub and lifted this mother’s dear child away forever.”

Looking over to the cat with only slight empathy, Aiden softly says, “Yeah, that’s gotta be tough. I’m sorry for her, but where does Ian come into this, Dan?”

Stepping around to stand behind him, Dan places both hands on Aiden’s shoulders and softly continues, “The unanticipated weight of the cub would prove too much for the owl, Aiden Huff, and he was forced to release her high above Ian’s tent. When awakened by the cub’s fall to Earth, your child came out of his shelter to investigate and found a broken, bleeding cub lying helplessly before him. Being the compassionate spirit that he is, Ian could not resist taking the precious, dying creature in his arms.”

Leaving Aiden, Dan walks back across the chamber. He sits cross-legged on the floor beside the mother and strokes the back of her neck, purposely leaving Aiden to a moment of thought.

Looking down, Aiden slowly shakes his head and whispers only to himself, “Why, Ian? Why? I taught you never go near a wounded animal in the woods. You knew better. You just knew better, son.”

“Perhaps you have already presumed the rest, Aiden Huff. Once the poor cub fell to Earth, this frantic mother immediately picked up on her child’s scent and was fast on the trail. Unfortunately, she would come upon Ian just as he lifted her bloodied and lifeless child. And yes, Aiden Huff, this mother struck! She perceived her child was in



danger and struck just as any parent would strike. No malice. No hate. No evil. There was only the primal instinct to save her child. Survival, Aiden Huff.”

As Dan finishes telling the tragic story, there are a few moments of silence before a somber Aiden asks, “Did she figure out it wasn’t Ian who killed her child?”

“She indeed detected the smell of the owl that morning yet was left only with the knowledge of what her eyes revealed at the time.” Turning his eyes to look into those of the purring female, Dan continues, “It was not until I recently communicated with her that she would become aware of the facts of that morning, and she was truly saddened.”

Aiden then lifts his own eyes to look over at the cougar. From across the chamber, she looks back at him and both seem to share some unspoken acknowledgment of the unfortunate events that brought them together this day in the grotto.

Still looking at her, Aiden asks, “Does she know it was me that killed her mate?”

“She does, Aiden Huff. She went in search of her missing mate not long after you slew him. His scent led to his lifeless body within your barn.”

“Yeah. I guess that’s why I’ve seen her watching me from the wood line every now and then. Is she looking at getting’ back at me?”

“No, Aiden Huff. Let go of the rage and recall your beliefs. Animals do not kill for hate or revenge.”

“Then why’s she been watching me?”

“Survival, Aiden Huff. She watches to learn avoidance of you and your kind. Man has hunted her species to what you believe is extinction within these mountains and she watches to learn of your ways so that she and her offspring may continue to survive.”

“How *does* she survive, Dan? Not many of us know they’re out there.”

“Since the arrival of what you deem *western* civilization, many unsettled mortals and beasts have taken refuge in these and other hidden grottos, Aiden Huff.”

“They hide from us,” Aiden acknowledges before getting back to the moment, “So, what happens now, Dan? Are we supposed to just forgive and forget?”

Dan rises from the cat’s side and again sits on his boulder before saying, “You will both forgive, Aiden Huff, but you will not forget. The best you will do is respect one another. You know that she is a beast of the forest and will do whatever it takes to survive. It is within her nature. She knows you are human, and you not only kill to survive, but also kill out of hate, anger, revenge, and even entertainment. It is within your nature.”

As Dan’s words trail off, the mother cat stands and, to Aiden’s surprise, walks slowly toward him. Seeing her head slightly lowered, he senses no aggression and comfortably lowers his own. She nears and brushes the side of her face against his with a raspy purr before pulling back to look him directly in the eyes. After a brief moment of sharing more unspoken thought, she slowly pulls back, turns to leap the entire width of the chamber, and swiftly vanishes through a dark passage. After watching her depart, the yearling stands and attempts one more aggressive purr-growl and paw swipe at Aiden before bounding after his mother.

“Well, I guess he’s not as forgiving as she is,” Aiden says with a soft laugh.

Dan stands from his boulder and replies, “Remember your own youth, Aiden Huff. Sometimes aggression only conceals one’s lack of wisdom. Now, come! Hannah waits outside.”

“Wait! What? Look, I get what happened with the cougar here. It was really cool and all, but I’m not sure it’s just instantly gonna zap all my anger away.”

Placing a hand on Aiden’s shoulder to guild him toward the passage, Dan replies, “Yes, Aiden Huff. You have carried this false-anger and rage with you for some time now. It has become a very hard component of who you are. Now, you must let it be who you were.”

“How, Dan? How?”

“Be soft as the water, Aiden Huff. Let the thoughts of today gently flow against the unyielding rage in your mind this evening and beyond.”

Aiden drops his heads, shakes it a few times, but then laughs before responding, “So you’re tellin’ me to just sleep on it, then. Great. But listen, you’ve really gotta tell me what’s with you and Hannah now? You said she’s out there waitin’ for me?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. I told her when to return for you. More importantly, she has also learned of a path that avoids the now heavily watched mountain trails. I suggest you allow the beautiful Hannah to guide you home undetected.”

The two men make their way through the grotto chambers and up to the forest floor. As they emerge, Hannah nickers when she sees them and turns her side to ease Aiden’s mount.

“You know Dan, somethin’s already botherin’ me.”

“You need fault, Aiden Huff. I feel it in you. If there is no other to blame for a profound and traumatic event in your life, you are compelled to find yourself at fault, are you not?”

Nodding his head, Aiden says, “Exactly. I’ve always wondered if there was maybe somethin’ I could’ve said or done, or maybe not done, that would’ve stopped Ian from dying.”

“For a man of your wisdom, this should not be a thought, Aiden Huff. But I understand. While you are contemplating this evening, and

from here forward, you must recognize that there was nothing you did which caused the passing of Ian, nor anything you could have done to prevent it.”

Aiden lowers his shoulders a bit, sighs, and responds, “I don’t know, Dan. It just eats at me, I guess.”

“Do not feed your desire to erroneously appoint blame, Aiden Huff. Especially in assigning blame to yourself. It shall wrongly slow your progress in moving forward.”

Placing a boot in the stirrup, Aiden launches his body up into the saddle and says to Hannah, “Well, girl. I hear I’m gonna be *your* passenger again. Whenever you’re ready, missy, let’s go home.”

As Hannah begins to walk, Dan says from behind, “Until tomorrow, Aiden Huff.”

Turning quickly in the saddle, Aiden responds, “Tomorrow? I thought you were all big on Thursdays in the grotto.”

“Aiden Huff! We both know you will not wait until then, do we not? And that is fine. I have specific intentions for Danuwoa tonight, and tomorrow you may assist me in further moving his spirit forward toward salvation.”

“So, I’ll see if Molly can join me, then.”

“No, Aiden Huff. Thursday is for you and for Molly. Tomorrow is for Danuwoa and for you. Tonight, is solely for Danuwoa.”

Aiden turns forward in Hannah’s saddle but says loud enough for Dan to hear, “You’re not foolin’ anyone, my friend. You’ve got a big night lined up playin’ Ghosts and Goldmines on that phone. You spirits aren’t much different from my kid, ya know? Stuck on those stupid games!”

Without another word, Aiden and Hannah push slowly into the thick woods at the edge of the wildflower covered forest. While man and horse can’t get in the wind today, another far off roar of a watchful

bear, and the faint screams of unwary, camouflaged men, allows for an uneventful, if not somewhat amusing, ride home.

## BYWAYS AND ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS

*“I searched for God and found only myself. I searched for myself and found only God.”*

*~ Jalal al-Din Rumi*

**S**tarting his Wagoneer, Aiden steers it down the long, dirt driveway from his house. When he comes to the paved road, he takes a left turn to head down the mountain for town. He drives through the quiet streets of an early Monday morning and pulls into the parking lot of Kelly’s Point Grocery. Heading straight back to the few standing freezers, he opens a glass door and pulls out a boxed cheese pizza. On his way to the front register, he walks down the snack aisle and grabs a bag of barbeque flavored potato chips.

“Mornin’, Linda,” Aiden says as he lays the pizza and chips on the counter.

Linda pleasantly smiles and replies, “Well, hello there, Aiden. Always good to see ya.”

“You too, ma’am.”

Looking down at the items, Linda snickers and says, “I gotta say, hon, all these years you told me you were comin’ in here buyin’ this stuff for your boy, God rest his soul. I guess I see who’s been the junk food lover all along, huh?”

“Now, you know me, Miss Linda,” Aiden responds while handing her some cash. “I’m not big on this stuff. I’m just helpin’

someone out who's a little needy, is all? And if it was good enough for Ian, then it's good for this fella too, I reckon."

Digging in the register drawer, Linda leans forward with Aiden's change and glibly asks, "Are you tryin' to help this poor fella out, sugar, or tryin' to raise his blood pressure?"

"Everything in moderation, ma'am," Aiden replies as he takes his change and food before nodding farewell with a pleasant smile.

Returning home, Aiden heads to the kitchen and cooks the pizza in the oven. When it's done, he cuts it into slices and vacuum seals the pieces in plastic bags before tossing them, along with the bag of chips, into a small backpack. He figures that if Dan wants pizza and chips, today would be a good day to bring them. He'll pick up another week's worth of freeze-dried camp food before Thursday's trip to the grotto with Molly. When he tosses the pack over one shoulder to head out, however, he hears the sound of car tires coming up his drive. Moving through the house to the front door, he spots the familiar black pickup truck of Deputy Marshals Cassell and Kerns coming to a stop.

"Mornin', fellas," says Aiden with a smirk as he steps out onto the porch. "I just got in from town. If I'd known you were comin' I would've, well, would've probably just stayed there, really."

Almost simultaneously, Cassell and Kerns open their truck doors, step out, and quickly move to the porch steps to look up at Aiden.

"He got another one, Huff," Cassell blurts out. "Damned savage you won't help us with got another little girl last night."

With his heart thumping and blood rushing to his face, Aiden stutters out, "Who? What're you talkin' about?"

"Jenny Lynn Porter," a disgusted Kerns answers. "She didn't come home from bartending over at Ernie's Pub last night. Her husband went over there this morning and found pieces of her clothes

all over the back lot. Her car was still there too, and damn if it wasn't covered in blood."

"And you think it's your guy?"

"He's killed before, Aiden," Cassell answers. "My guess is once he got loose, it didn't take long before he'd have to feed again."

"I don't know. Seems he's got a lot to lose coming down from these hills."

"Well, at least now you're admitting you think he's up here, Huff," Kerns says. "Now help us find this piece of trash, pal."

"Well, he could be up here, I reckon. But maybe he's hanging around town somewhere and that's why ya can't find him. You're focused too much on the mountains."

"Well, hell, Huff," Kerns snaps back. "Me and Cassell here got it all figured out with you, man. You wanna find this killer yourself and bring him in, don't ya? You're thinkin' it'll get your damned job back, right?"

Cassell chimes in, "And it's gonna get you killed, Aiden. We know you've been out there in the woods. A lot, too. You're just good at ditching our guys, is all."

"Well, heck, Deputy. I'm not tryin' to ditch anybody. Seems to me those boys you got out there just don't know how to stay on the trails, is all."

Pointing at Aiden, Cassell gruffly says, "You keep goin' after this guy yourself, you won't get your job back, Aiden. You'll get dead, is what you'll get."

"I'm retired, Deputy, not stupid. And I fully intend to stay both ways." With that, Aiden opens the screen door and walks back inside his house, while Cassell and Kerns disdainfully walk back to their truck and climb inside.

"Aiden?" Cassell calls out through his open truck window.



Returning to look through the screen door, Aiden answers, “Yeah?”

“We’ve got more surveillance tech comin’ in. And more men to watch the mountains. And you too! It’s for your own good, ya know?”

Turning without a word, Aiden walks across his living room and into the kitchen as he listens for the sound of the truck driving away. When he hears Cassell gas the engine and spin his tires on the asphalt of the mountain road, he sprints for the barn. Inside, he quickly tends to Hannah and sets her free in the fenced field. He then moves to the far end of the barn and spins the padlock combination on a storage room door. Once inside, he mounts and starts his four-wheel-drive ATV and steers it out of the doors. Taking a look around his property’s perimeter and finding no one watching, at least no one he can see, he guns the ATV and enters the forest. Taking the more concealed route through the thick woods that brought him home yesterday, he has no problem quickly traversing the grounds on the small four-wheeler.

As he breaks into the wildflower covered forest, Aiden surprisingly spots Dan standing next to the grotto capstone. When he draws near, he skids to a stop and nearly leaps off his ATV. “WHAT HAPPENED, DAN?” Aiden angrily shouts as he walks toward Dan, pointing a finger at his face the entire time. “You let this Danuwoa piece of crap take over last night, didn’t you? He went down the mountain and killed someone, didn’t he? *Didn’t he?*”

Dan only smiles and replies, “You should wear a protective helmet when you operate such a machine, Aiden Huff.”

“Stop it, Dan. Tell me what the hell happened?”

“Calm yourself, Aiden Huff. A matrimonial bond was violated. That is all.”

“What?”

Dan walks by Aiden and curiously looks at the ATV as he speaks, “You are referring to the young woman who did not come home from her place of employment, are you not, Aiden Huff?”

“You know damned well I am, Dan. Now tell me what you did? Or Danuwoa did? You may not be capable of killing, but he damned sure is.”

Turning from the ATV to look at Aiden, Dan calmly responds, “I have not departed the grotto since I saw you last, Aiden Huff. And the young woman has been located. If you check with your *resources*, you will find she is physically unharmed and back at home.”

Pulling his phone from his pocket, Aiden looks at the screen and says, “I’ve got no signal, Dan. I can’t confirm a damned thing out here.”

“Indeed. Not on *your* device, Aiden Huff,” says Dan as he pulls Ian’s phone from his shirt pocket and holds it out. “I dampen your signal when you are near so it cannot be used to locate you. You may, however, use mine.”

“You mean Ian’s,” Aiden says as he takes the phone and looks at the screen. “It’s got a full signal! But who’s to say they won’t track this phone?”

“The signal I employ cannot be discovered by your technology, Aiden Huff.”

Pulling the business card from his wallet, Aiden dials the phone number of Deputy Cassell.

“Deputy Cassell here. Who’s this?”

“It’s Aiden Huff, Deputy. I’m hearing some things on this missing girl. Fill me in.”

“What the hell, Aiden?” replies an agitated Cassell. “You’re callin’ me on an untraceable burner phone and demanding sensitive information on a crime? Where are you? You’re not at home, I know that.”

Frustrated, Aiden ignores the questions and continues, “Dammit, Cassell, I’m hearing this girl is safe. Just talk to me, dammit.”

“Easy, Aiden,” Cassell says, and then deeply sighs before going on, “Yeah, fine. She’s home, okay? Seems she closed up last night at the pub and got a little frisky with some yocal in the back parking lot. This guy had fresh stitches on his hand from a work accident, too. Apparently, when the clothes started coming off, so did his stitches. Turns out it was his blood found all over her car.”

“Where was *she* found?”

With a somewhat restrained chuckle, Cassell answers, “Word I got is they stumbled just down the road to his place and fell asleep after a drunken lovefest. The rest, I’m sure, will be public record in the divorce case.”

Without replying to Cassell, Aiden ends the call and hands the phone back to Dan. “Well, thankfully she’s okay. I guess I owe ya an apology. Or Danuwoa. Or somebody, darn it!”

Dan puts a hand on Aiden’s shoulder and replies, “You do not, Aiden Huff. It was a logical assumption. Come. Let us go into the grotto and perhaps I can enjoy some of the tasteful food that you have brought for me.”

“Boy, I can’t get anything by you, can I? What about my four-wheeler, though? Should I just leave it here?”

Waving an arm toward the grotto entrance, Dan answers, “It shall go undetected, Aiden Huff.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I have seen to it.”

Stepping in first, Aiden begins his flight down the stone steps as Dan moves the boulder back in place over their heads. Entering the hot spring chamber, Aiden pensively looks around the room as if expecting to find a cougar, or maybe even an over-sized bear, just lazily lounging somewhere inside. Dan enters the room just as Aiden’s attention goes

back to the stream and the moments he shared not so long ago with his son's spirit.

"Now, Aiden Huff. I would be overjoyed to share in the delightful food that you have brought for me. May I have it please?"

Removing his backpack, Aiden pulls out the bagged pizza and chips before holding them out and saying, "Maybe you can dunk these bags down in the hot spring water for a while and heat the pizza up a little. The bags'll keep it dry."

"Nonsense! Cheese pizza is best when served cold."

Moving across the chamber toward a passage unfamiliar to Aiden, Dan steps inside and signals for him to follow. Within only a short walk, the two men emerge into a small cave with very little light shining from above. The ceiling is domed, while the walls are flat and almost square at the floor and four corners. The only items within the chamber are two moderately sized boulders. Each one sits against opposing walls and have obviously been sculpted by some type of tool to resemble very crude armchairs. Taking a seat in one, Dan motions for Aiden to take the other and then opens the bag of potato chips. Reaching in and then placing just a single chip in his mouth, he closes his eyes as he chews and lets out a soft moan. Opening his eyes again, he plunges his hand back in the bag, pulls out a handful of chips, and stuffs them in his mouth. Chewing much like a cow chews cud, he leans forward with the bag in one hand and shakes it several times toward Aiden. Smiling, Aiden only raises a hand to politely decline the offer.

"I fail to understand how you do not desire such wonderful flavor upon your pallet, Aiden Huff."

"I've never been a big fan. But barbeque was Ian's favorite and I figured I couldn't go wrong with his taste over mine. I must be right, huh? You seem to love cold pizza just like him, too."

“Oh, undoubtedly, Aiden Huff,” says Dan as he closes the chip bag and sets it down beside the stone armchair. “But everything in moderation, no?”

As Aiden watches Dan put the bag away, he asks, “So, you had some stuff you were doing with Danuwoa last night and said I might help today?”

“Yes! I have determined that the past life of Danuwoa may be mutually beneficial. I would like to discuss that, and more, with you here today. I must warn you, however, it will indeed be a great deal for you to *absorb*, as you might say. Do you believe you are prepared?”

Taking a quick and somewhat nervous look around the room, Aiden answers, “Heck, I guess, Dan. I know I’d like to know more about ‘em. And I hate to sound rude, but especially if it’s gonna help me. So, yeah, I say bring it on.”

“Then I most certainly shall, Aiden Huff. Now, to better understand the life and spirit of Danuwoa, you must first better understand truth. And truth only comes from a better understanding of the One.”

Just as Dan’s words trail off, what little light comes from the ceiling above begins to fade. As the cave reaches total darkness, a panoramic view of the cosmos slowly begins to spread across the chamber walls and ceiling. Thousands of points of light begin to twinkle against the now black stone and cast a glow on the grotto floor. Aiden can see the milky, cloud-like views of far off galaxies, stars, planets, and even meteorites randomly streaking across the scenes before him. In the center of the cave, a small, white ball of light suddenly begins to form between the two men. As the intensity of the light continues to grow, Aiden must turn his head to avoid the uncomfortable glare. Soon, the pure light becomes so brilliant that he shields his eyes in the crook of his arm.

“This is the closest I can come to showing you the One, Aiden Huff. The Holy Spirit. God.”

“Show me what? I can’t see anything, Dan. It’s blinding!”

“Yes. Your mind is not fully capable of the concept. I will modify the vision for you.”

Peering over his arm again, Aiden finds the glare from the light has now considerably toned down. While it takes him several more seconds to adjust his sight, he soon begins to closely study the floating orb. After a moment, Aiden asks, “This is God?”

“God is pure energy and love, Aiden Huff. God is everything and everywhere. There is no visualization that can be accurately presented to you here. However, this representation will suffice for our purposes.”

Leaning in and squinting his eyes at the orb, Aiden asks, “What are all those little specks of light comin’ and goin’ real fast?”

“Those are spirit who temporarily dispatch from the One. Some are leaving. Some are returning.”

“Ah. Back and forth to Earth.”

“Yes. Earth and an undefinable number of other dominions created by God.”

“Other planets?”

“There are some. Yet, there are also innumerable domains of existence created by God that do not fit into your physical reality.”

Aiden pauses in thought and then asks, “But why leave, Dan? Why separate from God and go anywhere?”

“God is love. And through His love, He gives unconditionally, including free will to the One. Now, understand, Aiden Huff, that the Holy Spirit is the *One* and it is every *One* at the same time. While no *one* can truly separate from God, every *one* has the free will to journey throughout any of His domains for the purpose of growing in unconditional love.”

Aiden stands, scratches his head, and moves toward the ball of light. He has an urge to reach out and touch it in hopes it'll help him better understand. With his hand easily passing through the orb, Aiden says, "The Father, God, and the Holy Spirit, the One. What about Jesus, the Son?"

"The spirit of Jesus remains at the Father's side for now."

"So, he's a special spirit like you."

"Oh, no, Aiden Huff. The Son once came at God's command to be the savior of all mankind. While each in this domain are equally precious to the Father, I am afraid you do not rise to quite such a spiritual difficulty."

"Got it. But you say my spirit, you, Danuwoa, Ian, everyone, are all part of the One. The Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit is also ...?"

"God, Aiden Huff," Dan enthusiastically answers.

"And my spirit is part of the Holy Spirit? The One?"

"Yes."

"And the Holy Spirit is a part of God?"

"Yes, Aiden Huff."

"So, the spirit inside of me is God."

"Yes."

"I'm God?"

"Yes, Aiden Huff."

"Well," Aiden says with a laugh, "I don't see it goin' real well when I tell 'em down at the bank to give me better rates 'cause I'm God."

"No. Many are not so enlightened in His ways."

"*His* ways? I gotta ask, then, is God a man?"

"Pure energy and love can have no gender, Aiden Huff. Mankind, however, has free will of perception and generally perceives God as paternal, just as you perceive your home rests within the bosom

of Mother Mountain, do you not? You see the beauty as feminine and maternal."

Returning to his seat on the flat stone, Aiden asks, "Okay, so how do we end up with the likes of Danuwoa here? Was it his spirit's free will to come down here and be a monster?"

"No, Aiden Huff. While there are actually many of spirit who choose to experience a tragic or malevolent existence here, that was not the path that Danuwao had planned."

"So, you can actually choose your life here on Earth, good *or* bad?"

"Yes. The great majority of spirit will select a planned life based on the growth they wish to experience. However, there are some who choose to incarnate only to assist in the growth of another embodied spirit. Then there are others, like me, who come as direct emissaries of the One, although indeed very rare. To do so, I have temporarily incarnated alongside the spirit that embodies Danuwoa, but only until the completion of my task."

"Incarnated? You've said that before. So, we do reincarnate? We keep comin' back after we die?"

"You may do so if you wish. You have free will. Yet, there are so many other wonderful dominions to experience."

Aiden looks down to the ground and thinks for a moment before asking, "Ian, Dan? Can you tell me what *his* plans were?"

Standing and walking to Aiden's side of the cave, Dan sits on the stone arm beside him and says, "No, Aiden Huff. But I can tell you that Ian never strayed from his planned path."

"So, Ian's plan was to only be here eighteen short years and then poof, just like that, leave us all hurtin' while he goes back to the spirit world?"

"No. Ian did not make it to the end of his sojourn."

"Wait. I thought all this was planned in advance?"



“Yes. Planned, Aiden Huff. However, there are times the journey may end before the anticipated conclusion.”

“I don’t understand, Dan.”

“You often plan to make a long journey in your automobile, do you not? Yet, are there not times when your travels are interrupted?”

Dan then stands and walks to the orb in the center of the cave. He extends his hand and catches a quick-moving light speck on the very tip of his finger and holds it out in front of Aiden’s eyes. As Aiden’s sight focuses in on the dot, Dan continues, “In a dominion full of free will, one might encounter a wayward traveler, take a poorly chosen detour, or even meet with an unforeseen incident along the way. Ian’s journey, Aiden Huff, met with an unforeseen incident.”

“So, what you’re sayin’ is sometimes really bad stuff just happens to good people. Is that it?”

“Precisely, Aiden Huff.”

Aiden drops his head, and as his eyes begin to well with tears, he asks, “So, is Ian disappointed that his time here was cut short?”

Bending down, Dan takes Aiden by the shoulders and pulls him to his feet. In an emotionally uncharacteristic voice, he answers, “No, Aiden Huff! With you and his mother, Ian’s spirit grew in unconditional love far beyond his own hopes. He loves you both in heights he had never experienced elsewhere in his spiritual existence. You must remember that the journey *was* the destination for Ian, and I can assure you he is not disappointed.”

Crying while listening to the words of Ian’s love, Aiden can’t stop the impulsive urge to reach out and grab Dan in a tight hug. Pulling back after the feeling washes over, Aiden looks to him and notices tears running down from *his* eyes as well.

“We must speak now of Danuwoa Ross, Aiden Huff,” says Dan as he hastily sits down and turns for a moment to conceal his tears.

Doing the same on his side of the chamber, Aiden can't contain one last snuffle as he says, "Yeah. Tell me please."

With the wave of his hand, the glowing white orb in the center of the room fades away and Dan begins, "The spirit that now embodies Danuwoa came again in your time to experience a second incarnation among the proud culture of the Cherokee Nation. Yet, very early in his travels, Danuwoa would intersect with another embodied spirit who had grossly strayed from his own path. The enticement of evil became too powerful for Danuwoa and he, too, strayed."

"And straying from the path is a bad thing?" I thought we all had free will?"

As Aiden's words finish, Dan waves a hand again and the image of a vast street map displays across the cave. On the map, a long, blue line extends from one red dotted location to another across the wall.

Dan looks to the map and says, "Let us call it a route, for now, Aiden Huff, and not a plan. As you see, there is a beginning and an ending destination to the chosen route. But as you also see, there are many alternate routes along the way, are there not?"

"Yeah, I get it. There's highways and byways. A direct route and lots of sideroads. The sideroads just take a little longer to get where you're goin', right?"

"Correct. Some sideroads are much more problematic and far more difficult to travel. Some, however, can be tremendously exciting, and an unplanned detour or occasional alternate route can add great value to one's growth. Or it may detract from it, as well. And some sideroads, Aiden Huff, can lead so far off the main route that it is not possible to find one's way back."

"We map it out before we come though, right? So, don't spirits already know which routes to take when they get here?"

“Yes and no, Aiden Huff. Once your spirit embodies within a mortal, you are no longer aware of the route. You are no longer aware of the plan.”

“Well, how does that make any sense? Map out my trip, get in the car, and chuck the map out the window. Gonna be a good drive, huh?”

Dan broadly smiles and says, “Ah, but coming here as spirit and knowing the plan would remove the original desire to grow in love from the experience, Aiden Huff. If you already know the growth of the journey when you incarnate, why do so? To put it simply, you arrive here at the beginning and are pointed in the proper direction. It is because of this that the journey truly *becomes* the destination.”

“And I can choose to take the highway or get off on a byway and see the world’s biggest ball of yarn, right?”

Slightly nodding, Dan answers, “A wonderful way of putting it, Aiden Huff. Free will. But you should largely keep the journey to the planned route.”

Changing his glance from the map to Dan, Aiden asks, “So, are you here to get Danuwoa back on his route?”

“If possible, Aiden Huff. Unfortunately, Danuwoa may have detoured so far off the main route that there is no return. If that is the case, he will forever remain separated from the One.”

“Whaddya mean? His spirit can’t go back?”

Returning to a compassionate smile, Dan replies, “The singular purpose of any incarnation by spirit is to progress toward higher levels of unconditional love. When spirit and the mortal have transgressed in ways that are so far against love, such as with Danuwoa, spirit cannot rejoin with the One. Hate simply cannot exist in love, Aiden Huff.”

“So, he’d be stuck here. But what happens when Danuwoa dies, then? When his body dies?”

“His spirit will exist in Purgatory, Aiden Huff. He will not be able to return to the One. Instead, the disembodied spirit shall forever roam this dominion unseen, unable to interact with others, and unable to feel love for eternity.”

“A ghost?” asks Aiden.

“No. A detached, disembodied spirit.”

“And that is Hell?”

“A true Hell. Yes, Aiden Huff.”

“So, the spirit of every evil person that ever existed on Earth is doomed to Hell when they die?”

“No, Aiden Huff. Remember that some of spirit embody only to assist others in their journey. Should that include intentionally incarnating as one who hates or does evil deeds in support of another’s spiritual growth, well, that is certainly within His allowable purposes. Danuwoa’s spirit, however, was here for good intent, but fell too deeply within the addictions of hate.”

“He took a dead-end street then, huh?”

“You may say so, Aiden Huff.”

“So, is he pretty much headed for Hell, then?”

“Not if I am properly intervening. You see, I have been allowed special privilege to make yet another attempt at turning Danuwoa’s spirit from hate.”

“So, you called in favors, huh?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff,” Dan answers as he softly laughs. “If you must refer to it that way. I, too, have free will.”

“So why him? I imagine there are millions of other lost souls down here on Earth. Why Danuwoa?”

“Quite simple. I have a fondness for Danuwoa’s spirit. A long time ago in your years, his spirit and I closely interacted while embodied in this dominion.”

“So, you two have a past?”

“Yes. And I admit that I have previously attempted and failed to aid the salvation of Danuwoa’s spirit. This, therefore, is my last shot, as you would say.”

“What happened before?”

Dan slightly bows his head and answers, “Not so long ago, I incarnated as a mortal when it became apparent that Danuwoa had strayed. The plan was for me to intersect with him at a point in the future when I would intuitively know to help him.”

“What happened?”

“Danuwoa’s addiction to hate expanded much faster than anticipated. It would not matter, however, as my earthly existence would come to an early and unexpected end. Therefore, I recently solicited the One for more direct intervention, and my plea was granted.”

“So, how am I tied into all of this?”

“Your spirit is also closely connected to Danuwoa, Aiden Huff, and it is beneficial for you to find out how. It will also aid Danuwoa’s spirit in finding salvation. Will you further aid us?”

A little shocked at hearing he’s directly tied to Danuwoa, Aiden says, “Anything, Dan. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

“It shall *take* only the discovery of your past, for now, Aiden Huff. Let us simply share and revisit the unconditional love of that past. Shall we?”

With another wave of Dan’s hand, the cave goes dark. Graphic depictions of the mountain ranges slowly materialize across the small chamber walls. Sitting back in the stone armchair, Dan begins, “In the year 1818, your forefather, Aiden Joseph Huff, was the first in your family lineage to dwell within these mountains.”

“Yeah,” Aiden jumps in. “The family refers to him as Pappa Huff.”

Nodding his acknowledgment, Dan says, “He would also become a well-respected neighbor and trusted friend to many of the

Cherokee clan who also dwelled here at that time. Were you aware of that, Aiden Huff?"

"Sure. The Cherokee lived all through the Appalachians 'til the 1830s. That's when President Jackson had soldiers march 'em out by foot in what became known as the Trail of Tears. They were forced to walk all the way to reservations in Oklahoma in the dead of winter. Real sad. Thousands of 'em died along the way."

"Yes, Aiden Huff. You are wise in your history. What you may not be aware of is during that time there were two teenagers within a clan, Wahya and Ahyoka, who had deeply fallen in love. However, the young woman, Ahyoka, was very small and frail, and Wahya knew she would never survive such a march. So, the young couple utilized the confusion of the forced migration to break away and conceal themselves."

"Pappa Huff took 'em in, right?"

"No. He did, however, allow them to hide in his barn as the soldiers escorted the Cherokee out from across the mountains. When it was safe to do so, your forefather brought them here to live in this sacred grotto he had discovered just days before."

Rubbing a hand through his hair, Aiden says, "Well, it must've been tough for 'em to survive all alone. They were part of a culture where every single member contributed to the clan as a whole."

"Yes. For many years, the soldiers remained in these mountains to remove such resisters. Always hiding in the grotto during the daylight, young Wahya was forced to make only short hunting trips under the concealment of darkness. His love, Ahyoka, would also go out at night to aid Aiden Joseph and his wife farm their land. Together, they would cultivate crops and share in the harvest."

"So, did they live out their lives here in the cave?"

"Yes, although each of their journeys here would conclude early. Your forefather would come to visit them one afternoon, only to

discover Wahya and Ahyoka had both been mortally wounded by a soldier's gun."

"They found the grotto!"

With a scowling face, Dan answers, "Almost, Aiden Huff. One evening, Wahya and Ahyoka ventured out onto the ledge at dusk only for a brief glimpse of the mountain's beauty. Sadly, soldiers on watch, with firearms intended for long-distance, took aim from a far-off hill and struck them both. Before the soldiers were able to locate the two, however, Wahya and Ahyoka found the strength to crawl back within the blessed concealment of the grotto."

"I take it in those days there wasn't much Pappa Huff could do to save 'em, was there?"

"In a sense, there was, Aiden Huff. Wahya had already passed when your forefather arrived. However, as Ahyoka neared her transition, she pulled aside a rug hanging on the cave wall and revealed to him an infant child cradled in a reed basket. She informed your forefather that the male child's name was Danuwao and pleaded with him to take the child to his people."

With his eyes opening wide, Aiden points at Dan and asks, "Danuwao? You mean an earlier incarnation of this Danuwao?"

"Yes, Aiden Huff. An earlier incarnation by the spirit who now embodies within this Danuwao."

"Wow," Aiden says as he shakes his head. "But Pappa Huff? I can't imagine a poor mountain homesteader back then havin' the means to get a kid all the way to Oklahoma."

"He would obtain the means, Aiden Huff. The crops developed and cultivated with the aid of Ahyoka were found to be far superior to others offered at the nearby markets. Soon, your forefather began making a substantial profit from his sales, and within seven of your years had put aside enough means for the journey."

“So, I take it Pappa Huff raised the kid for seven years? Must’ve been tough to hide ‘em all that time, though?”

Turning his head to hide a sudden and unstoppable round of tears, Dan replies, “Seven very short years that went by in what your forefather describes as the blink of an eye, Aiden Huff. He had great emotional difficulties in returning the child, knowing he would never see him again. Yet he had made his vow to Ahyoka, had he not?”

“You okay there, Dan?”

Catching the tears under his eyes with a finger and sniffing back the rest, Dan continues, “Yes. Forgive me. It is very touching. You see, Aiden Joseph Huff cherished his time with young Danuwoa, and they grew to unconditionally love each other. He taught the child of his Cherokee ancestry the best he could, and they came to the grotto frequently to visit with the remains of young Danuwoa’s parents.”

Speaking quietly in reverence, Aiden asks, “So, Pappa Huff buried Wahya and Ahyoka here in the grotto, then. Are their remains still here?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. And I would ask you to go with Danuwoa now and visit them.”

Without another word, Dan abruptly rises and walks through the passage with Aiden quickly behind him. As they emerge into the stream chamber, they take another dark tunnel unfamiliar to Aiden, and Dan must use the bright screen of Ian’s mobile phone to light the way. The pathway travels slightly upward for several hundred yards before opening to another smallish, dark chamber. Taking his flashlight from his pocket, Aiden spots several large slabs of flat stone stacked into a crude box-like structure in the far corner of the cave. Moving there, Dan places his hands on one end of the top slab and motions with his head for Aiden to grasp the other end. When he’s done so, he nods and the two men lift the stone up, off to the side, and gently set it down against a cave wall. Slowly stepping back to the crypt, both men shine their lights



inside. What they see are the remains of Wahya and Ahyoka lying side by side and wrapped in blankets that had flattened long ago with the decay of body and bones.

Suddenly, Aiden slaps the palm of his hand against his chest as he feels a tremendous unseen impact that drops him to his knees. Spinning his backside to the crypt, he sits down on the ground as searing heat and sharp pain rips through his body. He hears the loud, anguished screams of a man in his mind, and his vision is filled with blurred flashes of mountains and sky, unknown smells, sensations, and a growing feeling of being cold.

“What is wrong, Aiden Huff?” Dan asks, although already aware of what befalls him.

With his thoughts spinning, Aiden slowly rubs both hands across the top of his head and answers, “I don’t know, Dan. It hurts. And I feel kinda weird. Sick. I don’t know what’s happenin’ here.” Closing his eyes and shaking his head several times, he takes in a deep breath before reopening to look wide-eyed at Dan. “I think Ahyoka’s spirit is here with me! I feel her. I know her. She’s in me now and I’m feelin’ what she musta felt when she died, Dan.”

“What does she feel, Aiden Huff?”

Closing his eyes again, Aiden replies, “Wahya’s love, Dan. She’s dyin’ and she feels Wahya’s unconditional love and her love for him. It feels so good. And oh, how she feels the amazing love for her new-born child. But she’s scared, Dan. And so, so sad. She doesn’t want Wahya to go. And *she* doesn’t want to go and leave this all behind, either. But it’s so cold here now.” He goes silent for a moment and opens his eyes to quickly scan around the dim room before adding, “She has faith though, Dan. She feels it now. And I feel her bring it out, too. From inside. She knows now that her spirit’s been released and has faith that she’ll be with Wahya and Danuwoa again.” Another brief pause holds Aiden before he enthusiastically starts again, “Hey! It’s not cold

anymore, Dan. Ahyoka feels warmth and so much love in being with the One. And guess what? She knows now she'll never really be without the love of Wahya and Danuwoa. Never apart. Oh, Dan. It's amazing. There's just so much love in her spirit!"

"And Wahya and Ahyoka would be together again in this dominion," replies Dan with an excited tone. "Would they not, Aiden Huff?"

With the pain and onslaught of Ahyoka's senses ebbing away, Aiden oddly tilts his head far to one side before emphatically answering, "*Yes! They are together again here, Dan.*"

"You see now! Do you not see, Aiden Huff?"

Smiling in sudden revelation, Aiden passionately answers, "*Holy, cow, Dan! Holy cow. Yes. Yes! I'm Ahyoka, Dan! My spirit. Me. I was Ahyoka. And, and -*"

"Yes, Aiden Huff," Dan cuts in. "Molly's spirit was Wahya, the young Cherokee father."

After a few long moments of almost giddy laughter, Aiden looks to Dan and replies, "Wow, huh? And just think, I almost started believin' I was the reincarnation of Pappa Huff."

"You were not far off, Aiden Huff," Dan responds as his smile broadens. "I do hope it will not disparage you to discover *I am* the spirit that once manifested as your forefather, Aiden Joseph Huff."

Laughing so hard that he rolls onto his side, Aiden finally catches his breath and, still somewhat chuckling, replies, "Oh, good gosh, man. I'm gonna need a baseball program here, with pictures and names and stats of everybody. But, hey! It's nice to meet ya, Pappa Huff. You're lookin' pretty good for a man of your age, ya know?"

"Do you now see, Aiden Huff?" Dan almost gleefully asks. "You have experienced the truth. The One! You have felt for yourself that death as you once knew it is only a transition, and we are all together as the One, and one with God. At times, however, we simply

exist on opposite sides of a very thin veil. Do you see, Aiden Huff? Do you now see?”

Aiden nods as his laughter lightens and he remarks, “Yeah, Dan. But, look. I gotta say we all seem to travel in an awfully tight group for spirits with lots of other places to go see, huh?”

“Yes, Aiden Huff. Even as spirit we often desire to experience the growth of unconditional love with others we are, shall I say again, very fond of.”

Sitting back up on the stone floor, Aiden tries to take a more serious tone between laughter and says, “And I kinda notice no one in our happy little group seems to complete his or her journey, Dan. Now, I’m just thinkin’ of Molly here, but should we be a little concerned about, ya know, a short trip this go-round too?”

Letting out one more loud laugh himself, Dan answers, “Aiden Huff! There are no promises. However, you must remember that the journey truly is the destination. There is much majesty held within that knowledge, is there not?”

Turning his face up to Dan, Aiden becomes a little more serious and says, “I miss Ian, Dan. Maybe he’ll come back before I go, since this life was cut short and all, huh? I mean, I know I’ll see him again, but I’ll always miss him bein’ a part of my life here on Earth, ya know?”

“He remains in your life, Aiden Huff. He is a portion within *your* journey that is your destination.”

Smiling again, Aiden says, “I know, Dan. And hey, I hate to sound like a worried mother here, but the Ahyoka part of me wonders what’s going on with Danuwoa? Did us comin’ up here and seein’ our bones do that ornery spirit any good?”

“Immensely, Aiden Huff. But that spirit and I have much work to do yet, so I must insist that you depart now and not return again until Thursday.”

Knowing it's futile to argue, Aiden smiles, points at the crypt and says, "Fine. I'll just check in with Ahyoka over the next few days. Maybe she'll keep me up to date with what goes on here."

Dan grins and says, "Come, comedian. Help me replace the stone."

As Aiden and Dan lift and set the top slab back on the crypt, Aiden says, "So, come on, Dan. Give me a clue. What kinda stuff are you and evil Dan gonna be doin' here? A parent has a right to know, huh?"

"You could not comprehend what I shall bring before the spirit of Danuwoa," Dan replies as he walks into the passage with Aiden following behind. "And even if you could, it would, as you might say, blow your mind. Yet, let us pray that I am successful."

As the two men exit the tomb passage, Dan walks directly to the tunnel with the ascending steps to the forest floor. As the capstone is moved aside and the two men climb out, Aiden searches the area with his eyes and asks, "Uh, Dan? What happened to my four-wheeler?"

Placing a leading hand on Aiden's shoulder, Dan begins walking across the wildflower covered forest. Within just a few steps, Aiden spots a large gap in the growth, and as they move closer, notices the handlebars of his ATV just barely peaking above ground level. The remainder of the machine is down inside a freshly dug hole that's been neatly concealed with tree branches and other assorted foliage.

Turning to look at Dan, Aiden asks only, "The bear?"

"Very helpful fellow," Dan answers as he points to one end of the dig. "Agreeable, as well. He also dug a ramp at one end for you."

Jumping in and hastily tossing out the branches and such that cover his ATV, Aiden breaks out into another deep laugh when he spots Ian's old motorcycle helmet on the seat. Only looking up with a nod and smile, he straps it on, kick starts the ATV, and guns the engine

to climb the slope. As he begins to search for his concealed path home, however, the ATV engine unexpectedly stalls.

“Aiden Huff,” Dan says from behind as he lowers a raised hand. “Remember. Do not return until Thursday. If you return before then, you will not be able to locate the grotto or me. Do you understand.”

Having turned his body on the stalled ATV to hear Dan, Aiden answers only by way of a sharp hand salute against his helmet. He then turns forward, starts the engine he already knows will restart, and man and machine are in the wind, at least until he comes to the thick woods at the edge of the wildflower covered forest.

## IN THE ARMS OF THE ANGEL

*"Here bring your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish; Earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal."*

*~ Thomas Moore*

It's only Monday afternoon and, for Aiden, just waiting for Thursday to get back to the grotto seems a lifetime away. He's interested in spending more time moving forward with the help of Dan, of course, but also excited about being with Molly again. He's learned so much about himself and about keeping Ian in his life, but a dark shroud is beginning to lift from over his heart. Along with all the other good, it's certainly revealed a void that can only be filled now by Molly. Pulling the phone from his pocket, Aiden dials her number.

"Aiden!" says Molly with excitement. "Oh, thank goodness you called."

A little surprised, Aiden replies, "Hey! What's wrong, Molly?"

"Oh, it's nothing, I guess. I've just had a really crappy day and it's nice to hear the voice of someone who knows me."

Without even thinking the words, Aiden responds, "You wanna tell me about it?"

For the next half-hour or so, Aiden listens as Molly talks about her volunteer position at the local community center in Bristol. It seems her extensive past career in accounting isn't good enough for the center director. Instead, a recently vacated assignment in the donations

department went to a much older woman who's only experience consists of handling the books at a local bingo parlor. It just happens to be the bingo parlor frequented by the center director, which isn't lost on Molly as she vents her frustrations to her husband. He's not saying much, either, except asking such things as how she reacted and how the obvious snub made her feel. Of course, there's the occasional twinge to tell her what he'd do, but it seems easy enough to just keep those thoughts to himself unless asked. And she isn't asking.

"Oh, Aiden," Molly says through the phone as she winds down her story. "I'm probably boring the bejeebers out of you, poor man. You must have more important stuff to do."

Aiden lightly laughs and responds, "Nah. Only too happy to hear what's goin' on in your life, Molly. It's either this or get out the tractor and mow the lawn. And trust me, you're the better choice."

"I'd better be, if you know what's good for ya, buddy. Hey! Thursday's comin' up. I can't wait. What time are we headed out to see your spooky guy in the cave?"

"If ya don't mind, I think we need to head out early. I don't wanna scare ya off, but I tend to spend a few hours up there when I go. It could be a long day."

"Early it is, then."

Anxiously, Aiden says, "Ya know, it's a bit of a drive up here from Bristol, Molly. If we're gettin' an early start, why don't you come up Wednesday and stay the night? You can sleep in our bed and I'll take Ian's."

"Now, that's a thought, big guy. But why don't we do this? I'll drive up Wednesday afternoon, we'll grab an early dinner somewhere and then see how it goes. How's that? If nothing else, I'll drive back to Mom and Dad's for the night and just get up super early in the morning."

Forcing a cheerful response, a disappointed Aiden responds, “I couldn’t ask for more, Molly. And I wanna fill ya in on some more stuff I learned about our past before we head up. So, tellin’ ya over dinner works out great.”

“Stuff about our past, huh? Oh, do fill me in now, ya tease. I got time.”

“No can do, ma’am. Afraid *now* I gotta go mow the lawn before it gets dark. You’ll just have to wait ‘til dinner Wednesday.”

“I’ll get ya back, mister. You know how much I love good dirt.”

“Molly?”

“Yes, Aiden.”

“Thanks for believing in me. And for goin’ with me.”

“I’ve always believed in you, Aiden. And I’d still go anywhere with you.”

“I’ll see ya Wednesday, then?”

“You betcha, big guy. I’ll call you Wednesday morning. G’bye.”

“Bye, Molly,” Aiden replies as he ends the call. Speaking only to himself, he softly adds, “I love you.”

The first rays of sunlight on Tuesday morning creep through the window of Aiden’s bedroom. He doesn’t wake right away, though, as a truly peaceful sleep warmly embraces him. It isn’t until the sound of spinning helicopter blades become loud in his ears that his slumber ends. Rising and moving to the window, he looks out to watch three black copters swiftly fly over his house toward the higher peaks of the mountains. He knows they’re in search of one specific target, and it makes him wonder about the outcome of it all. Without question, the feds will continue to look as long as Danuwoa’s on the loose, but what are the scenarios? Will Dan the spirit be successful in getting Danuwoa’s spirit back on the right track? And then what? Will Danuwoa be forced to live out the rest of his life in a hidden grotto as his ancestors once did? Will the end come when Danuwoa drops his



guard one day and ventures out at the wrong time? Or, should Aiden just turn him in?

Whatever the future holds, Aiden decides to stay locked on this Thursday in the grotto. To his rational mind, it's the next logical step in moving forward from Ian's loss and his future with Molly. With that in mind, he decides today would be a good day to venture a few towns over to shop the large outdoor store for Dan's food supply. As he pulls the Wagoneer out of his dirt drive and travels down the mountain road, he unexpectedly spots the front of a large, black SUV sticking out from a lower neighbor's driveway. Even through the heavily tinted windshield, he can make out a lone man sitting behind the wheel. He's dressed in a dark suit and sunglasses and intently watching Aiden as he drives past. As he comes to the bottom of the mountain and the main road to town, he finds that the state troopers have set up a checkpoint in both directions of travel. As he's waved up by a trooper, he already has his wallet and retiree badge held up in the windshield. Seeing this, the trooper nods but keeps his hand raised for him to stop, and then walks around the Wagoneer to peer into the interior. When satisfied no one's hiding inside, with or without Aiden's knowledge, the trooper professionally smiles, nods his head again, and waves him on.

As Aiden makes his way through town and onto the interstate highway, he notices two other large, black SUVs traveling together in the opposite direction. Looking in his rearview mirror as they pass, he observes both vehicles take his return exit into town. But while watching, he also picks up on the front end of yet another black SUV driving several cars behind him. Curious, he slows and pulls in behind an eighteen-wheeler that's traveling below the speed limit in the right lane. Watching his mirror, he sees the SUV quickly maneuver behind another rig to avoid being forced to pass. Pulling back into the left lane, he accelerates to speed and watches the tailing vehicle do the same. Taking his intended exit, he's not surprised when the SUV turns off as

well. Nor is he surprised when it pulls to the far end of the lot at the store when Aiden parks and goes inside. After shopping for his Dan's tasteless but necessary dehydrated food, he takes the return trip home with the same SUV in tow. As he comes in sight of the trooper checkpoint at the bottom of his mountain, however, the tailing vehicle finally breaks off and turns around. Going through the trooper's cursory search of his jeep, Aiden steers onto his road, waves to the federal agent parked just off to the side and pulls into his dirt driveway.

On Wednesday morning, a phone call from Molly sets the tone for the afternoon. She'll drive in around 3:00 p.m. and, at Aiden's suggestion, they'll meet at the new Italian restaurant just outside of town. He's heard through Polly that the food is good, and the atmosphere is toned down and quiet. It also doesn't hurt that there's not much of an appetite for Italian fare among the locals, either. That means no gaggle of nosey town folk looking for their next tidbit of rumor. So, with Aiden already inside, Molly fashionably arrives just a little after three and walks in. With a safe kiss on the cheek and light hug, he pulls out her chair.

"So, how'd it go with that deal at the community center?" Aiden asks as he moves back to his own chair at the small table.

Tossing her head back with a light laugh, Molly answers, "Oh, I went in yesterday and just quit. I figured if I could get upset over a little old lady who's givin' her time for free, maybe there's something else I should be doing."

"You never cease to amaze me, Molly. You wanna order off the wine list?"

Broadening her grin, Molly answers, "Oh, you know it, baby."

As the selected bottle arrives and the meal is ordered and served, Aiden and Molly talk openly about Ian as light music plays softly through the dining room speakers. During the conversation, she notices how her husband speaks so much more now about their son's wonderful life. As he talks of his days since only last Thursday, she's

able to ask him about his feelings during his enlightening encounters. She finds it refreshing to hear the honest and sincere answers, filled with emotion and self-discovery that once would have been avoided or entirely brushed aside.

After the meal is finished and a second glass of wine is poured, Aiden begins mocking a slow dance in his chair as a new romantic song begins to play through the speakers. When Molly cocks her head and smiles at his antics, he stands and holds out a hand, pulling her up and moving to an open area of the dining room floor. While the only other three patrons in the room watch, he turns her by the hand and she intuitively wraps her arms around the back of his neck. Taking his wife by her waist, the two begin a gentle sway to the soft rhythm of the music. Looking deeply into each other's eyes, she lets out a deep sigh and moves in to lay her face against her husband's strong chest. In turn, he raises his hands from her hips and wraps his arms around his wife's warm body.

After a few moments of serenity, Molly lifts her lips to Aiden's ear and whispers, "This is so much more than I ever expected, baby."

Lowering his face, Aiden responds, "I'm not going to lose you, or Ian, or me ever again."

Molly slightly pulls back from Aiden and looks longingly into his eyes. Still swaying to the music, she looks down to his lips, giving him the unconscious signal to move down for a kiss. As he does, she also comes up on her toes, turns her head slightly, and their lips meet in a marvelous moment of passion neither has felt in such a very long time. When the approving applause from the three watchful diners causes her to turn red, Molly breaks the kiss and gives them all a quick, shy smile.

Still blushing, Molly turns back to Aiden and quietly says, "You know, with all the good stuff you've told me lately, there's some crazy stuff mixed in there too, big guy."

“Sure,” Aiden answers as they return to their rhythmic embrace. “But who else am I gonna tell my crazy stuff too?”

“Only me, Aiden Huff. It better be only me.”

“So, you believe all the things I told ya?”

“Absolutely,” Molly answers, but then adds, “The things you told me about the bear, though? Are you serious or you just pullin’ my leg?”

Slightly pulling back and giving Molly a look of feigned surprise, Aiden responds, “All the weird things I’ve told ya and you’re havin’ problems with the *bear*?”

“No. I just think it’s adorable. That’s all. But seriously, Aiden. I gotta be honest. This whole *forgive* thing with the momma cougar? Yeah. I’m afraid you’re gonna have to work with me on that.”

Aiden only has a moment to smile before the song comes to an end. Motioning politely with his hand, he escorts Molly back to their table and holds her chair out as she sits.

“So, tell me something, mister. What would happen if, say, I’m in our bed tonight, you’re in Ian’s bed, and I get scared?”

Exaggerating a superhero look as he sits down himself, Aiden replies, “Well, ma’am, I’ll just have to come to your rescue and take care of whatever’s scarin’ ya.”

Looking down at the table and slowly back up at Aiden, Molly softly says, “I’m scared of never laying by your side again, baby.”

His heart thumping, Aiden pauses for a second, slowly leans into the table, and quietly whispers, “Come home, Molly.”

Molly then also leans in, but with a somewhat naughty smile forming on her lips. She darts her eyes left and right across the dining room hall before answering, “Okay. But are you gonna get the check first or we just gonna make a run for it?”

“I say we make run for it,” Aiden jokingly says back. Catching someone out of the corner of his eye, he turns his head, expecting to

find the waiter and ask for the dinner tab. Instead, he surprisingly finds Deputies Cassell and Kerns casually walking up to the table.

“Well, good evening Mister Huff. Missus Huff,” Cassell says in an overly polite tone. Looking to Molly, he continues, “Ma’am, I understand your drive up from Bristol went well this afternoon?”

Molly flashes a quick, polite smile at the strange man and then turns her look back to Aiden with her eyebrows raised in question.

“Deputies. Nice to see you both,” Aiden sarcastically responds. “But if you’re out on another goose chase, I don’t think they serve wild game here.”

With hands deep in his pockets, Kerns leans over the table and says, “Yeah. They don’t put goose in any of that freeze-dried crap ya picked-up yesterday either, Huff. The receipt shows ya got enough to feed a small army. You startin’ your own militia or somethin’?”

“Yearly stock up is all, Deputy. Ya never know when hard times are comin’, right?”

Snickering, Kerns stands back up straight and snaps, “Yeah. I sure hope *you* never face hard time, Huff. If ya know what I mean?”

Having had enough, Aiden impatiently says, “Okay, fellas. Spill it already. I’ve got things to do with my wife here.”

Dryly responding, Cassell says, “Nothin’ to spill, Aiden. Just a coupla visitors lookin’ for a place to eat in your little one light town is all. But while we’re all here, let me caution you again about going up in those hills alone after our killer. Maybe the pretty lady here can talk some sense into ya? Maybe keep ya alive, huh?”

Looking across the table to Molly, Aiden sees that she’s managed to raise her eyebrows even higher. After all their years of marriage, he can sense the words *what the heck is this about a killer* coming through her glare.

“Listen, you folks enjoy the rest of your really early dinner,” says Cassell. “You must have big plans since your back together now. But

maybe we'll see ya around the trails tomorrow, huh? Who knows?" Nonchalantly turning, Cassell walks across the dining room and out the front door, with Kerns almost trotting to keep up.

"*What th...*" Molly begins, before realizing she's speaking far too loud for the room. Looking over at the other patrons, she turns back to Aiden and continues in a hushed tone, "What the heck was that man talking about you going after a killer in the hills? Is this your spooky guy?"

With a weak smile, Aiden looks across the table to Molly, her beautiful face dimly highlighted by the soft glow of the candle, and asks, "Do you trust me, honey?"

"With all that I am, Aiden Huff," Molly answers, lifting her head in a loving gaze. "If what you're doin' is okay with you, it's okay with me. Just don't get me killed, stud muffin. That's all I ask."

Reaching out to take Molly's hand, Aiden quietly says, "Let's go home, baby. We'll spend a little time on the porch swing, and I'll fill ya in more."

Leaving the restaurant, Molly follows Aiden in her car, and they arrive home just as the sun is setting over the western mountain range. Stepping out, both stop to cherish the glorious vision and embrace for no reason other than loving impulse. For just this moment, they take the time to witness the final glow of a golden sun as it drops below the far ridgeline, leaving the wispy clouds above awash in stunning variations of purples, oranges, and muted reds.

Late evening turns to night as Aiden tells Molly more of the spirit known as Dan, and his quest for salvation of the wayward spirit who is Danuwoa. Along with this, of course, is the disclosure of Danuwoa's immoral and criminal past, as well as the death sentence and divinely led escape to the grotto. He also goes back in time to talk of Pappa Huff, the Cherokee's Trail of Tears, and how the hidden grotto has served, both then and now, as a refuge for many. Further, he tells

her of his own past incarnation as the ancestral mother, Ahyoka, and how he experienced her intense feelings of pain, grief, and then faith as she passed away. Finally, he surprises Molly by explaining that her own spirit once embodied as Wahya, the young Cherokee lover and father.

As the conversation winds down on the living room couch, Molly playfully asks, “So, *I was* the big, brave man in our past, huh? Not you?”

Grinning shyly, Aiden replies, “Yeah. I guess we traded off. But I think I got the better end of the deal this time.”

“Well, if I was makin’ this stuff up, Ian wouldda been our kid back then too. And since we all seem to like hangin’ out together over the generations, I wonder why he wasn’t?”

“I don’t know, babe. Dan’s been tellin’ me how I’m gonna be able to connect with Ian more if I work on it. Maybe tomorrow we can just ask the boy ourselves, right?”

“Right. So, hey, what’s gonna happen with Dan? Or is it Danuwoa? Whatever.”

Reaching over to run his fingertips down Molly’s long, dark hair, Aiden quietly replies, “I don’t know. I’ve been wonderin’ about that too. But with your analytical mind, I’ll just bet you’re gonna ask him that very question, huh?”

“Yeah, I will,” says Molly as she continues with a teasing smile, “But right now I’m thinkin’ it’s time for me, the big, brave warrior, to take his pretty squaw upstairs for a little wampum in the wigwam.”

Mocking a shocked look, Aiden responds, “Now, Molly Huff. That kinda talk is just rude, crude, and socially unacceptable. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Oh, shut up. I’m not feelin’ real social right now. But I *am* feelin’ a little rude and crude, though, so let’s go, squaw!”

Rising to take his wife by the hand, Aiden replies, “Well, my teepee is your teepee. But I’m not callin’ you my brave warrior.”

“Darn it,” Molly giggles as they walk up the stairs. “You never call me your brave warrior anymore.”

Dawn breaks through the bedroom window and finds Aiden and Molly in a loving embrace unbroken through the night. Waking and rising to an elbow, he lovingly strokes her hair as it flows down across her cheeks, and her eyes slowly open. Without words, he lowers for a kiss that’s lovingly received and passion once again consumes the reunited couple. As their intimacy winds down, they leave the bed together for the bathroom, where Molly turns on the shower and affectionately redirects Aiden to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee. Having accomplished his task, he returns, and they finish getting ready for the day. Afterward, the two sit in the kitchen and enjoy their first morning cup of coffee together in a great while. As they finish, Aiden quickly grabs the large backpack filled with camper’s food and fresh clothing before they walk out together through the back porch door.

Spotting the couple coming to the barn, an excited Hannah gives out a loud whinny and excitedly bobs her head several times. As Molly enters the breezeway, Hannah hangs her large muzzle down over the half stall door and softly nickers while her long neck is lovingly stroked. Without wasting time, Aiden opens the stall door slightly and squeezes through to hang a bucket of feed on a hook, saddle his horse, and tie his backpack across her rump. While she eats, he rejoins Molly and fills her in on their need to travel off the usual trails. An overly excited Hannah only goes through half her oats before pushing her stall door open and joining the couple. As she does, she moves up behind Aiden and gently nudges him from behind with the big tip of her nose. Smiling and shrugging his shoulders at Hannah’s antics, he holds out a hand to offer his wife help in mounting the saddle. Cheekily pushing his offer aside, Molly puts the toe of her boot in the stirrup and lifts herself up and over with little effort. As he reaches for the bridle to guide his horse out of the barn, Hannah pulls her head away and begins walking out on



her own, with a grinning Molly riding leisurely in the saddle. Soon, the three are in the thick, concealing woods and trekking toward the grotto.

Hannah takes great care to steer around any low hanging branches that might interfere with Molly's comfortable ride. Aiden also helps by walking ahead to pull and hold back any large tree limbs that block their way. Just as he spots the wildflower covered forest ahead and turns back to tell Molly, his eyes suddenly pick up on several camouflage clad men attempting to stealthily walk up behind them. Although still some distance back, the lead man notices they've been made and signals for the others to rush forward. Hearing the footfalls of heavy boots, Molly's head turns back to see the men, turns forward to look at Aiden, and then back again to the men. Suddenly, a now comforting roar erupts through the forest and, as if shot from a circus cannon, the enormous black bear leaps out from some unknown hiding place in the woods. Running at full speed, he loudly grunts and growls while bounding straight for the group of men. With no time to fumble for weapons through unfamiliar gear and clothing, they have no choice but to scream, turn, and run in the opposite direction.

Sitting on Hannah and watching the men run, Molly looks to Aiden and only asks, "The bear?"

"Yep. And I want one for Christmas."

Turning back to see the bouncing rear of the running bear, Molly adds, "Aww. That's so adorable."

"We'd better move, Molly," Aiden says as he pulls aside one final tree branch that blocks their way.

Without urging, Hannah moves forward beyond the bent limb and into the wildflower covered forest. Aiden then runs past Hannah and begins searching the field for any signs of Dan, but he's nowhere to be seen. Surprisingly, however, he easily spots the capstone and runs toward it, with Hannah's gait moving to a matching trot. Approaching the stone, he sees that it's already moved aside, and the stairway tunnel

exposed. Wondering if Dan might be out and about, he looks around for several seconds before raising a hand to help Molly dismount the saddle.

Cocking his head to one side, Aiden thinks he hears a faint voice coming from somewhere deep within the grotto. Moving closer to the hole, he clearly hears the words, "Come inside, Aiden and Molly Huff, and close the way behind you."

Turning to his horse, Aiden unties his pack from the back of the saddle, moves to her front and whispers, "Home, Hannah. Home." With his quiet command, Hannah bobs her head once as she nickers and breaks into a trot back toward the thicker woods.

"Will she go home, Aiden?" a somewhat startled Molly asks.

"Yep. Home and then back for us when we're done. Trust me. Now, we'd better hurry, babe. Agents are probably all through these woods. You'll have to climb down first, but it's okay."

Taking the first several steps below the surface, Molly peers down into the darkness and back up to Aiden with a questioning smile. When he returns a simple head nod, she continues down to the chamber below. He follows as soon as she's clear and tells her that he might be a moment while trying to move the heavy boulder back in place. As he raises both arms to the stone, however, he's astonished at how easily he lifts and moves it over the opening. Putting wonder aside, for now, he descends the remaining steps and finds Molly looking up in awe at the glow of the Fiery Moss in the cave.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is," answers Molly, who then changes her glance to the flowing water below and asks, "Is this where you talked to Ian?"

"It is, Molly. And where he told me I was still his father."

Turning to Aiden, Molly walks forward and moves her body against his. Instinctively, he wraps his arms around her and pulls her in tight.

“Did he tell you that you’re still my husband?”

With a heartwarming smile, Aiden responds, “No. I figured that out on my own, thank you.”

“Well, I wanna tell you myself, Aiden Huff, you *are* still my husband,” Molly says as she reaches up for a kiss. “And I love you so much.”

Aiden leans down into her kiss as he softly responds, “And I love you, Molly Huff. Unconditionally.”

After a few short moments in tender embrace, Aiden pulls back and excitedly takes Molly by the hand. He leads her across the stream chamber and through the narrow passage to a well-lit meditation cave. Although wanting to quickly find Dan, he stops when he notices Molly running a hand along the sculptured walls. She pulls her other hand from his grip and is oddly compelled to feel her way all across the stone.

Coming to a slightly recessed section of one wall, Molly abruptly turns to Aiden with a deeply empathetic look. After a slight pause, she speaks out in a slow, trance-like manner, “We will hang a blanket here where our child sleeps, Ahyoka. It will keep the draft away.” As she finishes, Aiden can see she’s incredibly overcome with emotions and moves in to hold her. Burying her face in his chest for just a moment, she pulls her head back, looks up to find his eyes and smiles.

“What is it, baby?”

Glancing all around the chamber and then back to Aiden, Molly whispers, “There is so much faith here, Aiden. And incredible, incredible love.”

“There’s so much more, Molly,” Aiden replies and pulls away to take her by the hand again. Turning his head to one side, he yells out several times, “DAN? DAN? WHERE ARE YOU? DAN?”

Finally responding from the main grotto chamber, Dan shouts out, “I AM HERE, AIDEN HUFF. AND I SHALL BE WITH YOU MOMENTARILY.”

Impatient and unwilling to wait, a grinning Aiden moves Molly through the passage and into the outer chamber of the grotto. There, she looks around and takes in the large, dank room, with its puddled water, moldy stench, and moss-covered rocks strewn about the floor. Walking across the vast cave with Molly in hand and scanning the area, Aiden doesn't see Dan. Keeping the acoustics of the room in mind, he uses a lowered voice to say, "Hey! I don't see ya, Dan. Where are ya, huh? Dan? Dan?"

"I am here, Aiden Huff," finally responds a somber sounding Dan as he slowly steps from the darkness of a far wall.

The sight immediately sends a bolt of chill through Aiden. Dan now stands before him and Molly in a lone beam of sunlight cast down from the roof above. His hands are clasped together in front of him and just below the waist. His head hangs slightly low, causing pockets of deep shadow to form under his eyes and high cheekbones. His shiny, black hair is free from its usual ponytail and drapes down to conceal both sides of his face. Releasing Molly's hand, Aiden holds his own up to instruct her to stay as he cautiously resumes walking toward Dan. Not one to avoid confrontation herself, she only waits until he takes a few steps before defiantly moving in behind him. As the two cautiously cross the chamber and come near, Dan slowly and deliberately lifts his cold, stoic face and, as the shadows give way, he stares directly at Molly with his dark, piercing eyes. Catching his intense gaze, she stops in her tracks and loudly gasps. Several moments go by as the two continue to look directly at one another, with Aiden scanning back and forth at both, feverously searching for any indication of what's silently taking place. Finally, anxiety takes over and he reaches out for his wife's hand. Brushing his attempt aside, however, she begins a steady walk across the remaining chamber between herself and Dan. Facing her as she walks, Aiden shuffles sideways and intently watches her expressions for any signs of greater distress. What he sees, however, is Molly turning her

head side to side several times as she moves in closer, curiously studying the man who now stands before her.

As the two get within just a few feet, Aiden is shocked when Dan's eerie gaze swiftly shifts from Molly to him. The two men deeply stare at each other for only a moment before Aiden's eyes go wide and he pulls his head back. Dan turns his look back to Molly, who places a hand over her mouth and lets out another loud but muffled gasp. Then, both Aiden and Molly watch as Dan's big eyes suddenly begin to water, and tears unexpectedly stream down his face. Just as compassion and intuition compel Molly to stretch out a hand, however, he collapses to his knees on the wet grotto floor.

"IAN!" Molly screams out as she lovingly peers down with the look of a mother who just found her lost child. She bends down to place the palms of both hands on either side of Dan's face and tenderly gives a pain-twisted smile as she blinks through tears.

Reaching up to Molly with his outstretched hands, the voice of Ian shockingly replies, "Momma, I love you so much!"

"IAN?" shouts a questioning Aiden.

With tears now flowing and her mouth fluctuating between expressions of anguish and elation, Molly drops to her own knees in front of Ian. With all his defenses dropped, Aiden watches as his son's spirit, in Danuwoa's big body, places those huge hands on the back of his mother's head. Gently pulling her in, he puts his forehead to hers and playfully turns it side to side several times while smiling and singing in a child-like manner, "The baby loves his Momma. The baby loves his Momma."

Laughing hard through her tears, Molly responds to this mother-son hug they've shared since Ian was a toddler by rubbing her own forehead across his several times and lovingly chanting back, "And Momma loves her baby, Ian. Momma loves her baby!"

Dropping down to his own knees, a still somewhat dazed Aiden reaches his arms out across the shoulders of both Molly and Ian. He leans forward to bring his own head in and the three just remain in a loving embrace for several long moments.

“Ian? I don’t understand, son,” Aiden finally whispers. “Is the other spirit gone now that took over Dan? Did you take his place or something?”

Lifting his face, Ian returns to his previous stoic mannerisms as he replies, “No, Father. I am the spirit that took over Danuwoa.”

“So, it’s been you inside all along? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I simply stated that spirit has no need of names, but if it was your will, you could call me by the name of the man I embody. It seems that was your will, Father?”

“Easy, smart guy,” Aiden says with a snuffle and slight laugh. “I’m still your dad, ya know? A confused dad, too. What’s with all the drama comin’ in here? You scared the crap out of your mother and me, lookin’ like somethin’ out of a slasher movie.”

“Please forgive me. It was my intent to meet you in the meditation chamber, but one final intervention with Danuwoa’s spirit was far more difficult than I had anticipated. It is now complete, however.”

“Good,” Aiden responds. “But, hey, you told me you were Pappa Huff back in the day. It just seems crazy that you’re Ian too, ya know?”

Standing, Ian takes the hand of both Aiden and Molly to gently help them rise before replying, “I was Aiden Joseph Huff, Father. However, I incarnated again in this lifetime as your son, as I truly desired to experience the unconditional love of you and Mother. But I also came as Ian to assist the wayward spirit of Danuwoa, who once, long ago, was the child I briefly raised in these mountains. As you now

know, Ian's journey came to an early end, bringing me here today as pure spirit and a final attempt at salvation."

"Wow. That's all pretty deep stuff, kiddo."

"Indeed. But you should also know, Father, that if not for you, Danuwoa's spirit would already roam within Purgatory."

"Purgatory? I kept him out of Hell?"

Reaching a hand up to his father's shoulder, Ian answers, "Yes. Your deep despondency convinced the One that two precious spirits in jeopardy might find salvation in my single journey. I would not have been allowed to come if only one of you was in distress. Visiting any of God's domains as pure spirit is strictly forbidden, except under the most extreme circumstance." As a somewhat impish grin crosses his face, Ian continues with, "So, how does it feel to be an extreme circumstance, Father?"

"Apparently, I'm just livin' the dream, son," Aiden sarcastically responds. Rubbing the back of his neck and trying to take it all in, he asks, "You know, you said that when I'm ready, I'd be able to connect with you whenever I wanted. Does this mean I'm ready?"

With a chuckle, Ian replies, "No, Father. You are getting very close, however. Your path forward lies before you now and I have faith you will grow and do so with Mother, as my time here is done."

"DONE?" Molly screams out with shocked surprise. "What do you mean, done? You...you're not going anywhere, son?"

Turning to his mother with a tender look, Ian replies, "I must, Mother. Father is moving wonderfully forward in rediscovering faith and unconditional love. It is also time for the spirit of Danuwoa to seek God's grace, and the mortal Danuwoa to face man's laws. All *His* will shall be done very soon, Mother, and my task completed."

"NO! NO! NO!" Molly screams through frantic breaths.

Wrapping her arms around Ian's shoulders, she goes on, "You can't go, Ian. You just can't. Just stay in this Dan guy's body. I don't care. I know

who you are. Come home with us right now. You hear me? We'll hide you at the house until the world just forgets about him."

Pulling his head back to look down to his mother, Ian says, "Mother, this journey must come to an end. But we will visit again. Often, and in many ways."

"**BUT IT'S NOT FAIR,**" Molly screams through lips knotted in anguish. As she beats her fists against her son's chest, she looks up to the grotto ceiling and painfully wails out, "**I THOUGHT YOU PROMISED JOY TO THE FAITHFUL, GOD. WELL, WE'RE GOOD PEOPLE, GOD, RIGHT? WE'RE FAITHFUL. WHY CAN'T WE HAVE OUR CHILD?**" All but spent, she buries her head in Ian's chest while almost collapsing and tearfully finishes in a defeated whisper, "*So, where is our love, God? Where is my love?*"

Tightening his embrace to support his mother, Ian softly says to her, "Mother, God loves you unconditionally. But He never promised anyone a life without pain, or laughter without tears, or sun without rain. But He did promise strength for your day, comfort for your tears and light for your way." He next looks to his father and says, "The grotto is now yours to use and keep safe, Father. It is a very sacred place for man, beast, and yes, spirit. But you must spend only Thursdays in the grotto, as the entrances shall remain concealed to you on all other days. Do you understand?"

"I guess so, son. I'm not real sure what you think I'd do with this place, though. But I'm hopin' we can keep connecting and you'll show me, right?"

"Yes, Father," Ian replies before gently moving his mother's shoulders away from their embrace. Then, taking both parents by the hand, he says, "Come. Let us walk outside where Danuwoa will seek God's grace in salvation. It is time and shall require your help."

As father, mother, and son walk toward the grotto opening, the thick outside vegetation mystically untangles and pulls away, allowing a



flood of sunlight into the cave. As they step out into the warmth of daylight, Ian leads his parents to the center of the table rock, where they spend just a moment marveling at the beautiful mountaintops before them.

Looking over to his father, Ian smiles brightly and says, "I love you, Father. Unconditionally. And I shall always be a part of who you are and who you shall become."

"I loved you too, son," answers Aiden with eyes refilling with tears. "And I will always be the proud father of Ian Taylor Huff."

Looking to his mother, Ian's smile turns more tender as he says, "I love you, Mother. Unconditionally. And I shall always be with you."

"Oh, my baby. I love you so much," Molly replies and tries to go on, "But Ian, I don..."

Molly doesn't get the rest of her words out before Ian suddenly pulls away from her. Without warning, he violently shoves her chest with his huge hand, causing her to fall to the ground several feet away. He quickly releases his father's hand and reaches up to grasp a fist full of his jacket. Clawing and tugging at the straight arm that holds him at bay, Aiden frantically, yet unsuccessfully, tries to break the strong grip of his son.

"IAN!" a panicked Aiden loudly shouts. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING, SON?"

Pausing only to answer, Ian replies, "Forgive me, Father. Danuwoa must be willing to give all."

"GIVE ALL?" snaps back Aiden as he continues to struggle. "WHAT? BY HURTING YOUR MOTHER AND FATHER?"

While moving his free hand behind his back, Ian intensely responds, "*No, Father. He must be willing to give all for unconditional love.*"

Without another word, Ian pulls a large hunting knife from his belt and raises it high in the air above his father. Just as his son is about

to seemingly strike down, however, Aiden hears a high-speed *zip-zip* sound snap right past his ear. He then watches in horror as two small explosions erupt in his son's chest, causing blood and bits of bone to spray outward and across the table rock. When his body stops jerking from the violent concussions, Ian looks blankly to his father for just a moment before slowly sinking to his knees. At the same time, Aiden hears the delayed *crack-crack* echo of two high-powered rifles behind him and instinctively turns in the direction of the shots. Squinting as he scans the wood lines, he spots two men on a far-off ridge who both immediately rise from prone positions with long rifles in hand. As the shooters begin to run down from the peak, he glances up to the ledge above the grotto in search of other agents, and seeing no one, turns back to Ian.

Letting the knife fall to the side, Ian keeps the grip on his father's jacket as he completely collapses onto his back. Pulled down by his son's weight, Aiden now watches as a large pool of blood begins to spread beneath Ian's body. Molly scrambles across the rock on her hands and knees and, overcome with what's just taken place, grabs her child around the neck and tries several times to pull him up. When her frantic attempts fail, however, she leans back on her knees and covers her panic-stricken face with blood-soaked hands.

Trying to maintain his usual stoic composure, Ian can't help but wince several times as the pain of being shot begins to overtake his body. "Father?" he asks as spastic coughing sends up thin blood that quickly forms in the corners of his mouth.

Leaning down closer to his son's face, Aiden responds, "Ian? Son? What've you done?"

"What must be done, Father," a pained Ian responds.

His mind going to his training, Aiden frantically rips open Ian's flannel shirt. He places his hands directly over the gushing wounds to

slow the blood as his son lifts his head a bit and says again, "Father. Come closer. I must share something with you."

"What is it, son? What? Tell me."

After another spastic round of coughing, Ian looks into his father's eyes, musters the best silly grin he can manage, and playfully announces, "This salvation stuff is a pretty tough gig, Pops. I think I'm gonna give that angel thing a try now, ya know?"

Hysterically laughing for only the moment, Aiden quickly returns to wildly glancing back and forth between Ian's face and the wounds. As he tries to spread open the bloodied shirt across his son's torso, Ian's mobile phone spills from the breast pocket and lands on the ground beside Molly.

A sudden wrack of pain twists Ian's body, but he manages to look at the phone and then up to his mother before forcing another weak smile and saying, "Take the phone, Mother. Please care for it, since it seems Father will loan it out to just about anyone."

"Ian, baby," Molly says through her continuous cries. "I don't understand what's going on, son. You can't go, baby. Momma just found you again."

Forcing a compassionate tone through relentless pain, Ian looks into his mother's eyes and replies, "I haven't been lost, Momma. I've been with you every moment of every day. Look for me. I leave you signs, you know? And please, keep talking to me as you do, Momma. I hear you, and it makes me happy."

Ian's body begins convulsing and Aiden reaches behind his son's head to protect it from the hard, stone ground. Suddenly, however, he goes completely limp. All his pain is gone and a contented smile beams across his face.

"I'm so, so sorry, son," says Aiden. "But I don't understand. You came here to save Danuwoa, right? To save the spirit inside this man. You did that, didn't you, son? You saved him, right?"

“Oh, yes, Father,” Ian proudly replies. “And it is glorious, is it not?”

Placing his bloodied hand against Ian’s cheek, Aiden deeply looks him in the eyes and asks, “But you said you brought your mother and me out here to help, son. We did it out of love for you. But how could you bring us here for this? How could you bring us out here to help Danuwoa die?”

With a raspy whisper, Ian replies with his final breaths, “Have you learned nothing since you first fell before me on this rock? You came not to help Danuwoa die, Father. *You came to help Danuwoa live!*”

Just as his words trail off, Ian’s eyes close. As they do, Aiden and Molly witness a small orb of bright, white light slowly rise a few feet above the body. Together they watch it hover for only a moment before it suddenly explodes in a spectacular bubble of translucent light that bursts out in all directions. After the silent rush of wind from the burst pushes them to their backsides, the couple spot a small, bright speck of light floating between their faces. The sparkling little dot spends a few quick moments flitting back and forth between them and somewhat comically does several figure eights before their eyes. After pausing for another brief but final moment, the peppy little speck begins to vibrate rapidly just before silently, majestically, blasting straight up to Heaven.

## EPILOGUE

*“When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.”*

*~ Kahlil Gibran*

**I**t’s been several weeks for Aiden and Molly since that faithful Thursday in the grotto. This early Saturday afternoon, they find themselves in the kitchen preparing to host an afternoon picnic with family and friends. As she stirs a large pot of potato salad in the making, he chops celery and onions on a cutting board atop the counter.

“You never told me how the delegation from the Cherokee Nation liked their tour of the grotto,” Molly says. “How’d that go?”

Taking a moment to stop cutting, Aiden looks over to her and replies, “Oh, I think they hated the hike, but they loved seeing the caves. And they put up with me babbling about us being their ancestors, too. They may or may notta believed me, but they put up with it anyway.”

“Well, they’re incredible for flyin’ out here to meet with the prison board and accept Danuwoa’s remains.”

Aiden laughs out loud and responds, “Yep. Good people. They come from good stock, I guess.”

“I’m still surprised they didn’t wanna take the remains of Wahya and Ahyoka back, though.”

“Nah. They said these mountains were the young lover’s land back then, and the burial was done all right and proper. They belong here on their own sacred ground. Oh, and they also said if I actually believed what I was sayin’ about bein’ Wahya and Ahyoka back in the day, then obviously our spirits were set free as they shoulda been, too.”

Resuming his chopping duties, Aiden accidentally cuts his finger with an errant slice of the sharp knife and moves to the infamous kitchen junk drawer to search for a bandage. Pulling it open, the first thing that gets his attention, however, is Ian’s mobile phone. Quickly popping his bleeding finger in his mouth, he grabs the phone with his other hand and watches in wonder as the screen instantly comes to life. Setting it down on the counter, he finds a bandage and wraps his wound. Picking up the phone again, he crosses the room while looking down at the screen and takes a seat at the kitchen table.

“It’s the darndest thing, Molly. The battery on Ian’s phone never goes down. And it comes on now just by me touching it.”

Moving toward Aiden, Molly takes a slightly joking but maternal tone as she says, “Now, now, Aiden Huff. Ian told me to take care of that phone for him. You’d better give that to me if you know what’s good for you.”

As Molly looks over his shoulder, Aiden remembers the photo he took of Dan and Hannah in the woods not so long ago. Touching the phone’s camera icon, a picture folder appears on the screen and he opens it.

“Well, I’ll be...” Aiden says as he looks down at the picture. While he anticipated that Dan would still be missing from the shot, he certainly didn’t expect to instead see Ian standing beside Hannah and patting her neck with a big, goofy grin on his face.

Molly smiles as she looks and says, “That’s a good shot of Ian and Hannah, honey. When did he take that?”

“He didn’t, honey. I did. Just a few weeks ago, too. Look at the time stamp. But that was Danuwoa standing there when I took it. Not Ian. And the crazy thing is the day I took it, he didn’t even show up in the shot.”

Suddenly, a melodic beep comes from the phone and a text prompt appears across the screen.

“What’s that say, honey?”

Smiling, Aiden reads aloud, “You see now because you believe. Love ya, Ian.”

Hoping to get into a text conversation with his son, Aiden touches the message prompt, but it immediately changes to the words, *Sender Busy* before disappearing from the screen. Nodding his head and lightly laughing, he then just flips his finger to view the next picture in the folder.

“You should sit, Molly,” Aiden says as soon as he realizes what he’s looking at on the screen.

As Molly looks to see what’s drawn Aiden’s attention, they both view a picture of themselves sitting in the very seats they are now. They’re dressed in the same clothing and, in the photo, Aiden holds Ian’s phone just as he holds it now. In the shot, however, a smiling Ian stands just behind his parents, with a hand on each of their shoulders and a magnificent pair of downy white angel wings spreading out wide behind him. Wrapping his big arm around Molly’s shoulder, Aiden pulls her toward him while they both lovingly look down at the phone. As tears of joy slowly begin to fall, Molly runs her finger across the glass to lovingly trace her son’s new wings.

“Well,” Molly says as she stands and tries to sniff back her tears, “We’ve got folks comin’ soon, angel dad. I guess we’d better get back to it then, huh?”

Aiden stands and moves back to the junk drawer. Instead of tossing the phone back inside, however, he decides at the last second to just slip it into his own shirt pocket.

“Aiden Huff!” Molly emphatically calls out.

Thinking he’s been caught, Aiden sheepishly answers back, “What? I didn’t do nothin’.”

“Stop it. You are such a dear. You ran out and got a new tablecloth for the picnic table. You, fella, are my hero.”

Quickly moving to window where Molly stands, Aiden peers out to see that the picnic table is, in fact, neatly covered in a red and white checkered cloth.

“Well, I didn’t do that.”

“Get out! Who did, then?”

Still looking out the window, Aiden spots something, looks over to Molly with a grin, and points his finger out toward the wood line.

Standing up on her toes, Molly peers out as she smiles herself and says, “Aww. The bear! That’s so adorable.”

“Yep. Real adorable. Now I gotta get ‘em to take it back to Miss Lena. But it can wait ‘til tomorrow, I reckon.

Hearing cars coming up their drive, Molly and Aiden move through the house and onto the front porch to welcome Clay Marshal and Doctor Rajeesh Rawat to their home. As they begin escorting their guests to the back yard, Aiden turns again to the sound of others pulling up. Smiling, he waves as Molly’s parents, Jack and Shirley Kilgore, come to a stop and step out of their car. Behind them is the cruiser of Captain Jack Stone, followed by Fire Chief Polly Jordan and her husband Glen. Lastly, a black pickup truck speeds up the dirt lane and skids to a stop before Deputy Marshals Cassell and Kerns jump out, each holding a bucket of fried chicken and a bottle of wine.

So, on this Saturday afternoon, not long after a couple fateful and faithful Thursdays in the grotto, the home of Aiden, Molly, Ian, and



Hannah Huff is filled with fellowship and love. Just beyond the edge of the forest, a Great Horned Owl sits on a tree limb perch, swivels his head toward the Huff house...and blinks twice.

## BIO

R. Glenn Kelly, or Ron to his family and friends, is a bereaved father, as well as an award-winning author and speaker. His past books include; *Sometimes I Cry in the Shower*, *The Griefcase*, *Grief Healings 365*, and *Grief in the Workplace*. After losing his sixteen-year-old son and only child to a rare congenital heart defect, Ron struggled with grief and his own identity. As he found healthful ways to move forward, he would publish his first book, *Sometimes I Cry in the Shower*, and become a highly sought-after Keynote Speaker and Workshop Presenter for several national bereavement support organizations, churches, universities, Fortune 50 companies, and more.

Speaking on the topic of grief healing, Ron has appeared as a guest on numerous television talk shows, radio programs, podcasts, and in newsprint articles. He has served as a National Board of Directors member for multiple national bereavement support organizations and a Board of Advisors member at Le Bonheur Children's Hospital in Memphis, TN, where his son passed away. Considered a Subject Matter Expert on the diversities between male and female grief, he enjoys conducting couples' workshops for parents who have experienced child loss.

When not involved in his favorite pastime of writing, Ron speaks at local civic organizations, churches, and businesses to bring greater attention to the impacts of grief in the workplace, both to the bereft and to their employer. His books can be found in print, ebook and audiobook at most online retailers, as well as bookstores everywhere. To find out more about R. Glenn Kelly, or to book him for speaking events, please visit <https://rglenmkelly.com>.

# THURSDAYS IN THE GROTTO

You've been there. At some point, maybe even now, the bottom just dropped out of your life. When Appalachian Game Warden Aiden Huff loses his son, his deep despondency brings on an avalanche of other tragedies, taking with it his job, his life-long friends, and even his dear wife. But raised as a child of the hills, Aiden knows the spirit of Mother Mountain can make or break a man, so he sets out to accept either fate in her arms.

When his journey takes him to a hallowed grotto off the highest trails, he encounters another wayward traveler hiding from the world. It's a good thing God placed a spark of salvation alongside this lost soul. Will it be enough to not only redeem this evil spirit but also guide our Aiden in rediscovering a life of faith, peace and purpose? Spoiler Alert; God never fails!

But please watch out for the bears, federal agents, cougars, helicopters, horses, nosy town folk, and so much more Aiden must cross to keep the sacred grotto and its sojourners a secret. For him, however, they might all play a role in the spiritual journey that could become his destination. Come find out all that Aiden discovers about life and unconditional love during his Thursdays in the Grotto.

R. Glenn Kelly is a bereaved father, having lost his sixteen-year-old son and only child to a rare heart defect. He is the author of other award-winning books about coming through the fire, including *SOMETIMES I CRY IN THE SHOWER*. He has appeared on national television, including Trinity Broadcast Network, on-going radio shows, and provided Keynote Addresses and workshops on personal recovery at Fortune Fifty companies, international non-profit organizations, universities, hospitals, churches, civic organizations and more.



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