

# Rise & Walk

A close-up photograph of a hand with numerous red spots, possibly a child's hand, gripping a rough, textured tree trunk. The background is dark and out of focus, suggesting a forest setting.

Gregory  
Solis

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By

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For Christina,  
You have made me so very happy.

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Gregory Solis

January 1, 2007

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# One

Many people are afraid of the dark, but Gary Jones had good cause. In all his nineteen years he had never before experienced such terror. He fled almost blind, through the mountain forest, groping to avoid the trees. The only illumination provided by the moonless night was a faint glow of starlight fighting through the thick clouds. His leg throbbed from a bad step that he had taken while evading his pursuers. Clutched in his right hand was an aluminum sample canister, much like a small thermos. Gary held the container close to his body as he ran. He knew he must get the contents of the canister back to civilization. First he would have to avoid his classmates, who were trying to eat him.

Gary wondered how he would recount the details of his ordeal to the authorities. The police might think him a lunatic and who could blame them. No sane person would believe the horrific events that he had just witnessed. As he propelled his tired body forward he tried to keep the facts fresh in his mind to reassure himself that he was not going mad.

His summer term geology course at the Junior College had camped out for a night in the mountains to examine some exposed rock formations. As the students prepared to leave, they spoke of an

excursion to the pizza parlor in town. Everyone was jovial with the thought of returning home.

The evening peace was shattered when a meteor burst through the heavy clouds with a supersonic blast. Professor Galloway, a man very excited by the prospect of scientific discovery, sent the students to search in teams.

The students located the meteorite two kilometers away in pristine condition. The Geiger counter measured no discernible radiation making it safe for recovery. The coconut sized traveler was so hot from its trip through the atmosphere that its heat deformed the shovel used to carry it back to camp. Carefully obtained scrapings were tested chemically and revealed it to be composed of olivine, a form of iron. The Professor decided to stay in the field until the meteorite cooled enough to be safely transported back to the campus.

Gary's classmates did not share the Professor's interest in interstellar discoveries. They were hungry and wanted to go home. The Professor told the students that discoveries of this nature were historic because the meteorite was most likely older than the earth. A find of this nature superseded their dinner plans. The Professor's decision did not make him a popular man. A group of impatient athletes who often taunted Gary decided to accelerate the meteorite's cooling by dousing it with cold water. The temperature differential caused the meteorite to shatter and throw a steamy dark green mist over four of their class. The spray caused chemical burns, seizure and within minutes, death.

The Professor ordered camp struck while examining the fallen students. He asked Gary to place the surviving bits of meteorite in a biohazard container. Recovering the broken meteorite was tense work but Gary was a talented student and knew the safety protocols.

Mindy, a freshmen cheerleader who wore her uniform with pride, though too often, cautioned Gary not to touch the meteorite. He was surprised at her warning. Those were the first words Mindy had ever spoken to him. He had admired her body from afar all summer, yet never caught her eye with his excellence in academia. She was in a panic trying to use her cell phone with no results. Gary remembered suggesting that she go start the bus. That was just before the screams rang out.

Clark Evens, the local baseball sensation with the eighties hair cut, was the first to awaken. The Professor was checking for a pulse, when Clark raised his head and bit the kindly scholar on his wrist. Gary remembered Professor Galloway holding his bloody arm as the blistered and burned athlete attacked once more.

He recalled his deceased classmates rising to their unsteady feet and attacking the other students. Amongst the screams, blood and confusion, Gary backed away into the darkness of the trees to watch the Professor die. He wanted to escape, but the forest was too dark. After waiting a few desperate moments he crept in fear towards the vehicle. When Gary reached the school bus he recoiled in horror at what he saw. In the drivers seat the Professor was taking large bites from the body of the once beautiful Mindy. Blood ejected out of her artery as the Professor tore at her soft neck. When Gary tried to pull the Professor off the young girl, he snapped back with blood stained teeth. The Professor growled like a wild animal as he returned to claw at Mindy's helpless body. Gary left her to be devoured, too terrified to be of any assistance. He would never forget her cries for mercy.

The guilt of leaving her would be unbearable, yet he knew that whatever was in the container was responsible for infecting the others. He tried to press himself on with the thought that he must

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find a way to bring the sample back to a lab for proper analysis. He hid for a few heart pounding minutes in the cover of the trees until he no longer heard screams. He saw his dead classmates in the distant light of the fire stand and wobble around like some evil newborn animals; unsure of their footing. *How could any of this happen?* He thought that the answer must lie within the fragments that he was carrying. His risen classmates began to walk, some in his direction. He sprinted into the forest, no longer afraid of the dark.

Gary was so very tired. He had been running with no point of reference to guide his course. Thoughts of resting echoed in his frightened mind but he did not dare. All he had now was running, yet injured, he was not moving very fast. He had to stop, if just for a moment. *Perhaps climb a tree and hide. But what if they find me and I become trapped in the middle of nowhere. What if they climb up after me?* He resolved that climbing a tree was not a good idea. With all of his exertion, Gary could not hear if anyone was behind him. He had to stop soon and catch his breath. *In a moment, he thought, just a little further.*

No longer able to endure the pain in his left shin, he felt his way behind a large tree and stopped in silence. A nightmarish moment passed as Gary strained to listen for his classmates. All he could hear was the wild pounding of his heart thumping in his head. He tried to breathe as quietly as possible but his lungs were famished. As his body calmed, he noticed the faint sounds of a stream in the distance. There were streams all over the mountain that led to Lake Sierra. *Water would be nice,* he thought as he took note of his thirst. If he could swim, the water should carry him down the mountain to someone who would help. *Swimming would be easier on my leg,* he thought. He noticed a small flicker of light in the far distance. It

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looked dim but he thought it might be a campfire. Gary started towards the light while trying to edge closer to the sound of the stream.

He walked with determination to keep his aching body moving when mind shattering fear sprang upon him. Gary heard a deep, dry, raspy throated exhalation of air from his right. Someone or something was next to him. Cold sweat beaded on his brow as Gary felt his stomach tense into rigid knots. He smelled uncooked meat and perfume as something tackled his right side. Gary's left leg buckled under the attack. Disoriented in the darkness, the hard ground hit him sooner than he expected. Long fingernails scratched at his face. He felt the terrible sting of teeth in his shoulder. Through fabric, skin, and the meat of Gary's arm, he felt his attacker bite down so hard that one of the monster's teeth broke on his bone. Horrid growls and the gnashing of braces snapped in the air. Gary grabbed at his attacker and felt that it was a she, wearing a skirt. He cast her off with what was left of his strength and realized that his assailant was Mindy, the cheerleader. He got to his feet and sprinted towards the sound of the stream. He felt his shoulder, bloody and bitten. Through the intense pain, Gary discovered an overwhelming desire to live. He was bleeding but not gushing out blood; his arteries must be okay. If he could get to the water he could have a chance. He heard rustling noises in the darkness. *There are more of them!* Gary realized that the light he saw, the campfire, was actually his camp. He had unknowingly run in a large circle. His disappointment turned to anger. Directly in his path were two of his former classmates. He was determined to go right through them and get to the stream.

The world had to know what was in the meteorite and find a way to prevent this from happening to anyone else. Gary felt hands grasping for him as he made his way past a deep groan. In the

darkness, he dodged another hellish wail. Gary felt the earth come out from underneath his feet as he plummeted into a rushing stream. Ice cold water enveloped him for a frozen moment until he broke the surface gulping for air. He picked up speed in the frigid drift as the current pulled him along. He held on tight to the canister with his right hand while using his left to swim. His right arm was useless for rotation due to his bite wound but he could still hold on to the sample. He grew very tired and began to forget about the pain. The biting chill made him sleepy yet he had to stay awake. He had to find someone and explain what he had witnessed. He struggled to maintain consciousness as the water drove him faster downstream. He thought of his parents and family. He thought of Mindy with the great ass and how he did not want to die a virgin. The frigid mountain stream was starting to bite at his body as he grew numb with hypothermia. The pain in his shoulder drummed to the beat of his failing heart. Slower and slower, but he had to stay alive. He faded in his efforts; his consciousness dissolving in and out as the current pulled him forward.

The stream opened up into a large body of water. His pace slowed and Gary could see the waning glow of campfires some distance down the shore. He struggled with stiffening limbs to find his way to the lake's edge. With great effort he made it to land. His legs would no longer respond properly to his commands. He made slow progress as he crawled up the muddy bank. Resting a moment he drew his limp left hand to his wounded shoulder to find it slimy with blood. He applied pressure and felt spikes of pain surge through his body. He lay in the mud staring up into the sky. A shooting star caught his eye as it crossed the cloud filled heavens. Gary's vision faded out with his consciousness. He dreamed that he was safe at home in his bed.

What he thought was moments later, must have been longer because when he opened his eyes again the sky was starting to show hints of the impending dawn. Gary tried to move but his body would not listen. The canister slipped from his weakened hand and rolled down the bank into the water. Its heavy composition drove it deep beneath the waves. *I'll pick that up later, just a little more rest,* he thought.

Gary's breathing grew more and more difficult. There was a dry thirst in his throat. Every breath was a labor. The distance between inhale and exhale grew longer as his lungs succumbed to the inevitable. His body began to buzz as if it were stung by a thousand bees. His vision blurred. The view of morning sky above smeared into a grey mass no longer recognizable. The image his eyes sent to his brain suddenly faded as if someone had unplugged a television. He knew he was dying. He was too overcome by exhaustion to cry out. All he could hear was his struggle for air that seemed to be traveling away from him, echoing at a greater and greater distance; losing volume with each tragic gasp. Gary thought that he was getting hungry. His mouth watered with starvation. Finally, Gary Jones stopped thinking; stopped breathing and his final comment on the world was a single tear that ran down his face from his open expressionless eyes.

Until, he got back up.

# Two

Jack Mason stood six feet tall, lean muscled and tough. His dark hair fell over his brown eyes making him appear dangerous when he narrowed his gaze. This early morning in front of his tent at the Sierra Valley campground, Jack was trying to teach his best friend a thing or two about sword fighting. His friend of over eighteen years was a stocky thirty year old man named Tony Sanchez. The two men looked a little like brothers though no one could ever tell which one was older. Tony attributed their youthful appearance to their shared half Latin, half Caucasian lineage. Growing up together, the two often trained in many forms of martial arts as teens. Jack took to the sword at an early age. His studies of combat were buttressed by a simple natural talent. He took sword fighting seriously and wanted his street brother to do the same.

Facing Tony about ten paces apart, Jack held firm onto the handle of his bamboo practice sword with his right hand. He raised the rounded, somewhat harmless looking weapon towards Tony and spoke,

“Okay, this time I am going to leave myself open. See if you can capitalize on the mistake.”

Tony sighed and held his *Kendo Sword* with both hands in a defensive position; straight in front of his body. He wanted a smoke.

He wanted a coffee. Hell, he wanted to be back in his tent sleeping but *Kendo*, the ancient Japanese art of sword fighting, was a reminder of a simpler time. He could wake up early for this once in a while. Tony took a deep cleansing breath, just as he was taught to do so many years ago and exhaled slowly, allowing his thoughts to wash away into a quiet calm.

Jack advanced with amazing speed. His left hand joining his right beneath the bamboo hilt bringing an increased force as it struck Tony's upraised sword. Jack pivoted on his left foot and spun, bringing his blade close to his body on the turn and extending it as he once again faced Tony. With instinct that he hoped looked like anticipation, Tony back peddled a step and caught Jack's blade mid-air. Jack feinted to the right, leaving his left leg overextended and exposed. Jack, who knew Tony to be a defensive swordsman, left an exploitable weakness in his stance. Tony missed what Jack thought to be an obvious opening. Tony backed off and resumed his defensive, sword first stance.

"You missed it," Jack chided.

"Huh?" Tony said while noticing he had stepped on a sharp rock. He shifted his weight to absorb the pain without conscious thought. Then, in a heartbeat, Tony had more to deal with than he could have imagined. He blocked Jack's strike from the right at a low angle, left from on high and again from the right. Pain rang out from behind his left hamstring as Jack's blade struck. Tony fell to one knee and put his sword up in instinctive defense. He looked to see Jack demonstrate his control of his weapon as he stopped his sword just inches from Tony's neck.

"Punk," Tony exhaled.

Walking away satisfied in his abilities but disappointed in his friend, Jack asked,

“Were you even paying attention?”

Taking a seat on the picnic bench that was anchored to their campground, Jack watched Tony struggle to his feet.

“Man, it’s too early to pay attention,” answered a defeated Tony.

He took a seat at the bench opposite Jack and drank the last of his tepid coffee from a stainless steel mug. Jack thought for a moment and decided to try some honest encouragement.

“You have to attack more, learn to think about offense and defense at the same time.”

“It’s kind of hard to find targets when you’re swinging at me so fast,” Tony complained.

“That’s why we train, so you can speed up your reactions, to see weakness and openings,” Jack said. He did not like criticizing his friend but he wanted to help improve Tony’s skill. They both had their strengths. Tony was a dynamo with the nunchaks; two hardwood sticks joined by a chain often used by Bruce Lee in the movies. Jack never could master Nunchaku. Then again, the swirling sticks were too dangerous to practice on a live opponent. Jack felt that there was no substitute for the challenge of a real person. The unpredictability of humanity was the only true way to test and improve oneself.

“You could be better, you just have to practice,” Jack offered.

“I am better, better than ninety eight percent of the general public,” Tony answered as he put down his coffee. “How many people practice Kendo anymore?”

“Not enough,” Jack said somewhat sad. “You should take it more seriously though.” Jack stood and started towards his tent.

“Yeah, when it’s for real I will,” Tony mumbled. He finished his coffee and looked around for his smokes. Amongst the clutter of the picnic table; underneath Jack’s copy of *Secrets of the Ninja* and Tony’s *Improvised Munitions Handbook*, laid his pack of cigarettes. Tony noticed that the box felt a little light but was relieved to find two smokes left. He separated the pair and popped one into his mouth. Finding the lighter would be another matter. It was not underneath the men’s camp fire reading materials. It was not near Tony’s collection of obscure vitamin supplements nor underneath his motorcycle helmet that he had allowed to fade in the sun. Tony stood over the table with his cigarette hanging dumbly from his mouth as he searched.

“Here, it was on your bike,” Jack’s voice rang out accompanied by Tony’s lighter as it sailed through the air. Tony caught the stainless steel Zippo and lit his cigarette. Tony saw Jack disappear into his tent and wondered what time it was. Looking out over their campground, past Jack’s white late model truck and their two motorcycles on a trailer, he could see the sun, still low on the horizon. There was still some hot water on the camp stove and the thought occurred to Tony that he should have some more Coffee. He poured a hot cup and added only instant creamer. He opened a bottle filled with eleven different vitamins and amino acids. Each pill had an esoteric purpose that Tony resolved would help him fight off the effects of smoking, careless nutrition and the occasional hangover. Tony had previously filled the bottle at home from his supply of health products in anticipation of the weekend. He palmed the mixture and downed eleven pills with a large slug of hot coffee.

Cigarettes and vitamins, Tony never even considered the contradictions.

Tony smoked while looking at the books on the table. They were so different from the textbooks that he had studied at college. The *Improvised Munitions Handbook* was written in the eighties by the U.S. Army to teach field personnel how to create explosives from common household materials. Tony had bought the handbook when he was sixteen from a military surplus store during the Reagan administration. Back when World War Three seemed like it was just over the horizon. He had read the book cover to cover many times and was reasonably confident that he had absorbed the principals of improvised explosives. The weapons and training all seemed like useless knowledge now. After finally graduating with a Bachelors in English just two months ago and now facing the prospect of finding a real job, Tony wondered if he had wasted his youth studying the wrong things.

“Do you think thirty is too old to play army?” Tony asked with a loud voice as he smoked his dwindling cigarette.

Jack exited his tent dressed in full camouflage combat gear. His tactical vest was neatly stuffed with equipment. A large combat knife hung on the left side of his chest with the scabbard fastened securely as not to snag on anything while sneaking through the brush. He cradled a very expensive black paintball rifle in his arms, always aware of where the weapon was pointing.

“Who’s playing?” Jack asked.

# Three

The bright sun continued on its westward course over the Sierra basin warming away the early morning mist. A short distance from the main body of the campground, away from the reveling and often loud local campers, stood a lone tent next to an old country squire station wagon. Marcia Dahlgren's mind danced in that small space between consciousness and slumber.

Since becoming a mother she had discovered an ability to multitask in her sleep. Her first acquaintance with this ability was when she had fallen asleep while her husband David had been watching football. Her dream had incorporated the sounds of the game coming from the television. That evening, during her nap, she had led the Steelers to victory over the Eagles twenty one to seven. Marcia found the experience quite pleasing. It was an exciting diversion from which she awoke rested. This strange skill had assisted her while her son grew up. She was able to nap while still keeping an ear on her child's activities. She could sing with purple dinosaurs or adventure with Hobbits while her mother's mind would let her know if her son was getting into trouble. As a mother, Marcia had learned to tell the difference between the sound of her son getting a cup of water and the sound of the top cabinet in the kitchen being carefully opened while sleeping. The top cabinet that held the chocolate chips she used in baking cookies. Her boy was clever and

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tried a number of times to gain access to the chocolaty treasure when he thought she was asleep. While taking a restful nap she could sleep through unimportant phone calls on the answering machine but bolt up with full awareness if the voice on the machine was family. Marcia was a mother and mothers could do that sort of thing.

She lay peaceful with her back to her husband in the warm tent. The familiar reassurance of her home brought pillow cuddled below her cheek. Her mind transitioned into the waking world ever so slowly, to the sounds of birds and a gentle lake shore. Her bladder was full. She tried to ignore her need to relieve herself yet the sound of the lake with its soft waves would not let her. She had remembered that David had been up and down during the night, clumsily exiting the tent in the dark to pee. *That will teach him to drink so much beer*, she thought smiling. This morning Marcia found herself a little envious that men could just pee wherever they wished. She would have to walk over to the main office to find a suitable restroom, David and her son could just use a tree. *It just isn't fair*.

Her husband was restless. She became aware that he was rocking back and forth. His body leaning towards hers, touching her back with a broken rhythm. Still half asleep, she opened her drowsy eyes and tried to discover through her senses what David was doing. She heard a wet sound followed by a slight groan. Her eyes widened at the thought; *is he masturbating?* She suppressed a slight giggle while her expression scrunched up as if she had just bitten into a lemon. *Oh that is funny*, she thought. He was feeling frisky last night but Marcia did not want to make love with her young son sleeping in the car so close by. She had agreed to let the boy sleep on his own but was sure he would get scared and return to their tent. Marcia did not want to be caught in the throws of passion. She had pretended to be too tired for her husband. *I guess I could join in*, she thought. Her

mother's ear would warn her if her son got out of the car. She loved her husband and in the soft warm confines of their tent she would be happy to lend the old pervert a hand, as it were.

Marcia rose up silently, intent on surprising her husband by saying something romantically clever. As she turned she was startled by the form of a young man sitting halfway in their tent through the open flap. She became frozen with an otherworldly fear. Her heart began to race. The young man appeared to be covered with dried mud. He was holding a pear sized piece of torn red meat. Greenish black drool fell in ropy strands from his bottom lip. His features were distorted and slack. The thing took no notice of Marcia who had become as stiff as a wax figure. Her expression was one most appropriate for a house of horrors. Her breathing quickened, filling her lungs with the foul fetid smell of decay. The young man-thing took a large bite from its handful of gore. Teeth gnashed against the meat while bloody hands tore the remains from his lips. It looked at the ground outside of the tent and appeared disappointed. A disgusting belch escaped the thing's mouth. It sniffed at the meat it was holding and casually tossed aside the slimy mass of tissue.

To Marcia's unbelievable horror, the creature turned its glassy eyes back in the tent. Its gaze passed her frozen form without recognition and fell to David's leg. A split second passed and she wondered with the speed of thought why David had not waked to deal with this filthy stranger. Her fearful eyes welling with tears, hesitated to move. The thing at the foot of her tent picked up her husband's leg. It lifted limply into her view. The leg was missing a generous portion of the calf muscle.

*This isn't happening.* She was having a most vivid and horrible nightmare. For once her lucid dreaming had turned against her. Instead of adventuring through a fantasy dreamscape her

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subconscious had delivered her a vision of hell. The man she loved devoured by a mud encrusted demon dressed as a college student. *No, this can't be real.* She must have had a bad meal last night. Something she ate was spoiled in the icebox and now it was giving her a nightmare. It would soon be over and she would awake to make breakfast with her son like she had promised. Breakfast, with freshly bought ingredients to be sure.

The ugly devil wore a torn expression of exasperation as it dropped the tattered leg. Disinterested, it turned slowly towards the outside and sniffed at the air. The living dead creature that was once Gary Jones stood with some effort, its body wracked by rigor mortis. Marcia shuttered as the creature exhaled a loud dry sounding gasp. It shuffled with stiff legs, towards the campground; foot steps diminishing with the growing distance.

She trembled. Her forehead beaded with ice cold sweat. Shivering she lay propped up on one arm looking at the open flap of tent where the creature had been. Silently her mind screamed; *this must be a nightmare.* She had witnessed the absolute impossible and it simply could not be real. The stillness of her terror was shattered by a sudden inhalation of air from her husband. The sickening sound of gas being drawn in by phlegm choked tubes echoed in the tent. She craned her neck to see David's face. His normally tanned skin had lost its color. His features that she had loved so well for over a decade were drawn and sunken. She moved closer, putting her arm on his chest, her sleeping bag falling open with her movement. Her husband's eyes opened. They were dry and empty of emotion. He blinked apparently without focus. He exhaled a stinking vapor that made her retch but she did not withdraw. This was her husband; this was a dream. She could make him all better as soon as she got hold of her food poisoned imagination. His eyes moved. Some sort of dark

awareness flooded his features like a monster suddenly realizing that it had been born; born again, to a living dead existence with only the most primitive of needs. He looked at Marcia with eyes devoid of pity. Her smell was fresh, somehow appealing. Without verbalization or cognitive thought, the creature that was once David Dahlgren wanted to consume the living thing before him. No longer recognized as his wife or a human being, she was food. That is all.

Mind numbing fear prevented Marcia from understanding what happened next. Her mind simply turned off. Her mind that was able to entertain her through naps and keep an eye on her child did her one last great favor. It robbed her of her consciousness to protect her from the horror of her husband's attack. Doctors would call her condition disassociative shock. She would feel nothing. She would have no idea that her husband of ten years had just bitten into her face, tearing the flesh from her cheek. She would not feel the slightest pressure of his teeth grinding with primitive aggression into her jawbone, removing the soft membrane of her skin. Her body silently submitted to the thrashings while her mind transported her back to the memory of her soft pillow, nestled beneath her cheek.

# Four

Through the glass doors of the campground market Veronica Emmons watched two men outside seem to argue. One of the men was her employer, Andy; the other man was a mystery. What was even stranger was that Andy, a six foot four bear of a man, seemed intimidated by the much smaller man with frosted blond hair.

“Who is that guy?” Veronica asked her coworker Nikki Howe.

“Are you kidding?” the short blond asked as she drank a soda.

Veronica looked at her with eyebrows raised, reassuring that she did not know who the man was.

“That’s Lance Richardson, his family owns the plant. You know; our sponsor for the match,” Nikki said and finished her can of sugary caffeine. She placed the can in the trash and began stocking drinks into one of the refrigerated displays that lined the wall.

“How long have you lived in Whisper anyway?” Nikki asked without looking back at Veronica.

“About six months.”

“Well, Lance is an asshole. He thinks he owns the place,” Nikki said.

Veronica was familiar with the plant. She had not really made any friends since moving to Whisper California; populations seven

thousand, however, she had heard about the plant in her classes at Whisper Junior College. It seemed that many of the locals worked at the ammunition plant, loading bullet casings and processing orders. The company had many government contracts and the ongoing war in the Middle East generated a lot of work. The Richardson Ammunition plant was the sponsor for Andy's latest venture, a paintball tournament. Veronica thought it funny in a sad way that a company that makes instruments of death was sponsoring a competition that turned mock warfare into weekend fun.

Andy and Nikki were the two people that Veronica knew best in her new town, but that was not saying much. She was not very close to anyone up here in the mountains of Northern California. Veronica had an almost self-consuming goal of becoming a doctor and her focus left her little time for friends. Veronica felt best when working towards a goal. Her free time was spent reading medical journals or textbooks; anything to keep her mind off of her past. Taking a summer job at the campground store allowed her to stay busy and earn some extra money but she also got to know her coworkers. She knew that Andy had worked hard to put together the paintball tournament to promote his field. Veronica admired his determination. Andy had built the general store at the campground to serve campers a couple of years ago. This year, the expansion of his business had provided Veronica with a job. Since there were no classes offered in the summer that she needed, Veronica was thankful to have something to do.

Andy, his conversation over, pushed on the heavy glass door to the shop and entered. He removed the sign that read CLOSED and propped both the swinging doors open.

"Veronica is your drawer ready?" he asked his attractive young employee.

“Yes, were all set,” acknowledged the tall dark haired woman as she shut the drawer to the cash register. A phone rang at the desk near Nikki who dashed to answer it. Veronica noticed that Andy seemed upset. She was very perceptive about others pain and felt compelled to inquire about his well being. Nikki’s voice sounded, cutting Veronica off before she could speak.

“Andy, it’s the Sheriff.”

Andy sighed as he turned and slouched his way towards the phone. Veronica watched with concern as Andy looked so heavy with thought. The smell of perfume and hair products snapped her out of her musings as Nikki took her side.

Veronica, a very pretty young woman of twenty eight, studied her coworker and wondered why she was always so dolled up for work. Nikki was short; about five foot one, but appeared more diminutive next to the five foot ten Veronica. She had medium length blonde hair and sparkling green eyes. Veronica hardly had time to be jealous of anyone. Her logical mind knew that she was attractive yet; deep down she felt a little plain with her long brown hair and brown eyes. She thought about coloring her hair or styling it at a salon but it was just easier to tie it back with a rubber band as she always did. There were just too many other, more important things to do. She was working on getting into medical school and had too many demons from her past to let such superficial things to get into her way. She had to admit though, she was a little jealous of Nikki’s large chest. Veronica was a B cup but being five ten made her appear smaller. Veronica never tucked in the paintball tee shirt that Andy had given the girls as a uniform. She liked to keep her shirt loose, where her coworker liked to keep her outfits as tight as possible. Nikki appeared very proud of her chest, something that Veronica was too shy to show off herself, but then again, she had different

priorities. She resolved that twenty one year old girls like Nikki were into that.

Veronica wondered; *was I ever that young?* She did not think so; she had too many things to do when she was twenty one. Taking care of her dying father took up all of her time and her youth. As an Army trauma surgeon, her father had contracted a mysterious cancer during the first gulf war. He had lasted six and a half years with the disease as a testament to his strength, but also due to the love and care of his daughter. Her mother had died in childbirth so Veronica and her father only had each other in the world. But that was a lifetime ago. The insurance settlement had ensured her a small level of comfort and the ability to pursue her education. Veronica had moved to the country to evade the memory of her past. To escape the bustle of the city that seemed to close around her choking off her humanity. Here in the open air, amid the slow pace of a quiet mountain town, she could get her life together. There was a small college and fifty miles down the highway a larger four year school with a Premed program. Here at the base of the mountain, she could find herself. She might not find a man with all his own teeth, but she could find peace.

“What does the Sheriff want?” Veronica asked. Nikki shrugged her shoulders and made an unknowing expression.

Nikki returned to her work, leaving Veronica to watch Andy. Her rough life had left Veronica somewhat empathic. She had learned to trust her feelings. Right now, her feelings were telling her that Andy might need a kind ear. It was in her nature to be sympathetic. Helping others was the best way that Veronica could think of to honor her father.

Andy hung up the phone perturbed. He approached the girls on the customer side of the counter.

“Girls, over here for a second. I just talked to the Sheriff. Looks like a bunch of kids from the JC were on a field trip up north of here. They haven’t reported back, so get the word out, if anyone sees any lost, hungry kids, call the Sheriff or the Ranger station. We got some worried parents back in town.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Nikki noticed a group of paintball competitors enter the registration area in front of the store.

“Sure thing Boss,” she said as she motioned towards the contestants. Andy turned his attention to the glass doors and waved a greeting to the men. Veronica had to ask,

“Is everything alright?”

“Yeah,” he hesitated, “It’s just hard to make all the decisions.”

“What did that man want?”

“He didn’t come right out and say it, but I think he was threatening not to sponsor us next year unless his team wins,” Andy confessed.

“Oh,” Veronica said studying his demeanor.

“I am not going along with anything dishonest. If I lose the sponsor, I’ll make it work without them,” Andy sighed.

“Your doing great, we are pulling in good money,” she reassured and touched his wrist.

“Yeah, thanks,” Andy said as he straightened himself to leave.

Nikki, who was eavesdropping on their conversation while pretending to stock the shelves, joined Veronica.

“Are you into Andy?” she whispered to Veronica.

“No, I am just worried about him. He seems upset today.”

Veronica was taken aback by the suggestion. She had no attraction to Andy, rather a general human compassion. He was nowhere near her type. She was not even sure what her type was anymore. It had been a long time since she was close to anyone; not since before her father had taken ill. Veronica decided to hide her discomfort and turn the suggestion around with a dash of humor.

“Why, would I be getting in your way?” she teased the girl. Nikki rolled her eyes and answered sarcastically,

“Oh yeah, you know I want to climb that mountain.” The two girls shared a laugh. Nikki continued,

“No, I don’t think I am going to find my Prince Charming in this old town.”

“Come on,” Veronica countered, “there are some attractive guys here.”

“Yeah, guys who like to play Army.”

Veronica shuttered at the mention of the word Army.

“No, my father was a surgeon in the Army. I grew up on bases all over the world. Army guys are far worse than this,” Veronica said.

“Well, I have lived here my whole life and I am sick to death of these idiots.”

Veronica’s attention fell towards Jack who was some distance away outside talking to a reporter from Warpaint Magazine.

“Who is that?” she asked nodding towards Jack.

“Some hot shots from the bay area, Berkeley or somewhere like that. They won the amateur championship for California last year,” replied Nikki unimpressed.

The man was attractive, eye-catching and somehow interesting to Veronica. Maybe he was her type, but the mentioning of the bay area caused her to relive old memories, dispelling her attraction.

“I used to live in San Francisco,” Veronica said in a quiet tone. Nikki looked at Veronica with interest.

“I was thinking of transferring to SF State.”

“I’ll never go back to that hellhole.” Veronica’s demeanor soured as she turned to restock a candy display.

# Five

Within the confines of his parent's station wagon, nine year old Elliott awoke covered in sweat. His mother had allowed him to sleep in the back of the station wagon on his own but he had grown fearful in the night. Elliott had reassured his mother that he was old enough to sleep alone. When the night started to play on his fears, he resisted the temptation to return to his parent's tent. Rolling the windows up kept out the creepy uncertain sounds of nature. The comfort provided by his nighttime security precautions worked fine until the sun rose. Elliot awoke within a stifling oven of glass and steel. He wriggled free of his sleeping bag and rotated his body so that his head faced the rear of the wagon. In a heat induced delirium, Elliot wormed his sleep weakened arm towards the door handle. Opening the hatch flooded the vehicle with sweet, cool relief. His hungry lungs drew in the fresh morning air. Elliott kicked his pillow forward and snatched it up with his free hand. He brought the pillow to the very edge of the station wagon and laid his head down right above the bumper.

Elliot was a kid prone to strange positions. He liked to sit upside down on the couch and watch television. His mom would tell him not to, that the blood was rushing to his head. When she would nap while he watched the Power Rangers, he would rotate in his father's recliner and watch T.V. with his head hanging off the seat.

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He did not see why it should be harmful. He enjoyed the bizarre perspective granted by watching a show while inverted. He enjoyed not getting caught as well.

Elliott gazed with sleet filled eyes to his right. With his head half out the open door he could see the lake. A boat motor started in the distance. People began to awake and go about their day in the campground. He could hear his parents starting to move around in their tent. *Good*, he thought. It was Sunday morning; that meant a big breakfast with eggs, bacon and waffles. His mother had promised to let him cook the bacon as long as he was careful. He had gotten to sleep in the car last night and now bacon. The responsibility excited the chipper nine year old. He turned his head to look at the ground. Being just a foot above the soft earth gave him a unique vista. He noticed pebbles of various sizes, a few twigs and the ridges of a half buried bottle cap. A pair of small bare feet entered his view. His mother's feet. He turned over and faced upward to greet his mother with a warm smile. The rising sun was directly behind her shuffling form causing her to appear only as a shadow. She was moving strangely. He rubbed at his eyes trying to focus.

"Mom, is it time for breakfast?"

Young Elliot Dahlgren was very lucky that he could not see her. If the angle was different or the sun obscured by clouds, he would have been driven over the edge of madness by her visage.

She had passed away from shock that stopped her heart yet her face was torn almost completely away. Her husband dined on her beautiful features the way a glutton might consume fried chicken, only the delicious skin. Her passing was quick though her appearance did not suggest so. The reanimated body of David Dahlgren had lost interest in her cooling flesh. His decaying mind

drew him out of the tent to seek fresher fare. When she had risen she found herself alone. What was left of her still retained muscles connecting her mandible to her skull. Instinctively, she began to make chewing motions. Her nose was missing and along with it, her sense of smell. She left the tent with the purpose to feed.

Her lidless eyes now scanned her son. He squinted against the powerful sunlight, unable to see her condition. She drew closer, salivating dark green bile. If she could have smelled the boy, she would have found his scent irresistible, however some living characteristic he had still held her interest. All she knew was that she was hungry.

“Mom?” Elliot questioned with a slight tremble in his voice.

She fell to her knees before the rear of the vehicle with a disgusting starved moan. Elliott struggled against her claws and horrid teeth. His small cries muffled by her attack. He fought with the strength of a boy but not for very long. He died upside down, his mother feeding from the soft tissue that comprised his neck. Blood rushed to his head and then splashed on the ground.

# Six

Mason strode with confidence into the paintball registration area just in front of the general store. Flanked on his right by Tony and followed by three other men in similar paramilitary gear and camouflage. These were, Gabe Duffy, Travis Jason and Billy Tate. The three men were new to the squad. The usual gang could not make it to the match so Mason improvised. This weekend, he had called up some new talent to mix things up on his team. They were called Team Blackjack, the name of any team lead by Jack Mason.

Gabe Duffy stood an inch taller than Jack but a little on the thin side. He had the slight athletic build of someone who might have played water polo or volleyball in school. Gabe wore a black baseball cap backwards to control his light brown hair. His hair was not too long but during stressful situations it would take on a curl. He did not know if it was in reaction to the humidity of his own sweat or some strange sort of scalp goose bumps. He just knew that he disliked it. Gabe had met Tony and Jack on the amateur paintball circuit, each time losing to Team Blackjack. Gabe started up his team, the Healdsburg Hitmen with guys from his work. Travis and Billy were bartenders from La Visage, the restaurant where he was a Chef. It had taken some doing to get the time off but Gabe was the kind of chef talent that kept customers coming back. His employer balked at the idea of losing three of his staff yet he did want to keep Gabe

happy. Gabe had hoped to work with Mason on the same side to learn about his strategy from within. Maybe they could become permanent members of Blackjack and win some first place trophies. Gabe's team was good but Mason's was pro material.

Travis Jason stopped to tie his black sneakers. His friend and roommate, Billy Tate stopped as well. They were like brothers but they could not appear more different. Travis was five foot eight with a very fair complexion. His light blond hair appeared almost white. His best friend Billy teased Travis that he was melanin deficient. Billy was a half foot taller than his friend. He was a black man who had grown up in the same neighborhood as Travis since kindergarten. His hair was cropped very close and he had a fair amount of muscle, much more than Travis. Billy, who was more outgoing and jovial when meeting new people, would introduce Travis as his "albino midget brother". Though they looked very different; Travis and Billy were inseparable.

Andy stood next to a booth that contained an array of measuring equipment and a large CO<sub>2</sub> tank. A man in a referee uniform was filling Tony's air canister that powered his paint rifle. Tony accepted the tank and attached the propellant to the rear of his weapon then re-attached his butt stock. He handed the reassembled weapon back to the referee. Paint guns are just that, they are guns. They fire balls of cellulose covered paint, driven by terrific amounts of compressed air. At their lowest setting a paintball hit is sure to leave a deep bruise on the skin. An internal valve regulates the amount of pressure that is delivered with every pull of the trigger. Each field has limits on their player's gun pressure. Andy's field used a different system to ensure compliance. After verifying the settings were within limits, the referee placed a thin strip of foil tape across the barrel where it met the body of the weapon. If someone were to

adjust their pressure on the field, the tape would tear. Should a referee see a gun with damaged verification tape, the player would be immediately disqualified. Finished, the referee returned the weapon to Tony. He switched on the safety and approached Andy.

“Blackjack, over here,” Andy called out. He spoke into a hand radio as the boys approached.

“Five Minutes, are they on the field?... Good,” he finished with the radio and spoke to the men.

“All right, championship match lasts ninety minutes. The team with the most members after that wins. Your opponents have already taken the field so you will be team blue today.”

Andy distributed five small blue pieces of cloth. As the contestants strapped on their arm bands, Andy took notice of the combat knife strapped to Mason’s gear harness. He pointed with his hand radio at the knife.

“What the hell is that?” he accused with the voice of an angry parent.

Mason was taken aback by the tone of Andy’s words. What he had seen of Andy over the past two days he had liked. Andy seemed like a cool guy trying to start up a good field. If Mason had thought Andy was an ass he would have barked back and returned aggression in kind. But this was not the case. Jack quickly surmised that Andy’s anger was misplaced and decided to keep the peace.

“My knife,” he answered in a calm tone.

“You can’t take those things out on the field,” Andy said relaxing,

“We wouldn’t want anyone to get hurt. The girl inside will hold it for you.” Andy pointed his hand radio towards the door of the store. “Get your guns verified and let’s do this.”

While Tony and Mason quickly unfastened their combat knives from their modular harnesses Gabe gave them a look.

“You guys are Hard-Core,” he said with mock praise.

Veronica finished labeling a box of supplies with a large red marker. She was on her knees behind the counter sliding the heavy box under the cash register. Retrieving yet another box she opened it to see what was inside. She labeled each box according to their contents. Nikki watched her curiously. She had worked with Veronica every weekend this summer. She thought Veronica was nice. She spoke differently than most people in Sierra Valley. Veronica did not have an accent, like she was from another part of the country, but she used words differently, more formal and clear. Nikki wondered how old she was. She did not think Veronica would mind being asked about her age yet she felt that it would be somehow rude to inquire. She looked young and healthy, yet seemed older. Nikki thought it strange that Veronica took it upon herself to label the inventory. Andy did not ask her to do it. If it was Veronica’s store, then that might make sense. *Why volunteer for something when you could just kick back and get paid for watching the counter?* Nikki helped herself to a pack of gum from the candy display. She had been chewing Andy’s gum all summer. She would have paid for it if someone had mentioned it, but no one ever did. *Perks of the job,* thought Nikki and placed a piece in her mouth.

“Hello,” said Tony with an amiable cheer.

Caught off guard by his approach, the chewing gum in her mouth had yet to soften with her body heat. She placed a hand over her lips embarrassed.

“May I help you?” she offered, her voice distorted by the gum.

“Yeah, can you keep this for me until after the match,” he handed her his large combat knife. She received the knife which sank in her grasp just a bit due to its weight. She brought up her right hand to open the clasp. Nikki pulled the twelve inch carbon steel blade halfway out of its scabbard, examining its dull non reflective surface.

“What do you cut with a knife like this?” she asked with eyebrows raised.

“History, tradition, the curvature of space time,” he answered having a bit of fun at her expense.

“What?” Nikki questioned.

“Abstract concepts, I mean, look at the thing, it’s very sharp.”

“What?” she asked again with growing frustration.

Jack appeared next to Tony, casually laying his knife on the glass counter.

“Mine too please,” Jack added.

Veronica, finished with her toils, rose from behind the counter. Her eyes met Jack’s. The two shared a glance for a heartbeat.

“Hi,” Jack said with a smile.

“Hello,” she said while a flock of butterflies took flight in her midsection. Jack’s eyes lingered for a moment then fell from her face to her hands. His face brightened as if he were struck by inspiration.

She felt quite nervous at the possibility of what part of her body was drawing his attention.

“Can I borrow that marker for an hour or so?” he asked, looking at her right hand with a growing hint of mischievousness. She had forgotten that she was holding the marker. Quickly, she replaced the cap.

“Sure,” she said offering it to Jack. He took it gently, a slight pause before she let go.

“My name is Jack Mason,” his deep voice said.

“Veronica,” she said unaware that she had replied. In that moment something happened to Veronica that had not occurred for a very long time. Not since her life had been turned upside down by the earthquake, not since before her father had passed away, not since little Jordan Paul had kissed her after her eleventh birthday party. In that moment, Veronica blushed.

“Thank you Veronica, I’ll be back soon.” He turned on a heel, pocketed the felt tip and proceeded out the doors. Tony joined him and left the market. Veronica took note of the shape of Jack’s butt under his camouflage outfit. Her expression was one of approval. She watched Jack walk towards his men outside. She wondered if he would look back at her. Jack turned his head, glanced at her, smiled and then returned his attention to his friends. When Jack looked back through the open doors, she felt another splash of adrenalin warm her body. She blushed again, turned to hide her embarrassment and pretended to sort through some paperwork.

*What the hell was that?* Thought Veronica; the adrenalin making her feel nervous. She suddenly felt a little stupid. She had lovers in her past; men that she knew, but did not really know her. Short term boyfriends in high school and the occasional blind date made up her

past relationships. But no one ever truly close, certainly not since her father contracted cancer. She felt that she was a mess. The thought of sharing all of her neurosis with someone other than a trained professional bound by the protection of a patient-doctor privilege frightened Veronica. She worried that she may never let herself get close to a man. Loosing her father left her with an aversion to letting others into her life. She felt silly that such a small moment with a man left her flustered. *All he did was smile and be nice*, she told herself, *no big deal*. He was charm and testosterone and she wished she could get to know him. She wished she could allow a special someone to get to know her. The encounter brought up thoughts that she did not want to think about. Veronica noticed that her hands were clammy. Her thoughts were racing. The walls of the little market seemed to close in on her. She had not felt this kind of anxiety since before she left San Francisco. She needed a moment alone. Stealing a glance at Nikki, she could see that her issues had gone unnoticed. Veronica took a deep breath. Her throat was parched. She exited from behind the counter and grabbed a bottle of water from the cooler that advertised Cold Drinks.

“Going to the restroom,” she said to Nikki over her shoulder.

“Don’t use the outhouses, they’re NASTY,” Nikki shouted.

A local man clad in cut off jeans and an open flannel shirt placed a twelve pack of beer on the counter.

“Whose nasty?” said the man, his open shirt revealing grey chest hairs.

Nikki clamped her jaw down on a gum bubble with a loud snap.

“Have I.D.?” she questioned disinterested.

# Seven

Timothy Erwin trudged through the forest underbrush cursing himself for wearing flip flop sandals in such terrain. He was relieved to get away from his parents for a while and finally smoke some pot. Timothy was fourteen years old; an age he did not enjoy. His parents did not think him old enough to stay home unsupervised. So he was forced to come out to the lake and spend the weekend listening to their childish bickering. He had discovered weed just six months ago and found that it made dealing with his parents much easier. Unfortunately his mother had kept him busy all weekend with stupid activities and trips on the boat. He had not had a chance to partake since Thursday night. The lack of pot in his bloodstream made Timothy think that he was experiencing withdrawals. He was cranky and uninterested in spending time with his parents. This morning he had finally convinced them to take the boat out without him. He had feigned sleep when they tried to rouse him and mumbled that he was feeling sick from the sun. Concerned, his mother wanted to head home early but his father said that she was babying Timothy. They argued of course, but eventually left him alone as he pretended to sleep. Once he heard the boat pull away he grabbed his pipe and headed out to find a place to smoke.

One has to be careful when trying to get high. Timothy knew that the other campers could smell the distinctive waft of the Ganja,

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so he would have to find a secret place. Smoking pot, or rather finding a place to smoke it was always an adventure. Back home he had devised complex rituals to hide his habit from his parents. He used incense in his room to hide the smoke that he blew out his window with the pretense of an interest in eastern philosophy. He even pretended to take up the hobby of jogging so that he could run around the corner and hide behind a liquor store to smoke. He left the house running, but always came home walking. His mother marveled at how his jogging had never failed to work up his appetite.

Timothy found a good place in the trees that he thought was far enough from the public. He leaned on a tree and fished his pipe and lighter out of his pocket. The bowl was already packed with some green bud from Oregon that had been floating around his high school. The senior he bought the pot from called it Medford Muffin Tops. Supposedly, the buds looked like puffy mushrooms filled with crystal red goodness. It was so good that a dime bag cost twenty five dollars each. Timothy tried some for the first time on Thursday night and was stoned for five hours. It was what the kids called creeper bud; it took effect slowly, creeping up on you. He lifted the pipe to his lips in anticipation, not noticing that he was salivating, lit it and took a long draw. The hot vapor expanded in his lungs. He held the hit as long as he could stand not wishing to waste any of the effect, and then let it out with a long relieved sigh.

“Fuck Yeah,” he said as a dry cloud rippled from his mouth.

Three more similar hits passed over Timothy’s lungs in the next half hour. He was developing a malignant case of cottonmouth. The pot began to work on his senses. Crimson spider webs of enflamed capillaries crept over his eyes. He knew his parents would get back soon and he could hide his dry eyes behind a pair of sunglasses. He would go out with them and hit some stoned

waterskiing. Then he could have lunch. *Roast beef, potato salad and two fucking Cokes*, he thought. But not until later, eating might kill his high. The pot was good and should last a while but he did not want to lose his buzz prematurely.

Six months experience smoking pot had given Timothy an amateur standing as a drug user. He knew how to smoke but he had yet learned how to deal with strange events while stoned. The corpse of Gary Jones approaching through the trees startled him but he did not run or recognize a threat. The dirt encrusted form seemed unreal to Timothy's highly intoxicated senses. The creature paused and seemed to have a problem. It grunted as a terrible loud flatulence escaped the monster. A blob of unidentified black matter slipped out the bottom of the things shorts, plopping on the ground. Timothy laughed at what he perceived to be a hallucination. In the back of his mind he thought that he must have gotten hold of some laced pot. Maybe the senior who sold him the bud had wanted to trip Timothy out with some high powered shit. Perhaps it was laced with angel dust or dipped in opium. There was no way he could go back to his parents if he was seeing things. He would get busted for sure. *No*, he thought, *I'll stay here with my new friend Dirty McShittypants and hang out until I can get my head together*. Actually, the dirty man seemed quite funny to Timothy's stoned mind. The young man put away his pipe and began to laugh. The level of detail to what he thought was a hallucination was amazing. Timothy thought that he was going to enjoy the company of his new buddy.

The creature moved closer to the laughing boy. Timothy put his arms up like a person afraid of being tickled as he giggled uncontrollably. Monstrous jaws snapped shut, removing two of the boy's fingers. Laughter turned to screams as Timothy's trip spiraled into hellish torment. He tried to roll off the tree and back peddle but

slipped in his flip flops. He hit the ground in agony, falling on a dried branch that punctured deep into his lower back. Timothy's life force flowed from his back, collecting on the slippery leaves beneath. The wretched beast fell to all fours and crawled slowly over the helpless boy. Timothy shuttered with shock as the putrid ghoul seemed to inspect his defenseless body with inhuman interest. The thing's gaze stopped at the boy's throat. Cold drool fell from its opening mouth, splattering on Timothy's cheek. Monstrous teeth grasped roughly at his neck, tearing ghastly chunks free with a hot spray of blood.

# Eight

Team Blackjack entered the eastern side of the field. They assembled under the shade of the thick forest canopy. Tony drew a quick representation of the field from memory in the dirt. Mason liked the layout of the field. It was four acres of foliage roped off on three sides with a large slope that made up the south perimeter. Three referees were posted on the hill to help keep an eye on the event. They had headset radios on their belts to let the field referees know where the action is. There were assorted ditches and piles of earth in random places to provide players cover. There were many places to hide and strike from in this part of the country. He disliked the paintball fields that set up inflatable plastic bunkers for capture the flag style games, especially indoor arenas. Those contests forced players to attack each other directly, without any finesse or cunning. He would rather move around in battle, force his enemies to chase him or harass them with hit and run raids. Looking at the detailed map in the dirt he noticed that Gabe had something on his mind. Tony spoke.

“We haven’t met these cats yet, but I heard that they asked every team we beat this weekend about how we work. Even bought some of the guys beer last night to hear the tale of Team Blackjack. We got to mix things up.”

“How about you let us take point?” Gabe said looking at Mason, Billy and Travis nodding behind him.

“Eager for some kills?” asked Mason.

“We gotta mix it up,” Gabe said smiling.

“Sure, walk the south edge. That will limit their angle of attack,” said Mason as he indicated with the barrel of his weapon. “We’ll stagger out on the north side. If we hear pops, we’ll come running and catch them in a cross fire.”

“Same here,” said Billy pulling his face mask down over his eyes.

“What if we don’t make contact?” Tony asked Mason.

“We will both hold at cover about 20 yards off the western perimeter of the field. If by 10:30 we don’t engage them, we’ll converge towards the center of the field, link up, fan out and catch them from behind,” said Mason.

Gabe stood, affixed his mask and nodded in agreement.

“Move quietly,” stressed Mason in a whisper.

“Come on guys, northbound V formation,” said Gabe. The three newest members of Blackjack moved out.

Mason was happy. He liked those guys. He had wondered how they would be to work with, but they were a good squad. He had thought that Gabe, being a leader of his own team, might be difficult but there was no ego problem at all. They had agreed on strategy all weekend and made some good suggestions. They took their hits and did not complain; *not a sissy in the bunch*. Mason pulled his mask down and seated it tight on his face. He thumbed off the safety on his weapon and held his finger off the trigger guard, pointing forward. *It’s game time.*

Gabe Duffy moved as quietly as he could through the low laying greens of the forest. To his rear followed Billy at a distance of ten yards. To their right spaced out another ten yards was Travis. They formed a triangle as they moved in unison through the brush. If one man came under fire, the other two could follow up with support. The blast of air released by a paint gun is very loud and would alert their back up to come rushing across the field. In these beginning moments of a match one had to stick their neck out to draw fire and find the opposition. A match where everyone hid and never engaged in fire would end without a prize. Not even second place cash would be awarded. Gabe wanted to make up the lost pay for himself and his men. First prize was fifteen hundred dollars, three hundred each. If he had worked the weekend he would have made more but Travis and Billy would have picked up less on their short shifts. Second place would still be good for them, but with gas and food for the trip, Gabe would be at a loss. He did not mind the money; he coveted a first place prize. Since starting up the Healdsburg Hitmen, Gabe and his men had always swept their part of the wine country. His team ranked each year for entry to the Northern California regional but every time lost to Team Blackjack. Gabe was tired of second place.

Walking point was nerve-wracking. Gabe knew that at any moment a high velocity paintball could smack him in the chest, the thigh, or worse, directly on his lightly protected hands. The idea of taking a hit in the face was fine with most players. The facemask provided good protection. He wore a groin cup during matches for the same reason but he had never had to test it. He was thankful that he had yet to get hit in such a sensitive area. Walking point to draw fire brought up these kinds of thoughts. He was sweeping his attention and gun barrel slowly from side to side looking for the

enemy but all the careful concentration and quiet made the back of his mind busy. To the south he saw a referee on the slope of the hill lift a radio to his mouth. The ref was wearing his communicator microphone connected to his goggles, but still lifted a radio to his mouth. *Microphone malfunction*, Gabe thought and paid it no more mind. The enemy was out here somewhere, gunning for him; waiting to put a red ball of paint in his crotch and test the effectiveness of his cup. Gabe cringed at the thought. He wanted a first place trophy in the worst way. He wanted to make sure his men got some money for their efforts. But he also wanted to have children someday. He slowed his pace without realizing that he had done so and continued into the brush with greater care and focus.

Tony followed on Mason's nine o'clock, to his left and a little further back. A large pathway meandered through the trees, dividing the match field. Tony kept an eye on the path while staying in the thick foliage. He figured that their local opponents might lack the good sense to stay off the path. The enemy of the day was Hillbilly. These locals were probably used to hunting while drinking beer, rifles carelessly off safety, breaches loaded. The kind of guys who would eventually shoot one of their buddies by the time they had their second divorce, from their cousin of course. Tony knew better than to underestimate an opponent but he liked to make fun of people, even if it was only in his head.

He noticed something through the brush to his left. Stopping instantly, he angled his weapon towards the movement. With his camouflage outfit and stealth he should go unnoticed. Tony knew that the human sense of sight relied mostly on movement. It was a leftover from our more primitive existence. When one looked directly at something the mind tried to make a connection from the shape of what it saw. Something man shaped was a man; something tree

shaped was a tree, or so the mind told us. The broken patterns and random dark colors of his camouflage were designed to blend in with nature. It was not until you started to move that one could recognize the form as manlike. Movement, or the lack it movement, was a factor. Our peripheral vision is very sensitive to motion even in the very dark. If he stayed motionless, he should be invisible. He waited a breathless beat, eyes penetrating through the trees. A field judge walked down the path, oblivious to Tony's presence. Tony followed him with his rifle and smiled, removing his finger from the trigger.

The impact on Travis' back stung like an electric shock. It caught him dead center in the spine. The force of the blow sent small misdirected signals through his nervous system. Unable to control his muscles, he dropped his rifle and fell to the ground. As he fell three more blasts followed, one striking his shoulder adding to his pain. Billy whirled around to assist his best friend and caught a dose of flying paint in the forearm. It hurt, but he ignored it and swung around to return fire. Technically he was out but Billy did not want to give up until called out by a ref. He wanted to tap at least one of his adversaries. He fired blindly, dropping to one knee to minimize his height and profile as a target. He heard running foot falls to his left. Billy raised his rifle to the plastic mask that protected his face and took careful aim. A whistle blew.

"You're out," a referee hollered. Billy raised the rifle over his head, stood and allowed the referee to remove his armband. He cursed under his mask.

Gabe turned to run back to the action. A single burst sounded behind him and a split second later he was thrown off course by a Charlie horse in his right hamstring. Just below the butt cheek a

flying red mass of defeat slammed into his leg. He fell to the ground face first, thankful for his facemask. He rolled to his back and looked up. He saw a hillside ref, blow a whistle while pointing in his direction. *Damn*, he thought, *where the hell did that come from?* Gabe sighed, switched his weapon to safety and threw it to the ground.

Moments after the first sounding of the battle, Mason and Tony sprinted towards the action. Tony was set to cover Mason as he ran across the path when Travis and Billy came through the brush on the other side. Travis struggled along with Billy's help. Gabe fell forward out of the brush limping. He removed his mask and cursed loudly.

"Fucking ambush," Gabe said passing a referee.

"It was like they knew where we were," he wondered out loud while looking at the ref accusingly.

Tony looked at Mason. The outburst was for their benefit. Gabe was trying to let them know that something unfair was at work. Mason lifted his mask and spat.

"Still got over an hour," he whispered to Tony.

"Change of plans?"

"Button hook east, stay in the bush. They are confident now; we'll have to reduce their numbers."

The two men made their way back deep into the trees.

# Nine

Veronica splashed cold water on her face. Her nerves had settled with the change of scenery. She looked at herself in the tin plated mirror of the camp office bathroom. The mirror was made of unbreakable metal and did not reflect well. The image presented was slightly warped. Veronica stared for a moment feeling distorted from within. She let out a deep breath. It had been almost a year since she had felt that overwhelming anxiety. The strange sensation that she was not really in her body had not plagued her since after the death of her father. She grieved for a time after his passing. Soon after the funeral she had suddenly realized how alone she was. Spending almost seven years devoted to her dad had left her without purpose. She had things to busy herself. She had the goal of studying medicine but almost nothing else. Veronica floundered at San Francisco City College in remedial Math and English classes. She had to make up for lost time in basic courses to gain entrance to the classes that really interested her. With extreme patience, she labored to complete arbitrary scholastic tasks while silently suffering with her loss. She lasted a year in the city alone. Her last semester at SF City College, she had taken sixteen units. Veronica had shoveled education into her brain the way a fat kid eats a birthday cake; as fast as possible, lest someone else get more than their share. She had taken Intro to Algebra, Critical Thinking in History, Intro to Psychology, Biology

with a lab and English. Her last final over, she bent down to tie her sneakers. The string broke low in her laces, leaving her no way to secure her shoe. She began to cry. Veronica had no idea what was happening to her. Her elaborate system of emotional defensive barriers seemed to collapse. The broken shoelace, a small and simple issue, was the last straw. The ride home on public transportation was a trek through emotional chaos. She pretended that everything was alright and to the untrained observer on the street that is how she appeared. Inside, she was screaming.

She had been uncomfortable in large cities since she was eleven years old. Since that October day when her father took her to a baseball game, her life had changed forever. They had gotten lost on the serpentine assemblage of concrete and asphalt that made up the Oakland, California highway system. Her father had just exited the interstate to a not so savory part of town in search of a gas station when the earthquake hit. The car shook so violently that she thought they had run over a patch of rutted dirt road. Her senses would have attributed the shaking to the car having a bad suspension if it were not for the loud rumbling. Her father pulled over right away and held her hand with reassurance until the quake ended.

The Loma Prieta earthquake measured 7.1 on the Richter scale. Moments later, several people started running past Veronica's car asking for help. The upper level of the Cypress freeway had collapsed onto the lower deck trapping hundreds of motorists. Feeling his duty as a doctor, Veronica's father identified his profession to one of the worried men. The man jumped into the back seat and directed them to the scene.

The earth had stopped shaking only minutes prior to their arrival at the structure yet one had to wonder how so much damage could occur in so little time. Veronica was stunned as she got out of

the car by the number of cries and pleas from the double-decker concrete sandwich. Thick black smoke crawled out from the thin access in between the smashed road beds. A man had climbed up on the first deck, balancing himself on a cracked support column. He was yelling to another man on the ground to find a ladder and “something to pry the door open.” He was a black man with a rough appearance. Someone that the young sheltered Veronica might have been afraid of in other circumstances, but not then. He was an everyday hero, casting aside his own safety to help a stranger. The man had tears of frustration in his eyes as he tried to talk to someone trapped in the structure. She would never forget the man’s courage.

She was deathly afraid, not for herself or so much for those trapped, but for what her father might do. She did not want him to put himself at risk and possibly get hurt. She ran to his side and hugged him. The young Veronica begged him not to go. She did not want to lose her daddy. He knelt down to her level, like he always did when he wanted to tell his daughter something important.

“I am a doctor Honey.”

“Daddy, don’t go up there,” she said, her lip starting to quiver.

“People need me.”

Veronica shook off the cascade of memories, stopping up the passage to her past. She was desperately laboring to learn to become a doctor so that she could be there for others who needed her. She was there for her father in his final moments when he had needed her. As she spied her countenance in the distorted mirror, things became clear. She had spent a great portion of her life being needed. The encounter with the man in the store had revealed to her something

that Veronica had a hard time admitting. She was too accustomed to putting others needs first and ignoring the fact that she had needs.

The bathroom was quiet and all of a sudden very lonely for Veronica. She wiped her face with a paper towel.

“I don’t have to figure it all out today,” she said aloud to herself in the mirror and left.

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