

# FLOWING WATERS

by Brendan DuBois

Brendan DuBois began his fiction-writing career in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in 1986. In the twenty years since then he has had well over 100 short stories published, as well as some two-dozen novels, in various genres. Recently he has been collaborating with the bestselling James Patterson on a series of short novels (see *The Witnesses*). His latest Lewis Cole novel, released in November 2016, is *Storm Cell*.

God bless my therapist, I don't think she knows I lie to her every time I come in for my weekly visit. Her name is Grace Pomeroy, and God bless her again, she wears pant-suits with matching jackets that look like they were the highlight of a twenty-year-old Sears fashion catalogue, along with black-rimmed glasses and a blond bouffant for hair. Of course, I should keep my mouth shut, since I've been trying, with little success, to get back to wearing civilian clothes after my discharge, trying to figure out what kind of shoes go with what kind of skirt or purse. Blah.

Anyway, whenever we meet in her small and neat office—desk, filing cabinet, computer terminal, and no personal items—she always gives me a welcoming smile and says, “How are you feeling today, Jessica?”

“Doing fine,” I say, just like now. My left shoulder aches like hell and whenever I move it, the snaps and cracks sound like a microwave-popcorn package heating up. My scarred right knee still throbs, and there are scars on my belly and back that shouldn't be painful, but always ache, as if the flesh were still protesting about being torn apart.

“Sleeping well?”

“You know it.” Yep, sleep great, especially when I've had a tall lemonade with Stolichnaya before hitting the sack, sometimes with a Vicodin to temper down the nightmares and the old scents and terrors, and every morning, it's sheet-changing time, since they're soaked through with night sweats.

“Glad to know it,” she says. “About your promise, last week . . . have you come through?”

Oops. I've reached the limit of how much I can lie to her today, so I try something different and tell the truth. “No, I haven't. I've been reluctant . . . but I promise, before the next meeting, I'll go out some night.”

“Very well,” she says. “And just to reemphasize, we're looking for a bit of progress, that's all. Going out in a public space for a few hours, fitting and blending in. Learning to trust again. That's all.”

“I understand, Grace.”

“Great!” she says. “Now, is anything new going on?”

And here comes *my* surprise of the day.

“Believe it or not, I’ve decided to get a dog.”

Well, gosh darn it, Grace gives me a big smile on that and makes a few notes—and I have a feeling there’ll be a scribbling in my file (*Patient Pettis getting dog v. impressive*) when I depart—and she says, “That sounds great. When are you going to do that?”

I check my watch. It’s battered, a bit rough around the edges, and hasn’t left my wrist since I started serving our country. “In one hour.”

“Male or female?”

“Not sure. I just got adoption approval back from the shelter. They had to do a background check, or so I’m told.”

That causes a brief pause. “Well . . . that’s very well done. Good for you.”

I know the question is on her lips, and I don’t bother giving her an answer. Let’s say a few Ben Franklins judiciously donated will sometimes ease restrictions and background checks on pet adoptions.

Another little scribble. “And what made you decide to adopt a dog?”

I cross my legs, keeping a smile on my face, even though my right knee has just popped and sent a bolt of red-hot pain right up my thigh. “It’s like this,” I say. “I love my house, but it’s too empty during the day and night. And we both know dating is off the schedule for the foreseeable future, so I need someone around. Cats are fine but most times they ignore you. I’d like to have a dog to play with, to keep me company, to help me get out more.”

With each phrase Grace nods her head, and I guess I’m ahead of the game, because there’s one more reason, which is that I’m hoping having a dog around the house at night will keep me from digging up my 9mm service Beretta, putting the business end in my mouth, and pulling the trigger.

“Well, Jessica, I wish you luck.”

“Thanks,” I say, and that’s the end of today’s session.

\* \* \*

Outside of the Wentworth County Mental Health Center, a plain wooden building that looks like an old one-story elementary school from the 1940s, I’m pleased to see that no one’s parked on either side of my dark blue Jeep Wrangler. Still, from habit, I make a quick walk around the Jeep, glance underneath to make sure nothing’s hanging from the undercarriage—wincing this time from the pain both in my shoulder and knee—and then I climb inside, start up the engine.

Another day of therapy, another day of lying.

For besides adopting a dog today, I’m still searching for the man who injured me months ago, whom I plan to kill.

\* \* \*

The drive to the Southern Wentworth County Animal Shelter takes about fifteen minutes from the mental health center, and my only hiccup along the way is getting stuck at a traffic light. Depending on my mood and how I slept the previous night, usually it’s no big deal, but today, I’m stuck behind a large white panel truck that blocks the view of the traffic light, meaning I can’t see it flash back to green. Meaning if the driver and whatever bad guys are in the rear of the truck want to delay things, they can easily do so without me knowing.

Plus I’m in the lane going straight, and a lumber truck occupies the left-

turn lane next to me. Blocked. And behind me, two young guys in a red Toyota Camry have pulled right up to my rear bumper.

Trapped.

The Jeep's radio is on low, tuned to a classic-rock station. My left hand is on the steering wheel, tapping in time with the music. Anybody in the area looking in would see a plain-looking woman with shoulder-length brown hair, gray sweat-shirt with ARMY in front, humming along to an old Rolling Stones tune. But they wouldn't see my right hand, which is right between the two front seats, grasping the butt of a Desert Eagle Talon .45 caliber pistol in a quick-release holster.

As I wait for the unseen traffic light to change, I'm easing my breathing, evaluating the situation, examining my options. If the rear doors to the panel truck start to swing open, my right hand is coming up and will rip off at least four rounds through the Jeep's windshield, hopefully preempting whoever's in the truck.

The same with the two fellows in the Camry behind me. Those doors suddenly open up and then I'm up with the Desert Eagle, rotating quickly, and I'll snap off rounds to the rear.

Either way, however I'm shooting, I'm going to plow the Jeep through the panel truck or the Camry. Messy, but at least I'll be breathing and alive when it's over.

The white panel truck moves and the traffic light comes into view. The light is a pleasant green. With both hands on the steering wheel, I go through the intersection, my singing getting louder.

\* \* \*

The animal shelter is at the end of a long curving driveway and is a rambling, two-story building painted white. There's a fenced-in pasture to the left where horses that have been seized or given up quietly graze, and I park in front and go to the check-in desk. A slight young woman named Amanda, with long blond hair and tats up and down her arms, wearing powder-blue scrubs, leads me to the rear, where the dog pens are kept. Around us are cages for birds, hamsters, and rabbits, and through large glass windows, views of cats in their respective cages, all of them looking imperious and angry at the world.

She opens the door leading to the dog pens, and a wall of barks and yelps rolls right over me, almost knocks me back. There are cages upon cages, set on the cement floors, and almost every kind of dog breed imaginable is stuck behind the bars and wire fencing. Amanda raises her voice and says, "Take your time. Each dog has a card out front, explaining what he or she is all about. I'll let you be."

The desperate cries and barks of the dogs reach through me, through an opening I didn't know existed, and tug hard at my heart. I just want to grab Amanda's arm and yell, "I'll take 'em all!" but I push that thought away, knowing it doesn't make sense, wouldn't work.

I spend about a half-hour, slowly going from cage to cage. Some dogs jump and bark, looking like they want to show themselves off in hopes of being adopted. Others remain lying on mats on the floor, looking up, eyes just full of old wounds. I take a deep breath, keep moving, past the other folks in there also looking to adopt. There are light blue cards on each door, listing the dogs' name, sex, and the circumstances of why they're here. They range from STRAY to GIVEN UP DUE TO MOVE to PREVIOUS OWNERS COULDN'T AFFORD.

I look at pit bulls, poodles, Scottish terriers, greyhounds, German shep-

herds, and the ever-popular “mixed.”

But one dog catches my attention. A female Labrador retriever with yellow fur, and she is lying down in the farthest corner of her cage, and she doesn't even bother raising her head. She's straddling two dog beds. The card says her name is TRUDY and her age is two or thereabouts, and everything else is blank, save for the phrase: SEE STAFF FOR DETAILS.

Amanda comes by and I say, “What's the deal with Trudy?”

She crosses her tattooed arms, bites her lower lip. “Bad deal, I'm afraid. She was rescued after a complaint to the police. Was starved, beaten, and her left rear leg had been broken and not set. We've had her for nearly a month . . . it's been hard to place her.”

I lean into the fence, call out, “Trudy, hey, Trudy!”

Her head lifts for a moment, her brown eyes unblinking, and she lowers her head. “Who did that to her?”

Amanda shakes her head. “Can't say. It's confidential. You know how it is.”

Considering how many federal nondisclosure forms I've signed over the years, I most assuredly know how it is, but I don't share that with Amanda.

“I'll take her,” I say.

“But . . . we can't guarantee how she'll be once she leaves the shelter.”

“I'll manage.”

“Except for the beatings, we don't know much about her background, how she'll act in a new home.”

“She's a girl, I'm a girl. We'll go on from there.”

“All right . . . but just so you know, if a man gets too close, she'll bark, growl, maybe even nip. She doesn't like men.”

I open the door to Trudy's cage. “That's all right; neither do I.”

\* \* \*

What follows is a numbing hour of paper signing, check passing, and briefings, along with being loaded up with a water bowl, food dish, and Trudy's two beds, plus a leash and collar. Amanda warns, “Don't give up the beds, all right? They have her smell on them . . . only things now that belong to her.”

“Okay.”

“And good luck.”

“Okay.”

And I don't know if it's the heat of the moment, or a bit of emotion on her part, but instead of giving me a hearty handshake, she gives me a brief hug, her voice choking, “Good luck with Trudy. We'll miss her . . . but we know she'll be in a good home.”

“I'm going to give it my best,” I say, as I lead Trudy on a leash to the parking lot. From the open door, Amanda calls out, “Remind me again, what did you do for the government before you retired?”

“Stuff,” I say. I open the passenger-side door to the Wrangler, and Trudy looks at me, looks at the Wrangler, and I swear, she gives out a sigh and then jumps up, like she's doing what's expected of her, but she's doing it without the expectation of anything nice happening in return.

I go around to my side, start up the Jeep, and rub the top of Trudy's head. “Let's go home, hon. Our home.”

\* \* \*

Home is a small cottage, built along the shores of the Piscassic River. By the

front is a dirt country lane, called—wait for it—Piscassic Road, and a patch of dirt where I park my Jeep Wrangler. There’s an enclosed front porch on the opposite side of the house that overlooks the river, which is a fast-moving piece of water that dodges its way along exposed rocks and boulders. On the opposite bank is a tree-shrouded shoreline that’s part of a nature preserve that will never be developed. As peaceful looking as the woods are, I’m never comfortable standing outside with my back to them. Plenty of places for gunmen to hide in there.

Once I park the Jeep, I go around to the passenger side and open the door.

“C’mon, Trudy, let’s get settled.”

She raises her head and her moist brown eyes just stare at me. I hold my hand to her nose, and she gives it a long sniff. I say, “All right, I’ll help you out.”

I reach under her and lift her off the seat, my left shoulder screaming in the process, and then I gently lower her down. I quickly reach in to grab the leash, concerned she might make a break for it, but she’s the perfect lady, just sitting still. I snap on the six-foot leather leash and lead her around the cottage, which is about fifty years old and stained light brown, and she doesn’t sniff much or pull at the leash. I do notice, though, she limps on her left rear leg.

Once we go around the house, I arrive at the side door, just as a man calls out, “Hey, Jessica! Wait up!”

I grimace at Trudy and turn. The voice belongs to my nearest neighbor, a bachelor named Art Woods, who lives up the road. Art’s about ten or so years older than me, reasonably fit, with a closely trimmed white beard and twinkling blue eyes. He has on fishing waders that go up to his chest, a black short-sleeved polo shirt, and a Red Sox cap. Over his right shoulder is a dark brown leather fishing creel, and in his right hand he carries a fishing pole.

“Catch anything, Art?” I ask.

“Just cold feet,” he says, coming up on the road. Art teaches English at a local community college, claims he’s writing a novel in his spare time (“Not a great American novel, but at least a somewhat-more-than-adequate one.”) and since I moved in about two months ago, he’s asked me out a couple of times, and I’ve always turned him down. He did this even after an unfortunate incident when we first met, with me at first misidentifying the pole he carried in his hand, and with me escalating the situation by grabbing my pump-action Remington 12-gauge shotgun and threatening to blow off his head—okay, his goddamn head—if he ever trespassed on my land again.

After a quick and fruitful discussion of his good intentions and his long-time habit of fishing on the Piscassic River, I apologized for overreacting.

He’s a good guy, a good neighbor, and I would prefer to leave it that way. Still smiling, he comes over and notes my new companion. “Hey, what a great-looking dog. Male or female?”

“Female,” I say. “Her name is Trudy.”

What happens next stuns me. Art slowly walks forward and lowers his hand to her head, saying in a soft tone, “Hey there, Trudy, what’s—”

With a loud snap and growl, Trudy flies out of her sitting spot like a cruise missile being launched, and only by some quick back-pedaling on his part does Art avoid getting his hand mauled or throat ripped out.

“Hey, cut that out!” I yell, tugging back on the leash, and Trudy is berserk, snapping and barking at Art. His face flushes and he picks up the fishing pole he had dropped. “Boy,” he says, trying to joke, “talk about not wasting time in

disliking someone.”

Art steps back out on the road, and Trudy quickly backs down, sitting, breathing heavily.

“Sorry, Art,” I say. “She’s a shelter rescue and I just got her today. She was abused in her previous home and doesn’t like men.”

Art’s pretty shook up but does a good job of trying to shake it off. “No problem, I understand.” He starts up the road. “She looks like a sweet girl. Good luck with her, Jessica.”

“Thanks,” I say, and despite my reservations about Art, I really mean it.

\* \* \*

Inside I give Trudy a tour of the place, from the two small bedrooms upstairs to the living room, bathroom, and combination dining room/kitchen. She sniffs all around and seems relaxed, or maybe she’s just disinterested, like she doesn’t really care about the place because she’s not sure of me and how long I plan to keep her. She does pretty good except for the cellar. It’s not much of a cellar—it has a dirt floor, low overhead, and oil furnace and electric water heater—but she refuses to go down. I turn on the lights and lead the way, but she sits down and no amount of tugging or pleading will get her down those steps. I wonder if she was earlier punished by being kept alone in the cellar.

“Fine,” I say, taking off the leash. “If that’s the one place you don’t like, that’s okay.”

\* \* \*

She comes with two doggy beds, one that goes in the living room and the other upstairs. I first considered putting it in the spare bedroom but no, I don’t want my girl to be scared and alone on her first night, so it goes into my bedroom. She eats slowly and mechanically from her dry-food bowl, and slurps up a goodly portion of water. I make my own dinner, of stir-fry beef, veggies, and rice, and I eat from the kitchen counter and she sits by my stool, looking up at me.

I ponder that for a moment, and then shrug my shoulders. “Ah, hell, I’m probably setting a bad example, but so many people consider me a bad girl anyway, so why not.”

So I eat and share my beef with her. I offer her veggies and she gently takes a strip of carrot from my hand, rolls it around in her mouth for a second or two, and then drops it on the tile floor.

“Hunh,” I say. “Knew a guy like that years back with the same appetite. All beef, no veggies. Probably dead of a coronary by now.” I eat another veggie slice. “If I and the world are lucky.”

\* \* \*

I do the dishes, retire to the couch to read a couple of newspapers, watch a movie on television, and then check the time. Nearly ten P.M. Trudy has spent her time on her living-room bed. I get up from the couch and say, “Time for walkies!”

That doesn’t bring any response from her, but she does watch as I go into the kitchen and up to a cabinet, taking out a small fanny pack containing a .357 stainless-steel Ruger revolver. I strap on the pack, take a cell phone out of the same cabinet, snap a leash on Trudy, and go outside.

\* \* \*

For some reason, the sound of the flowing water seems louder at night, and tonight is no exception. There’s not a single streetlight on Piscassic Road, which is just fine, letting me watch the bright stars overhead as we slowly

walk up the road. My eyes quickly adjust to the darkness and I see pretty well, and after about five minutes, Trudy has done her business, both fore and aft. I stop at a large flat boulder that allows me a place to sit, and after checking the time and seeing it is exactly ten P.M., I take out the cell phone and call a memorized number.

It's answered after the first ring, with a male voice repeating the last four digits I had entered: "Three-eight-two-one."

"Evening," I say. "I'm looking for an update."

"Hold one, please," he says.

No static, no music, no nothing. Trudy sits calmly at my feet. The voice comes back. "He's in-country for sure. New England. He made a mistake, which allowed us to narrow the search terrain."

I try not to get excited. It's been a very long time. "What next?"

"We narrow it down. If he makes another mistake . . . you'll be notified."

"Thanks."

Then the cool professionalism slips away, and the male voice changes. "Jessica . . . I've read the files, seen the videos. I've taken a personal interest in this. No matter how long it takes . . . it'll happen."

"Thanks."

"But just remember . . . this will be a one-shot deal on your part. This goes through, a lot of heat will come down on you. You better not even get a parking ticket for the rest of your life."

"Appreciate the advice."

"Three-eight-two-one off."

I stand up from the rock, cell phone in hand, and toss it into the fast and flowing waters of the Piscassic. One and done.

"Back to the homestead, hon," I say to Trudy. She gets up and matches my pace, and I see her limp has come back.

"A couple of damaged broads, ain't we?" I say.

\* \* \*

After touring the perimeter, checking the locks on doors and windows, I take the usual nighttime snack of a Vicodin washed down with vodka and OJ, and I'm in bed, asleep, and the nightmares roll in as usual. Sometimes they're quiet and seductive, like the one where I'm having a meal break with my old unit and we're joking and playing grab-ass and eating, when their faces and hands start bleeding. Or they come in hard and fast, with flashbacks and scents and sounds of weapons being fired, explosions, stabbing pain, and suffocation, a weight pressing down, pressing down . . . not able to breathe. . . .

I wake up, sweaty, still gasping for breath.

A heavy weight is draped across my chest.

From the dim glow of the night light, I open my eyes to a big lump of fur lying on top of me.

"Sweet Jesus, Trudy, you trying to crush me?"

I push her body off of me and swing out and stand up. I switch on a lamp by the nightstand. She looks up at me, no real expression, just the moist and haunting brown eyes.

"Hey!" I say, pointing to the dog bed. "That's yours, hon. That's where you belong. So off!"

She stays still.

“Trudy, off!”

She doesn’t move.

In my previous lifetime this would have been considered a challenge to command, and I grab her collar, and again say, “Off!”

I half expect a growl or a tug back, but Trudy lets out a deep sigh and rolls over, exposing her belly.

I let go of the collar. She’s frightened, she’s rolling over, she’s being submissive.

I stare and stare at her yellow fur, note the trembling of her legs, her quickened breathing. At this angle, I can see scars on her rear legs, the one on the left being thick and angry looking.

I rub at my face. “All right, hon. Just make some room, okay?”

I switch off the light, crawl back into bed. I shove my legs underneath her bulk and she rolls over, and soon enough, she’s glued to my side, and she quickly falls back asleep.

Surprisingly enough, so do I.

\* \* \*

Two days later, we’re at the Freeland Veterinary Clinic. The vet is a sweet plump woman with short brown hair, black slacks, and a white doctor’s coat. She wears black shoes that have cat faces painted on the front, complete with eyes, smiles, and whiskers.

I bring along the thin paperwork from the shelter, and the vet—Dr. Dennis—gives Trudy a lengthy and thorough exam. The only hiccup is when a young man comes in to retrieve some blood work, and Trudy flattens out on the floor and growls. Dr. Dennis gently says, “Ralph, you can leave now.” And when Ralph leaves, Trudy sits up and lets Dr. Dennis rub her back, scratch her ears, check her teeth, and look into her sweet brown eyes.

When she’s done she stands at a counter and goes over her notes. “A pretty girl, but she’s got issues.”

“More like she has the whole subscription,” I say, which awards me a laugh. Dr. Dennis goes on, “Psychologically, it’s no secret she doesn’t like men, and based on my exam, I can tell why. She’s been beaten, at least three ribs were broken and have healed, and the left rear leg . . . it was broken and torn at some point and never properly set.”

I feel my pulse rate go up, my face gets flushed, my senses start responding. I can now smell the perfume Dr. Dennis is wearing, hear the whine of a cat somewhere out back, taste my last cup of coffee. “I see.”

She closes the file folder. “Best you can do is just keep on loving her, taking care of her. The physical wounds have healed. It’s the others . . .”

“What about the guy that did this to her?” I ask.

“Did the shelter have any information?”

“No,” I say.

She frowns. “I don’t approve, but sometimes, deals are made. People agree to give up their pets without any fuss, maybe quietly pay a substantial fine, and promise never to have pets again, all in exchange for no prosecution, no punishment.”

“I see.” My right hand is on Trudy, gently stroking her neck.

“Then again, it’s best for the dog, in the end,” she says. “It gets her out of an abusive home, someplace safe, but it still sticks in my craw that someone escapes responsibility. But I guess that’s what rules are for, right?”

I stand up, and Trudy stands up with me. “So I’ve been told.”

\* \* \*

For the next several days we adjust to each other. I take her on long walks up and down the dirt road, and since there’s so little traffic, I feel confident in letting Trudy go off leash. The first two days, she’s content to stay at my side, but on the third day, I’m pleased to see her catch the scent of something and race into the woods. But all it takes is me whistling and calling out her name, and she quickly trots back. We play this game for nearly a half-hour, and I enjoy every minute.

Back home, other games don’t go so well. I have a stick, a green tennis ball, and a rope chew toy. I toss them in the air, toss them from one side of my yard to the other, and she watches the flying objects go overhead with little interest. Even when a ball bounces and rolls to a stop in front of her, she just yawns and looks at me.

“Silly, I know,” I say, giving up and retrieving the toys. “Us crazy humans, tossing around perfectly good objects. What’s the point?”

At night she’s a quiet beggar at the dining counter, and on the second night, she decides she’d rather sit on my couch than stay on her bed on the floor. As before, I try to order her down, but I surrender when she puts her head on my lap and gives out a deep sigh of contentment.

“You damn dog,” I say. “You’re spoiled rotten . . . and you know it.”

She continues to share my bed with me, gently snoring at times, and other times, her legs start jerking and trembling, and she whines and sets off soft cries, and the noise is so pathetic it makes my eyes water. When that happens I gently stroke her ears and head and whisper, “Trudy, it’s okay, Trudy, it’s okay, wake up, hon, wake up . . .”

When she does, her face lights up with joy and her yellow tail thumps a few times, and she goes back to sleep.

Twice when this has happened, I’ve also gone back to sleep, and none of my usual and habitual nightmares comes for a visit, either slow or fast.

None.

She even rides with me in my Jeep as I run errands, though the first time, she sat still in the front seat, trembling, and I think she was scared that she was going back to the shelter. When that turned out not to be the case—I had gone on a newspaper-and-breakfast-pastry run—she had panted happily all the way back home.

Then, nearly a week after her adoption, I pick up my mail from the post office and see a business-sized envelope from the Wentworth County Mental Health Center, and slipped inside along with my monthly statement is a postcard from a local nightspot. Scribbled on the back is: *Remember your promise! Grace.*

I sure do, but I wish she hadn’t. Trudy is next to me, on the passenger seat, and I hold up the postcard to her face. “Damn,” I say, “I thought I was through following orders after I signed all those discharge papers.”

Trudy leans over, sniffs the postcard. “I guess this wasn’t an order, but it was a promise. And I never ignore those.”

\* \* \*

Later in the evening, after two glasses of lemonade and my favorite clear spirit, I get ready for my night’s mission . . . er, evening activity. I take a brief shower and shave those parts of me that haven’t been shaved in a long while,

and then I splurge and take a long bubble bath, and then trim the cuticles from both ends of my body. Trudy sits in the bathroom and calmly watches me, and those eyes are just full of observation and intelligence. I rub her long nose. “You poor girl. Where the hell did you come from? Was it a beat-up trailer? Apartment house? Regular house?”

She turns her head, licks my hand. I say, “Who was the guy that did this to you? Mmm? And for Christ’s sake . . . why? Why would anyone want to hurt a sweetie like you? Why?”

I draw my hand back, instantly recalling the last time I had said that, waking up in a military medevac aircraft, whispering *why why why*.

\* \* \*

I retrieve a pair of panties and a bra that aren’t made of sturdy white cloth, and pull out the customary little black dress. Around my neck, a simple gold chain, and the same for both wrists. The dress is in good shape, better than me, and after I slip it on, I take a look in the bathroom mirror and whisper, “Oh Christ, sweetie, look at you.” With my special bra my girls are squeezed together such that they bulge out nicely, but on my left shoulder a furrowed pink scar is visible, and the same is true for my right knee. Along my forearms there are other, smaller scars, little pockmarks and valleys of white tissue, and I turn and look at myself, and then look again.

A thought comes, to slide on black pantyhose to at least hide the bad scar on my knee, but no, I won’t do that. I’m afraid that the tight pressure of the pantyhose will remind me of the dressings and bandages that I wore once, and I don’t want to travel down that dark section of memory lane.

Another twirl before the mirror. “What the hell,” I say to the mirror and Trudy. “What you see is what you get.”

\* \* \*

There’s a moment of crisis before I leave, when Trudy trots behind me and pushes at me, to follow me outside. I had left most of the lights on and the television, tuned to the Weather Channel, so she can at least hear a person’s voice while I’m gone, but Trudy doesn’t want to have any part of it.

“No, hon,” I say, gently pushing her back. “You can’t come along. I’ll be back in a while, okay? Nothing’s wrong. You’re fine.”

She does go back and sits on the kitchen floor, her dark brown eyes guiltling me something awful. I slip out and go to my Jeep Wrangler, and from the house, I hear her mourning my departure. She’s not barking or howling. It’s a low, moaning, keening sound I heard once before, in an isolated province of Afghanistan, when we came across a young boy sheep herder who was crying over a number of his flock that had been accidentally shredded to death by an Apache attack helicopter.

I blink some tears away as I back out of the dirt driveway.

\* \* \*

The restaurant and drinking/dancing establishment is about a ten-minute drive away, and it’s on the shores of Piscassic Lake, and called The Lakefront. Pretty original name, eh? One story, half of it built on pilings pounded into the lake, and after I park, I grab my small handbag and stroll inside. Prepping the handbag was a challenge before I left. It’s a sweet little black leather grip, enough to hold my driver’s license, credit cards, cash, and a few other incidentals. But no room for a weapon. That makes me nervous and then I

reassure myself that I will still have my .45 Desert Eagle Talon in my Jeep.

Once inside The Lakefront, I go to the bar and have myself a very decadent and thick cheeseburger, with a side of fries and salad. I have one and then two Sam Adams. No *New York Times* Style-section food and drink for me tonight, thank you, and when I'm on my second Sam Adams, the music starts up from a woman DJ set up in the corner. There's a wide dance floor with a great view of the lake as the sun is setting, and fortified by the beers and my pre-op drinks, I find myself having fun. Scratch that, I find myself having a lot of fun. The woman DJ spares us any slow-dance romantic music, and it's a mix of oldies and new stuff that just gets people out on the floor.

Boys still being shy boys in this part of the world, I'm encouraged to see some women out on the dance floor dancing by themselves or with each other, and I join them. The music seems to rock right inside of me and stir up something fun and attractive that I thought had been dead for ages. I let it all loose and even though my knee and shoulder are screaming by the end of the third song, I don't give up.

Pretty soon men are dancing with me as well, and I surprise myself by not minding it at all. Additional Sam Adams are ordered and I take advantage of the men's generosity, and as the night goes on and on in its rock-and-roll and dance splendor, I give out three cell-phone numbers—none of which match—and tell some eager lads that my name is Molly, Mindy, or Mandy. In explaining the scars, I tell stories of being struck by a combine, falling off the back of a motorcycle, or suffering an unexpected job-related accident, which is pretty close to the truth.

Twice I have to go to the women's restroom—always joining a pack of my sisters as they barge in—and as I'm washing my hands, another woman next to me, about my age but looking sweeter and softer, is touching up her lipstick and says, "Hon, I don't know if those scars are making all those guys want to heal you but, shit, you're rockin' it tonight."

I take that as a compliment, and after a few more twirls on the dance floor, I realize I've been gone long enough with Trudy being left alone, and I pick up my little handbag and stroll out into the cold, refreshing air, a bit unsteady on my legs but feeling the happiest and most free I've been in long months. Damn, my therapist Grace was right, whaddya know. Learning to trust again. Good ol' Grace.

Then it all goes to the shits in the next sixty seconds.

\* \* \*

I'm nearing my Jeep Wrangler when a man calls out, "Hey, Mindy . . . Mindy . . . wait up!"

I ignore the man, keep on walking. "Mindy, hey, wait up!"

Keep on walking. Keys to my Wrangler in my hand. The parking lot is dark, the parked cars and trucks are unlit, looking menacing, out of place, threatening.

The man's voice is closer. "Mindy, me and Tony, we just want you to come to our place for an after-hours party, you know—"

A touch on my shoulder and that's all it takes.

I shrug off the touch, whirl, and with the momentum, raise up my right arm and elbow and slam it into my questioner's nose. It cracks under my elbow and I like the sensation. Keep moving, kick the back of the man's lower legs and by now he's crying out and falling. Another man is behind him, backing away, and I'm on him quickly, punching him twice in the throat, my car keys

protruding through my fingers.

He falls hard, too.

I stop, panting, everything tingling and hard-wired, my heart sweetly racing along, my breathing fast but controlled, and I move, look, move, look, evaluate, evaluate, evaluate.

Both men are rolling about on the dirt parking lot, moaning, groaning, and cursing. I pick up my high-heeled shoes, not remembering having kicked them off. I get over to the Jeep, slip my shoes back on, and drive home.

\* \* \*

Inside, Trudy looks up from the couch when I come in. I go over, pat her head, kiss her muzzle, and switch off the television. I roll upstairs into my bedroom, strip, and go to the bathroom and wash off my makeup, trying not to look at my face, and then fall into bed. With the alcohol in my system and the post-fight drop-off, I'm slow and sleepy. I drift in and out, feeling sorry for myself, anger at the men who wouldn't leave me alone, despair that for a few short hours I was in the world of a trusting civilian life and enjoying every minute of it.

Would I ever get back to that feeling again?

A thump.

I rub my eyes. *Why why why.*

Another thump.

My legs are trembling. Where to go from here? What to do?

A third thump. What the hell?

I switch on a lamp, raise my carcass out of the bed, and see Trudy. She sees me and tries again to jump on the bed, but her crippled leg must be sore or stiff, because she can't quite make it.

"Oh, Christ," I say, and I spin off the bed, pick her up, and settle her down. She licks my hands, my arms, and then my face, and I bury my face in her fur and like that, I go to sleep.

\* \* \*

The next couple of days pass in a long slog of eating, sleeping, and not doing anything else. Trudy senses my mood and stays at my side like she's got sticky tape for fur. I take her for long walks up and down our country road, and although she spends some time racing from one embankment to the other, she never leaves my sight. Three days after my disaster date, we're walking back to the house and I'm deep in miserable thought before noticing Trudy's limp is growing worse. I stop and sit down on a length of an old stone wall and she limps over to me and settles down.

"Cripes," I say, "I've been a bad companion, haven't I? Didn't realize you were hurting so much. Damn it."

We're about a quarter-mile from home, and she's panting and panting, and damn, she's thirsty, too. The river is about fifteen feet away, but how to bring water back to her?

Damn it again. I stand up from the boulder and look around, hoping to see an empty beer or tonic bottle, but nothing. Panting and panting. I could go down to the river and soak my T-shirt with water, bring it up and twist the cloth, drip water into her mouth. All right, but suppose she wants to come down to the river with me? It could hurt her leg even worse. And how many times could I do this, going back and forth to bring squeezed-out water for her?

Trudy gives a slight woof. I turn, and ambling up the road is my neighbor Art

Woods, would-be novelist, English professor, and fisherman. Trudy stays still and he quickly senses the situation, and drops his fishing gear at the side of the road. From his creel he pulls out a collapsible plastic cup, goes down to the river, comes back, and hands the cup of water to me. I lower it to Trudy and she quickly laps it up. Twice more Art goes to the river and back, and on the third time, he lowers the cup to her and, after a brief hesitation, she laps up the water. Art brings his hand slowly down to her muzzle. She gently sniffs his hand, and Art slowly moves his hand to her back, rubbing her in long strokes.

"I'll be right back," he says.

"You don't have to."

"Maybe not, but I want to."

Five minutes pass, he comes back with his Toyota RAV4, and I gingerly place Trudy in the rear seat. I get in and Art takes us home. I get out and lower Trudy to the ground, and she limps in happiness to the door.

Art watches her progress. "Sweet girl."

"Yeah."

"The guy who abused her . . . anything happen to him?"

"I don't think so," I say.

Art scratches his beard. "That's too bad," he says. He eyes my scars on my shoulder and knee. "People who hurt other people, or dogs . . . they shouldn't get away with it."

"Art?"

"Yeah?"

"Agreed," I say.

\* \* \*

On my next visit with my therapist Grace I sit down and half-listen to her blathering on and on, answering questions with one or two words, and then I finally interrupt her.

"Look," I say. "I'm pretty confident I know what's in my paperwork, right? Bright and shiny language about combat experience and being wounded and PTSD. Am I right?"

She responds well, nodding. "Fairly accurate, Jessica."

"Then it's time for a story, don't you think?" I say quickly, my words tumbling out. "You have a smart, tough young girl, from America's supposed heartland. Assigned to the military, assigned to intelligence agencies, and, because she's a woman, she's used in areas of the world where women are oppressed, persecuted, killed because they're female. So she's used in recon missions, undercover ops, hard and dangerous tasks that really put her out there on the edge."

I have Grace's one-hundred-percent, wide-eyed attention. I keep going on. "This tough girl works for the army. She works for the forces of the host nation. She works for a variety of intelligence agencies. Wherever she's needed, that's where she goes, like a utility baseball star in the major league. But sometimes . . . these players, they're called upon to make a bunt, or a sacrifice fly. . . ."

My cheeks are moist with tears, my hands are shaking, my legs quivering. "Then one day this special player is sent deep into a province controlled by the bad guys. Probably the most dangerous, high pucker-factor op she's ever been on. And it goes into foul territory pretty quickly . . . she's exposed, there's gunfire, explosions, and she manages to escape, shot up and bleeding . . . against every odd you can imagine."

Grace starts to speak and I don't give her a break. "Later, she's recovering at a hospital in Germany. Word gets around. She gets visitors here and there, and one older woman, about to retire from one of those alphabet government agencies, stops by. This visitor doesn't dare speak . . . but she scribbles a note. 'It was no accident,' she writes. 'You were betrayed to help enhance the position of a local warlord.' This woman even supplies the name of the man stateside who decided it was in the best interest of everyone to sacrifice this utility player, in a long-range, strategic, and diplomatic operation."

I pause. Grace is frozen. "But this woman, after she leaves the hospital and is discharged, isn't interested in anything long-range, strategic, or diplomatic. Her only interest now is to track down this man, this stateside man who didn't care if she lived or died, and walk up to him and kill him. That's what's driving her. That's what's keeping her up at night. Planning her revenge. That's the whole alpha and omega of this woman's existence. To settle accounts, once and for all."

Another pause. I grab a tissue from a nearby box, dab my eyes, and Grace clears her throat. "Jessica . . ."

"That's me," I say.

"Jessica, under state law I'm compelled to report to law-enforcement authorities if I believe a crime is going to be committed."

"That's all right, you're in the clear."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you remember what I said at the beginning?" I ask. "I said, 'I'm going to tell you a story.' And that's just what I did."

Then I blow my nose.

\* \* \*

A day later it's sunny and I'm sitting on a small patch of grass at the rear of my cottage. Trudy is next to me, on her side, baking in the heat. From the way she's positioned, the thick pink scar on her rear left leg is visible. The Piscassic River roils and bubbles and sprays as it slides its way east. Art Woods is upstream, barely visible, casting his fly or whatever it is that they call it, and I rub Trudy's belly and tell her what a good girl she is.

Art comes up slowly, smiling, and lowers his rod and gear and sits next to Trudy. He gingerly extends his hand, she sniffs it, and she lets him stroke her back for a few seconds.

I blame the irrational jolt of jealousy that hits me from getting too much sun.

Art says, "River's a bit high today."

I don't say anything. Trudy's fur is smooth and warm, and as I run my fingers over her ribs, I wonder which are the ones that were broken. Art adds, "You ever hear of the Greek philosopher named Heraclitus? He lived in Greece before the time of Socrates."

"No, I haven't, but I think I'm about to," I say.

Art laughs. "Good call. Thing is, seeing that river flow by reminds me of one of his most famous sayings. Something to the effect of, 'No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.'"

"What about us members of the fair sex?"

"I think it'd be safe to apply the statement to everyone."

More stroking of Trudy's fur. After a moment I say, "Well, do go on, Professor. What does that mean?"

"It means . . . well, that's been debated for hundreds of years, though I'll take a stab at it. Heraclitus also said that the only constant thing in life is change, and that connects to his river quote." Art pointed to the river. "You and I look at the river, but deep down, it's changing, second by second. You or I step in the river, those flowing waters, and we'll come out a different person. Perhaps something very, very tiny . . . but when we come out of the river, we'll be changed."

Art turns his head to me, lowers his voice. "I also think it means that it's futile to engage in a task, or a quest, to restore something, to bring something back to an original state. That's not going to happen, no matter how sincere the intentions. Change is the only constant."

It seems like he's looking at the scars on my knee and my shoulder. "You saying that to me for any particular reason?"

"No, I'm not," he says, gently retrieving his gear. "Philosophy is philosophy. You can adapt it to whatever you think will work."

I smile up at him. "Gee, and you get paid for passing out nuggets of info like this."

Rod and gear in hand, he goes up to the road. "Not nearly enough, Jessica."

Then I sit for a while more in the sun, watching the river flow by, rubbing my good girl Trudy, and brooding.

That damn flowing water.

\* \* \*

A while later Trudy is panting harder and I'm feeling pretty warm myself, so slowly I walk her down to the river, making sure my back isn't exposed to the thick woods. I gingerly step my way into the cold water, onto a stretch of sandy bottom. I turn and Trudy is waiting, looking, and then joins me as well. The water is icy-sharp and refreshing as it rushes around my legs. Trudy is at my side, lapping and lapping. I lower my hand, cup some water, and dribble it over her warm head. I repeat and repeat it, the water going on her back, and I rub it in her fur. She snuffles and snorts in the water, and I lead her out, back up to the sunny part of my yard. She flops down and I rub her belly, my fingers running across the pink scars of my poor girl.

No going back, Art had said. No going back.

I looked to the river, back to Trudy and my strong and wet feet.

"Not the same river," I say. "Not the same woman . . . or puppy."

Trudy rolls and licks my hand. "But maybe we can still make things right."

\* \* \*

Another walk at night with my best girl. I carry another disposable phone and sit on the large boulder I usually use for these calls, and dial the memorized number.

"Three-eight-two-one," comes the brisk and familiar voice.

"Looking for an update," I say.

"Hold one."

Again I'm on hold. Trudy is sitting by my side, relaxed and at peace in her world, even though those bad dreams still strike her every now and then. As for me . . . it's been awhile since I've soaked the sheets with night sweat from my terrors. It's almost like my sweet girl is taking on the bad-dream responsibility for our little home.

Another familiar voice comes on the phone, and I cut him off. "I have some additional information for you."

I appreciate his professionalism when he doesn't express any surprise.

“Ready.”

I talk to him and when I’m done, he says, “You sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Jessica . . . remember what I said earlier, about a one-shot? Still applies.”

“I know,” I say. “It’ll be all right.”

“You sure?”

I know I’ll never meet my cell-phone confidant, but I have a little-girl crush over his confident voice. “You ever hear of a Greek philosopher called Heraclitus?”

“Of course.”

I laugh. “Showoff. Well, he’s the key.”

“The key to what?”

“To what’s going on,” I say. “Moving river, time, changes, all that good stuff.”

“Whatever you say, Jessica,” he says. “Call us in twenty-four.”

He hangs up and I toss the phone back into the river, and go home.

\* \* \*

The next day speeds right by. I take Trudy for a couple of short walks, play with her in my small yard—I’ve now gotten her to a point where she’ll play tug-o’-war with a rope chew toy—and I give her lots of attention and belly rubs. At both lunch and dinner, I also spoil her by giving her little pieces of my meal, and then I slide into an energetic state of mind, dusting and vacuuming and tidying up the joint. Later that night, I take a dog brush and spend nearly an hour just lightly brushing her. My first dozen strokes bring up a lot of dead fur, but after a while, there’s nothing in the brush, but that’s okay, and we both get into a loving pace of me just stroking and stroking, not wanting to think much about why I’ve spent so much time cleaning the place. It’s almost like I’m prepping the joint for the next tenants.

Then it’s time. “Walkies!” I call out, and with another disposable cell phone in hand, I retrace our steps. I make the call and in a few seconds, my mystery man comes on.

“Got him,” he says, triumph in his voice. “Got him. Name’s Bill Fitzhugh.” He rattles off an address and other information and I memorize it without difficulty. “That’s your target. That’s your man.”

“Thanks so very much,” I say. “Very impressive work.”

“Thanks,” he says. “Just so you know . . . two things. One, when I hang up here, our task is completed, and this phone number won’t work, ever again.”

“Got it,” I say. “What’s the other thing?”

A pause, his voice slightly shaky. “Jessica . . . it’s been an honor and a privilege to do this for you. Please, be careful . . . and take care of yourself.”

“You too,” I say, and then, briskly, he says, “Three-eight-two-one out.”

That’s it. I toss the phone into the river and realize I never knew his name.

\* \* \*

The next day I surprise Art by walking up to his house—a chalet-type house slapped down in a grove of pine trees—and he answers the door, says, “Jessica . . . what can I do for you?”

Trudy sits at my side, gently panting. It pleases me so very much that she’s not reacting violently to Art. I guess some wounds can heal, after all.

“If you’re free tonight, I need a favor.”

“I’m free,” he says. “What’s going on?”

I take a breath. “I need to go out tonight. I’d like you to come to my place and keep an eye on Trudy. I don’t know what time I’ll be back. It may be midnight, it may be later. There’s also a chance I might not ever come back. If that happens, I hope you’ll take Trudy and take care of her. Also, on my bookshelf, there’s several thousand dollars stuck in a bio of Winston Churchill that’ll be yours.”

Art says nothing. I add, “If I do come back, Art, you can never ask me where I was, who I saw, or what I did.”

Art’s face is calm and serene. “What time do you want me there?”

\* \* \*

Just over twelve hours later I’m in a town called Bethel, waiting. Leaving my home was easier than I thought. Art had distracted Trudy with some treats and I had slipped out and gotten on my way. Now I was in the woods, watching, in full battle-rattle . . . well, as much as I can get away with in the civilian world. Combat vest, fatigues, assorted bits and pieces of gear hanging off my vest. Bill Fitzhugh lives in a nice suburban development with lots of McMansions and cul-de-sacs. I’m not surprised. I’ve seen the most evil things done by men who had all the advantages in life, including a free college education . . . and I’ve seen dirt-poor villagers—not an exaggeration, the richest villager was the one with a steel cooking pot—give out the last of their food and water to an unexpected stranger who showed up bleeding and nearly dying after a deep betrayal.

As Kurt Vonnegut said, many times, “So it goes.”

I lower my night-vision goggles, scope the rear of the house. William Fitzhugh, former government worker, now retired—surprise, surprise—living here with his wife Martha. No children left at home. No alarm system. Rear door. It’s night and I watch the lights on the first floor go off, one by one. Then an upstairs light. It goes off, replaced by the flickering blue glow of the television set. I wait some more. The blue glow disappears. I give it another half-hour, and then I’m up and out, trotting across the rear lawn, being careful not to fall into the in-ground swimming pool, and hating to admit the sheer joy that’s coursing through me, of being back in my familiar gear, going out on an op.

At the rear door it only takes a few moments to pick the locks and then I’m in. A short entryway and I’m into a wide and clear kitchen. To the left, an even larger living room. For a moment I feel like the well-known stranger in a strange land. In all my life, I had never lived in a place like this, just a series of apartments with my parents and then barracks and temporary quarters and hotel rooms and brick or mud huts.

But enough of the sheltering critique.

I go to a set of stairs, softly walking up, hugging the wall, so I won’t cause any of the stairs to creak.

Now to the left.

Open bedroom door.

Into the bedroom.

Martha is sleeping on the right, Bill Fitzhugh is on the left. I move around the bed and from my battle-rattle gear, I take out an extendable police baton, flick it open, and then smash it into the side of Bill’s head.

He shouts and rolls and collapses to the floor. The second-deadliest person in this room has been neutralized. Martha is slow to wake up, not sure if she’s having a nightmare or what’s going on, and I’m on her in a few seconds, and I slap a length of duct tape across her mouth, and with plastic zip ties on her

wrists and ankles, the third-deadliest person in the room is taken care of.

I go back to Bill, who's rolling back and forth on the floor, hands held up to his bloody face. He's moaning. I slap another length of tape over his mouth as well, to quiet him down, as I kneel down and speak clearly in his ear: "Mr. Fitzhugh, consider this payback. And I don't need to say anything else, do I?"

I go to work with the police baton, aiming specifically and with malice, until I'm satisfied by what I've accomplished. I'm pretty sure he can see me through his tear-filled eyes, and I hold up my .357 Ruger stainless-steel revolver so he can check it out. His moans and groans get louder from beneath the strip of duct tape.

I whisper to him, "One last gift from the sisterhood, Mr. Fitzhugh."

I lower my revolver, aim carefully, and shoot him. The report is deafeningly loud in the bedroom, the muzzle flash temporarily blinds me via the night-vision goggles, and Martha's screams behind her duct tape ratchet up.

And then I leave, my op done, and sorry if anybody's offended, but I feel pretty damn pleased with myself.

\* \* \*

Three days later, trouble comes as I sit on the grass again with my Trudy, rubbing her warm belly, reading George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* with my other hand. Without warning she rolls up and she's on her feet, trembling, gazing out on the road. Her fur bristles. Then I hear the sound of an approaching car. I rub her head, put the book down. "Nice hearing, hon," I say. "Mine's been dinged around a bit by gunfire and explosions."

I stand up and a dark blue Chevrolet Impala pulls into my small dirt spot, right behind my Jeep Wrangler. The Impala has a whip antenna on the trunk and police license plates. I keep a bland look on my face, feeling partly concerned about what is about to happen, and partly impressed by the quick police response.

Two men emerge from the unmarked police cruiser, and Trudy leaps forward, growling, and I just barely grab the edge of her collar. I manage to pull her back as the men approach, both wearing light gray suits, black shoes, white shirts, and neckties. The one on the left is squat, with a buzz crewcut, and the one on the right is taller, solid, with short blond hair. They both introduce themselves as police detectives from Bethel, and I instantly forget their names.

"Is your name Jessica Pettis?" Blondie asks.

"That's what it says on my driver's license," I say, holding tight to Trudy's collar.

The two men don't seem to appreciate my attempt at humor. Crewcut says, "Ma'am, control your dog. Control your dog, now."

"She'll be fine," I say, pulling her back. "She's just nervous around men. Trudy, c'mon, calm down."

But Trudy senses my unease and the unease of the two men, and keeps on barking and snarling. And Crewcut snarls back, as he pushes his suit coat to reveal a holstered pistol. "Ma'am, I'm not joking. You control that dog right now, or I'm going to consider it a threat, and deal with it accordingly."

His hand moves to the butt of his pistol. I'm thinking that if the pistol comes out, I'm going to let Trudy loose, at least give her a fighting chance, while I'll duck into my Jeep and pull out my Desert Eagle. It'd be two against one—the one being me, of course—but I'm so pissed at Crewcut that I don't

care about the odds.

Blondie speaks up, playing Good Cop. "Could you put the dog in the house, please?"

I tug Trudy to the side kitchen door and propel her into the house. But even with the door closed, she's still barking and yelping. Crewcut and Blondie have moved so they're in front of my Jeep, meaning my Desert Eagle is no longer readily available, meaning the chances of me readily arming myself are pretty low.

Blondie looks around my place and gets right to it. "Ma'am, we're investigating an incident up in Bethel."

"Bethel? That's some distance away."

Blondie: "Have you been to Bethel lately?"

"Not that I recall," I say, remembering my earlier training and a chaplain visit where I was advised that sometimes a small lie was necessary to protect the greater good.

Crewcut: "You sure?"

"I'm positive," I say. "I think I would have remembered something like that. Or would you prefer to shoot me if I'm not being cooperative?"

Crewcut glares at me but Blondie makes it clear he's in control. "Do you know a man named William Fitzhugh?"

"No, I don't know a William Fitzhugh." Which is true. I know *of* him, but I don't *know* him.

Crewcut says, "Are you sure?"

Maybe I should call a lawyer, stop answering these detectives' questions. They are certainly out of their jurisdiction. That would be the sensible thing to do, but would a sensible person make a career of jumping out of perfectly good airplanes?

"Positive," I say. "Who is he?"

Blondie says, "Where were you this past Saturday night?"

"Night is a long time," I ask. "Can you be more specific?"

Crewcut's face is getting red. "Between the hours of midnight and one A.M."

"I was here, home with my dog," I say.

A repeated question: "Are you sure?"

"Positive," I say. Blondie and Crewcut stare at me with their very best intimidating looks, but I stare right back. I've gone eye-to-eye with the best of them, from military officers to State Department officials to a whole host of enemies, both foreign and domestic.

The funny thing is, they know I'm lying. I know that they know I'm lying. And they also know that I know that they know I'm lying. We three are a very knowledgeable group.

I break the silence. "Can we get back to William . . . Fitzhugh? Right? William Fitzhugh? Did something happen to him?"

Crewcut's face is even redder. Blondie says, "Someone broke into his house this past Saturday night. Assaulted him and his wife. His wife received minor injuries . . . but Mr. Fitzhugh, he was severely beaten and shot."

"Wow," I say. "So why are you questioning me?"

Trudy is still barking and whining from inside my house. Blondie says, "Because of what happened to him. At least three, maybe four ribs were broken. And his left leg . . . someone placed a revolver against his knee and shot him. The IRA had a term for that, called 'kneecapping,' which they used to get

revenge against locals who pissed them off. His knee and joint were shattered. Once he recovers, he'll walk with a limp for the rest of his life."

I scratched at my chin. "Poor guy. But why are you here, talking to me?"

Crewcut's turn, his voice angry. "Because in our investigation, we learned that he was once the owner of a female Labrador retriever that had been seized from him after an animal-welfare investigation. The dog had an injured leg and injured ribs. That same dog was brought to a local animal shelter, where you adopted it a few weeks ago."

"She," I say. "Not 'it.'"

"Miss Pettis," Blondie says, "you're a discharged military veteran, with psychological issues. We like to be fair and reasonable, if you're prepared to cooperate. Now, you have one last chance to tell us what happened last Saturday night. If you don't . . . the situation will get very, very serious for you."

"If you're trying to scare me, guys, you're doing a piss-poor job of it."

Crewcut turns to Blondie and says, "I've had enough of this shit. Let's get a local judge, get a warrant, and arrest her ass. And while we're at it, we'll get a complaint on that damn bitch of a dog, get it put down for being aggressive."

It's like Crewcut has just flipped the proverbial switch, because everything snaps into focus. The smell of the two detectives. The dust on the hood of their Impala. The distance between where I am and my Desert Eagle, in my Jeep Wrangler, and how best to blitz through them both and take care of them, because what Crewcut has just said, I will not allow to happen.

I will not.

Then Blondie and Crewcut turn, and I wonder why, and then my battered hearing hears it as well: the whistling of a man, coming down the road.

I realize just how fast my heart is racing when Art Woods turns the corner at my driveway, in waders, carrying his fishing gear, and he brakes to a halt.

"Hey, Jessica, how's it going?" he asks

"I've had better days," I say.

"Sir," Blondie starts, but Art cuts him off and says, "Jessica, you know, you still owe me that recipe you promised from our dinner last Saturday, the roast pork. Damn thing melted in my mouth. C'mon, don't say you're holding out on me."

I smile. "Give me another day or two. It's buried someplace in my recipe collection."

Blondie steps forward, displays his detective shield. "Sir, may I ask, who are you?"

Art looks cool and comfortable. "The name's Art Woods." He gestures up the road. "I'm Jessica's closest neighbor, and she lets me cross her yard so I can go fishing."

Blondie says, "Did you just say you had dinner with her last Saturday?"

Art has a slightly confused smile on his face. "Sure. Right here. Best roast pork I've ever had, with roast potatoes and string beans. When it comes to string beans, I can take 'em or leave 'em, but Jessica had a way of cooking them that made them right tasty."

Crewcut looks about twenty pounds lighter, like he's slowly deflating. "So you had dinner with her last Saturday."

"Yep," he says. "Hey, is there something wrong going on?"

Blondie says, "And how long were you here with her?"

Art pauses, lowers his voice. "I'd rather not say."

Crewcut is now a bit eager. "And why is that?"

"Because I don't want to embarrass Jessica, that's why."

"And why would that happen?" Crewcut asks.

Art looks right at me with a friendly smile. "Because I stayed for Sunday breakfast."

\* \* \*

Well, that's that, and there's some chatter and cross-talk, and Art promises to sign any kind of affidavit the cops want, and I can tell Blondie gives up. But Crewcut says, threat in his voice, "I have a very short list, lady, and right now, you're on top of it. So you be careful out there."

I say, "Not much of a list, if you didn't ask for my dress size."

The two cops roar out in their Impala, kicking up dust and gravel. I go up to the house, let Trudy out, and she nearly tears the screen door from my hand as she bounds out, sore ribs and limping leg and all. I rub the back of her head and she licks my hand, and she sprints over to Art, skids to a stop, and he rubs her too.

"Nice timing, Professor Woods," I say.

"All in a day's service," he replies.

"What brought you over here?" I ask. "This isn't usually your time to hit the Piscassic."

Trudy rolls over, and he squats down, rubs her belly. "Your visitors . . . they had parked up the road a piece, and I could hear their police radio squawking. Then they came down here. And . . . well . . . I may be a simple English teacher, but I know you were up to something on Saturday night. So I came over and did what I did."

"That was very unwise, and potentially very dangerous for you, Art. If things had gone wrong, you could have been in the rear of that Impala, handcuffed, sitting next to me, heading to lockup."

Art says, "Then I would have been in very good company, wouldn't I?"

I try to say thanks to Art, try to express my appreciation for what he, as an inexperienced civilian, has done for me, but I think the dust kicked up by the Impala has dried out my throat. I nod and fold my arms. My right knee and left shoulder are still aching, but something's missing, something's gone. I have my back to the woods across the river, and I feel okay.

I feel okay.

Art says, "Thing is, you better come up with a roast-pork recipe to show them, in case they come back."

"I don't have one."

Art tries to keep his voice light. "Well, I do. From my French-Canadian grandmother. Maybe I can make it for you some night."

Trudy finds her way back to me, nudges gently against my right leg, like she's sending me a message, and I nearly laugh. Silly dog.

I say, "How does tonight sound?"

Art recovers quickly from his surprise. "Tonight sounds great."

"Then let's make it happen."

Trudy sidles up to me, I scratch her back and her warm fur, and she turns to me, eyes alight, and Trudy's a very, very happy creature.

And for the first time in a long time, I can say the same for me.