

Creech  
by  
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For Chris,  
Who always liked westerns more than I did.

Hammond Creech didn't look or sound scary. He didn't have scars all over his face and his voice wasn't filled with grit. But somehow I knew, from the very first time I saw him, that he was going to be trouble. My stomach told me so, and if there's anything I've learned in my eighty-six years on this Earth it's that you should trust your stomach. When all of your friends have betrayed you and those who've sworn their allegiance have stabbed you in the back, your gut is the one thing that will remain true to you.

My name is August Brumbelowe and I was twenty-six years old in the Autumn of 1896 when I first met Mr. Creech. Even with what's hanging over my head now, 1896 was the hardest year of my life. Thinking about the events of that autumn makes me feel like my chest's caving in, you know? Maybe you don't. If not, I pray that you never have to.

Before I dig all the way into this, I want to warn you about a couple of things. First off, I'm an old man and old men sometimes forget things and make up all new things, if they can remember that they're forgetting things to begin with. I think I've got this story straight in my head but that's liable to change while I'm writing it down. I'm not so arrogant as to believe that I remember things the way a camera might—all one sided and flat, but basically true. My memories are fed by tributaries and the main drag sometimes splits off into little cricks here and there, many of which have already dried up. What I'm trying to tell you is that I might fuck up a detail here or there. I'm hoping you can just let it slide when that happens.

Second, I've been under a lot of pressure lately. If you read the papers, and you should get in the habit of doing that if you don't, you know all about that. I hear they even talked about me on the television last week. Well, go on and watch your news on that newfangled gadget but know that

this is more than a news story with three bullet points and a sensational headline. Getting all of this out of my heart and onto this paper might very well be the last thing I ever do but it'll be worth it if it sets the record straight.

I already mentioned Hammond Creech, the hub of this particular wheel. He found me one sunny October morning in a hole of a town called Spruce Rocks, in the Oklahoma territory. At that time, half of what's now the state of Oklahoma was still Indian territory and parts of it were being claimed by Texas, so the whole area was a little bit more on the wild side than most of the genuine states that were even further West. That appealed to me as I wound my way out of the wounded south looking to find myself.

I grew up in south Georgia, just outside of Savannah. Tow-headed and raring to go, I was doing just fine. Then the war of secession sealed my fate before I even knew what a war was. My father had been drafted and he lost a leg in a battle up near Macon. When he returned home, he couldn't work, so I started working on the docks at the age of fifteen. I hated the job, lord knows I did, especially the calluses, but there was an upside to it too. I got to spend many of my evenings at a River Street watering hole that just so happened to have a rickety upright piano in the back. Nobody much cared who drank what and at what age in those days but drinking wasn't what attracted me to that dump. No, the real reason I put up with the acrid smell of those whiskey-drenched assholes was the piano.

Humidity isn't kind to most things that aren't planted in the ground, but it's especially unkind to pianos. That monstrous upright had maybe three notes that were in tune, but it was better than nothing and there was always an eager audience. I mainly played ragtime because those songs just sounded right on that old clunker. Something about the semitones on that swollen wreck of an instrument made that kind of music sing out like a chorus of dilapidated gods who'd just crawled out of the river. I could feel them stirring deep down, like the music was forcing its way into the meat of my soul. My whole life, I've never felt anything else quite like the emotional stirrings brought on when I hear powerful music. I say powerful because it doesn't have to be good exactly. It

doesn't even have to be a particular kind of music. It can be soft and sweet like the back of a girl's neck or raucous and rowdy like a sailor's night on the town. None of the specifics matter so long as it has the power to push those emotions out of your toes and into your heart where you can feel them full-force.

My piano banging down on River Street eventually drew in enough of a crowd that I was offered a part-time job playing there. I told my folks about it with great joy but they didn't share my optimism. They told me that job wasn't a proper foundation for a young man to have. I guess rubbing my hands raw on ropes and cleats down at the docks was more respectable. I didn't argue the point with them. I just took the money that I had earned and I set out to find myself a life beyond the only world I'd known.

I know it sounds like a crazy thing to do. It was impulsive and dumb, but I think it's the prerogative of the young to be foolish. How else would anything significant ever really happen in this world? Even so, I might have kept working on the docks if I'd been able to see what was coming down the tracks towards me.

I wandered around the southeast for several years after I left home, but there weren't a whole lot of opportunities to be found. Things were just plain bad all over the south and they didn't look like they were going to be getting better anytime soon. Atlanta was a mess and Charlotte was even worse. Defeat has a texture and I could feel it in the heavy air that surrounded everything south of Mason and Dixon's line.

Even though I was born and raised in Georgia, I never condoned the idea of slavery, but if I'm to be completely honest I have to admit that my father did, and that ignorant position cost him his leg. Not that things are much better for the negroes these days, but the point is that the south was fucked before I was even born so I was fucked right along with it in a way. I'm proud of where I'm from and all, but I wasn't going to remain there while it festered into a boil around me.

So, after nearly six years of scraping by while trying to find work in the south, I headed west. All those stories of

the wild west made it sound like it would at least be more exciting than where I was. That turned out to be true, but excitement isn't always a good thing. In my case it damn near got my ass killed on multiple occasions.

I gingerly wound my way around Indian territory and along the border of Texas looking for a place that I could stomach. That part of the country was a mess too, but there were plenty of people out there who were on the mend financially. They could afford to hire me for a couple of day's work before I moved on. One such person was Iris Meriwether, an old woman who needed a fence mended on her property to keep her milk cow from wandering off. I told her I'd replace the whole fence and make it like new if she'd give me the old Spanish guitar that I'd seen sitting in a dusty corner in her little house. I could see that she didn't want to part with it, but I told her I'd throw in some roof work and a couple of other chores if she'd accept the deal. She finally agreed on the condition that I strum the song her husband played for her on their wedding night. I didn't know the tune she mentioned but she hummed a bit of it and I faked it well enough that she took pity on me and sent me on my way when my work was done. Those guitar strings were shot to hell and they dug into my fingertips like tiny knives, but I could strum it with enough rhythm to get toes tapping around a campfire and earn a meal and a shot of rye from time to time. I longed to play piano again but those things are kind of hard to carry cross country on horseback.

I continued that way for months, picking up work here and there, then moving on. I eventually stumbled onto Spruce Rocks, which, as it turns out, is how the place was founded to begin with. According to local legend, a wagon train had headed into the territories before the official land run was authorized and its leaders got lured in by a rock formation that looks an awful lot like a spruce grove on a hilltop.

It didn't take me long to find pick up work at one of the farms near Spruce Rocks and a place to stay in back of the apothecary. I settled in for a spell but I stayed on the lookout for a piano. Unbelievably, I found one at the local bar and I wanted to play it so bad that my fingers ached

whenever I walked by that place. The keyboard lid was locked shut, leading me to believe that it might not play at all, but its dusty brown varnish kept calling to me.

Now, I don't drink much. It's a waste of good time and money if you ask me. But I figured I'd better patronize the place and befriend the owner if I wanted to get my hands on that music box.

It took some doing, and more than a few nights of good-natured, but fake, camaraderie, but I eventually talked the owner, Seamus Ashe, into letting me at those ivory keys. That piano made the one in Savannah sound like a concert grand, but I didn't care. It sounded heavenly to me. I know that doesn't make a lick of sense, but it's how I felt. When I hit those obnoxiously flat notes, I heard them in my mind as if they were pitch perfect. See, when I played that piano it was like it refueled me. I wish I could make you understand how my insides felt when I heard music that I loved flowing out underneath my fingertips. Some songs made me cry every single time I played them, and that's not something I tell you lightly. I'm not ashamed of it, mind you, but it's hard for a man like me to just come out and admit something like that when I've hidden it for so long. Fortunately for me, that bar was so hot that the regulars probably thought my tears were beads of sweat.

Why'd I hide my feelings? Because I'd been around long enough to realize that those who were out to get you would almost always exploit your weaknesses. True love is the greatest weakness of all. I had a passion for music so I held it deep within my chest, only letting it flow when my fingers banged out raucous tunes to hold the mob at bay.

Every now and then, though, I tried to play music that was beyond me. Classical music. I knew that particular piano wasn't up to the task but then again neither were my hands. I don't know why that prissy shit made my heart soar like it did. Probably because it elevated me out of the muck I waded through day in and day out. Classical music sounded like what we'd been told heaven was like. I don't put much stock in Bible stories but that music was my own personal heaven.



Some mornings Seamus would sleep in and I'd let myself into the bar to work through a classical piece or two. I could remember just about anything I'd ever heard and play it back in my head at will, but my dream was to be able to make those sounds with my own hands. I knew it wouldn't happen without real music schooling but I still enjoyed chasing those compositions. My fingers never could quite conjure up the sounds I heard in my mind, but the challenge kept me working at it.

It was during one such chase that I met Hammond Creech. He wandered into the bar one morning in early October while I tried to figure out the subtle intricacies of Beethoven's Piano Sonata number 14 in C sharp minor. I didn't do the damned thing justice but as I came to the close of the opening movement I was startled to hear a pair of chapped hands clapping behind me. I spun around on the crate I used as a stool and saw Mr. Creech for the very first time.

"That's damn good, boyo. You've got a feel for the rise and fall of the tempo there, but you're forcing it a bit."

I nodded. He was right but I was stunned, feeling like my private, little world had been invaded by marauding Huns.

"Now, where are my manners? I apologize. Name's Hammond Creech." He strode over to me faster than seemed possible and stuck out his hand with a middling smile. I shuffled to my feet and did my best to grip the man's hand the way my daddy had taught me—like it was a contest for my soul.

"August Brumbelow, sir. Pleasure." But I was lying. It wasn't a pleasure at all. The first thing I noticed, besides his vice-like grip, was the fact that Mr. Creech seemed off-kilter in a lot of ways. Like he'd been deposited there by a passing comet or something. To start with, he was unnaturally clean. If there's one thing you get used to in a town like Spruce Rocks, it's dirt. Dirt is everyone's constant companion and the sooner you come to terms with that fact, the better off you are. Mr. Creech looked and smelled like he'd just bathed down at the barber shop. Maybe he had, but even his fingernails were freshly trimmed and his face freshly shaven.

On top of that was his smell. He smelled...*good*. I don't mean that in some girly way, because he still smelled more or less like a man, but he didn't have that undercurrent of stink the rest of us walked around with. He was like a void in our world of bad smells and dirt, and it made him seem otherworldly. Even his Stetson cavalry hat, which I didn't consider odd at the time, was without the sweat stains the rest of us had to live with. I was busy contemplating this when Creech broke the silence.

"You seen Seamus today?" asked Creech.

"Um, no, sir."

Creech laughed loudly but it seemed to lack a certain visceral quality that usually accompanied laughter. It was like a bad imitation of a laugh and it crawled right up my spine. "I'm no 'sir'. I work for a living!" boasted the cleanest man in town, but he didn't say anything else about his work and I didn't ask. I was frankly ready for him to move on and leave me to my piano playing.

"Do you know where I might find that Irish bastard?"

"Well, he's usually sleeping about this time. This place keeps him up pretty late."

"Ah. So it does, boyo. I'll stop by his house, then. Fare thee well!" And with that, Creech wandered back out into the street.

I sat at the piano a few minutes longer, then I got up to see where Creech had gone. By the time I reached the window, he was nowhere to be seen.

**2**

As the day wore on, I realized that my meeting with Creech had taken up residence in the back of my mind. Most of the hired hand jobs I was able to land didn't offer a lot in the way of intellectual stimulation, so I often lost myself in my thoughts. That day, I spent the afternoon helping to put up a wire fence on Mr. Parker's property. I liked the Parkers and Mr. Parker was always as generous to me as he could afford to be, so I always tried to do my best. This day he prodded me a couple of times to pick up my pace. "This ain't no goddamn Mona Lisa, son," he said, and he was right. I'd just always wanted to do right by people. Yeah, I was eager to get done so I could meet up with my friends, but I also wanted to make sure Mr. Parker got his money's worth out of me. I guess that was just pounded into me when I was a kid and it stuck. God knows I dislike my father, but no one could ever say he wasn't a hard worker. Not until he lost the leg, anyway.

When the sun began to fade and the air started to take on a chill, Mr. Parker turned me loose for the day. I headed straight for home, a little room behind Deerson's Apothecary. Folks these days'd say it was a closet, but it was plenty of room for me at the time. It had a comfortable cot and even an oil lamp so I could read whenever Mr. Deerson lent me a book. Mostly it was a place to sleep, but after so many years spent wandering around and camping out, it felt good to have a place to call my own, no matter how small. Yeah, it got cold as a witch's tit in the winter, but other than that I had no complaints.

Mr. Deerson was a Chickasaw who'd decided to embrace the ways of the white man when he was still young. He maintained contact with the tribe and through them he could procure all manner of things to sell in his shop. Folks

came from as far away as West Texas to make purchases from Mr. Deerson so he was able to provide very well for himself and his son. Over the years, they'd become an integral part of the community, accepted almost as if they were white folks.

Let me pause a minute here to state something right out in the open. My daddy was a bigot and I'd bet dollars to dumplings his daddy was too, but I never wanted any part of it. I don't quite know how all that mess started to begin with, but I think we'd all be better off if we took a critical look at ourselves before casting aspersions on somebody else because of their skin and such. That said, I was a part of the culture of the white man, so I might slip up from time to time and use a word or two you think is contradictory to the statement above. I hope you'll do me the favor of cutting me a little slack when I do. Shit gets in your ears and that very same shit sometimes comes back out your mouth. That's just how it is.

Anyway, the reason I mention that is that folks in the town never talked of the Deersons as Indians. They had a big load of respect for Mr. Deerson. Maybe it was because they all thought he might turn them into something unnatural while they slept but I prefer to think it was because they actually thought highly of him. Running a business in a big town like Twining was hard enough. Doing it in the wilds of the territory was something else entirely.

Mr. Deerson's son was just a couple of years younger than me so that pretty well insured that we'd be friends. He'd been given the name Michael and he didn't tell me his Chickasaw name if he had one. He said he wanted to blend in, and that he did. He was the reason Mr. Deerson brought in select books when he could afford to. Michael was a voracious reader and a deep thinker. On many a late night we'd huddle around that oil lamp and debate the merits of Keats or the intricate details of Homer. I'll admit to you right now that I didn't really understand some of that stuff, but Michael did and he'd wax on and on about this or that passage and how it linked to ideas in other works by the author. Looking back on it now I can see that words were to Michael what music was to me. That's funny in a bittersweet

way, since it really ought to be him writing this instead of me. That's not likely to happen though, so you're stuck with me.

When I reached the apothecary, I clambered through the store. Mr. Deerson greeted me as usual with a big smile and a wave while he continued to help a customer with something that looked like a pile of black feathers. I headed for my room, busting with the need to talk to somebody about Mr. Creech. Once inside, I took off my shirt and hung it up before washing my face in the basin. I looked up into the little mirror fragment I'd hung on the wall and took in the choppy haircut and tanned features that made up my face. For the first time ever, I felt like I was getting older. I can't explain it, but I could see it on me in a way I'd never been able to before. It's funny to think of now, but that day was the first day I realized I was going to get old. The thought made me feel melancholy, just like that Beethoven piece I'd been playing that morning. It's a hell of a thing to feel old at 26, but I was bound to feel even older before winter came.

I heard the bell on the outside door jangle, so I slipped my shirt back on and went out to see Mr. Deerson.

"Hello there, August," said Mr. Deerson. He was being his usual, cheerful self, but underneath it he seemed to be a little sad too. Maybe it was just me. Once you reach that melancholy place in your own heart, you pretty much assume everybody else is drowning in their sorrows too.

"Hello, sir. You seen Michael this evening?"

"Not yet. He had to ride over to Twining to make a delivery for me." He glanced up at the grandfather clock in the corner. "Should be back soon, though."

"I'm going to run over to the saloon and play a while. Would you mind telling him where I'll be? I need to talk to him."

"Certainly," said Mr. Deerson as he continued putting away his oddities in the little, square drawers built into the wall behind the counter. "You eat any supper yet?"

I looked up at him sheepishly. "Naw, sir. I'll get me something over at Seamus' place." Truth be told, I'd be playing for my supper since Mr. Parker usually didn't pay me

until the job was done. That'd mean at least one day later, maybe two.

"Well, I just brought in this fresh buffalo jerky. I'm told it's mighty good too. You fancy a couple of strips? You'd really be helping me out, son. I need to know if it's any good and my teeth aren't what they used to be."

THAT was an understatement. Mr. Deerson meant more to me than my own father did, but his mouth was a wreck of brown stumps that churned my stomach if I looked at it for too long. That's why most of his smiles were of the closed mouth variety.

He took out the jar of jerky strips and my mouth began watering at the thought of that salty treat. "That's okay. I can get something over..."

Mr. Deerson interrupted my pathetic attempt at politeness and shoved three strips of the jerky into my hand. "I'll tell Michael to stop by the bar," was all he said. At least I had enough sense to shut up.

The walk over to Seamus' bar usually lightened my stride a bit, but on that night I was practically flying. Having risen from the depths of my own bewildering sadness over growing old, I was buoyed by the generosity of Mr. Deerson. I gnawed on that jerky and it tasted every bit as good as the filet mignon I'd had on my one and only trip to Atlanta. I'd finished it by the time I hit the doorway to the saloon. The autumn chill was settling in so Seamus had rigged up the heavy doors for winter. It made the place stuffy from all the cigar and pipe smoke, but it also made it feel homier for some reason. There weren't many people there yet, so I stood at the bar with the intention of quizzing Seamus about Mr. Creech. Before I could ask him anything, Seamus waved me over and whispered across the bar. "You be talking to that fellow Creech this morning?"

Stunned, I simply nodded.

"And what'd the bastard say in your direction, son?"

"Not a whole lot, Seamus. I mean, he said he was looking for you. That's about it."

"Well, he came to my house, he did. Put some sort of sign on my front wall."

"A sign?"

"Dammit, your ears busted, boy? A sign. A scrawled sign. He knocked on the door and I didn't answer seeing as how I'd been *entertaining*, but I looked out onto the porch there and seen him doing it. Painting that weird symbol with a big old smile on his face." Seamus' hands were trembling but he didn't seem like he'd been drinking.

"So what? He left you a note, right?"

"This was no note, lad. This fella's out to get me."

"What'd the sign look like? Is it still on your house?"

"Hell, no! I washed it off before coming here, and let me tell you, it took some tremendous scrubbing. Red paint. A sign I ain't seen before. Weird as hell, it was."

"Can you draw it out?"

"What the hell is this, the third degree? I just needed to know what he said to you is all." His false bravado had turned into a semblance of the real thing so he was no longer shaking, but his reaction made me even more curious about Mr. Creech.

"So who is he?" I asked as casually as I could.

"Never you mind. Here, have an ale then get to playing. I expect we'll have a good crowd, what with the cold night air and all."

I took the ale he offered since the salted meat had made me thirsty. Seamus brewed it himself so it was watered down, but it tasted okay if you drank it fast enough. I did just that, then I perched myself on my crate and got down to business as the refugees of Spruce Rocks turned up one by one to get their nightly doses of socializing and alcohol.

Michael came in around ten or so, at least that's what time I figured it was. Seamus didn't believe in clocks and I couldn't afford a pocket watch so I'd gotten pretty good at estimating the hours of the day. I nodded in his direction and Michael waved as he sat down at the bar. A little skinny guy had followed him in and he took a seat right next to Michael. I glanced over now and again while I was playing and I noticed how chummy they were. The guy had long, dirty-blond hair and dirtier clothes, but if Michael had befriended him he was probably okay. Michael was almost as good a judge of character as his father was. He could see right through the most convincing lies with little or no effort.

It was a little spooky, to be honest, but I figured having medicine man blood in your veins had to count for something.

When the saloon had cleared out except for those who were hanging onto the last threads of consciousness, I wound things down with a brief bit of Beethoven then I went over to the bar where Michael sat.

"Hey, Michael!" I said as I clapped him on the back. "I got something I need to talk to you about."

"Hello, my friend," said Michael with a smile. His teeth were like alabaster tombstones compared to his fathers'. "I've got something big to tell you as well. But first, I'd like you to meet Jamie."

He backed up to give his new friend a better line of sight in my direction and I reached out my hand to him.

"Hey there, Jamie. Pleased to meet..." I paused as the young man looked up revealing a face that didn't belong to a man at all. He was a she! At least he *looked* like a she. I stood there with my jaw flapping against my neck while I stared into the most beautiful eyes I'd ever seen on an individual who was wearing pants. What the hell? Jamie took my hand and shook it firmly.

"You can shut your mouth now, Gus," said Michael with a laugh. Jamie laughed too and I was relieved to hear a high-pitched, albeit dusty, timbre.

"Um, sorry. Sorry, ma'am. Forgive my bad manners, won't you? I just..."

"Let me guess. You never seen a woman dressed like this before? Well, that ain't news. Heard it before. At least a thousand times."

"That wasn't what I was about to say, ma'am." It was but I wasn't going to tell her that.

"That right? Well, what exactly was you going to say next, piano boy?"

I normally bristled at being called a boy by someone close to my own age, but something about this strange girl was compelling. Maybe even attractive. I looked over at Michael. "Ya'll together or something? You know, 'together' together?"



They both busted out laughing. "No, but we go way back. I just rode over to Twining and picked her up this afternoon. That's part of what I needed to talk to you about."

I nodded. "In that case, miss..."

"Winters, but you can drop the 'miss' and 'ma'am' shit."

I was no stranger to cursing, but when it came out of such a lovely mouth it was positively titillating! I expect that showed on my face, but I plowed ahead anyway. "Alright. In that case, I was about to say that you have the prettiest eyes I've ever seen on a cowboy."

While she gave no immediate response, Jamie tipped her head down so her hat hid her face.

"Gus! Now you've gone and embarrassed her. I ought to..."

Jamie put a gentle hand on Michael's shoulder and murmured, "No, it's alright," but she didn't look up right away.

Fortunately Seamus interrupted and kept the discomfort from taking root. "Ya'll need to get on home, now. It's time for me to be closing up."

We wandered out to the street and Seamus wished us a genial good night as he pushed the last couple of drunks out behind us. Then he locked the place down and I realized the three of us were just standing there watching the others stumble home. These days those movie westerns make it look like there were wild parties and gunfights going on all the time back then, but it wasn't really like that in a town like Spruce Rocks. Usually it was just plain quiet. Too quiet for some.

"Where you staying, Jamie?" I asked, not really wanting to break up the gang just yet. It had been a pleasant enough evening but I'd spent the bulk of it working the keys. I was craving some conversation and the subject that was foremost on my mind was Mr. Creech.

Jamie bumped her shoulder against Michael's. "Mike's daddy's gone let me bed down over there."

"I thought ya'll weren't together?" I said, only partially in jest.

"We aren't, Gus," Michael laughed. "Jamie's practically my sister."

The two of them chortled and punched each other while I stood there dumbfounded trying to figure out what the hell it all meant and whether or not I might one day be able to sneak a kiss from this unusual girl. I sat on the stoop outside the bar and watched as a little black cat slunk underneath the wooden sidewalk across the way.

Michael plopped down beside me and Jamie sat on the other side of him, then they commenced whispering back and forth and just having the grandest time. At first it was funny seeing Michael acting so childish, but then it became annoying. I was never too big on being the odd man out, especially with my best friend and a girl I hoped to get a little closer to. "If ya'll are just going to sit here and giggle, I'm going to go home and read. My book's better company than ya'll are any day," I said, but I didn't get up to leave just yet.

"Sorry. Really, I'm sorry, Gus," said Michael. "I...we just have something serious to talk to you about and I guess I'm just reluctant to launch into it. It's such a nice night for friends and I've had a couple of drinks, so... Jamie was just reminding me to get to the point. That's all."

I nodded even though I didn't believe him. "Something going on up at Twining?" I asked without looking up.

"Yessir, there is. That's why Jamie comes to be in our company tonight." He looked over at Jamie but she remained silent, content to let Michael spin the yarn. "Seems that there's been some weird disappearances up in that area."

That got my attention. I turned and saw that Michael's gaze had turned to steel. "What exactly do you mean? Like they just vanished in thin air in front of other folks? Like a magic trick?"

"No, not exactly. It's just that there's been a lot of missing persons. Folks who wandered off or were killed. Or both. After a year or so of that the local sheriff, a guy who's not too quick on the uptake, figured out that the only folks who'd gone missing were women. That holy revelation came forth eight months ago and the disappearances are still going on. Husbands and fathers are waking up to find that their

wives and daughters are missing. Jamie's father and mine go way back, so they discussed it and decided she should stay down here with us for a while. Her father's the one who made her dress this way." He pointed at her outfit. "Figured if she looked like a boy from a distance the angel of death might pass her by."

Jamie snorted a laugh. "Little did Daddy know I'd take to it like I did." I stared at her, trying to imagine what she'd look like in a light, gingham dress, but the image wouldn't materialize in my mind. It just didn't work, like eating pickles together with apple pie.

"That sheriff don't have enough sense to figure out where they went?" I asked, tearing my gaze away from Jamie's face to look back at Michael.

"Nah. He's either too dumb or too unlucky. My money's on dumb. He tried putting extra deputies on watch but the womenfolk still disappeared. Not one of them was seen leaving and there was never any evidence. They were just gone. It's got the folks in Twining mighty scared, but they're trying to keep it quiet."

"It's weird we haven't heard about it, though. News like that usually travels real fast."

"I think they don't want to scare any new settlers off. These days that could only mean one thing."

"What? Coyotes?"

Michael shook his head. He was sobering up as he spoke. Sometimes telling serious news can do that to you. "They think it's us, Gus. Indians, I mean. They're crazy, but frightened people aren't usually logical. They jump on the bandwagon of the first possible answer anybody mentions and they run with it. That's another reason for getting Jamie out of there. She was raised by the tribe."

I noticed Jamie sit up taller at this comment even though most white folks despised the red ones. I always chalked that up to their own guilt over the indignities they'd thrust upon a race of people who didn't deserve such treatment, but whatever the reason the feelings were real.

"She don't look Chickasaw to me, Michael. No offense, ma'am."

"I ain't offended unless you keep on calling me ma'am," said Jamie with a smile. I smiled back. She sure as hell was growing on me.

Michael said, "She isn't Chickasaw by blood. When she was just a baby, her family was settled way north of Twining. Back then that was still partly Chickasaw territory. That's where my daddy was raised too. There were some *misunderstandings*. Mr. Winters got into it with some of the local warriors and ended up starting more than he could finish."

Jamie stood up to stretch her legs and Michael turned to look at her in the moonlight. She muttered, "Go on," as if she'd read his mind.

"Well, her mother went and got herself killed in the fracas but no one's ever really said how. My father says it was probably an accident because Mr. Winters couldn't shoot worth a shit, but however it happened, Mr. Winters felt so guilty he couldn't live with himself anymore. In his despair he started groping for answers and he was eventually befriended by my father. He introduced Jamie's father to the ways of the great spirit who dwells above and he sent him on a spirit quest while the tribe took care of Jamie."

It was hard to believe that the white girl with freckles who stood before me had been at least partially raised in teepees, but it added another facet to my fascination with her. "What's your Chickasaw name?" I asked.

She stood up tall and said in a proud voice, "Itanale." She drifted into her memories for a moment, then continued the tale. "My daddy didn't come back for a long time. Years. I don't even know how long he was gone 'cause I was too little to remember. He didn't never tell me where he went or what happened to him then, so I reckon it's between him and Aba Binili."

I knew enough about the Deersons' beliefs to recognize that name. It meant the one who dwells above. God, basically. You know, when you get right down to it, everybody more or less believes the same thing regardless of what they call it.

Michael picked up the thread of Jamie's story and continued weaving. "Jamie and I grew up together until her

daddy decided it'd be safer for them to live down in Twining. After that we didn't see them much."

"Daddy'd ride out to the Chickasaw village with gifts for the elder council members from time to time but he didn't never let me go with him. I think he was afraid I'd stay. Probably would have, too."

A not unpleasant lull fell over us as we watched clouds pass over the moon and cast their shadows on the dusty street. I felt better for being trusted with her secrets so soon after meeting her, but that kind of thing is sometimes easier with a complete stranger than it is with a close friend.

"Sounds like you've had an interesting life, Itanale," I said, and I meant it. She smiled at the sound of her Chickasaw name and I thought she was blushing but I couldn't really tell in the darkness.

Michael spoke and severed the silvery thread that hung in the air between her and me. "So anyway, she's here because her father asked my father to help keep her safe from whatever's going on up there. I rode up to Twining to get her this afternoon, so I guess we're stuck with her for a while!" He laughed loud and strong and Jamie joined him even though his tease was hardly funny. In mere moments, it was like that almost connection between Jamie and me had never even happened. Maybe it hadn't, but I was still hoping it had.

We sat there until the words ran out and the yawns started, then we walked together toward home. Halfway there, Michael said, "Hey, wasn't there something you said you needed to talk to me about?"

I mulled it over, considering just how little a thing my obsession with Creech was now that I'd heard Jamie's tale. "It'll keep," I answered. "I'm ready to call it a night and the whole thing'll take some explaining." *And, I thought, it's not something I really want to tell you in front of Jamie. Not yet.*

**3**

I had to be back up at Mr. Parker's place by sunrise, so I slipped out before Michael and Jamie woke up. Mr. Deerson was the only one up and he urged me to take a few slices of toast with me. All it took was one look at the strawberry preserves he'd generously spread on them and I gladly took him up on the offer. I had just finished the last few bites halfway between town and the Parker place when Mr. Parker rode up to meet me on his spotted horse, Sparks.

"Thank God. I thought that was you, August," wheezed Mr. Parker. He sounded like he'd run there instead of having ridden Sparks.

Ben Parker rarely took to people. He loved his family for sure, but he was distrustful of many of the other townsfolk, and he was downright paranoid about strangers. He was as generous a man as you were likely to meet, but getting in was a bit like storming a castle. There might as well have been a moat around him. Unfortunately, since so many got locked outside his gates, people were apt to say he was an uppity asshole. Mr. Parker didn't have a lot of friends in Spruce Rocks and he sure as hell didn't have many favors he could call in.

"Good morning, sir," I said as I patted Sparks' muzzle. "I'm sorry if I'm late or..."

Mr. Parker cut me off. "August, I need help. Will you help me, son? I got nobody else to turn to."

Fear and panic were evident in Mr. Parker's eyes. Those peepers were always rock solid, but now they popped out at me as if some sort of pressure was reshaping them from the inside. Seeing him that way shook my foundation a little bit and I got scared without even knowing why.

"Sure, Mr. Parker. Sure. I'll do what I can, sir. You know that."

Mr. Parker scanned the horizon as if he thought a giant hawk might swoop down on us at any second. We were alone on the road but he acted like he'd been chased there.

"Thank you, son. I knew I could count on you. Here, climb on up." He offered me his arm and I slid onto Sparks back behind him. My crotch was jammed into the back of the saddle but I didn't have time to get repositioned. Mr. Parker urged Sparks forward with all the speed he could muster.

Sparks was a capable horse so we got to the homestead before I even had a chance to think much about the pistol grip I could feel jutting out of Mr. Parker's belt. In those days pretty much everybody had a rifle at least, especially if they lived out a ways, but most didn't carry a pistol unless they thought somebody was apt to be shooting at them. I wouldn't have thought that Mr. Parker even owned one, seeing as how he wouldn't have had much use for the thing. The movies make it look like you could gun a man down with a six shooter at forty paces but it didn't actually work that way. Get further than twenty feet away and those little shooters weren't a whole hell of a lot of good.

Once we'd gotten off the horse, I thought to ask Mr. Parker about the gun, but he had other ideas. "Son, I don't know what on God's green Earth is going on, but I aim to shoot any son of a buck who sets foot on this property before I've gotten a good explanation, you understand?"

I nodded out of habit, but, I most definitely did not understand. What the hell had this normally sedate man so spooked? I was trying to figure out how to phrase that very question when I noticed that the front door to the Parker's house had been ripped off its hinges and thrown to the ground in front of the porch. It looked as if it'd been burned on the side that lay face up.

"What happened to your door, sir?" I asked. The question seemed to rock Parker's world. He ran over to the door and flipped it over in the dirt. The other side—the inside side—was free of burns and still sported a small sprig of lilac in a little wire ring.

"Mr. Parker?" I touched his shoulder and he jumped like a frightened cat.

"What am I to do, boy? Oh, sweet lord Jesus, what am I to do?," he said as he wrung his sweaty hands together. "You said you'd help me, right? You said you would!"

"Yes, sir, but what exactly do you need help with?" *Other than fixing a clearly broken door*, I thought.

"Betsy's gone. Katrina too." His wife and two-year-old. "Just up and vanished. I woke up this morning and they were just gone! I reckon the door was like you see it now, but I'll be damned if I can remember. Don't even remember saddling up Sparks, but that must've happened, right? I just rode out looking for them, fast as I could. I thought I could find them, but they aren't here, August. They aren't anywhere!"

Mr. Parker fell to his knees beside the door. I patted his shoulder and saw that tears were rolling down his face and falling into the dust that had settled on the burnt wood surface in front of him. He really did think his family had disappeared. Was he crazy?

"They gotta be close by, right?," I asked. "I mean, you only got the one horse."

"You can see for miles in every direction out here! If they're close, they're either lying in the scrub or they're..." He couldn't say it, but I nodded my understanding as he plopped onto his ass.

I scoped out the surroundings. He was right. You could pretty much see five miles in every direction, especially on a clear morning like that one. The sun had crested the hills to the east and her rays were painting the plains with light that would have normally made me feel happy to be alive. Instead, on this particular morning it filled me with dread.

I left Mr. Parker on his ass there in the dirt and wandered over to the house. There wasn't much to it, but it was built to last. Lots of homesteaders threw together flimsy shacks. Compared to those, the Parker house was a mansion. It had three rooms, a large stone fireplace, and even a front porch. I mounted that porch cautiously and examined the door frame. It looked like somebody had held a big torch up to the door but the fire hadn't actually caught hold anywhere. I rubbed at the soot and it came right off onto my



thumb. If there had been a fire, it hadn't burned for long or the whole house would have gone up.

Stepping inside, I felt a chill that told me that the fireplace and stove were both cold. My arms were suddenly covered in goose bumps that eventually made their way up the back of my neck. It was dark and a little damp in there for sure, but that wasn't what was scaring me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but it felt like being in a funeral parlor. It was hard to breathe and I felt like my heart stopped pumping for a second or two. I was suddenly afraid that something truly terrible had happened to Mrs. Parker and her baby. That was when I knew I had to get out of there as fast as I could.

I ran down off the porch and nearly fell over Mr. Parker who still sat crying beside the door. Once I was back in the sunlight, I felt the blood moving through my veins again and I felt a little foolish for getting spooked so easily.

"You felt it too, didn't you?" asked Mr. Parker. "Don't lie to me, son. It feels like death in there, don't it?"

I nodded. "Reminds me of when my daddy came back from the war with his leg wrapped up in a bag under his arm. We buried that leg out back and...well, the house feels like that cold hole we buried that leg in. It's like a grave without a body."

Mr. Parker got to his feet and clapped me on the shoulder. An old, LeMat revolver was in his right hand and the hammer was cocked. Now that I was scared too, Mr. Parker was coming back into himself. Like many men, he could feel weak when he was alone, but rarely indulged in that particular feeling when there was someone else nearby who needed him to be strong.

"What you planning to do with that?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but I feel a little better when I'm holding onto it." He paused, looking off into the landscape as he turned a full 360 degrees. "There's a rifle behind the barn door. I want you to go get it and make sure it's loaded."

I didn't particularly want to bring another gun into this already screwed up situation, but I was eager to be far away from Mr. Parker so I did as I was told. I found the rifle

and carried it upright by the barrel across the yard to him, but by the time I got there he'd lost interest in the firearm.

"Mr. Parker. We've got to report this to the Sheriff up in Twining. If you want me to, I can take Sparks up there for you, but I think it'd be better coming from you." Twining. Just saying the name made me think about the trouble up that way that Michael and Jamie had told me about. Was this related to that in some way? Were the disappearances moving south? Come to think of it, the Parker place was the northernmost settled part of the Spruce Rocks area if you didn't count the Chickasaw reservation in the hills.

"Telegraph'll be faster. You live with that injun family, right, son?"

I bristled at that word, but nodded. The last thing Mr. Parker needed at that moment was a lecture on race relations from the likes of me.

"Don't he have a telegraph there?"

"No, sir. He doesn't, but the land office across the street does. Charge a pretty penny too."

"But it's an emergency! They wouldn't charge for..." He never finished his sentence. He knew as well as I did that those greedy, government bastards would steal the coins off the eyes of a corpse if nobody was watching. As he considered this, Mr. Parker started weeping again. His muscles went limp and he fell back to the ground right where he'd landed before. When he plopped down, he accidentally pulled the trigger on that old revolver and sent a lead ball screaming across the prairie. I was close enough that the sound of it damn near made me pass out from fright. For all I knew, it was the angel of death coming to strike us down with the very same lightning bolts he'd used to fry the Parkers' front door.

"Jesus Christ!" I shouted as I ducked. Mr. Parker was crying loudly by then with the hot iron of the pistol in the dirt by his knees. I picked it up and tossed it over next to the rifle thinking that firearms probably weren't the best things for Mr. Parker to have around at the moment. I wondered if the man had simply gone crazy, but he'd seemed sane enough the day before.

I crawled over to him and patted him on the back. "I'll figure out something, Mr. Parker. If you'll let me borrow Sparks, I'll run into town and see if there's some way I can send a message up to Twining, alright?" No response. "Why don't you come with me, sir? There's not a lot you can do here by yourself."

It was then that I learned just how far Mr. Parker's mind had gone around the bend. He flopped over onto his side on the dusty ground and pleaded with me, his bloodshot eyes brimming with tears. "Son, you go on now. Go home to your mama. I'm just going to rest here a while and wait for the rain."

The sky looked awful clear to me, but there's no telling how people's experiences cloud their internal skies when the serious shit starts happening. I knew how much Mr. Parker loved his wife and daughter, and I could see just how certain he was that they were now dead.

"I'm going to ride into town, sir, less'n you tell me otherwise." Mr. Parker just lay there on his back looking up at the sky while a fly lit on his lip. I brushed it away and looked over at the guns. "I hope you don't mistake what I'm about to say, sir, but I think it'd be for the best if I took the bullets out of those guns." Mr. Parker stayed where he was and didn't bat an eyelash so I crawled over to the guns and tried to dump the LeMat's homemade bullets into my palm, but they wouldn't budge so I did the next best thing and took the percussion caps off the back. Then I ejected the store-bought Winchester rounds from the rifle. "I'll bring these back when I come with help."

I whistled for Sparks and he came running, probably just as eager to get the hell out of there as I was. He didn't have any saddle bags on so I just pushed the warm bullets and caps down into my pocket as I patted the horse's muzzle. I said, "You sure you won't come with me, sir? I really think it's for the best," but Mr. Parker wasn't listening.

I climbed onto Sparks and patted his neck, then I turned him around and took off for town without looking back.

## 4

"Boy, you know better than that. Telegraph wires don't grow on trees." The speaker of that tidbit of idiocy was none other than Earl Fouty, the very person I'd hoped I wouldn't run into at the land office. He was a beastly man with a beastly manner and he almost always pissed me off, but that day I couldn't afford to let my emotions take a hold of me. That day, I actually needed that pompous asshole to help me out.

"Mr. Fouty, it's a bonafide emergency! Mrs. Parker and little Kat have gone missing." I pleaded with him but I could see that the only pleading Fouty understood was the kind that had the face of a president on it.

"Not my problem, boy. Now get the hell out of here. I got a good prospect coming in at ten and I don't need him scared off by the likes of you."

I felt lost but Fouty's last statement gave me an idea. I grabbed Sparks' reins and tied him up in front of the apothecary before heading inside. I could smell the bacon from out on the sidewalk so I knew Michael and Jamie were up. Sure enough, I found them squeezed around the kitchen table with Mr. Deerson. The warmth in that room was a stark contrast to the cold plains I'd just come from and their camaraderie immediately cheered me up some. The look on my face had the opposite effect on them.

"What's the matter, August?" asked Mr. Deerson. Michael had been laughing about something but his smile fell away abruptly the second he saw me.

The words didn't come easy but I managed to tell them what had happened. Michael and Jamie shared glances that told me that they were thinking along the same lines as me. When I was done, Mr. Deerson stood up.

"You did well to come back here, August. I'll ride back out to the Parker place and see if I can learn a little more from the surroundings. Evil leaves its mark, no matter how small." I didn't know what the hell that meant but it scared me more than seeing Mr. Parker cry.

"I went to the land office to send a message to the sheriff in Twining, but that Fouty son of a bitch wouldn't have it. Said I'd have to pay up first."

Mr. Deerson sighed then he strode over to the cash register and rung up a no sale to open the drawer. He handed me a dollar and told me to send my message. Paper money wasn't something I often got to lay my hands on so I had to take a minute to stare at the picture of that old bastard Stanton on the treasury note before running out the door.

When I came out of the land office, Michael and Jamie were waiting on the sidewalk in front of the apothecary. I ran across the street and handed the change to Michael.

"I ought to get back to the Parker place. I got to return Sparks to Mr. Parker anyway." I could tell that Michael wanted to come along. He probably would have if Jamie hadn't been there.

"Weird that we were just talking about this kind of thing last night, huh?" asked Michael.

"Look, we don't know nothing yet. Mr. Parker might've just gone loony. Mrs. Parker and Kat could have gone off to pick blackberries for all we know." I said the words out loud, but my heart felt differently. Bad news had come to roost, but I didn't know just how bad things were going to get.

"Did they burn their front door down before they left?" Michael laughed but the sound was humorless.

"I know. It's weird. I'm going to get back out there to see if I can help your father before the law gets there, alright?"

Michael nodded and turned to go back inside, but Jamie put her hand on my forearm and locked her eyes onto my own. "Be careful, Gus," she said, then she let her fingers slide off my skin leaving a tingling trail behind as she went inside with Michael. I smiled in spite of my fears and went to get Sparks ready for another ride out to the Parker place.

It was close to noon when I got back to the Parker's. I hitched Sparks up in the barn and fed and watered him. I hadn't seen Mr. Deerson as I rode in, but Shunahoya, his horse, was over by the house. He never lashed her reins to a post and she never ran off. They had some sort of agreement, those two, and I was never privy to it, but I envied it in a way. It was hard not to be envious of such trust from an animal. Maybe some of what other folks in town whispered about Mr. Deerson was true, but true or not, he'd won the heart of Shunahoya.

I patted her as I walked past and I was just about to step up onto the little porch when I heard Mr. Deerson's voice from inside. "Stay back, August. Don't you come in here!"

Squinting in the bright daylight, I looked through the doorway to see Mr. Deerson crouched on the floor. "What is it, Mr. Deerson? You seen Mr. Parker?"

"I'm afraid I have, son. He's dead. Shot himself in the face as far as I can tell."

My mind raced. Surely he couldn't have fired that cap and ball revolver without the caps. "Can you tell what gun he used?"

While another man might have asked why on Earth I wanted to know something like that, Mr. Deerson looked back at me from that gloom and answered, "It's an old LeMat. Why?"

"Because I unloaded that gun's caps before I rode back to town. He was acting so sketchy, I thought it was for the best."

"Well, it looks like he used the grapeshot. His face is a mess."

Damnit, I forgot. Those old LeMat pistols had a little shotgun under the main barrel. I didn't even think to unload that.

Mr. Deerson spoke quietly, but that house, now empty and cold, amplified his voice. "Did you come inside the house when you were here before?"

"Just inside the doorway there. The place kind of spooked me." My mind was spinning as I tried to understand that Mr. Parker was really dead. He'd done all he could to help me along even though I wasn't the strongest worker

around. He'd done it because he'd liked me, and I'd let him down when he'd needed me the most. It was a lot to bear. I stood there and felt my sorrow settle into the pit of my stomach as I forced myself to look at the pulpy mess that used to be Mr. Parker's face. Mr. Deerson was saying something, but I'll be damned if I heard any of it. Mr. Parker had been turned into a bloody mess because I hadn't remembered that LeMats have that little shotgun barrel. I'd been in too big a hurry to get out of there.

"August? Can you hear me?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry, I just..." Then it all hit me like a giant tidal wave of sadness and I whimpered, "I'm sorry, Mr. Parker. I'm so sorry." I wept there on that porch with my back to the doorway, afraid that if I turned around I might see Mr. Parker's damaged face again.

I was lost in my sorrows when Mr. Deerson laid a hand on my shoulder and eased me down onto the steps. He was a wise man, so he knew better than to try and stop the flow of tears. Instead, he chanted a brief but beautiful song in his native language. Somehow the sound of that song lightened my load and I managed to blow my nose into my handkerchief. "Feel better?" was all he said, and I nodded my reply. "Good. I'm going to need you to help me with something before the law shows up."

"What's that?" I asked, unable to imagine what could be coming next.

"First off, we need to get rid of that revolver. I want you to tuck it into your pants. If the lawmen ask, it was your father's and you've had it for years. Understand?"

"Sure, but why..."

"No questions for now. Just do as I say."

I nodded and stayed on the porch while Mr. Deerson went inside to get the gun. He handed it to me and it was so heavy that I nearly dropped it. Somehow I managed to hold onto the huge thing and tuck it into my belt.

"Are there any other guns here that you know of?" asked Mr. Deerson.

"Yes, sir. There's a Winchester. When I left, it was laying out here on the ground next to Mr. Parker."

I could hear Mr. Deerson rooting around in the house, but I still didn't want to turn and look inside. These days I'm glad I had the sense to do that. I'd seen it once in the dark and that was enough. If I'd seen it again, Mr. Parker's bloodied face would have very likely haunted my dreams to this day.

"Seems the rifle's gone missing."

"What's going on here, Mr. Deerson?" I thought he knew more than he was sharing, but he wasn't ready to talk just yet.

"We'll converse when we're safe at home. For now, I need you to get on Sparks and ride back to town. Wait for me at home and don't let on to anyone that you came out here."

He walked toward the barn and I stood there puzzled and disappointed. Puzzled because I didn't understand what Mr. Deerson was up to and disappointed because I'd thought I was going to get to meet the big city lawmen and maybe even discuss my theories about this case being linked to the disappearances in Twining.

I ran to catch up with the old medicine man. "I think I ought to stick around long enough to tell the law about what happened, don't you?"

He didn't answer but instead grabbed Sparks' reins and handed them to me without looking me in the eye.

"Come on, now," I pleaded. "Won't you tell me what's going on? Mr. Parker was my friend." I stood my ground even though it was clear that he wanted me to let things lie for the time being. I respected him more than he knew, but I also felt like I had to put a stake in what I wanted or I'd never get it.

Mr. Deerson sighed and finally met my gaze. "I'm asking you, man to man, August. Will you let this go for now? I promise to fill you in when I get home but for now it's in your own best interests to get out of here as fast as this horse will take you."

The look in his eyes combined with the peer-to-peer way he'd expressed it made me capitulate. Looking back on it now, I can see how he manipulated me by looking into my heart and seeing what words might act as the key to my



lock. He was such a smart man, and I owe him my life sure as I'm writing this, but I still resent how he kept me out of the picture that day. I expect things would have turned out a lot worse if I'd stayed and talked to the lawmen, but I felt that it was my prerogative to do so. Oh well, water under the bridge and all that.

I headed home on Sparks at a slow trot so I'd have some time to think before I faced the barrage of questions my friends would most definitely have ready for me.

## 5

Mr. Parker's revolver loomed large on the table between Michael, Jamie and me, surrounded by its percussion caps and the .44 caliber cartridges from Mr. Parker's Winchester. Michael and Jamie were captivated by it. I just wanted it to go away. Every time I looked at its battered metal surface, it made my stomach hurt. If only I'd been able to remember that it had that little shotgun barrel, Mr. Parker might still be alive.

"He's actually dead? You saw him?" asked Michael. It's a funny thing about being young. You never really accept death even when it's staring you in the eye. I accepted Mr. Parker's demise because I was there, but Michael saw it as an abstract concept.

"I didn't go into the house, but I could see him laying there in front of your daddy. I really didn't want to see any more," I said quietly.

Jamie eased her chair closer to mine and rested her hand on my shoulder in much the same way that Mr. Deerson had done, but Mr. Deerson's touch hadn't triggered a rise in my pants the way Jamie's did. I felt sad and miserable and horny all at the same time. Then I felt guilty for feeling horny when Mr. Parker lay dead just a few miles away. It was a big bundle of feelings for a young man to have to deal with all at once. I've never in my life been able to figure out why women are at their most available when men are feeling distant and preoccupied but I guess that's just one of the mysteries of life.

"Did he say how long he'd be?" asked Michael.

I shrugged. "He said he was going to talk to the law when they come down from Twining." I looked at Jamie. Her eyes sparkled and her skin was so smooth that it was practically translucent. I didn't know what the hell was

happening to me but I was fascinated by her. "You know anything about the lawmen up there, Jamie?"

She shook her head, but looked away when she did it. Michael saw it too. "Do you remember the sheriff's name?" he asked.

"Hays, but I ain't sure he's even a real sheriff. My father calls him a fraud 'cause he used to be head of the vigilance committee and now he done made himself the official law. Daddy says he swung that 'cause he couldn't do nothing else and now he ain't doing nothing to settle all them disappearances. Most folks up that way don't look on him real kindly right now."

"Well, shit," I muttered, then I realized I'd just cursed in front of a girl and I turned beet red. "Oh, Jamie, I'm sorry about that!" If my mother had pounded one thing into me, it was to respect the fairer gender to a fault, but Jamie didn't care.

"What the hell do I care if you say 'shit' in front of me?" she laughed. Michael and I joined in and pretty soon the heavy gloom that had lingered in the air since my return lifted slightly.

My gaze kept returning to that old pistol. "I feel like I ought to hand this gun over to the law but Mr. Deerson said to hide it here. You got any idea why he'd do that, Michael?"

"No, but he's got no soft spot for the law. They've never been real helpful when it comes to our people. Maybe he's just scared. Maybe he thinks that they'll make him a suspect."

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't think so," I said. "I figure he knew more about what happened up there than he was letting on. Maybe he knows what's going on up in Twining too."

Jamie leaned forward and said, "He did persuade my daddy to get me out of there."

Michael got up from the table, obviously frustrated by the implications. "I'm going to make some tea," was all he said.

I continued to stare at that pistol, trying to wish it away, but it remained a solid reminder of the events of that morning. I was fully aware that the object had become my

personal burden, so I wrapped it up in an old rag and hid it away in my room.

We did very little the rest of the afternoon, afraid to wander too far away from the apothecary in the event that Mr. Deerson showed up. As it turned out, he didn't make it back until it was nearly dark. We ran outside to meet him, but he shushed us immediately. "Not now," he said. "Wait until we're inside. Gus, would you take care of Shunahoya? The rest of you see about fixing us some supper."

I walked Shunahoya back to the stable and removed her saddle and bridle. She needed a good brushing but I figured that could wait. I was dying to know what happened up at the Parker place. I looked up and saw Mr. Deerson standing out in the alley. Had he been there the whole time?

When I finished, I turned back towards the apothecary and saw that he'd gone inside. I washed my hands in the basin out back and slung open the back door, already a little bit angry considering the possibility that Mr. Deerson was spilling the beans without me there. This whole mess revolved around me so I couldn't understand why he was shielding me from it.

As soon as I entered, Mr. Deerson motioned for me to come to the kitchen table and sit. A more solemn group I had never seen, and it was made even more somber by the gathering darkness outside. Michael lit a kerosene lantern and the smell ran right up my nose and made my eyes water profusely as Mr. Deerson leaned forward to tell his tale.

"I imagine that August has told ya'll about what happened this morning." Nods from Jamie and Michael. "There isn't much more to be said. Two deputies from Twining showed up in response to August's telegram. I told them that Mr. Parker had been shot in the face and that his wife and daughter were missing." I raised my eyebrows at this but remained silent. "They examined the scene and asked me a litany of questions. That's where I've been all this time. Answering their questions in order to convince them that I had nothing to do with it. In certain cases it doesn't pay to be a Chickasaw." He turned to stare right at Michael. "They don't trust us any more than we should trust

them, and yet somehow we've been thrust together." He looked down at his weathered hands. "It is a conundrum to be certain."

There was a pause so I took the opportunity. "Mr. Deerson?"

Those old eyes turned their full bearing onto my own and sent a fresh chill up my spine. I saw fear in them—something I'd never seen there before.

"You wish to know how I could be trusted if I lied to those deputies, yes?" I didn't bat an eye, hypnotized as I was by Mr. Deerson's countenance. "I don't know how to tell you without frightening you, August, but perhaps you should be frightened. All of you." Finally that perceptive gaze was cast in another direction like a powerful beam of light from a lighthouse, constantly turning and seeking. "It isn't something to speak of lightly."

He got up and rummaged in a drawer just outside the kitchen for his pipe and tobacco. He took a few moments to pack and light the pipe as he mustered up the courage to begin. Finally, with the smooth skin of his face encircled by fragrant tobacco smoke, he began to let us inside.

"First off, are you feeling alright, August?"

Surprised by the question, I simply nodded. If there'd been flies about I'm pretty sure they would have lighted in my gaping mouth. The atmosphere was so much like when ghost stories are told around a campfire that I began to expect him to spin one. What I got was much scarier.

"Good. I want you to tell me if you feel ill in any way, agreed?"

"Yes, sir. But what is it you think I..."

He shushed me with a wave of his hand. "There are things in this world that I'd rather not discuss, but ignoring such things doesn't make them any less a threat. You all may think me crazy for believing these things in this modern age of telegraphs and steamships, but once you know something—really know it deep down in your heart—it cannot be unknown." He drew another long puff on that worn out old pipe and continued. "It's a tradition of our people to never discuss death, but I must do it now if I am to protect you from the evil that is striding toward us and which may have

already touched our good friend August here." Shit, that didn't sound good.

"Ever since the Chickasaw people were forced to move to this area, our tribal elders have been concerned about the shadows we left behind. We were forced from the lands of our ancestors and our dead have become lost, remaining upon the Earth, unable to climb the spirits' road." He noted the confusion on all our faces, even Michael's, and he paused for another puff of smoke.

He took Michael's hand across the table, holding it like it was a fish that might get away. "When this flesh is left behind, only shadows remain. Our inner shadow, shilup, and our outer shadow, our shilombish, can be deceived by a Nalusa Falaya, a being existing entirely of shadows. A Nalusa Falaya can make any man, or woman," he looked at Jamie, "do great harm to others."

I leaned in to catch Mr. Deerson's eye. "So you're saying somebody did this? Somebody killed Mr. Parker and the others? This Nalusa person?"

"Yes and no, August. The Nalusa Falaya are a group of beings, not a person. They're a bit like your Christian demons." I wanted to tell Mr. Deerson that the Christian demons weren't mine, but I didn't want to interrupt. "They're beings of shadow, just like us, but unlike us, they have no substance here on Earth. Sometimes you can see them out of the corner of your eye in the light from a flickering fire." I was suddenly aware of our shadows being cast onto the walls of the kitchen. "Nalusa Falaya must find a human to manipulate if they are to be successful at spreading their evil deeds. They are known to consume a man's will and make him evil, making him deceive and hurt even his closest friends and family members." He said this last bit with considerable gravity.

"You're saying you think Mr. Parker was possessed by one of these things?!" My anxiety made my voice surprisingly loud in the little room.

"I don't make any claims at all, August. I simply fear it may be so. And if it is true, the one that was riding Mr. Parker will be looking for a new host. That's why I wanted you to leave the Parkers' place. So soon after death, Mr.

Parker's outer shadow would most definitely have been lurking about the house and would preoccupy the Nalusa Falaya for a spell, but the creature will eventually start looking for a new roost."

"Wouldn't you be just as susceptible to an attack, father?" asked Michael.

"Only if I were unprepared. That is not the case." He puffed on the pipe as if the smoke would carry his wisdom straight into our minds. "This subject has been discussed at the tribal councils over the last few months. Ever since the disappearances in Twining began. Most recently, I've been asked to return to the tribe and be their medicine man, as my father was before me." Michael's eyes grew wide. I could only imagine what he was thinking. "I've not been called by Aba Binili yet, but these incidents foretell a spiritual storm that I'm not sure I can weather outside of the protection of the tribe." He looked around the table at our obviously frightened faces. If we weren't frightened enough by the killing and the disappearances, now there was a supernatural element to the whole thing too.

"What about the revolver?" I asked. "Why did you have me take Mr. Parker's gun?"

"Objects can hold great spiritual power, August. Mr. Parker's shadow might cling to such a thing if it were kept near the body. As it stands now, it's just a gun. Keep it for the time being and tell no one where it came from."

I sighed my relief and nodded. At least the gun in my room wasn't haunted by Indian spirits. If things got bad, I'd have it for protection so long as I could put my hands on some more ammunition.

"Mr. Deerson," said Jamie, her soft voice piercing my thoughts and sending them far away from the LeMat. "I'm glad you took me in and I respect all that your folks done taught me, but..." She considered her next words carefully. "I don't rightly believe in ghosts or shadow people. I'm not real sure we even got souls. People, I mean. I'm sorry."

"I'm not so sure either," I murmured.

At this, Mr. Deerson smiled broadly. "The truth is never any more the truth for being believed, nor is it any less the truth for being ignored. Whatever the truth may be in

this case, we will learn it in time if we are meant to. In the meantime, I need all three of you to be diligent in your observations of the goings-on around here. If you see or hear anything unusual, no matter how trivial, I want you to come and tell me. Can you all do that?"

We all nodded and Mr. Deerson stood up and crossed to the stove. "Good. Now, who'd like some corn fritters?"



## 6

After dinner, I wandered out to sit on the front stoop with Jamie and Michael, but we didn't talk a whole lot. We were all buried in our own thoughts.

What if Mr. Deerson was right about what was going on? I wasn't usually one to believe in anything supernatural, not even God if I'm to be completely honest, but there was the timbre of truth to Mr. Deerson's statements. Mr. Parker had indeed been outside himself just before his death. I'd chalked it up to the panic he was experiencing after the disappearance of his family, but what if he'd caused those disappearances himself? What if he had been possessed by one of those shadow things and it had kept him from being aware of his own actions? Believe it or not, that was a situation I could relate to.

When I was a child I was prone to sleepwalking. My parents would often wake up to find I'd left the front door open on my way out. After a brief search, they'd always find me. Sometimes I'd be up in the big oak tree out front, or sitting in a wash basin beside the house. Other times I'd be standing out in the moonlight having a conversation with someone who wasn't there. A touch would usually awaken me, but when I did wake up I could never remember doing any of the things my parents said I'd done. That was the part that scared me. What if I'd gone and done something terrible when I was in that state? Was I responsible for those actions even if I didn't know I'd done them? The very idea made Mr. Deerson's theories strangely plausible.

"What do you think, Michael?" I asked, breaking the silence. "Are those things your daddy told us for real?"

"My father thinks so, but the old beliefs... I don't know how much credence I can give them. It's hard being a

Chickasaw on the outside but a white man on the inside. I'm not completely invested in either one."

Jamie smiled. "That's funny. I feel the opposite. Growing up with the tribe planted stuff in my head I can't hardly remember, but it makes me think different than most white folks. Especially different from most girls."

At that moment, I was so proud that I could call these people my friends that I forgot about the horrors of the day and simply clapped my hand on Michael's shoulder and wrung it out like a dishrag, hoping to bring him some comfort in the process. I didn't want to lose him or Jamie to the Chickasaw reservation up north but I didn't think there was a whole lot I could do about it if Mr. Deerson decided to move. Sadly, that would also mean the end of my own living situation in Spruce Rocks.

No matter what supernatural threats were at hand, my concerns were firmly rooted in the practical. At present there wouldn't be any more work from Mr. Parker coming my way, my best friend might be leaving, and I might end up without a home. I'd been uprooted before, of course, but in those cases I'd usually been ready to move on. Not this time. This time I wished everything could just stay the same. The world doesn't work that way, of course, but I couldn't help but wish for it. Before things went crazy with the Parkers, I'd felt happy, but that happiness was looking to be short lived.

We sat together for a while, enjoying the cool night air until we saw Seamus running down the street toward us. Shit, had I told him I'd work tonight? When he got closer I could see that it was something more than my work schedule that was bothering him. The man was in a panic.

"Gus, you seen Creech this evening?" He was panting from his run. No one had ever accused the barkeep of doing too much physical labor.

"Huh?" was all I managed to say while my brain tried to keep up with my ears. 24 hours ago, Mr. Creech had been at the forefront of my thoughts, but a lot had happened since then.

"You know, that Creech fella. The one who came looking for me then put that shit on my house."

"Well, no. I haven't seen him since the other morning at your place." I knew I shouldn't ask but I couldn't help it. "Why?"

"Why?" Seamus turned to acknowledge Jamie and Michael for the first time. "He asks me why, does he?" He turned back to me. "I'm asking you because somebody done painted that sign on the front of my bar. Got some of that God forsaken red paint all over the windows too! Jesus!"

"I'm sorry, Seamus, but we haven't seen anybody tonight. You sure it was him that did it?"

"Am I sure?! Get your head out your ass and come see it, then tell me if you think it wasn't him. Same goddamn sign he painted on my house! Can't be a coincidence now, can it?"

"Alright, I'll walk over with you." I turned to Jamie and Michael. "Ya'll want to go too?"

Michael was already on his feet. "Let's see it," he said as he helped Jamie up.

The three of us tried to keep up with Seamus until he stopped short in front of his business. Scrawled in red paint, across the entire two-story face of the building, was a weird symbol just like Seamus had described. It was clearly visible in the lanterns and moonlight. It might even have been glowing, but that's probably more my imagination than real life. It's how I remember it though. Glowing like it was lit up from the inside.

The design was pretty basic. It was a big arc like an upside down horseshoe, but with hash marks all along both sides and a vertical line up the middle. In the center of it all was a circle with some marks inside it that looked like some kind of writing. I had no idea what it meant, but it seemed vaguely Indian to me so I looked to Michael for an answer.

"It's not Chickasaw," said Michael as he backed up to take in the whole thing. "I reckon it's supposed to be some kind of bird."

Other folks were gathering now, gawking at the symbol and whispering to one another.

"How the hell did somebody get up there to paint it?" asked Jamie. "Didn't nobody see them doing it?"

"You'd think so, missy, but don't none of my neighbors remember anything amiss this evening and the thing wasn't there this afternoon! I swear on my mother's grave, it's the exact same thing Creech drew on my house! I watched that prat draw it with his finger there but it was only a foot tall. Nothing like this!" The night air was getting colder but I could see sweat rolling down Seamus' face. He was scared and it wasn't just the new paintjob that was scaring him.

I pulled him aside and asked him quietly, "So what's Creech's problem with you, Seamus? Why's he after you? Is it money? If you tell me, maybe we can help you out, but if you don't..." I raised my eyebrows, hoping he'd take the bait.

Seamus turned so no one else could hear him then leaned in close enough so that I could smell the stench of whiskey on his breath. "We had us a deal, Creech and me, and I sorta didn't finish paying him off for his part. That's all there is to it."

I sighed. "What was the deal?"

He gave a quick glance around at the gathering crowd to make sure nobody was eavesdropping, then bent in close again. "It ain't nothing, really. I just didn't have the money to pay the man, is all."

"Pay him for what, Seamus?" I was eager to reel in this fish but I was also scared of spooking him off the line.

"It ain't none of your fucking business!" shouted Seamus, and with that he stormed back up to the front door of his bar and turned back to address the crowd.

"Any one of you who wants to wet his or her whistle had better make it quick because the first round's on the house!"

A cheer flew up from the street followed by a stampede into the building. I followed suit and waved for Jamie and Michael to come with me.

"I ain't going in there," said Jamie as she eyed the giant symbol. "That thing gives me the creeps."

Michael said, "Yeah, me too. It's like somebody's trying to curse Seamus."

I laughed, half out of amusement and half out of bravado. "I think you're letting your daddy's talk get to you,

Michael. There's plenty of tips to be had for a piano player in that joint tonight, so I'm heading in." Still, I wasn't entirely sure they were wrong. It seemed to me that it would take several men nigh on an hour or more to get something that big painted, and that's with ladders. And yet no one had seen or heard anything?

Michael and Jamie headed back to the apothecary and I walked into the bar. Once inside, I noticed a distinct heaviness in the air. The place had only just filled with greedy drinkers so it was hard to believe the air could get so stale so quickly. Seamus waved at me and shouted, "Hey, Gus, would you prop them doors open?" I nodded and did as he asked but it didn't help a whole lot. I made my way over to the piano as the crowd was downing that free round Seamus had promised. He might have been crooked but he wasn't stupid. At the very least he knew how to sweep his little problem under the rug for the time being.

I sat down at the piano and before long the crowd was going along with me wherever I wanted to go. I was soaring on the music, letting it lift me to a happier place than the one I'd been in all day. I didn't spare a thought for Mr. Parker who now lay dead on a cold slab up in Twining, nor for his missing family. Despite the stale air and the bottom feeders I was surrounded by, the music grabbed me by my bootstraps and hoisted me onto its shoulders right up until the point when my parched throat told me it was time for a break.

I paused and shouted, "I'll be right back. I just need to put some water in one end and let some out of the other!" I laughed at my own joke and the crowd laughed right along with me, but I suddenly felt like somebody was sitting on my chest. It hurt to breathe and each breath felt as if it were drawing in less and less air. I hear tell that's what a heart ailment feels like but, bless my stars, I haven't had that particular horror visited on me just yet.

I walked out onto the sidewalk to get some fresh air and the second I crossed the threshold the temperature dropped a good twenty degrees. I walked into the street and turned to see something I'll never forget.

The doorway into Seamus' place was standing wide open, just how I'd left it, and a haze was clearly visible inside. It was even more dense than the cigar and pipe smoke that often accompanied a busy Saturday night. The air itself was thick and the cloud ended in the doorway I'd just walked out of, hanging there like a curtain. Where I stood the air was fresh and clear. There was even a cool evening breeze, but that haze wasn't affected by it. Now that I think back on it, I believe that even a tornado wouldn't have been able to move that thick air around. It was locked onto Seamus' place and it didn't look like it was going to dissipate anytime soon.

I was standing there, gawking, when a loud scream rang out from within the bar and everyone inside went silent. It was Marchand, an old Frenchman who'd ended up in Spruce Rocks after his quest for gold out west had turned up little more than sweat and heartache. He was leaning over the bar, shouting something in French, but despite my curiosity I was unwilling to go back inside. I watched through the doorway as several men went behind the bar and roused Seamus to his feet. He must have passed out, an act which, while not a frequent occurrence, wasn't completely unheard of. I was turning back to the street when the Frenchman shouted, "Son visage!" Now, I don't know a whole lot of French, but I knew enough to take a closer look at Seamus' face. I could see that the crowd was backing away from the bar instead of rushing toward it. Most accidents drew a crowd. It was a heinous one indeed that drove folks away. When I finally caught a glimpse of Seamus' face, I saw that it looked exactly like Mr. Parkers had after he'd shot himself! But I hadn't heard a shot, and I knew that Seamus didn't keep a gun behind the bar. It was getting hard to breathe again.

I fell onto my ass right there on the sidewalk and slid backwards into the street as the quiet terror inside the bar quickly turned into a frenzy. Folks who had no idea how to render aid were crawling over the bar and examining the body. It was nothing more than an object now because the man I knew as Seamus was long gone. While several of the

men tried to revive him, several others reached over the bar to relieve the dead barkeep of several quarts of his estate.

Working in places like that over the years, I'd learned just how fickle a crowd of drunks could be. One moment they were laughing uproariously and the next they were at each others' throats, all because of somebody's clumsy verbal misstep. Drunks are the lowest of the low if you ask me. They're capable of practically anything because their whole word view narrows to the size of a needle's eye, and the only thing that can get through it is their next drink.

Within five minutes, the scene inside the barroom devolved into a mass of bodies whose movements were punctuated with punches and screams. Supernatural or not, whatever took Seamus was spreading to the rest of the people inside. They were at each other's throats like wild dogs. Two of the Owens brothers were just inside the doorway pummeling each other with broken bottles! While the Owens were an uneducated group of ne'er-do-wells if I ever saw one, they always stuck together. You'd never so much as hear an argument between two of them, and here they were cutting each others' faces off! I watched as Mitchell Owens dug the broken end of a whisky bottle into his brother's nose until it disappeared in a mash of red gristle. Blood ran down into the young man's mouth as he grappled with his brother, gouging out his eyes with his thumbs. What the hell was going on? The whole bar had turned into a bloodbath that would rival the gladiatorial games I'd read about as a kid, and not a single one of the participants was trying to escape. Instead, they were all hunkered down, ready to fight one another off until no one was left standing.

Those folks needed help. Nobody else was out on the street at that hour, so I ran to the apothecary. Grabbing the handle, I found that the front door was locked. Why? With everyone at home it really wasn't necessary. I fumbled in my pockets but I couldn't find my key. I shouted through the door, "Michael?! Michael, you in there? Mr. Deerson!" I was about to shout again when Michael and Jamie came walking around the back corner of the house.

"What're you yelling for, Gus? You're going to wake my daddy up," whispered Michael.

"Good! We need him. The folks over at the bar have gone crazy. It's a fucked up mess of fights over there and I think it's got something to do with..." *With what?*, I thought. Was I really about to tell my best friend that some evil spirit had come to our town? I didn't really believe it, but the evidence at hand sure made me think it was a possibility. After all, something had made those people in the bar go crazy, and something had killed Seamus.

A loud scream pierced the night and we turned to see smoke and flames rising into the air from the next street over. Those assholes had set Seamus' place on fire!

Michael quickly unlocked the apothecary and yelled for his father to come outside. Mr. Deerson was there in a flash and he dispatched Michael to the neighbors' to see who he could rouse. By the time we made it back to Seamus' bar, the building was completely engulfed in flames. Mr. Whittaker, the old guy who ran the dry goods store next door, was busy organizing a bucket brigade. They wouldn't be able to put the fire out since it was way beyond dousing at that point, but they might be able to wet down the neighboring buildings so they wouldn't catch fire too.

The whole town pitched in as best we could and somehow we kept the surrounding buildings from burning. There were some singed shingles and the dry goods store lost a couple of windows when the side of the bar collapsed, but the damage was kept to a minimum. I looked at the burning rubble and it scared me to think that I could have been trapped in there myself. How many people had been killed? Probably a dozen or more. That doesn't sound like a lot these days, but a dozen people in a small town like Spruce Rocks was a considerable chunk of the population.

Once we knew the other buildings were safe, Michael and Jamie and I sat down for a rest, but I'd lost track of Mr. Deerson in the frenzy. Sometime near the first light of day, I saw him again. He was across the street from the bar drawing something in the dirt and chanting. He must have gone back home to get his things because he'd laid out several objects and was holding others while singing quietly and bobbing his head up and down.



I leaned over to Michael and asked, "What's he doing?"

"I'm not sure," said Michael. "Probably trying to talk the shadow people into leaving this place." Was he serious? He sure looked like it. "Gus," he added, "I don't believe everything my father believes, but sometimes there's no other explanation, you know?"

I nodded, thinking back on everything that had happened that night. Like most folks, I'd prefer to think of myself as a good person, but sometimes my emotions got the better of me and the strongest one—the one that always made me do regrettable things—was jealousy. At that moment, standing in the street surrounded by the remains of Seamus' bar and smelling like smoke, I flashed back to the night before and the fact that Michael and Jamie had been out back behind the apothecary when I'd come looking for Mr. Deerson. Maybe it was because I was tired or maybe it was the influence of evil spirits, but whatever the cause, a little part of me snapped like a twig in the underbrush and I let that jealousy take root.

Ignoring Michael's statement, I launched in at him. "And just what the hell were you doing with Jamie last night when I came home? You two kissing out in the stable or what?!" Fortunately, Jamie was out of earshot when this nasty tidbit came tumbling out of my mouth.

Michael stood up, looked me square in the eye, and said, "We went out to check on the horses because they were acting up and making a bunch of noise." He looked through me in that way that only a very close friend can. "Gus, I'm going to chalk this up to lack of sleep and the craziness you've seen over the last day or so. If you'd care to make a bigger fool out of yourself, you're welcome to go ahead and do so, but I'm not going to stand here and listen to it."

He turned his back on me and walked through the alley back toward the apothecary just as Jamie wandered over. "What's wrong with him?" she asked as she tried in vain to clean the dirt off her face. Even covered in ash, she was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen.

"He's just tired," I lied. "He's heading home to clean up."

She yawned. "We should go too." She nodded at the crowd in the street. "They got this under control 'til the law from Twining gets here and pulls them bodies out. How many you think there is?"

"I figure at least twelve or thirteen."

"Jesus!" she muttered, then she did the most girly thing I'd ever seen her do. She started crying.

By the time we got cleaned up most of the morning was gone but we still tried to get some sleep anyway. I don't know how the others were doing, but I couldn't nod off. I had Seamus' bloody face on my mind. It was just too much like Mr. Parker's for it to have been a coincidence. Was it possible that Mr. Deerson's shadow people really had done these things? If so, what did Mr. Creech have to do with all of it?

The longer I lay there thinking about it, the more something nagged at the back of my mind like an itch in a place that I couldn't reach. There was some detail that didn't quite add up but I couldn't put my finger on it. If Mr. Parker had shot himself in the face with the LeMat shotgun, how had Seamus managed to do the same damage without a weapon? He didn't even own a gun as far as I knew, but both their faces looked exactly the same.

Then it hit me. I sat up in bed and looked over at the drawer where I'd hidden the LeMat. Was it possible? There was only one way to know for sure.

I removed the revolver from its hiding place in my chifferobe and felt its cold weight in my hand. The hammer pulled back easy enough so I could look at the tiny metal nipples that held the percussion caps. On that old pistol there was a flip up hammer that you could set to one of two positions. One allowed you to shoot the bullets in the chamber and the other one triggered the tiny shotgun underneath the main barrel. None of the caps were present so I dug around for the ones I'd removed the previous morning. One, two, three, four...ten caps! I was right! I'd removed all of the caps, even the one from the shotgun nipple. Probably did it without even noticing that it went to the shotgun. Still, there was one more thing to check.

I turned the pistol over and in spite of my better judgment, I stared down into the shotgun barrel. It sure looked like it was loaded but there was one way to be sure. I put the cap back on the shotgun nipple, forcing it down hard, and I pulled on my pants, hefting the heavy suspenders over my bare shoulders. I strode out back behind the horse shed and once I was far enough away to be sure I wouldn't wake anyone, I flipped the hammer back and pulled the trigger.

The grapeshot blast damn near knocked my shoulder out of its socket because, deep down, I hadn't expected it to fire. Thinking back on it now, I'm just grateful I didn't lose a toe.

"So, you see that it wasn't your fault after all," said Mr. Deerson from right behind me.

I whirled around, only slightly startled. After the tremendous noise produced by the LeMat, Mr. Deerson's voice was hardly a whisper.

"Mr. Deerson, I have to tell you that I don't believe in devils or shadow people or whatever it is you think might be causing all of this." I looked him in the eye when I said it. Even at that age, I knew enough to deliver the bad news front and center.

Mr. Deerson smiled slightly and said, "That's okay, August. Many Chickasaw didn't believe in white men until they were rousting them out of their homes with fire sticks like the one you're holding now. I still know one or two who think you're all apparitions, here at the bidding of the soul eater. We each believe what we want, but when the time comes to act you must always trust two things: your eyes and your heart. If you can do that without falling back on what you think or believe, you will always emerge victorious whether the threat is physical or spiritual."

I didn't really understand what he was talking about—I rarely did—but his words were comforting all the same.

"You want me to take care of that weapon for you? It could use a good cleaning," he said.

I drew back a bit, suddenly feeling protective of the old gun. "No, that's okay. I'll take care of it."

"As you wish," said Mr. Deerson, clapping me on my bare shoulder with a rough hand. "Why don't we go in and work up some breakfast? I expect Michael and Jamie will be up soon enough."

I nodded, bristling slightly at the mention of their names together like that. I wasn't used to feeling jealous and was surprised by how easily the emotion had taken root. On our walk back to the apothecary, I vowed to try and do better. After all, Michael was the least of my worries what with a crazed shadow demon killing folks in the area. I chuckled and Mr. Deerson stopped to look me up and down. Then he smiled too and opened the back door for me.

After breakfast, Mr. Deerson opened the store to a rush of business. It's funny how people choose to believe in certain things when they get scared. Most of the people of Spruce Rocks were Christian, but a little Indian medicine never hurt when confronted by things they didn't understand.

Michael, Jamie, and me walked back to take in what was left of Seamus' bar and we arrived just in time to see the last of the bodies being loaded up for the journey to Twining. I figured it was Mr. Gleason's body since his wife was in hysterics near the back of the wagon. The Twining lawmen were having to hold her back while their cohorts loaded the covered form.

One of the deputies noticed us watching so he waved us over. Funny how the folks with the power never come to you. They learn pretty quickly that they can make you go to them.

"You young folks see any of this last night?" asked the deputy. I nodded. "You want to tell me what you saw?"

"Not really, sir," I said. "Didn't some other folks already give you an earful?"

"Yeah, they did. I just need to hear it from everybody that was here. It helps us fill in the blanks." I hesitated for a moment and the deputy's persuasive prowess reared its ugly head. He punched me in the shoulder and said, "Don't be a pussy about it, boy!"

I immediately glanced over at Jamie, then back at the deputy. Up close, he looked more like a miner than Johnny Law. He was stooped over as if the weight of his big, waxed moustache was dragging his face toward the Earth.

"I don't much cotton to how you're speaking in front of this lady," I said, indicating Jamie.

The deputy stood up a bit straighter and squinted his eyes in Jamie's direction. Just what we needed—a blind lawman.

"Oh, I'm sorry ma'am. My mistake. I didn't mean to say anything to offend you," said the Deputy. Jamie just gave him her iciest stare. The deputy didn't notice so he turned back to me. "So, you were saying?"

"If you're going to insist, I'll tell you what I saw, but I ain't going to do it out here in the street."

The deputy nodded, now a little off his guard because of his mistake with Jamie. "That'll do. How about we step over to the sidewalk and you tell me in private?"

"Alright," I said and I followed him over to what was left of the bar's sidewalk. The building was completely gone, save for the chimney and the big pot bellied stove I used to warm my hands at during cold nights spent playing the piano.

It didn't take long for me to tell my tale. Deputy Moustache nodded now and again, but he didn't take any notes. At first that made me mad, but then I figured he'd heard all the details before from other folks. It was only when I reached the part about the people inside the bar tearing each other apart that his eyes widened.

"Say what, now?" he asked, so I told him again. "Stay there. I'll be right back," he said and he ran over to the wagon that was about to take the dead on their final journey. He returned directly with a short, pasty man who appeared to be made of white taffy.

"Boy, this is..."

"My name's August Brumbelow, not 'boy'," I interrupted.

"Um, right." The presence of the taffy man definitely had Deputy Moustache on his best behavior. "This here is Sheriff Hays. Will you tell him what you just told me?"

I went through it again, and the sheriff listened attentively and quietly until I was through.

"So you're saying something was keeping those people inside that bar and at each other's throats?" he asked, not as skeptically as I had expected.

"I'm not saying any such thing," I said. "That's just what it looked like from out here. When I left I didn't have any problem walking through the front door myself."

"What's that now?" asked the sheriff. "Were you inside there when this started?"

"Of course. I'm the piano player here. I mean I *was*."

The deputy looked troubled but he stayed quiet and looked to Hays for guidance. The sheriff was antsy but he gave no indication as to why. He lowered his voice and leaned in close. "Son, as far as I can tell from what other folks have said, you're the only one who got out of there alive last night. Did you know that?"

"No, sir. But I thought... Marchand didn't get out? I was sure I saw him..."

The sheriff pointed at the wagon. "He's in there with the others, son, or so I'm told. Won't know for sure 'til the doctor up in Twining takes a look, but it appears he was burned to death."

I stood there aghast. Did any of this mean anything or was it just a random series of events? The sheriff and his deputy were conversing, so I started walking back toward Michael and Jamie. I caught Jamie's eye just as the sheriff tapped me on the shoulder with a doughy finger.

"Hang on a minute, son. You live around here?"

"Yes, sir. I live at the Deerson's place. Got a room in the back."

The deputy leaned in and whispered something to the sheriff before the taffy man continued. "We might need to ask you some more questions, but for the time being we got to get these corpses up to the doctor before they rot."

I nodded, but I knew that I'd never see that man or Deputy Moustache in our town again. Both men's eyes revealed a deep set fear that betrayed their real motivations. They wanted to get as far away from Spruce Rocks as they could, and they wanted it right fucking now.

The sheriff mounted his horse, a creature for whom I felt great pity that day, and led the wagon out of town at a pretty good clip. I watched the dust rise and fall in their wake and walked over to where Jamie and Michael were leaning against a hitching post.

"What'd they want?" asked Jamie.

"Mostly, they just wanted to get the hell out of here. They know more than they're letting on."

"You told them what happened?"

"More or less. I left out a few parts, though. Like the way Seamus died." Saying it out loud like that convinced me that my friend's death was real. He'd died. Dead. Never to be seen again, just like Mr. Parker. It hadn't been a very good day for friends of August Brumbelow.

"What about Seamus, Gus?" It was Michael's turn to ask questions.

"I saw him right after he collapsed. Marchand hauled him to his feet and said something about Seamus' face so I looked right into his eyes. Sure enough, his face was a bloody mess, just like Mr. Parker's had been when we found him. I'd assumed Mr. Parker had shot himself with that LeMat shotgun but I tested it this morning and found out it was still loaded. Something else did that to Mr. Parker and whatever it was, it did the same thing to Seamus in a room full of people."

I wasn't getting worked up or anything, but I could feel a flutter in my stomach and a lightness in my head that told me I should be frightened. Jamie reached over and took my hand and then took Michael's as well. Damn it.

Michael looked at Jamie and said, "I guess bringing you here might not have been such a good idea after all."

"Oh, I don't know. At least it ain't dull here." She squeezed my hand when she said it and I couldn't help but wonder if she'd squeezed Michael's too.

We stood around for a while, talking about what we ought to do next but none of us had a clue. Jamie decided her lack of sleep was catching up with her, so she went back home for a nap while Michael and I remained to keep watch over the skeletal remains of the building.



After we'd finally tired of telling passersby about what had happened, I got a wild hair. "I'll be right back," I said and I took off for Seamus' ruined building before I lost my nerve.

"What is it, Gus?" shouted Michael, but I ignored him. I just needed to do one thing.

I carefully picked my way through the ruins of the bar to get to the place where the piano had once stood. The floor there was mostly gone and the rest of the bar was unrecognizable, but there were things that I could identify as parts from the piano. The keys were gone, of course, their ivory turned to powder by the intense heat, and the wooden body had been completely consumed by the fire, but the cast iron frame was still there, leaning against some burnt timbers as if it had never been anything more than a piece of trash. I tried to rub the soot off the frame before I realized that it wasn't soot at all. The fire had burned the gold paint off leaving only the black iron underneath. On the floor were a few of the heartier strings, so I picked one up and coiled it around itself before pocketing it. I don't know what I expected to do with a burnt piano string, but I felt like I wanted a memento of the instrument. That mechanism had soothed my soul on many occasions, and as I thought back on some of them, I realized that piano was yet another friend that I had lost.

I climbed back out of the rubble and saw a glimmer of understanding in Michael's eyes. "I'm sorry, Gus. I know how much you loved that piano. I didn't even think of that until now. What'll you play? There isn't another piano this side of Twining."

What would I do? How could I live without a piano in my life? I had no idea, but I didn't think it'd do my soul any good to wallow in sorrows. I shrugged, "Guess I'll get better at the guitar."

Michael smiled and clapped me on the shoulder, but he didn't say any more. I didn't much feel like talking either so we took up a position across the street and watched as some of the locals worked to take down what was left of the building. Whenever asked, we pitched in, of course, but those farmers were used to raising barns and they had the

process down pat. I can't say that I'd ever been to a barn lowering before, though.

By early afternoon, the biggest timbers were on the ground so we helped load up the debris. One of the farmers jokingly asked if I wanted the piano frame and I was surprised at myself when I told him that I did. He and several others helped me take it back to the apothecary where we leaned it against the back of the horse shed. While I knew it would rust away back there, I felt better knowing that the piano had been laid to rest by someone who'd truly appreciated it.

I invited the three farmers inside for lunch, seeing as how we all had to eat and most of them were a long way from home. I was afraid they might want me to tell them about what had happened last night, but either they didn't know I'd been there or they didn't care. I'd learned from folks like Mr. Parker that when you fought hard to eek your living out of the land every day, other folks' struggles just didn't seem to matter so much.

Jamie remained absent throughout our meal, but Mr. Deerson was a generous host. He even went so far as to give each of the men a fresh cigar from his stock. I noticed none of them smoked them, though. They preferred to take them in later when they could truly relax.

We were all heading out to finish the job at hand when Mr. Deerson pulled Michael and me aside.

"Make sure you're back here in time for supper. Tomorrow we're going to ride up to the reservation. I'm not sure how long you'll be staying there, so pack up whatever you think you might need after you get home tonight."

"You're not going to be staying up there with us?" asked Michael.

"For a spell, but I'll have to come back here to tend to the store. Now, go on."

He rushed us out the door but Michael and I were both troubled by this new turn of events.

"I don't much like the idea of hiding," I said. "If this really is some spooky dooky thingamabob, I don't think we could hide from it anyway."

Michael didn't look at me as we walked. "We won't be hiding. My father thinks the tribe's medicine can protect us. I hope he's right."

## 8

After supper, both Michael and I were too tired to confront Mr. Deerson about his plan to take us to the reservation. We both went to bed early while Jamie and Mr. Deerson played cards by lantern light.

I slept like a corpse, but when I awoke early the next morning, I was jarred by the dream I'd had. In it, I was living in a cabin under a rainbow that could only be seen at night. The rainbow glimmered with a silvery light and acted as a shield against anyone who might do me harm. I don't know how I knew this, but in the dream I didn't question it. I looked up and saw a beast that looked like a giant horse with a bear's head stomping away at my rainbow, breaking off big pieces of it and dropping them on top of me. I stayed put, confident that my shield would endure, but just as the horse-bear was about to collapse the rainbow entirely, a freaky little man peeked out from behind my cabin. In the light from the rainbow I could see that his face was a bright red skull. He was smiling, but then again what choice did he have without any lips? He whispered to me in a hissing staccato, "Don't you know you're dead, boyo? You're mine." That was when I woke up.

It took me a while, but I was eventually able to take a mental inventory of everything that had happened over the last couple of days and reassure myself that my little room at Deerson's apothecary was indeed the real world. It was still dark out so I decided to go ahead and feed the horses and stoke the wood stove in the kitchen. When I was done, I went out back to wash my face and hands. As I stood there in the gathering dawn, my face and hands dripping with freezing cold water, I noticed that there was a silence in the air. It felt strange. Unnatural. I looked around, but all I could see were the usual things. I could hear the horses moving

around in the stable but that was all I heard. After a moment I realized that the silence *was* the problem. There were no birds out and about. It was autumn but it wasn't too late for the birds, especially crows. Where the hell were they?

I backed up and ran right into Mr. Deerson. He'd been standing on the back steps. "The birds have left us," he said. "This is bad. We have to get moving."

"Mr. Deerson," I said, "if you really believe all the crazy things that have been happening around here are due to evil spirits, how will taking us to the reservation help? Won't those spirits be able to find us there too?"

Mr. Deerson sighed. When he turned to look at me, I could see that he hadn't slept much. His eyes were red and puffy and their glassy surfaces reflected the sunlight as it peeked over the hills to the east. "Maybe, August. But spirits such as these need to be grounded—fixed in place by something or somebody. They can't just flit around anywhere they choose. Think of them like men riding horses. We couldn't just ride off in any direction for as long as we liked. The horses need to be fed and watered along the way. Evil is much like this, only it doesn't feed on hay and water." He looked up at the sun and gauged the time of day. "Now, get inside and eat your breakfast."

I nodded and headed up the steps, but Mr. Deerson pulled me back again. He leaned in and whispered, "And don't forget to load that LeMat and bring it along. I'll give you some fresh ammunition after we eat." With that he nudged me on up the steps and into the warmth of the house.

An hour later, the four of us were packed and ready to go. We only had three horses, so we took turns doubling up so as not to tire any one of them out too quickly. Jamie was the lightest so she was forced to switch from horse to horse every time we stopped to take a break. I can honestly say that I thought very little of evil spirits during the time when she was seated behind me with her arms around my chest. It wouldn't have been considered ladylike for her to do such a thing under normal circumstances, but this trip was far from normal.

Mr. Deerson thought we could make the journey inside of two days if the weather held, so we stopped at nightfall and made camp near a small brook. Maybe I was being hyper-sensitive, but I would have sworn that the horses had gotten less antsy as we'd gotten farther away from Spruce Rocks. I unsaddled them and made sure they had plenty to eat while the others started working on our campfire and dinner.

Standing alone with the horses, I reflected on the fact that I often felt like an outsider. Watching Jamie and the Deersons building our fire, I began to fall into those thoughts that night, but I was startled out of it by Shunahoya. She nuzzled me, probably hoping for a carrot.

"Sorry, girl. Maybe they'll have some carrots for you at the reservation." She seemed to understand that she wasn't going to get a treat but she continued to listen. Horses are good listeners. "I'm a little scared of the reservation, myself," I continued, "but you? You'll fit right in." I smiled and Shunahoya nuzzled my shoulder. I guess I wasn't alone after all.

After a supper of beans and leftover biscuits from breakfast, I was ready to lay out my bed roll. I did so, upwind of the fire and lay down, wishing I could snuggle up with Jamie.

"That's a good idea," said Jamie as she brushed away some sticks and rocks and laid her bed out right near my own. Michael did the same but Mr. Deerson was nowhere to be seen.

"He's laying out our protection for the night," said Michael when he noticed me scanning the horizon for his missing father. "He'll be back directly."

I was curious, but something stopped me from asking what the hell that meant. I figured it was more Indian mumbo jumbo. Now, I don't say that to denigrate anyone's beliefs, especially not those who I loved like family, but when you didn't grow up in that world it can be extremely tiring to hear about it all the time. Lord knows I wasn't a good Christian, but at least I had the benefit of knowing the ins and outs of Jesus and his disciples. When it came to mountain spirits and such as that, I was in uncharted

territory and it never failed to make me uneasy. Thinking back on it now, I realize that their beliefs were probably better than those of white folks in a lot of ways. Theirs taught them to treat the natural world with respect, but at the time the medicine bags and chants and stuff unsettled me.

Jamie laid her head down on a rolled up blanket and stared at the fire. I looked at her face in the firelight and it was all I could do not to lean over and plant a kiss on her lips. I didn't do it because it would have surely injected extra stress into an already difficult journey, but I sure wanted to.

"Reckon we'll make it to the reservation tomorrow?" asked Michael. It was as if he could read my thoughts and hear my unspoken plea for distraction from the nape of Jamie's neck.

"If what your daddy said is right, we will. Sky's clear as a bell," I replied, looking up at the stars. The milky way was clearly visible, cutting a bright path through the darkness overhead.

"I miss laying out like this," said Jamie. "When I lived on the reservation, we'd lay out on some high rocks until it felt like the Earth was falling away and we was flying off between them stars." She giggled, a first that showed she was finally letting her guard down a bit. Or maybe she was just tired. "I used to imagine I was a hawk what could fly up and up forever 'til I touched them stars with the tips of my wings. That's pretty silly, huh?"

"I don't think so," I said a little too quickly. "I think it just shows you've got a good heart and a vivid imagination." I could feel my face get hot and I knew I was blushing, but I hoped it didn't show in the firelight.

After that we all settled down. Our mood crackled in silence just like the fire. I was dozing off when Mr. Deerson returned. I looked over and he was suddenly just there, laid out on his bed roll as if he'd never left.

"Restless night tonight," he said matter-of-factly before he looked over at me. "It's too bad about your piano, August. My spirit could certainly use a song or two right about now."

"It wasn't my piano," I replied. "It belonged to Seamus, God rest his soul."

"Ownership has very little to do with money and deeds and such. It has more to do with your heart. That piano was yours because you're the one who breathed life into it. It became an extension of you."

I propped myself up on one elbow and looked over at the old man. For the life of me, I couldn't remember a time when he'd set foot inside Seamus' place. "Come on," I said. "You never even heard me play."

"You're so certain?" He turned to his son. "What say you, Michael?"

Michael was grinning so I knew something was up. "My father loves the music of Beethoven. Every time you went to Seamus' in the morning, he'd ask me to watch the store so he could sit on the stoop and listen to you play. You didn't know he was there?"

I shook my head, mesmerized by the idea that someone I respected so much could get such pleasure from something I'd done.

Without looking in my direction, Mr. Deerson reached out and stirred the fire sending showers of sparks skyward. "You were getting quite good. Beethoven isn't easy to play. You still rush things a bit and that piano was never in tune, but I appreciate what you could do in spite of the limitations of your tools. Like I said before, you breathed life into that piano. I'll sincerely miss hearing you play."

While I was flattered, there was something else Mr. Deerson's revelation brought to mind. "Were you outside that morning when Mr. Creech came by looking for Seamus?"

Michael shifted positions and he met his father's eyes. Was there something they weren't telling me?

"I understand you were asking Michael about Creech." Just Creech. No Mr.

"That's right." Maybe I'd finally get some answers.

"Well, I'd advise you to let that go. I've told Michael the same and I'll tell you too, Jamie. Don't mention his name or think of him again if you can help it. We'll all be better off that way."



I wanted to know what was going on so badly that it hurt, so I was willing to cross Mr. Deerson's line in the sand. "He visited Seamus that morning and painted a symbol on his house. Seamus said it looked like a bird. It was the same one that was on the..."

"Let it go, son," interrupted Mr. Deerson. "You may not take heed of my words, but I'll not have you endangering us out here with any more of that talk."

I looked over at Mr. Deerson, suddenly afraid that I'd gone too far, but his face was as placid as ever.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Deerson. I just..."

"No apologies are necessary, August. You're a young man and your curiosity's been piqued. Curiosity can be a good thing sometimes, but in this case it could very well get us all killed." And with those words of warning, he laid back and settled in for the night.

I looked over at Michael and Jamie just in time to see Jamie mouth the words 'what the fuck' and that made me chuckle.

"And you shouldn't use words like that if you ever want to find a husband, young lady," said Mr. Deerson, even though I was pretty sure his back had been turned toward us when Jamie had mouthed the word in question. It was enough food for thought to make us all shut up and settle down for the night.

Daybreak came late due to the thick clouds that had rolled in overnight. The overcast skies seemed to bother Mr. Deerson but I was happy for the cool air they provided. It didn't take long for us to pack up our camp and get on our way again, but the events of the night before left us all in silent contemplation.

We rode along quietly until the weather turned and the rain made us stop to don our ponchos. I was never all that fond of my hat, but I was glad that I had it then.

The rain brought out those musty odors that the land usually hid from our human noses. Those smells soon mixed with the smell of wet horse hair to create a unique bouquet. While many people would call the smell offensive, it was somewhat nostalgic for me and it brought to mind my ride from Atlanta to Spruce Rocks. Thinking about that trip made me wish I'd brought my guitar, but I knew better. The rain might've finished up that old beater of an instrument for good.

The rocky hills lay ahead of us but they seemed to be pulling away instead of getting closer. The rain eventually stopped near nightfall and we saw the first signs of life among those rocks. Several campfires sprang to life and illuminated the surrounding stone walls. It was the reservation.

Mr. Deerson stopped Shunahoya and stared up at those hills. "We could make it there tonight," he said, "but mud and darkness can be a bad combination. I'm not sure we should risk the horses."

"Sparks here is definitely wheezing," I said. "I don't think the damp air has been kind to him." I leaned over and patted his neck and he repaid me by shaking the rainwater out of his mane and all over me. At least Jamie got a good

laugh out of it. I looked around at our little band of sewer rats and figured I knew why Mr. Deerson wanted to keep going. All of us would have enjoyed a dry bed.

"Well, maybe it won't hurt to bed down," said Mr. Deerson. "We're near that old shelter aren't we, Michael?"

Michael nodded and pointed off to the right of the trail we were on. "Yes, sir. There's a creek down there too." He looked back at me and explained, "We used to hunt and fish around here when I was little."

I nodded, and nudged Sparks to follow Michael's horse into the underbrush. There were some big boulders out there that were as big as houses and one of them had a thatched roof attached to one side. It was the shelter Mr. Deerson had asked about, but there was much more to it than I'd expected. First off, it was huge. The roof covered an area the size of two covered wagons and the ground there was slightly raised so that any ground water would naturally flow away from where we'd sleep. It was a little ways off the path, but it was worth the detour.

I gathered what little dry wood I could find while Michael took his turn tending to the horses. I was coming back around the boulder that was the rear wall of the shelter when I nearly ran into Jamie. She'd been carrying wood too, so twigs and dead branches went flying in all directions.

"Jeee-zus shit, you scared me!" said Jamie.

I laughed nervously, very aware that the two of us were alone with one another for the first time. "Me too," I said. "I mean you scared me too." She tried to pick up the wood she'd dropped, but ended up stumbling over the twigs and landing right in my arms. I caught her and wrapped my arms around her lithe frame to keep her from falling. I was overly aware of her supple breasts pressing against me as she tried to stand up, but I didn't let go. I'd been waiting for an opportunity like that. Maybe she had too. At any rate, I wasn't exactly thinking when my mouth found hers and we kissed for the first time. Since we had both just spent a couple of days on horses out in the rain, you might think that we'd have been repulsed by one another, but I don't think either of us minded the smell one bit. We relaxed into one another's arms and knocked our hats off in the process! I can

honestly say that it was my first time kissing anyone who was wearing a man's hat.

We both laughed and I stooped to pick the hats up. I handed hers to her and smiled while looking into those deep blue eyes. She smiled back. Jamie, the girl who could curse better than any sailor I ever met on the docks in Savannah, was actually blushing. I leaned in to see if I might be able to steal another kiss when I heard Michael calling my name and both of us wiped at our lips and commenced to pick up all of the wood we'd gathered. We went back to the camp, approaching from opposite sides of the rock, and dumped the wood next to the fire.

I sat down next to Michael and Jamie did the same on the other side. It took all the effort I could muster not to look over at her, so I looked up at the bemused face of Mr. Deerson.

"I see you found some mighty good hardwood there," he said while looking at me, then he grinned. "That ought to last a while." I didn't realize it at the time, but he was making a dirty joke of sorts at my expense. I don't doubt that I was sporting a hard-on, but I don't think I ever considered that anyone else might have noticed. Least of all, Mr. Deerson!

I mumbled something about the horses and Michael answered me but I didn't really hear him. My mind had been struck dumb by the tingle I could still feel on my lips.

We had more beans for supper, but there was the added treat of corn bread that Mr. Deerson cooked up in his old frying pan. The good food settled in my stomach and made me feel just how tired I was.

Michael and I took the pots and utensils down to the creek to wash them off while Jamie unpacked our bedrolls. We were doing some pretty good washing in that frigid water when Michael got a twinkle in his eye and started in with the questions. "So, what exactly happened when ya'll were gathering that firewood?"

"Nothing," I said, still thinking that I had a secret. "Why're you making such a big deal about it?"

"No reason," said Michael. Then, after a good long pause, he added, "But both of ya'll were red as beets when ya'll came marching around that rock. In unison, at that."

"Probably just got our blood up out there. Exercise'll do that to you, you know. If you got off your ass from time to time, you might learn a thing or two about that yourself!" I knew my reaction was too much and that it gave away my position too quickly but I was on the defensive and not entirely thinking straight.

"Uh-huh," said Michael with a grin. "You mean to tell me ya'll weren't kissing back there behind that big rock?"

"What?! Where the hell...you go and..." I said some words but I couldn't form them into a sentence to save my soul. Why didn't I just tell him the truth? I was afraid of driving a wedge between us. We'd been friends pretty much from the moment that I'd arrived at Spruce Rocks and it had always been an easy friendship to maintain. One that wasn't forced. When we sat out on the sidewalk after supper, if neither of us had anything to say, we could just sit there for hours and not talk. Say what you will about conversation, it's the people you don't feel obligated to talk to who are your true friends.

I could see that Michael's feelings were getting hurt by what he assumed was my lack of trust, so I broke down and told him what had happened. I thought he might get mad, but instead he punched me in the shoulder and laughed.

"I'm glad you finally got that over with! Now I won't have to listen to Jamie go on and on with 'Do you think he likes me?' and 'Why don't you ask him, Michael?' That was getting a little tiresome."

Michael seemed genuinely happy for me, but I was still nervous about the whole deal. "You sure you don't mind?" I asked him. "I mean, she's your friend and all." I wanted to say so much more. About how much I cared for him and how much I enjoyed his company, but those words didn't come easily between two men, even young ones.

"Mind? Who am I to mind? Gus, you're both like siblings I never had. What could be better?"

"I just thought maybe you were interested in her yourself, despite what you said before. You've got to admit, ya'll are awfully friendly at times." *So much so that it had made me crazy on occasion*, I thought, but I kept that part to myself.

"It's not like that, Gus. Like I said, she's more like a sister to me. I couldn't even imagine us being together like that."

We both fell quiet and finished up the washing, then we gathered up the clean cookware and walked over to check on the horses before returning to camp. Life was so complicated between people. There were so many ways to misunderstand folks and very few ways that you could get a good glimpse of what they were really thinking. Sometimes I thought I would have been better off as a horse.

We hiked back to camp and hung up the cookware to dry, then, when we went to bed down, we noticed that some rearranging had taken place in our absence. Mr. Deerson was relaxing in the same spot he'd occupied before, but Jamie's bedroll was now between Michael's and mine. I immediately looked to Mr. Deerson.

"Don't you make me regret it, children. I just don't want it said that this old man didn't do his part when it came to the only thing that really matters on this Earth." And with that, he rolled over and pulled his blanket over his back.

What with the restlessness of the night before, I'd expected to sleep soundly on this night, but that wasn't to be. Jamie and I slept head to head, with Michael down by her feet, forming a horseshoe around the campfire. We looked at each other off and on and stared into the eyes of the fire, but our hands stayed locked together all night long. I longed to kiss those fingertips, but I didn't dare budge lest Mr. Deerson thought we were up to something. I was like a blind man, taking in the whole of Jamie's being through that tiny bit of contact. We hardly slept a wink.

The next morning revealed a day that was still obscured by cloud cover, but Jamie and I didn't mind. It was as if a large reserve of energy had been uncorked in both of us. I felt like I could stay up for days as long as she stayed next to me.

"Alright, lovebirds," said Mr. Deerson with a smile. "Let's break camp and get on home." Many years had passed since he'd lived with the tribe, but he still thought of them as his home. Not the place—the people. "If we make it in there by midday, I might head on back to Spruce Rocks this evening instead of waiting 'til tomorrow."

"You're not even staying the night?" asked Michael with a touch of the whine that he got whenever his father vexed him.

"I told you, son. I have to get back and mind the store. Folks'll need me more than ever what with all that's been going on."

I could see by the look on Michael's face that he wasn't so sure that his father was telling him the truth, but he let it slide for the moment. I mounted Sparks and helped Jamie climb up behind me. It was going to be a great day.

As it turned out, it only took us a couple of hours to reach the reservation. I wasn't well versed on why the Chickasaw had been run out of their homeland down south, but I had some idea and it made me sick to my stomach. Much like my embarrassment of my father, seeing the tribe here in this less than ideal territory made me ashamed to show my white face. I knew I didn't have anything to do with all of that, but I could see resentment on the faces of some of the Chickasaw who came out to greet us. When they looked at Mr. Deerson and Michael, they smiled and embraced them. They even greeted Jamie the same way

once they realized who she was. But me? They gave me a wide berth. They were cordial because I was in the company of their kin, but they still looked upon me with suspicious eyes.

Several people came up to the Deersons and spoke to them in Chickasaw. Michael couldn't understand much of it, of course, but he did a pretty good job of faking it. When a person hugs you and smiles as they're talking, it's a pretty safe bet that they're greeting you warmly so all he really had to do is smile and nod in return. I was surprised at how many of the people there were wearing white folks' clothes. There were still some remnants of their traditional garb and quite a few of them were sporting beads and feathers and the odd bit of animal skin or fur, but for the most part they dressed like anybody else you'd meet on the streets of Spruce Rocks or Twining. Hell, I'd seen trappers who looked wilder than these people. How white folks could refer to them as wild Indians was beyond me.

Mr. Deerson leaned over and told us that we were to be brought before the minko, the village chief, so I braced myself for more tenuous glances. Jamie reached out and took my hand, her broad smile easing my feelings somewhat.

We were marched into a house that was about the same size as the Parker's cabin, but which had walls of sticks and mud and a roof made of thatch. It was dark and cool inside despite the fire that burned in the middle of the room. It felt like the inside of a cave. On the other side of the fire, an old Chickasaw man sat on the fur covered floor and eyed us up and down. Even in the dim firelight, I could tell that he was very old. I assumed this was the chief but I couldn't be certain because no one had spoken a word yet. The old Indian man motioned for us to sit, so we did so, with Mr. Deerson taking the lead.

When he saw Jamie's face, the chief suddenly broke his stern demeanor and smiled broadly. He motioned for her to come forward and he reached out to take her hand. She knelt next to him and he spoke in soft whispers that only Jamie could hear. She smiled and nodded, then returned to her seat next to Michael and me.



Next it was Michael's turn to undergo the same treatment. While he was being spoken to, some women came in and served us a hot drink. I'd later find out it was coffee, but it didn't taste much like any coffee I was used to. It was warm, though, and it helped make that cave of a house feel more like a welcoming home.

When Michael returned to his seat, the chief gestured to me. I was nervous as I set down my cup and moved to comply. I knelt beside his seat and the old man grasped my hand and stared at me with eyes that were bright and clear. The skin on his hands felt like soft tissue paper that covered the gentle strength underneath. He said something to me softly in Chickasaw and I nodded in return. Nothing more was said so I just sat there until Mr. Deerson tugged on my shirt to prompt me to return to my seat.

Mr. Deerson didn't get the same treatment as the rest of us. Instead, he got up and served the old man his coffee, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. My expression must have betrayed my surprise because Michael leaned over and whispered, "He's my grandfather." Finally the pieces started to click into place and I was able to relax. We sat there for a long time, silently watching and listening as Mr. Deerson had a palaver with his father, only occasionally looking to Michael for a detail of our story which he then quickly translated for the chief. It was hypnotic in a way, what with the darkness, the warmth of the fire, and the strange drink.

They finally wrapped up their conversation and Mr. Deerson motioned for us all to go outside. "Well, it took some doing but he's agreed to shelter the lot of you."

"It's me, isn't it?" I asked. "He didn't want me here because I'm white. I understand. I don't know if I'd want me here either."

Mr. Deerson had a twinkle in his eye when he answered. "Well, as a matter of fact that was *not* the problem, young Mr. Brumbelowe. He's mostly concerned that the Nalusa Falaya might've ridden one of us into the reservation seeking more souls to consume."

I felt embarrassed that I'd revealed my own opinions of my people with my outburst, but I was relieved that the

chief didn't immediately resent me just for the color of my skin.

Michael asked, "Were you able to hear what grandfather said to me? I didn't have the heart to tell him that I don't understand much Chickasaw any more."

"He knows," said Mr. Deerson, "and no, I wasn't listening. The minko's words were for your ears only. It was made clear that I am not welcome to stay, at any rate. I'll be on my way as soon as Shunahoya has been fed and watered."

"What?" said Jamie. "You're not welcome? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means, dear girl, that my father is still disappointed in the way I conduct myself amongst the white men."

"But what about us?" asked Michael. "We do the same but we're being allowed to stay."

"That's true, but you were raised there. Any of the white man's traits that you've taken on are my fault." He looked as strong as I'd ever seen him, but I could still tell that he was saddened by this turn of events. "At any rate, you're allowed here, but not without conditions."

"What conditions?" asked Michael, now clearly upset by his grandfather's reproachful attitude toward his father.

"You are to be quarantined. The three of you will be given food and shelter and you may walk about the reservation by day with an escort, but at night you must remain indoors. And you must not speak to any of the tribe members while you're here."

"Is that all?!" said Michael sarcastically. "You know, we don't have to stay here! We ought to just ride back with you!"

Mr. Deerson moved swiftly and grasped Michael's shoulders. "You WILL stay here. It is my wish and you will obey me. Do you understand?" Michael nodded, the wind taken out of his sails by his father's sudden sternness. Mr. Deerson looked at each of us in turn. "It is very important that you all do as I say. You will be protected here in ways you can't understand. You're to stay put until I return. I need each of you to give me your word on this."

Each of us did as requested, and as we were doing so I noticed that one of the Chickasaw warriors was edging closer to us. When he realized he would no longer be interrupting, he raised a hand and approached. His humble demeanor made me like him immediately.

"I am to be your chaperone," he said in English better than my own. "My name is Losa Opa, which means Black Fox. You may call me either. Please follow me."

He turned and strode away and we followed. We were almost at the entrance to a nearby cabin when I heard hoof beats and turned to see Mr. Deerson riding away. Michael looked like he was about to run after him so I held his arm and shook my head. "We agreed to follow his instructions, Michael. He knows what's best for us."

"Maybe. Maybe not," said Michael, but he let me pull him back toward Black Fox.

We were escorted into the cabin and Black Fox began building a fire in a fireplace that was dug out of the wall to the right of the entrance. I moved to assist, but he stopped me.

"It is my honor to welcome you here," he said.

"Alright," I muttered, but it made me uncomfortable to have him waiting on us like that. "Thank you," I added and Black Fox nodded.

Pretty soon the fire was crackling and the room took on both a physical warmth and an emotional one. Black Fox told us we were honored guests. We would be under the watchful eye of the tribe and given anything we needed, but we would not be allowed to wander about unattended, nor would we be allowed to speak to just anyone. He had been granted the honor of tending to us and he would be our constant companion for the duration of our stay. Frankly, we'd heard it all from Mr. Deerson, but because it seemed important to Black Fox we all acted as if we hadn't.

We introduced ourselves and Black Fox struggled with our names. Mine seemed to amuse him, but it was my turn to be amused when he started calling Michael Mike Uhl, as if they were two words.

"Why is it that you do not have a Chickasaw name, Mike Uhl?" asked Black Fox. I didn't sense any malice in the question, only genuine curiosity.

"I am Michael Deerson. Deerson is my father's name, but he chose to give me..." He paused and looked over at me before continuing. "He gave me a white man's name because he said it is now the white man's world."

Black Fox nodded. He thought about what he'd just heard before replying, "He is wise and much admired among our tribe. You are very lucky to have such a father."

Michael said, "I guess so," and left it at that.

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence which was thankfully broken by several women who arrived at the door with food and drink. Black Fox thoroughly inspected everything, then we enjoyed our lunch. He wasn't dissimilar to the secret service men who were said to protect President Cleveland. That thought made my own esteem rise a peg or two despite the fact that we were still, technically, prisoners.

After lunch we had very little that we wanted to discuss in front of our new friend, so we just sat quietly and enjoyed our warm, berry tea. Jamie hardly wanted to speak to Black Fox at all, which I found a little odd. He sensed the awkwardness in the room, so he broke the ice himself with a question that I really hadn't expected.

"August, are you the one who has seen the long, black beings?"

I nearly choked on my tea. "The what?" I exclaimed.

"I am sorry," said Black Fox, genuinely embarrassed by my response. "I am curious. I will one day be the tribe's medicine man, but I have only ever heard tales of the shadow people. I have never seen one."

I gently put my hand on his shoulder. "I'm the one who should apologize," I said. "I just didn't understand what you meant. What is it you called them?"

"The long black beings. They are also known as Nalusa Falaya."

I looked over to Michael for confirmation and he nodded. "That's what my father calls them too."

"Yes, of course," said Black Fox. "That is the more appropriate name. I am sorry to have alarmed you."

"Don't worry," I said, though I had been alarmed. "And, no, I don't think I've seen anything of the sort."

Black Fox looked disappointed but he pressed on. "Is that not why you are here?" He looked up at Michael and Jamie. "All of you?"

I didn't know what to tell him so Michael decided to give it a shot. "My father believes the Nalusa Falaya are the cause of the goings on in the white villages, but we don't have any proof just yet."

"Oh, but if the great minko's son says it is so..." He saw my obvious surprise at his words so he elaborated. "Deer Son has powerful medicine." He was obviously taken with Mr. Deerson, or the legend that had evolved in the wake of Mr. Deerson's departure from the tribal family, but his enthusiasm wasn't dampened by our responses. He interpreted our surprised expressions as something different.

"I apologize," he said. "You know him much better than I ever will. I do not need to tell you about how great he is."

Eager to sooth Black Fox's embarrassment, I said, "He is a great man, Black Fox. We're all in agreement on that point." I held up my cup to make a toast and Black Fox looked at me as if I'd grown a third arm. I showed him how we had the tradition of toasting great people and great events and he took to it quickly, eventually toasting each person in the room.

I wanted to speak to the others in private, but I couldn't figure out how to politely ask Black Fox to leave. I wasn't even sure that a desire for privacy was ever polite in an Indian village. They shared every part of their lives. I eventually feigned sleepiness and asked if we might be allowed to take a brief nap.

"Of course," said Black Fox. "There are blankets here for all of you. I am certain your journey has made you weary. I will wait outside while you rest." And with that, he was gone.

We all sighed, releasing the tension that had built up in the warrior's presence. Black Fox was very kind, but we all felt like we had to be on our best behavior with him around. It was tiring.

"At least now we can talk," said Michael.

Jamie nodded. "Being so damned quiet's wearing me out!"

"Yeah, what's that all about?" I asked with a laugh.

"Women folk ain't supposed to talk when the men are having their say. If it's a pau-wau we ain't even allowed to be there!"

Michael laughed. "So if you ever need to shut her up, just call Black Fox!"

She punched him in the shoulder hard enough to make a bruise, but he didn't stop laughing.

"I don't know if I can take being cooped up like this," said Jamie. "This ain't how it used to be here."

"Yeah, but when you and Michael lived here before you weren't potential carriers of those whatdyacallems," I said.

Jamie looked at Michael and they both had a moment of realization. "You might be right," said Michael. "They sent their medicine man in training to deal with us, after all. They'd assume he'd be the best equipped to handle such a threat if it manifested out of one of us. That would also explain why Black Fox kept trying to bring the conversation back to the Nalusa Falaya. Many believe that evil beings' names will sometimes draw them out."

I nodded. "I hope we passed the test."

Black Fox returned after our rest period and continued to politely try and draw the evil spirits out of us, but it quickly became tiresome seeing as how we didn't actually have any evil spirits in us. It was early afternoon and I was getting restless.

"I'd like to see the rest of the village," I said. "Could we take a walk? I'd also like to check on our horses."

For the first time, Black Fox looked nervous about one of our requests, but he quickly returned to his confident demeanor. "Of course. Give me a few moments to prepare." And with that, he stood and left the cabin.

"What the hell does that mean?" asked Jamie.

"I've got no earthly idea," I answered. "But at least we don't have to stay in here all day. Wasn't there a hill where you said you laid out at night to watch the stars?"

Jamie grinned, obviously pleased that I remembered her story. "Yeah! We could go up there!" Then her smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. "But they're not gone let us be outside at night. It just ain't the same during the day."

"That's okay. It's cloudy so we couldn't see the stars anyway."

Michael got up and stood beside the door so he could peek through the cracks and watch the goings on outside.

"See anything?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Weird. It looks like everybody's going inside their huts."

"Is that on our account?"

Michael shrugged. "Could be. If they really are afraid that we're possessed by evil spirits, no one will want to have any contact with us. I'm actually surprised grandfather allowed us into his home if that's what he truly thinks is

happening. If we weren't family, he wouldn't..." He stopped short, obviously intrigued by something he saw outside.

"What is it?" asked Jamie.

"Probably nothing. It just looks like the guy Black Fox is talking to is a Chinaman, but he's wearing a mantle of feathers and he's carrying a cavalry sword of all things!"

"What?" asked Jamie, dumbfounded.

"What's the big deal?" I asked. "So there's a Chinaman out there. There're lots of them in Twining."

Michael moved away from the door and sat next to me. "It isn't that it's a big deal but..."

"Yeah, it is, Michael," said Jamie. "I ain't never heard of no tribe taking in a Chinaman before, and they sure as hell wouldn't let him be a warrior!"

Michael whispered, "They're coming this way," and he moved quickly to return to his seat.

Black Fox entered, only this time he was accompanied by the Chinaman Michael had seen. "Please excuse me. Before we go, I would like to introduce you to Hashi. He is one of the few amongst our people who is not afraid to be near you."

*Well, that was less than subtle,* I thought.

Hashi stepped forward and bowed as Michael and I stood to greet him. "I am Hashimoto," he said in a strangely harsh voice.

We introduced ourselves and I held out my hand, but he didn't take it.

Black Fox clapped Hashimoto on the shoulder. "Hashi is a very brave warrior from Nippon," he said with pride.

"Is that in China?" I asked. If the question offended Hashi, he didn't show it.

"No," he said. "The great island country of Nippon is southeast of the countries you call China and Korea, in the Pacific ocean."

I'd never heard of Nippon or Korea, or even the Pacific ocean for that matter. Geography hadn't been a big part of my schooling. "I see. And what brings you here?"

"I am to help chaperone you during your walk," said Hashi.



I thought to tell him that that wasn't what I meant, but Black Fox was already guiding us outside. "Where would you like to go?" he asked. I couldn't be certain, but I thought there was a terseness to his speech now that we were all out in the open. Maybe I was imagining things.

Jamie spoke up for the first time and told him of the outcropping atop the hill where she'd stargazed as a youngster. "Ah, I know of this place," he said. "I will take you there. We can stop and check on your horses on the way back." And with that, we were off.

Led by Black Fox and followed by Hashi, we were like a prison detail without the chains. Fortunately, the skies were still overcast and the air was cool so it was a pleasant walk. Once we'd gained a little elevation I looked back and saw that the village was completely abandoned.

"Where is everybody?" I asked. Since I was at the back of the line, Hashi heard me and responded.

"They are in their homes by order of the minko. Whenever you are outside of the protection of the cabin, we are to accompany you and the people must to go inside. Losa Opa has put protections on your cabin."

"To protect them from us, right?" asked Michael. He was obviously perturbed by the idea that we could be a threat, even passively.

"I do not understand," said Hashi. "Is not a wall good for both neighbors?"

I answered, "Yes, but we're obviously harmless."

"It is not so obvious," said Black Fox in a low voice.

Hashi continued, "No one can see the akuma..." He paused, searching for the right words. "Opa-san!" he called ahead. Black Fox turned. "What are the white words for the spirits they carry?"

"We're not carrying any spirits!" shouted Michael. "I am of this tribe, and this girl was raised here! I don't see why we're being treated like prisoners!"

Hashi looked away. "I am sorry I have upset you, Michael-san. That was not my intention. I wish only to answer Gus-san's question."

Black Fox, troubled by this turn of events, huddled up with us and spoke softly. "Follow me to the stargazing rock

and remain quiet. Once there I will answer your concerns as best I can, but I cannot do it here."

Jamie and I both nodded. Michael seemed content to sulk, remaining quiet for the remainder of our hike.

When we got closer to our destination, Jamie beamed with her remembrances of the place, and pointed out several spots where she'd played as a child. Her excitement made her pick up her pace and pretty soon she was leading the group.

Since I had him alone for a minute, I whispered, "Black Fox, what are you afraid of? It can't be us. If you really do have big medicine, you know what I'm saying is true."

Black Fox motioned for us to move to a clearing near the large outcropping that Jamie was climbing and he called out, "Please come down, Itanale. We must make friendship first."

Jamie seemed to understand what he meant so she quickly climbed down to join us. I wasn't sure what was going on and I didn't completely trust Black Fox, but then again I didn't have much of a choice, did I?

Everyone else seemed to know what was going on, so I just watched. The men lined up on one side of the area and Jamie on the other. Hashi motioned for me to join the men and as I did so, he shouted a guttural cry that scared the shit out of me. I was gathering my wits when Black Fox began to chant a song of sorts. Jamie kept the rhythm with her hands and feet while Black Fox moved about in a very dance-like way. This went on for a while and there were some times when everyone responded to his chant, kind of like those slave songs with their calls and responses. I mostly just watched as everyone spun about. Black Fox motioned for me to line up with the rest of them again and he suddenly shouted toward the sky like Hashi had done earlier. I thought that must be the end, but as I turned to sit down, he shouted again, even louder. By the time the whole thing was done, I felt drunk with confusion, but Black Fox and Hashi acted more relaxed around us.

"What was all of that?" I asked as we climbed onto the rock where Jamie had once watched the stars move across the sky.

"It is a friendship dance," said Black Fox. "We have now agreed to be friends. We will be protected by this friendship. All of us. I am still learning the ways of medicine, but I feel we have made a first step toward keeping the Nalusa away." He was positively beaming, and it wasn't just from the dancing.

"So why not speak to us openly in the village?" asked Michael. "The whole village should dance the friendship dance with us."

"All do not feel as I do," said Black Fox. He looked over at Hashi. "Hashi does. Your grandfather and father do as well."

"And what exactly are your feelings on the matter?" I asked.

"The world is not all that we see, Gus. Do you agree?"

I wasn't sure where this was going but I figured I could at least ride the train until it got to a station I recognized. "Yes. Science has shown us that there is more to the world than meets the eye."

"The people are afraid that your contact with the Nalusa Falaya may have left you with one or more of those shadow spirits in your heart. I could be speaking to them right now in your place."

I grinned. "I expect they'd be a bit easier to get along with though."

"Perhaps, but the minku," he looked at Michael, "your grandfather, will not risk the tribe. Not even for his own flesh and blood. If but one of these shadow spirits were here and able to call forth the Nalusa Chito—the great black being who eats men's souls—it would be the end of all of us. The minku has declared that you will be kept away from the people and them away from you until such time as you are deemed free of the shadows."

"But that doesn't explain why you and Hashi aren't afraid to be with us," I said.

"I do not share all beliefs of the minku and the rest of the tribe," said Hashi, as if that simple statement explained everything.

"And I have big medicine," said Black Fox. "You have heard of the birds used by the white men who dig for coal?"

I nodded. "So if anything happens, it will happen to you first? Is that the idea?"

"Yes, with the hopes that I will be able to ward off the shadows or destroy them before they can leap to another person." He said it matter of factly but he was proud that he'd been chosen for this duty. "I would like to know more about your encounter with them."

I shook my head. "Like Hashi here, I don't quite buy the whole shadow people story."

"Buy?" asked Black Fox.

"I don't believe in it. Not really. There's definitely something weird happening to folks in these parts, but I don't for a minute believe that it's being caused by mystical demons. More likely it's some bad guys out there who'll eventually be caught by the law." *Maybe just one bad guy*, I thought, but I didn't say it. I didn't have much evidence against Creech yet, so it really wasn't fair to accuse him.

Black Fox listened as I casually denigrated his belief system, then he smiled and said, "We will see the truth together when it is revealed, then. Yes?"

"I guess we will at that," I said.

"So tell us your tale. All of you. Please."

By the time Jamie, Michael and I were done rehashing all the details of the last few days, the sun was creeping closer to the horizon. Black Fox and Hashi had hardly spoken except to ask for clarification here and there, but they obviously believed there was something supernatural going on.

"It is good you are here and protected by Losa Opa's medicine," said Hashi.

"I thought you didn't believe in that," said Michael.

"It is not my way, but there are paths that cross. The Kami-sama are everywhere and they have many different names. I have been thinking on this." He sat back and as he did so, the odd saber he carried scraped on the ground.

"Why do you wear a cavalry saber?" I asked.

Hashi's eyes lit up. "It is my katana," he said as he grasped its odd hilt. He'd replaced the standard issue brass handle and guard with a simple, straight grip that had an intricate fabric wrap. "My father was a blacksmith, Gus-san. He taught me the ways to create this." He gripped the sword gently and asked Black Fox something in Chickasaw.

"The white man's word is 'sword'," said Black Fox.

"Yes. Sword," said Hashi. "My father was maker of swords and I was to be too. I do not have all I need to craft such things here, but I salvage this steel and make many modifications. It does not have..." He whispered to Black Fox who answered him quietly. "...*spirit* as a sword I crafted would, but it is as close as I can get in this land of barbarians."

His look of satisfaction made it difficult to be offended by his reference to us as barbarians. He got to his knees and removed the saber from his belt, bowing as he presented it to me on his upraised fingers. I took it gingerly, careful not to drop it. It was obviously important to him, but I couldn't figure out why. Most of the confederates I'd known, my father included, called swords like that one wrist-breakers because they were more likely to injure the wielder than the person being attacked. As I removed the blade from its sheath one thing became crystal clear: this was no ordinary cavalry sword. It might have been so in the past, but Hashi had crafted its cheap, stamped out metal into something much more elegant, and more lethal.

The hilt had been changed significantly, as I mentioned before, but the blade also looked unlike any blade I'd ever seen. It had been sharpened to death, its width now less than most cavalry weapons and, consequently, it was lighter than those as well. Its edge had a wavy line along its length that was lighter than the rest. I indicated the white part without touching it. "What's that?" I asked.

"Hamon," said Hashi. "I do not have words to describe it in white man talk. Heat is different here," he pointed at the edge, "and here," he indicated the shiny silver of the back of the blade. "Now it can be sharper."

He motioned for the blade so I resheathed it and handed it to him with two hands and a bow, mimicking his earlier gesture. He seemed to appreciate the effort, but he corrected my procedure. "Always pass with cutting edge toward you, Gus-san. It is polite way. Understand?"

I nodded, but I didn't follow completely. I didn't see how it could matter if the sword was sheathed, but if that was his custom, I could easily comply. Thinking about it later, I began to equate Hashi's sword etiquette with that which most musicians used when handling their instruments. Even the old guitar I'd dragged around deserved a certain respect and another player would never presume to even strum a few notes without permission first. Guitars were a rare commodity west of the Mississippi back then, and I figured that gussied up swords were even more so.

Hashi climbed down off the rock and addressed a small tree as he carefully put his sword back into his belt on his left side. In one swift motion, he unsheathed the sword, cut the tree clean through, and resheathed the blade in silence.

"Sharp, yes?" asked Hashi.

We all agreed vociferously as he climbed back to our perch. "He has been attempting to train me," said Black Fox, "but I am no warrior." I didn't understand what he meant by that, but he obviously felt shame over the revelation so I didn't ask him to explain.

Throughout the afternoon, Jamie and I kept meeting one another's gaze. It was painful in some ways and exquisite in others. Don't get me wrong, I didn't think it was so exquisite just then, but thinking back on it now I realize just how pleasurable those moments of yearning had been.

There was nothing more to talk about at the moment so we all relaxed and used our senses to experience the day. The clouds in the west were breaking up and the sun began to peek through as it got closer to the Earth. I was about to nod off completely when a messenger arrived from the village.

"Losa Opa!" shouted the young man.

Black Fox rose quickly and jumped down off the rock. After speaking to the messenger, he motioned for us to join him.

"What is it?" asked Michael.

"Your father is injured," said Black Fox. "We must hurry."

**12**

We ran back to the village as quickly as we could, forgetting for a moment the charade of our roles as prisoners and chaperones. We were all just people who wanted more than anything to find Mr. Deerson alive and well when we got there. Alas, that wasn't to be the case.

Michael's father had been brought to Black Fox's home, a small hut that had been built in the shadow of an overhanging cliff. Several Chickasaw warriors stood outside the doorway, their arms and shoulders smeared in blood. Michael struggled to get inside to see his father, but the warriors held him back at the urging of Black Fox.

"He is in the sacred space, Michael," said Black Fox calmly. "I will do all I can but you will not come inside." Michael nodded but the warriors maintained their grip on him for the time being. Hashi persuaded them to release him, but he remained between Michael and the doorway just in case.

Jamie and I sat on the dusty ground outside the hut, hoping to hear Mr. Deerson's voice inside but all we heard were the soft chants of Black Fox. After an interminable wait, the hut's small chimney began to smoke and Black Fox emerged from the darkness within, his hands shaking.

"I thought the sun was a good omen but the sun will not help us this day." He spoke directly to Michael and Michael alone. "Your father will not survive unless Aba Binili wills it. You should speak to him now before he climbs the spirits road." Michael nodded and Black Fox opened the flap door and allowed him inside.

I stole a glance through the open doorway and I could see Mr. Deerson laid out next to the fire that burned in the middle of the room. As Black Fox closed the flap door, I saw a glimmer of firelight cross Mr. Deerson's face. It was a bloody mess just like Seamus' and Mr. Parkers! I felt the



panic begin in my stomach and twist its way to my heart. Had Mr. Deerson been right all along? Had *something* come gunning for him? Jesus, if it came for him wouldn't it also come for the rest of us?

The flap opened again and Black Fox emerged into the late afternoon sunlight. I pulled Jamie aside and told her what I'd seen.

"Oh, Jesus H. Christ," she whispered. "It's gone be us next, ain't it? Ain't it?!"

At that moment, I regretted the weakness inside me that made me tell a woman what I'd seen. I needed to tell *somebody*. I just couldn't take it all in fast enough. Besides, Jamie was in this like the rest of us, wasn't she? Woman or man, she deserved to know the truth.

"I don't know what's going on, Jamie, but we better start figuring it out," I replied. "We need to get out of here. Just you and me. Michael's got plenty on his hands just dealing with..." but I couldn't say the words. I knew Mr. Deerson was dying not twenty feet away from us, but I couldn't think about that just yet.

"Did you see where our horses were being kept?" I asked while trying to look as if I were consoling Jamie.

She nodded. "I seen them when we was up on the rock."

"If we can get Hashi or Black Fox to take us back to our cabin, I figure we can slip out later and get them."

Jamie nodded. "I think I can handle that part," she said, and she passed out in my arms.

I was so surprised that my reaction was genuine. "Jamie? Jamie?!" Hashi ran over and helped me lower her to the ground.

"This is no good, Hashi. I need to get her back to our cabin. Will you help me?"

Hashi looked to Black Fox and the young medicine man nodded. We picked Jamie up and moved her inside the cabin where we'd been housed earlier. Once I had her situated, Hashi brought some firewood and fresh water and got a fire started. I was afraid he was going to stay but he stood abruptly and said, "Black Fox will need to look on her."

I nodded and he went to find Black Fox. As soon as he was gone, Jamie sat up and hugged me tightly. I could smell her hair as my nose grazed the softness of her ear. I inhaled deeply, not wanting to leave that embrace, but I felt guilty that we could have such a moment when Michael was going through hell.

"Can you stay sick 'til dark?" I asked. "I think we'll have a better chance of getting out of here then."

"I guess so, but..." She stopped, obviously holding back.

"What?"

"I don't know where we're gone go that's safer than here."

She had a point. Where would we go? If someone was gunning for us, being alone on the road probably wasn't going to help us much.

"Do you think it's those shadow things that are after us, Jamie? Mr. Deerson's Falaya people, or whatever they're called?"

She considered the question for a moment, then answered quietly. "No. I don't. I never seen nothing like that, even when I lived here."

I had a handful of doubts but a lifetime of Sunday schooling that told me that Jesus, God and the Holy Ghost were the only real spiritual beings. I didn't hardly believe in them so it was real hard for me to believe in these killer shadows. "Yeah, I don't believe it neither," I said.

"Then who's doing these..." She stopped short and leaned her head over on my shoulder. Black Fox had arrived. I didn't want to deceive him, but I wasn't sure the tribe would let us leave otherwise. Mr. Deerson carried a lot of weight on the reservation and his death would certainly convince the others that we would be in danger out on the road.

"Deer Son is on the spirits road," said Black Fox as he bowed his head.

All I could do was sigh. Mr. Deerson was like a father to me, but there was no way for Black Fox to know that. In a way, I resented the fact that Michael got to be there with him in the end. It broke my heart to be held at arm's length.

"I am sorry," said Black Fox. "I hope his shadows make a successful journey and do not linger."

I nodded. "I don't know what to do now, Black Fox. He wanted us to wait here for him, but..."

"I understand. Now you must take your own path. If I may help, please let me know."

His earnestness made me feel guilty and that guilt overwhelmed me. I knew I couldn't lie to him. Besides, he'd be a good ally to have. I was about to tell Jamie to give up her ruse when Black Fox laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"You may sit up. Do not be afraid. I will not tell the others that you are not sick."

Jamie couldn't disguise her shock as she sat up. "What?"

"Why do you wish everyone to think you are ill?"

Before Jamie could answer him, I spoke up. "I put her up to it, Black Fox. I'm sorry. Everything just started happening so fast and we needed somewhere to talk privately."

"Good. You are honest, Gus. Do you wish to leave this place?"

"Everything in my heart says to run away, but I'm not sure where to run to. I just want to get on my horse and go."

The fire made the little cabin feel like home. The hickory smell was as reassuring as a mother's embrace. What was I running from exactly? I needed to figure out what was happening before we were all dead, but I didn't see any way to do that while I was hidden away on the reservation.

"Are we allowed to leave?" I asked.

"You are not prisoners, but if Michael wishes to follow our customs, he will stay near his father's burial site for weeks. Possibly months."

I was shocked and in a moment of weakness, I let it show. "Months? That's insane! He can't stay here for months!"

Jamie leaned over to calm me down and Black Fox said, "It is the way of our people. It will insure Michael's father has a safe journey."

I wanted to tell him that he should have been worried

about Mr. Deerson making a safe journey back to Spruce Rocks, but I didn't. Part of me wanted to inflict that particular cruelty on someone as a payback for taking Mr. Deerson from me, but on whom should it fall? Surely not Black Fox.

Jamie asked, "Where was Mr. Deerson found, and who found him?"

That was the first time I was amazed by one of Jamie's intuitive leaps, but it wouldn't be the last. Before Black Fox could answer, I added, "And what about his horse?"

"Shunahoya was killed as well. She remains on the prairie. The two warriors who found them were dispatched by the minko to follow Deer Son and watch over him."

So much for my thought that they hadn't been looking out for Mr. Deerson on his way back to Spruce Rocks.

Black Fox continued. "They say that he was attacked by an invisible spirit." His eyes moved to his clasped hands. "I know you do not believe our ways, but it is true. They have seen this. His face was ripped apart as he struggled. As Shunahoya was struck dead, Deer Son was lifted from the saddle and held in midair." He looked at Jamie. "There is more but I will not speak of it in front of a woman."

I was flabbergasted. Could it actually be true? "I want to go there," I said. "I want to see the place and I'd like to bury Shunahoya. She was a fine horse and she deserves a decent burial." It's funny how some things can strike your heart more than others. I was indeed distraught over Mr. Deerson's death, but it was the destruction of Shunahoya that started my tears flowing. I'd always had a soft spot in my heart for animals. I reckon I still do, for that matter. The thought of that noble beast—the same one who'd borne me on her back so many times without any complaint—lying dead by the road somewhere made me feel lost and alone.

"We will go, then," said Black Fox.

"No, Black Fox, I meant that..."

"Deer Son was my mentor. He is the reason I found my place here, Gus. His is my spirit guide as well. I must do something to repay this generosity. I will help to bury Shunahoya."

"Alright. I certainly won't turn down the help. But if that crazy story about the attack is true, we might be getting

into some deep shit." I quickly looked over at Jamie and muttered, "Sorry."

She snorted an almost-laugh. "Please," was all she said, but she took my hand in her own and gave it a good squeeze. It's the simple gestures that sometimes mean the most.

"I will need to tend to Deer Son first, then I will need to speak to the warriors who saw the attack. Perhaps we can leave at first light."

I wanted to go right then, charging off into the night to see what was out there, but I knew we'd all be better off if I could keep a level head. "Yes. In the morning." I looked at Jamie and she nodded.

"Very well. I will have some food brought to you and I will summon you if your friend needs you."

"Alright," I said, and with that Black Fox was gone.

The food that was served to us was magnificent, but to this day, I can't remember what it was. I suppose it could have been a special meal for mourning. It sure seems to be a custom amongst all the peoples of this Earth to feast in the wake of a death. Why should the Chickasaw be any different?

After our meal, Jamie and I laid down by the fire and snuggled up together. It wasn't long before nature took its course and we began to kiss. Death also inspired any number of carnal delights by reminding us that life is so fleeting. It just makes you want to celebrate it while you can. Whatever the reason, Jamie and I were both naked before we knew it. And for that, I didn't feel one bit guilty.

**13**

We were awakened by a gentle knock on the doorframe. I kissed Jamie's temple then wrapped myself in a blanket before opening the flap to look outside. Standing before me were Black Fox, Hashi, the minku, and several warriors. I felt a little underdressed until I realized that even in a blanket I was wearing more than any of the warriors.

I didn't really know what the etiquette was so I bowed before the chief. Black Fox stepped forward and said, "The minku would like you to know that he will be mourning his son alongside his grandson but the tribe will assist you if you intend to seek the Nalusa Falaya."

I was unable to figure out what to say because I really hadn't planned on going after anyone. Hell, I didn't even know who to go after. All I had was a feeling.

Fortunately, the chief didn't expect a reply. I suppose he was used to making proclamations that everyone on the reservation simply accepted. He turned and walked back to the cabin where Mr. Deerson's body had been and the warriors went with him leaving Black Fox and Hashi behind.

"It is our honor to accompany you on this quest, Gus," said Black Fox. "When do we leave?"

I looked over at Hashi and noticed that he was dressed out and ready to go. "We'll need to eat and dress. Say, an hour?"

"Very well," said Black Fox. "I will return. Hashi will alert the women that you are ready for a meal."

They turned to leave and I went back inside. It was getting cooler in the mornings and the warmth inside the cabin was comforting, but the lovely girl I found sleeping there was even more so. Her face was a blank slate as she slept, but it found its way to a smile when I kissed her cheek.

"Good morning," said Jamie.

"Hey. Good morning," I whispered back. "Sorry to wake you but I just had a meeting with the chief. He's going to allow Black Fox and Hashi to accompany us. They're raring to go, so we better get ready."

She nodded and covered herself as she stood. There was a small basin of water in the corner, which she eyed. She might have dressed like a boy but she was all woman underneath.

I was pulling on my pants when I saw that look in her eyes. "Oh, did you need to wash or something?"

She nodded, slightly embarrassed that she wasn't really one of the guys. I was grateful for that fact, though.

"Sorry. I can give you some privacy. Let me get my boots on and..." I was grabbing my things and trying to get outside when I fell over my own feet, one of which was halfway in the wrong boot. I started to get up but Jamie jumped on top of me and pinned me to the floor with a kiss.

"Jamie, I'd like nothing more than to stay naked with you all day, but I already met the chief while wearing nothing but a blanket."

"Really?" she laughed. "He probably didn't notice. You've seen what the warriors wear most of the time, right?"

"Yeah, but..." She interrupted me with another kiss. God, how I would have liked to have stayed there, but it wasn't to be.

There was another knock on the doorframe. I jumped up as if we'd been caught doing something wrong. I didn't really understand that the Chickasaw looked upon sexual relations very differently than most white folks. I managed to get my feet into my boots and pass Jamie's food inside as I sat outside the doorway to examine what was in my own wooden bowl. It was a sweet paste mixed with various nuts and berries and it tasted like heaven. I was halfway through wolfing it down when Jamie finished her toilet and sat down beside me.

"You like that?" she asked. My mouth was full so I nodded my answer. "I remember helping the women gather them kinds of berries. I forgot about that 'til I tasted 'em again. There's a lot I forgot here." She drifted away into her thoughts. "These're good people."

"Would they take you back? Permanently, I mean"

She leaned her head on my shoulder and I could smell the fragrance of the soap she'd just washed with. "I suppose."

"Is that what you want?"

"I don't know, but it's nice havin' the option. For now I just want to stay wherever you are." She smiled and I felt my stomach lurch. I knew what lust felt like, but this was different. I didn't know it yet, but I was falling in love with this girl.

"Well, speaking of that," I had to talk fast so I didn't lose my nerve. "I wonder if it wouldn't be better for you to stay here for now."

"What?!"

"You know...until we can figure out what..."

"You mean until you big, strong men folk can suss things out? Who the hell you think you're talking to, Gus?! We spend one night together and now I'm suddenly all frilly and shit?"

At that moment, I would have done anything to take back what I'd just said. "No, I mean... It's not like that." I fell over my own words, trying to figure out how to rebuke her statements, but when I really thought about it, I realized she was right. "I'm sorry, Jamie. I just...I made a mistake, alright? I don't want you getting hurt."

The rage I'd seen embedded in her brow loosened its grip slightly and her grimace melted into a look of pity. "I can take care of myself, you hear? If you care about me, you got to let me be."

I nodded. I never thought I'd fall for such a headstrong woman, but now I couldn't imagine not falling for her. "I'm sorry, Jamie. Really. I'll try to do as you ask, but my Mama raised me to treat womenfolk in a very particular way. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah. I just want you to remember there's a time and a place for that. I ain't no delicate flower and I don't appreciate being treated like one just 'cause of last night."

"Alright." I was going to say more but I saw Black Fox and Hashi approaching. Jamie and I stood to greet them.



"We go soon. You," Black Fox pointed at Jamie, "will ride young Deer Son's horse. He will not be needing it until after we return."

"Okay," said Jamie, "if you're sure it's okay with Michael."

"I'll talk to him about it," I said softly to Jamie before turning toward Black Fox. "I'm going to need a minute with Michael before we leave. Is he still over at your house?"

"Yes, he is inside, but he cannot speak to you."

"Look, I just need to tell him goodbye. I don't want him to think we ran off and left him here without his horse."

"I understand. I will pass your message to those who are tending to Deer Son's body in my stead." He stood and strode toward his home but I still felt like it was wrong to leave Michael that way.

"You come with me to get the horses?" asked Hashi. Jamie and I nodded and followed him up to the plateau, but we remained silent most of the way. We walked our horses down to the village as Hashi spoke softly to his speckled mare and Black Fox's chestnut and white painted horse.

"I'm sorry we ain't good company this morning," said Jamie.

"Understand. Thoughts are with your friend," said Hashi as he patted his horse's neck. She wore no bit and no saddle. He guided her by gently grasping her mane in his fist.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Nanami. It mean seas. She move across the plains like water." He smiled as the horse nuzzled his pocket in hopes of obtaining the berries that he'd hidden there. He complied without hesitation.

Black Fox emerged from his home and jumped onto the back of his own horse. "Do not worry," he said to me. "Your brother will know where you went. He will understand."

There was a part of me that wanted to ask Black Fox if he was referring to Michael as my brother in the way all men are "brothers" or if he'd read something between the two of us that had made him say that. In the end, I just nodded because I preferred to believe the latter.

The warriors who'd returned Mr. Deerson to the village had given Black Fox the precise location of the attack so we wasted no time getting there. Nevertheless, it was a long ride. We stopped around midday to eat some dinner then we got back on the path, as sullen and pensive as before. There was no good humor to be had between us because we all felt the pressure bearing down. What would we find, if anything? Regardless of whether the culprit was man or demon, how could we stop anyone else from getting killed? None of us had answers to these questions, and I was getting more and more nervous as my thoughts dwelt on one simple fact: Mr. Deerson had been unable to fend off whoever or whatever had killed him. The same held true for Mr. Parker and Seamus, but it was Mr. Deerson's death that troubled me the most because he was the one person in my life who usually had the answers. If he hadn't survived an encounter with whatever it was, how could I hope to fare any better?

Sensing my trepidation and trying to drive away her own, Jamie reached over and squeezed my hand. I smiled but I was worried. We didn't have any way of defending ourselves if we got attacked. Hashi had his sword, of course, and Black Fox a bow, but those weren't going to do us a lot of good against a six shooter. I had the LeMat, but it was still hidden in my pack where it was unlikely to be of any use whatsoever.

We rode across plains that were occasionally broken up with mottled sunlight. It didn't look like rain and the clouds helped to keep us cool, so why did I feel so scared? The texture of the day reminded me of something that had happened long ago. Something so far in my past that even I couldn't remember the specifics, but I could remember the feeling. I strained to recall the event, but you know how memories can be. Sometimes the harder you try to remember, the more elusive they become.

It was almost sundown by the time we got to the location where Mr. Deerson had been attacked. The prairie was mostly flat in that area so poor Shunahoya's corpse stood out like a boulder on a beach. I'd cared for Mr. Deerson's horse since I'd moved to Spruce Rocks so seeing her like that was extremely hard for me to take. She was a huge lump in the grass, looking much like a whale surfacing for air, only this particular beast wasn't ever going to breathe again. I could feel the tears welling up as I got off of Sparks. I reached in my pack for the LeMat and Jamie gave me a look that was one part "what are you doing with that?" and one part "I'm glad you've got that thing handy". I watched as Black Fox surveyed the horizon, then I walked over to the corpse, alone.

She'd been a beautiful creature and her coat was still shiny, but her sweet face was vacant. Flies crawled all over her upturned eye. I brushed them away angrily. I could see no wounds but there was a lot of blood on her saddle and down her side. Probably Mr. Deerson's. She'd only been down a day or so, but the smell was already bad. We hadn't smelled it before because we'd ridden in from upwind.

I knelt beside Shunahoya and placed the LeMat on the ground. "Don't come over here," I shouted, a brief catch in my voice that almost turned into a sob. I pulled my neckerchief up over my mouth and nose as much to hide my anguish as to keep out the stench. I closed Shunahoya's eye and leaned over to kiss her cheek. That was when the tears really started flowing. She really had been the most gentle of horses, and, like Mr. Deerson, she hadn't deserved this. I laid my face in her mane and my tears rolled down onto her fur. I wanted to remember that smell as long as I lived. I wanted

to remember that whoever did this was going to pay. I would see to it.

I patted her cold neck once more and wiped my eyes. When I stood and turned, I saw the others standing beside their mounts with their heads bowed. I was thankful that they'd given me the space, but we had a job to do.

"I guess we better get to work," I said as I went to Sparks and grabbed the small shovel I'd brought. "It's going to take a while. I understand if ya'll need to go back, but I have to do this for her." I paused, trying to find the words to explain. In the end, all I could come up with was, "She was my friend."

Black Fox strode over and I thought he was going to strike me, but instead he hugged me, and I let him. "We are beside you, Gus. Do not forget this. We are here to help."

He looked uncomfortable so I prodded. "There something else?"

"I am sorry, Gus, but I also have to ask if you were able to see what killed her."

"No. It's as if she just fell over dead. There's quite a bit of blood on her but it looks to be Mr. Deerson's. There are no wounds that I could see."

"May I approach her?" The reverence with which Black Fox was dealing with the situation moved me deeply and took me one step closer to accepting him as a friend.

"Yes," I said, but the word got caught in my throat.

Jamie moved closer and took my arm. Together, we watched Black Fox examine Shunahoya's body by laying his hands on her. He was so gentle, touching her as if she were still alive and about to jump up and gallop across the plain. The sun was setting behind them so the man and the horse were stark black silhouettes against the brightly colored sky. I watched, transfixed, then I realized that Black Fox was chanting something.

"He's singing her to the spirit's road," whispered Jamie. I looked at her and back at Black Fox. My tears started silently flowing once again. Like all funerals, this one wasn't really for Shunahoya. It was for me, and I couldn't remember a time when anyone had given me such a generous gift.

Black Fox stepped away from Shunahoya and nodded to me. I nodded in return and no more words were spoken. We simply found a soft spot and began digging. The sun went down and we continued by moonlight. There were still a few clouds high in the sky, but there was a nearly full moon out to light our way.

After four or five hours of taking turns, we had a hole that looked like it was big enough. I removed Shunahoya's saddle and reins and we slid her toward the hole. It was an ungainly process and one I'd rather not have inflicted on my friend's remains, but I didn't see any other option.

As we neared the grave, we rolled her over to let her body slide down into the gap, and that was when I saw it. There was something on her flank. It was on the side that had been resting on the ground so we hadn't seen it.

Black Fox took up a shovel and started to heft a load of dirt in on top of her but I stopped him. "Did you see that mark?" I asked.

Everyone shook their heads. The others were tired and it was dark so they hadn't noticed, but I was sure I'd seen it.

"It was on her side. It looked like..." I thought I knew what I'd seen but it had been a fleeting glance. I had to be sure before I said any more. "Hang on," I said, then I ran across and grabbed a branch off a long-dead tree that lay nearby. I brought it back and pulled a tin of phosphorous matches out of my pack. After a couple of attempts, I was able to light a wad of dry brush on the end of the branch and hold it out over the grave. We all peered in and saw, painted on Shunahoya's side in what I presumed was Mr. Deerson's blood, the crude shape of a bird flying skyward.

"I do not know this sign," said Black Fox, "but I can see by your face that you have seen it before." He stared at me expectantly in the flittering firelight.

"I seen it too," said Jamie. "It was on the bar in Spruce Rocks wasn't it, Gus? That night Seamus was killed and those other folks went crazy."

I nodded. "Yeah. It was painted big as life on the front of the building. It was also painted on Seamus' house earlier. He said he saw Mr. Creech paint it there."

I noticed Black Fox and Hashi look at each other when I mentioned Creech, but they stayed quiet until I was done telling them what Seamus had told me.

"Do you know this man, Creech?" asked Black Fox.

"I don't know him well, but I've met him. He seemed nice enough, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Yeah. I mean, he said nice things and put on a nice face."

"But something about him bothered you?"

"Yeah. He just seemed... I don't know. He just gave me the creeps down the small of my back."

"I do not know this word 'creeps', but I think I understand. We too have had our dealings with this Creech."

Hashi nodded and said, "Hai!", which I eventually learned was a sort of catch-all version of "yes" in his language.

Black Fox continued. "He has been encountered by our hunting parties while on Chickasaw land. He is always on foot. When asked how he got there, he says he walked. This is many miles from the nearest path or train track. He has a striking charm but his countenance is still frightening. The other warriors eventually started calling him Tohbi Sinti. It means White Snake in white man talk."

"That's appropriate," I said.

"He returns periodically. The visits are always the same." He looked at the symbol on Shunahoya's side. "If this means that he was here, we must be cautious."

As if on cue, we all looked around, half expecting to see Creech stroll out of the brush. When that didn't happen, we turned back to the work at hand.

It didn't take long to cover Shunahoya's grave, but when we were done there was a good bit of displaced dirt left humped on the spot where she lay. I felt worried, but I couldn't say why. I watched as Black Fox went to his horse to retrieve his bow and hand it to Hashi. While Black Fox chanted another song, Hashi shot arrows into the ground around the grave. When they were done, Hashi said, "Now she will be safe. Do not worry."

I thanked him, and even though I didn't understand, I felt better about leaving her there alone in the ground.

We walked our horses away from the grave and toward a small cluster of trees to camp for the night. I wanted to start a fire but Black Fox was adamant that it would be wrong to do so while we were still close to where Mr. Deerson and Shunahoya died.

"We must not attract the attention of the evil spirits, Gus. They are nearby this place. We must hide from their sight for the time being."

I accepted this explanation not because I believed it, but because Black Fox had been so kind in his dealings with Shunahoya. The funny thing was that we all huddled up near those trees as if we did have a fire. It made the night seem even colder than it was, and impossible to get warm despite the fact that we were all wrapped up in our bedrolls and blankets.

I tried to get some sleep but sleep never came. I'd occasionally look over at Black Fox or Hashi in the darkness and see their eyes glinting in the moonlight. Whatever it was that had them spooked was spooking me too, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Then, as I lay there listening to the silence, I realized that it was that lack of sound that was so weird. It was exactly like that morning when we'd left Spruce Rocks. No animals stirred in the night and no breeze sang through the treetops. Mr. Deerson had said, "This is bad," and I was beginning to agree with him.

I laid there next to Jamie and watched the moon through the tree branches as it passed behind a dense batch of clouds. We were plunged into near total darkness for a minute or two. When the moon emerged again, Hashi sat up abruptly and reached for his sword. Black Fox followed, jumping to his feet without a sound.

"What is it?" I whispered, but neither of them responded. They were too busy looking for whatever it was they'd just heard.

The seconds ticked by ever so slowly as we waited, but there were no other sounds. Finally, Black Fox crouched beside me and Hashi snuck over to join us.

"There is someone watching us from the plain. I believe he is near the horizon. I heard him call out in the voice of a fox. Perhaps he mocks me."

"Or maybe it's just a fox," I offered.

"No. When a fox speaks, you will always hear a response from another fox. When a shadow being takes the form of a fox, no real fox will ever respond. His cry is not true to them."

I sat up, careful not to disturb Jamie, but truth be told, I don't think she'd have awakened if I'd slapped her. "So you're saying some kind of evil spirit's out there stalking us?!"

"I said no such thing," said Black Fox. I couldn't see his face clearly in the darkness, but I'd have sworn he was smiling. "It is a spirit, but we know not what his intention is. It could be a witch. It could be a shadow of a dead man or a shadow of an animal. I do not know. It could also be the Nalusa Falaya. All I do know is that he wishes us to think he is a fox."

With news like that, I wasn't going to be getting any more sleep so I got up and walked out to where the trees ended. I stared into the darkness hoping that I'd see something that would confirm my hopes that whatever was out there was from the natural world. The idea of some magical ghost thing taunting us in the darkness scared me more than I even thought possible. It's one thing to hear stories about the supernatural and it's another thing entirely to be standing in the wilderness in the middle of the night while a Chickasaw medicine man tells you some spirits are nearby making fox sounds. The situation makes it all damned near believable.

I walked back to the others and whispered, "I'm going over to the grave."

Black Fox asked, "Why?"

I couldn't explain it to myself so how could I explain it to him? "I don't know. I'm just... This is going to sound silly but I'm worried about Shunahoya."

Black Fox nodded. "You are right to do so."

Funny how that didn't comfort me one little bit. I'd hoped for a scoffing laugh or a small jibe, but instead the



medicine man had told me I was right to worry about the well being of a dead horse.

Hashi moved closer and whispered, "I will go too."

I sighed. At least Hashi's statement made me feel better than Black Fox's. I grabbed the LeMat and we set out across the plain together.

**15**

When I'd first gotten out from under the blankets, my adrenaline had been flowing so I hadn't felt the cold. Now that Hashi and I were creeping closer to Shunahoya's grave, the bite in the air grabbed hold of me and wouldn't let go. That chill worked its way under my skin and made me feel like I'd never be warm again. Part of it was fear, of course, but there was more to it than that.

Hashi had his sword at the ready as we approached the mound of earth. I'm not sure what he planned on doing or what he thought we'd see, but I'll bet you he didn't expect what we found.

All of the arrows he'd shot around Shunahoya's grave for protection were broken, and not just snapped in two. They were shredded and twisted. I reached for one and Hashi stopped me.

"Do not touch," he said, and the look in his eyes made me obey.

We were standing near the grave, surveying the area, when we heard an awful screeching sound coming from the copse of trees where we'd left Black Fox and Jamie. We turned to run back there but we were stopped by a man who stood directly between us and our destination. He was still far enough away that we couldn't see his face in the darkness, but he looked like a normal man as far as I could tell.

Hashi raised his sword and called out, "Speak your name!"

I cocked the LeMat and pointed it at the man as well. "You heard him. Speak up, mister, or we might get the wrong idea." There was no "might" about it. I already had the wrong idea and it was scaring me shitless. All that talk of witches

and ghosts and evil spirits made me wonder if this might not be a man at all.

He stood there in the moonlight and cocked his head back to his right as if indicating the trees where our camp was. Then he suddenly ran at us as fast as he could, screaming an ungodly howl!

Without thinking, I pulled the trigger. That monster of a pistol jacked my arm back and sent its bullet astray. Fortunately Hashi was more practiced with his sword than I was with my pistol. He immediately severed the man's right leg just above his knee. The stranger fell sideways to the ground, but his good leg kept churning as if he thought he was still running. Hashi was getting ready to relieve the man of his head when the guy abruptly stopped moving. No cries of pain or pleading. He just laid there in a heap.

We approached slowly, our weapons at the ready. Hashi used his free hand to ease my gun down and away from him. Seeing as how I'd just missed a shot at point blank range, I can't say that I blamed him, but it was still a bit of a blow to my ego. I made a mental note then and there to spend a little bit of time practicing with the gun if we got through the night.

When we got up close to the man we could see that he was as still as a stone. His head was hanging down against his chest so we couldn't see his face. I prodded him with my pistol.

"Hey! Hey, mister!" I said, but the man stayed still.

Hashi relaxed and reached out to grab the man's bushy black hair. He pulled his head back, with considerable effort I might add, and revealed a bloody mess of a face! This man who'd appeared out of nowhere had the exact same countenance as all the others who'd been killed!

"Dead," said Hashi. He kicked the man's shoulder. The body fell over in the exact same position, like a statue.

"What the hell's going on?" I asked in a whisper. I didn't expect an answer, but Hashi gave me one.

"This man long dead," he said as he backed away from the body.

"Wait a minute," I protested. "How could he have been dead for a long time? He was just standing here. He

was just making crazy sounds and running towards us!" The moonlight could play tricks on your eyes, but nothing so convincing as this.

"We go," said Hashi and he ran for the trees.

I followed, occasionally glancing back over my shoulder to make sure the dead man hadn't gotten up to join our little race. We got to the camp only to find that Black Fox was holding Jamie at knifepoint. She was crying, backed up against one of the larger trees.

"What the hell are you doing?!" I screamed, no longer fearful of being heard. At that point I pretty much figured that whoever or whatever was after us was damned well aware of exactly where we were.

"Stay back, Gus," said Black Fox. "The shadow spirit is speaking through her."

"Have you gone crazy?" I strode toward Jamie but Black Fox pushed me back.

"No! You must not touch her!"

I'd never seen Black Fox act so aggressively toward anyone, but looking back on it now, I realize that he was just plain scared. I was scared too, but at that moment all I could see was a guy holding a knife on my girl. I raised the LeMat and pointed it squarely at Black Fox's chest.

"Let's just start by pointing that knife somewhere else, alright? I might not be any good at shooting this thing but I'll bet I could hit you from here." I said it softly, but I could feel the anger welling up inside my chest. How dare he hurl such accusations at Jamie?!

"Gus, you must not do this. The shadow spirit is here! We must not let it go any farther."

"Damned straight, it's here, but you got the wrong carrier. He's dead out there in that..." I froze when I heard Hashi's sword scrape against its sheath behind me.

"Put the gun down. You will do this, yes?" said Hashi.

I could see the moonlight reflected in Black Fox's eyes as he turned and looked to where Hashi stood behind me. He took the LeMat from my hand, turned the cylinder to an empty chamber and uncocked it before laying it on the ground at my feet.

"I am sorry, Gus, but she was screeching. You must have heard it," said Black Fox, his enormous knife still pointed at Jamie.

"That was her?" I asked. The sound had been what had made us turn back from the grave site.

"Do not listen to him," said Jamie. "You must help me! He is just a stupid injun! He's trying to scare us! That's what he's doing! Filthy redskin shit!" shouted Jamie. I was shocked because, despite her normal cussing, I never thought she'd be one to talk to one of the tribe that way. On top of it, she was also using perfect grammar. I don't know which surprised me more.

"Jamie?" I leaned closer, but Black Fox continued to hold me at bay with this free arm. I ran over to my pack and grabbed my matches. I lit one and held it up to Jamie's face. She recoiled as if I'd burned her, but the lit match was still a good two feet away from her.

"She looks different," I said, to no one in particular.

"Yes, she is being ridden by the shadow, Gus. It will change her appearance. Eventually she will be more shadow than human." Black Fox lowered the hand that he'd been using to hold me back.

"What's with this shadow shit, injun?" screeched Jamie, then she fell to her knees and abruptly began weeping. "Help me, Gus. Please!"

The match was about to burn out, so I looked around for a dry twig to light. When I saw one and leaned down to pick it up, Jamie sprang at me, screeching that ungodly howl like she was some sort of wildcat. I didn't want to hurt her, but I had to get away! I rolled across the ground, extinguishing the match as I did so. My eyes had become accustomed to the light from the flame so the darkness seemed even deeper than it had before. I couldn't see a thing but I could hear Jamie as she turned and ran off through the trees. Luckily, Black Fox's eyes were better suited for the night. He ran off after her.

I stood up and Hashi put his hand on my shoulder. "We follow. Black Fox will help her."

I nodded and felt around for my pistol. What the hell had just happened here? Had Jamie really just screeched like the devil and run off into the night?

I located the gun and Hashi and I started after Black Fox, but we didn't get far. We met him at the edge of the little clump of trees. He was breathing hard, his knife still held firmly in front of him.

"She is gone for now," he said.

"What? What do you mean, 'for now'?! We've got to go after her!" I yelled.

"No, Gus. We will go after sunrise. She is faster than a horse now and she sees better, but she will be easy to track in the daylight. The shadow will recede by the light of day as well. It may even leave her if we let it."

"Jesus!" I fell to the ground, struck by the reality of what had just happened. Hadn't I just been cuddling with Jamie in our camp? How long ago had that been? Ten minutes? What was happening here, and why was it all swirling around me?

"It's Jamie, Black Fox. Not some stranger. We have to go now before she gets hurt, like that other guy." I was close to weeping again, but I held it together.

"What other guy?"

Hashi spoke up. "A man blocked our way. He acted crazy."

"Hashi cut off his leg and the man fell down, but by the time we got to him, he was already as stiff as a week-old corpse. He's over in that field, but I'm thinking he'll keep 'til we find Jamie!"

Black Fox knelt beside me and put his hands on my forearms. "I speak the truth, Gus. She will be less likely to be harmed if we wait. Antagonizing the shadow spirit could cause it to burrow deeper within her. If that happens, they could become inseparable."

"You think it will leave her? If there really is something inside her, it's probably the same thing that killed Mr. Deerson! Why wouldn't it just kill Jamie too?"

Hashi dropped to one knee beside us, but continued to eye the area beyond the tree line.

Black Fox said, "I do not think this shadow will kill a woman. It may use one for a time, but it has only killed men to date, yes?"

I thought back through all that had happened. "But a bunch of women have disappeared in Twining and Mr. Parker's wife and daughter went missing too."

"Yes, but there have been no bodies. No women have been killed. Just taken."

I thought about the night when Seamus died. Had there been any women in the bar that night? I was sure there'd been at least one or two. I clearly remembered Mrs. Sherman guzzling the sauce with her husband.

"You might be right, but we can't just sit here!"

Black Fox rose and offered me his hand. "Yes, it is difficult, but you will do it if you wish to help her."

He obviously believed what he was saying so that made it a little easier to follow his instructions. I took his hand and stood up to follow him to our camp, but I kept looking back beyond the trees.

16

When the sun finally rose, it found Hashi and me on lookout and Black Fox snoring like a train engine. I could see the fear in Hashi's eyes but he never let on to me that he was afraid.

"Hashi, you weren't raised as Chickasaw, right?"

"No, Gus-san. I come to America a young man full of the adventures."

"Why come here? Didn't you like Nippon?"

"I like very much but..." Hashi paused and looked me in the eye. "We are friends, Gus-san?"

"Um, yeah. Yes. I'd like us to be friends." I felt as weary as I ever had in my entire life but I managed a half smile for Hashi.

"This is good. I wish it too. Good friends speak of these things, Gus-san, so I tell you. My father is great maker of," he grasped the hilt of his sword.

"Swords," I said, as if I were playing a parlor game.

"Hai. Swords. Many kinds. It was his honor to make swords for our emperor." At this he unsheathed his own weapon and looked into the steel. "I was to follow, but I disgraced him. I disgraced family."

He looked like I felt at that moment. "I'm sorry, Hashi. That sucks."

"Yes. Suck. I feel the same. But I want to draw the sword, not just make the sword. Wakarimasu?"

"You wanted to be a warrior, not a blacksmith. I get it."

"Hai. Father very angry. In my land, a person cannot change this way. Very bad thing."

"So you came here? That's a drastic move."



"I not know 'drastic' but I move. I come on boat from China that stop in Nippon to trade silk then come to San Francisco."

I was about to respond but Black Fox sat up and I was more eager to get started than I was to hear the rest of Hashi's story.

"Sorry, Hashi. Excuse me." I turned to Black Fox. "The sun's almost up."

Black Fox looked at me like I was a child with a terrible birthday present that, once unwrapped, might just devour me. "We will go soon. First we eat. This day will be long."

I was let down but his response wasn't entirely unexpected. If I'd thought that Black Fox could be coerced into leaving before he decided the time was right, I'd have skipped Hashi's story entirely and awakened the medicine man much earlier. If Mr. Deerson had taught me one thing about Chickasaw men it was that they could not be rushed.

We built a small fire and Hashi told me a little bit more of his story. About how he came east and met up with the Chickasaw tribe. Black Fox went ahead and prepared our meal, having obviously heard it all before. We ate in silence, then packed up our gear.

"Before we go," said Black Fox, "I wish to see the dead man who was ridden to Shunahoya's grave."

We walked to where the man had fallen in the grass the night before, but the body wasn't there. The leg either. Hashi and I looked around and even walked over to the grave and back to be sure. We had the right spot but the dead guy was gone.

"He was right here!" I said excitedly. "I swear to God he was!"

Hashi knelt to examine the grass. "Hai. Gus-san is right. We see this man fall here."

Black Fox examined the ground, then walked out past the grave. He turned back and waved us over.

"Someone walked away from here. I see your footprints around the grave and your steps back toward the man. There is another set here, though. It continues in that direction." He pointed out across the plains. The man had

somehow walked away in the direction that was the exact opposite of the way that Jamie had gone. Evil spirits or not, it was hard to consider that a coincidence.

"You think he's trying to draw us away from her?" I asked.

Black Fox said nothing, but Hashi was thinking of more practical matters. "Losa Opa, this man dead. I touch him. I kick him over. He only has one leg. He can not walk more."

There was something about the look on Black Fox's face that I didn't like. There was something he wasn't telling us, but I let it go for the time being. If he wanted to share, he'd do so in his own way and in his own time.

"We will go after Jamie," he said, and we walked back to get the horses. Hashi and I climbed onto our mounts but Black Fox walked ahead of his, eyes to the ground. It didn't take long for him to pick up Jamie's trail. He walked for a while then climbed onto his horse.

"Her trail is clear. We may move swiftly." That was what I wanted to hear.

We pushed our horses to their limits while Black Fox continued to survey the ground that rushed by beneath us. The clouds parted and the sun warmed us with its light as we continued the chase. That's what it really felt like—a chase. Only the person we were chasing had run this way eight or ten hours earlier.

I couldn't stop thinking that something terrible had happened to Jamie. Whether or not the shadow spirit was real, there were plenty of other threats out here. A wild animal could have taken a liking to a screaming, flailing girl, as could any number of men. As empty as the plains sometime seemed, there were often individuals out there who'd gotten stuck outside the edges of civilization. Some were white, others Indian, but however you cut it they weren't to be trusted. Years spent alone in nature did one of two things to a man. It either made him reverent and peaceable, or it made him completely crazy. I wasn't too worried about the former type, but the latter?

We'd been riding for several hours when Black Fox suddenly slowed his horse and dismounted. Hashi and I stopped too and watched as he examined the rocky soil.

"I do not see her path now," said Black Fox. "The Earth here is hard but I should still see signs of her passage. There are none. Her path just ends."

My heart beat quickly in my chest as if I'd been the one running instead of Sparks. "But, you can find her, right? It'll just take more time."

"Gus, I cannot track when there are no signs. I see none. It is as if she flew away from here like a bird."

I couldn't believe we'd come this far only to fall so short. "She couldn't be far away, could she? We've been riding a long time. Even if she ran all night she couldn't have gone much further. We should just keep going in that direction." I pointed ahead along the path we'd been following.

"A girl is not a train, Gus," said Black Fox. "She may not always move in a straight line or follow a logical path."

That thought made me feel stupid. He was right, of course. On foot, Jamie could go just about anywhere. Our advantage was speed but it had just run out on us.

"Okay, then what do we do? You tell me! You're the one who said we had to wait 'til morning! Well, now it's morning and she isn't here! How the hell do we find her?" The panic was taking root in my belly even though I was trying to will it away.

"We keep looking for her trail. It may turn up. It may not. That is not for us to decide."

I was getting sick of the Indian mumbo jumbo. Funny how it suited me when it worked in my favor but it became hokum the minute Black Fox stopped telling me what I wanted to hear.

Hashi and I dismounted and all three of us walked forward, scanning the ground for any evidence of Jamie's flight. My fears took hold of me, but I didn't speak them right away. Instead, I let them fester in my chest for a while like a putrid stew. When I couldn't contain myself anymore I asked, "What if she was picked up by someone?"

Black Fox answered without looking up. "Then we should see their path as well. Every being leaves behind a wake. Some are physical. Some consist of spirit. All can be seen, but not all by me."

We climbed a large hill and used the elevation to our advantage. I had no idea where we were, but the view at the top of the hill made it clear. There before us, spread out in the valley below, was the town of Twining. Had Jamie simply run home to her father? Was that it? It made sense. If her higher functions had been sabotaged by something, her base instincts would be like those of a child. Home. Food. Parents. I said none of this, but all of us were thinking it. We all got on our horses and began the slow ride down the other side of the hill.

We arrived on the outskirts of town in less than an hour and it wasn't long before my unusual friends started drawing unwanted attention from the locals.

"Hey Chinaman!" shouted one drunk bastard outside a saloon we rode past. "How's about doin' some launderin' for me?" He guffawed and I noticed that the front of his shirt was covered in dried vomit. I was thankful that Hashi ignored the man and kept on riding.

"We need to find the sheriff," I whispered to Black Fox. "I had a little run-in with him in Spruce Rocks right after Seamus was killed. He doesn't like me, but I think he'll listen to what I have to say."

Black Fox nodded. "Perhaps Hashi and I should not go to the sheriff with you, Gus. The white lawmen will not look kindly on us."

I shrugged. "Frankly, I don't give a damn if that asshole likes you or not. He's the law so he's got to help us, right?"

A crooked smile crossed Black Fox's lips. "The world is not how you would like it to be, Gus." I looked at him quizzically but he said nothing more on the matter.

After asking around, I finally got a duded up easterner to tell me where the jail was. We followed his directions and, sure enough, there it sat, just a stone's throw from the courthouse and hanging yard. Convenient.

I tied up Sparks but Black Fox and Hashi stayed put. "We wait here," said Hashi.

I don't know what angered me more – the idea that Black Fox was judging these people, or the idea that he was probably right. If I was honest with myself, and I wasn't on that day, I'd have reckoned that it was my own fear of going in there alone that was driving my anger to its peak. But like I said before, I knew better than to try and talk Black Fox out of something once he'd already made up his mind, and I also knew better than to ask Hashi to cross Black Fox. There was something between them that went deeper than friendship and maybe deeper than brotherhood. If we found Jamie and made it back to the reservation, I'd have to get them to tell the tale.

"Fine," I said as I turned toward the squat structure. "I'll be right back."

The walk was longer and harder than I'd expected. What the hell was I going to tell the sheriff? He already disliked me. I was pondering these things when I reached the wooden sidewalk. It was a quiet day with only the noise of a couple of passing wagons to distract me from my appointed task. I took a deep breath and plowed ahead, forcing my feet to take me into the little jail house. It was dark inside, but I could see well enough to make out the deputy behind the improvised desk made of a couple of barrels and some planks.

"What you need, son?" asked the man, amiably enough.

"Um, hey. I, uh... I need to see Sheriff Hays," I stammered.

"Uh-huh. And why you need to see the sheriff so bad?"

I hated gatekeepers. They were like those bridge trolls in the old storybooks. "My girl, her name's Jamie Winters, she's from here. Twining, I mean. She's from Twining. We were on the trail last night, and we camped out." I could see that the deputy was less than interested, so I thought I'd try and spice it up. "We were robbed and those bastards kidnapped my girl! Not much I could do about it,

there were so many of them. I don't know who they were but one was named Burton. I heard that clear enough."

The deputy sat forward and spit his cigar out. "You say Burton? Burton Alvord?"

"I don't know," I lied, "but he was bald and had a big moustache." Like I told you before, it helps to read the papers. Burton Alvord had been a lawman from Arizona 'til he got to hitting the sauce real hard and eventually turned outlaw. He and Sheriff Hays had been good friends back in the day, or so the Twining Sentinel had said.

"Jesus! Hell yes, the sheriff's gone need to talk to you, son. But he's in court right now. Might be there all day. You want to come back around supertime?"

"I will if I'm still in town. We got to get after these outlaws before they up and hurt my girl." I was working up my emotions real good there for a spell. Nearly shed a real tear or two when I considered that Jamie was still out there somewhere.

"Don't you go doing nothing rash, you hear? This ain't the eighties no more. You let the law do the heavy lifting. We're just gone need to know where to start looking."

He stared at me expectantly but I wasn't going to give him anything else just yet. "I'll only tell the sheriff," I said.

The deputy looked like he might just wring the sweat out of me so I turned and trotted out of there to meet up with my friends on the other side of the square.

"No dice. Sheriff's in court all day."

"We must find her house then. Surely she will seek her family."

"Yeah, well, Michael knows her father and knows where he lives but I've only ever been here a time or two, myself."

"Is there a land office?" asked Black Fox.

"Maybe. I think Twining had a claim club when it was originally settled but that wouldn't be legal these days. You thinking her daddy was registered when he settled?" Every thing he did, be it big or little, increased my overall estimation of Black Fox.

"It is a place to start," he said as his stomach grumbled. I was hungry too, but I needed to keep looking for Jamie more than I needed to eat.

"Tell you what," I said. How about you and Hashi go find some food and I'll go check out the land office real quick. It's bound to be close by if it's still here."

Black Fox nodded his assent and he and Hashi got on their horses and went off in search of sustenance. I wasn't sure if they'd get anybody to sell to them, but I had bigger worries at the moment.

The steps to the courthouse clicked under my boot heels as I climbed them nervously. I could handle a deputy, no problem. I understood that type. But these government folks? They gave me the willies. They were just like the big, cold buildings they inhabited.

I was wandering down a marble-floored hallway when I was stopped by an old man in a suit. I turned and quickly removed my hat.

"You lost, son?" he asked.

"No, sir. I don't...well, kind of. I'm looking for the land office."

The old man immediately relaxed and stroked his graying goatee now that he was able to put me into a category. Probably assumed I was a farmer from out of town.

"They don't call it the land office anymore," he said. "The federal government rolled it over into what they're calling the department of the interior. Ain't that a hoot? The one office that only deals with the great outdoors and they call it the department of the interior!" He laughed and stroked his goatee.

"Yes, sir," I said, waiting for him to calm his ass down and answer me. "Do you know where this interior office is, then?"

"Well, you'd be a fortunate fellow. I just so happen to be the federal agent in charge of the office that you seek. Mr. Beauregard P. Swain." I perked up a bit at this. He might have run on at the mouth a bit but at least I'd found what I was looking for.

"Really? Great!" I said with genuine enthusiasm. "August Brumbelow. Pleased to meet you, sir." Mr. Swain

grabbed my hand and shook the living daylights out of it. "I'm about to, uh..." I had to do some quick thinking. I was never one to brag or tell lies to increase my standing among others, but in a fix, I could rattle them off if I had to. "Well, you see, sir, I'm about to get married and..."

"And you were looking to settle some farm land in these parts! Is that it, son?"

"That could very well be, sir. I won't deny it. But first..." I looked up and down the hall as if fearful of being overheard. "First I was thinking I'd check to see what land the father of my betrothed has. He lives around here and he's telling me we'll inherit his land when he passes, god bless his soul."

"So you want to check out your dowry? Is that it, son?"

"Yes, sir. If it's not too much trouble."

"Follow me, young man. I think I can help you out," said Mr. Swain and he danced off down the hall.



I walked out of the courthouse with a small scrap of paper in my hand and an urgency in my heart that I'd not felt since we'd lost Jamie's trail. Hashi and Black Fox were sitting on a bench eating apples.

"Come on, let's go. I got Mr. Winters' address."

I untied Sparks and climbed into the saddle but Black Fox remained seated. Hashi started to stand but when he saw that Black Fox wasn't budging, he relaxed.

"What gives? Didn't you hear me?" I asked, perplexed.

Black Fox tossed me an apple. "You must eat," he said.

"You don't look much like my mother but you're starting to act like her." I said, annoyed that they weren't as excited as I was. I bit into the apple and spoke with my mouth full. "There, you happy? I'm going whether you come along or not."

I turned Sparks away and started riding down the street. It wasn't long before Black Fox and Hashi caught up with me. Black Fox said something but I really wasn't paying much attention to him at the moment. I was too busy looking for the street I wanted. Twining wasn't as big as Atlanta, but it was growing rapidly and there weren't always signs on the street corners.

"Did you hear me, Gus?" shouted Black Fox.

"Am I chewing with my mouth open now? Sorry, Ma," I sneered.

He continued to speak and I continued to ignore him. There was a time and a place for everything and the present moment was reserved for finding my girl. Black Fox eventually stopped trying to talk to me altogether. Instead, every time I looked back, he was huddled up with Hashi.

Fine. Let them sort through their apples. I had bigger fritters to fry.

After a couple of wrong turns and a bunch of suspicious looks from the locals, I found the house. It was a two story home of white clapboards just like any number of houses in the area. I dropped Sparks' reins across the hitching post out front and leaped up the steps to knock on the front door.

"Jamie! You in there? Jamie, honey, it's Gus!"

I pressed my ear against the door as Black Fox and Hashi walked up onto the porch behind me. It didn't sound like anybody was home.

Black Fox put his hand on my shoulder and pulled me around to face him. "Gus," he said. "I need to give you protection before we go inside. It is important."

I was frantic, fearing the worst, and the last thing I wanted was more Chickasaw spiritualism. "Look, you got to get off me, alright?!" I shouted, pushing him away.

"No. You will listen. I will not lose you to this shadow. I can offer you protection so you may safely touch Jamie when we find her. It will not take long."

I pounded on the door again, scared to death that she wasn't in there. While I did so, Black Fox grasped his medicine bag and began singing behind me. No matter what I said or did, he continued until he decided he'd done enough.

"That's annoying as hell," I said.

Black Fox shrugged. "Better to be annoyed than possessed by the shadow."

"Fine. So you going to help me get in here, or what?"

"I will help," he said, "but if we are to get inside, we should not do it here where we can be seen. The locals will not much take to a Chickasaw breaking down a white man's door."

He had a point. The last thing we needed was to get shot.

"Yeah, alright," I said. "Let's see if we can see anything through the windows. Ya'll go around the right side and I'll go around the left."

Hashi nodded and dragged Black Fox away with him. He saw that Black Fox was getting on my nerves so he was going to do his best to keep it from coming to blows.

I tried the front windows first. Not only were they locked, they were covered with something from the inside. Something was definitely wrong in there.

I climbed up on a rain barrel beside the house and saw the same thing in the side windows. Everything was locked and covered up from the inside. I couldn't reach the second floor but it looked like those windows were covered up too.

I rounded the back of the house and found Black Fox and Hashi standing by the rear entrance. "All the windows are locked and covered," said Black Fox.

"Same on this side," I said. "We've got to get in there and find out what's going on," I added, half expecting a fight, but there was none. Black Fox simply nodded.

I grabbed the stair railing and reared back to kick the door open but Hashi stopped me. He leaned forward and tried the knob. It turned easily and the door swung open with a creak.

"Well, I'll be goddamned," I said.

Hashi drew his sword and that seemed like a pretty good idea so I ran back to get the LeMat out of my pack. I stroked Sparks forehead and he nuzzled me in return. I gave him what was left of my apple and he ate it gratefully.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," I whispered to Sparks as he ate. "I hope so, anyway."

I checked the gun and walked around the house. When I reached the back porch I found Hashi and Black Fox just where I'd left them, staring into the darkness inside the house. Black Fox had taken down the porch lantern and lit it, but it was like a single star in a black sky.

"Our eyes will adjust inside. We must give them time," said Black Fox.

I nodded and we all moved inside slowly. Once over the sill, Hashi closed the door behind us.

"Hey, wait," I said. "That's at least letting some light in."

Black Fox turned to face me in the lantern light. "No, he is right to close it. It is better if the neighbors do not see an open door."

I disagreed, but I was outvoted so I kept it to myself as I looked around the room we were in. At first the only visible thing was the lantern's flame but slowly my eyes adjusted just as Black Fox had said they would. We were in a large, empty kitchen. It looked like no one had lived there for a very long time and there was a faint but decidedly dreadful odor to the place. I looked back and both Black Fox and Hashi nodded, urging me to take the lead.

We moved forward slowly in a clump. If my eyes had looked the way they felt, they'd have been sticking six inches out of their sockets as I tried in vain to make out the details of the house's interior. The next room was probably the dining room but I couldn't see anything yet. Everything was dark except for the lantern, as if the walls, floor, and ceiling were sucking the light in instead of reflecting it back.

The house appeared to be completely empty so I figured our best bet was to find a wall and follow it. We crossed the room and nearly ran into a closed door on the far side. The door was dark stained wood and the walls were covered in red velvet wallpaper with a black paisley pattern. No wonder they were hard to see.

I eased the door open and proceeded onward. I felt my way along the wall on the right side of the room and the lantern suddenly sputtered out. "What now?" I whispered in the darkness. "Hashi, you still got those matches?"

A silent hand placed the small box against my arm and I nearly screamed. I took a deep breath and tried to light a match. It sparked a little and I could smell its sulfurous odor, but it wouldn't light. I tried several times, but there was no flame.

"You get these wet or something?" I whispered.

Hashi's response was a terse, "No." Of course not. We'd been together the whole time since he lit the lantern out on the porch. When had he found the time to go swimming?

I tried another match and got the same disappointing result. I tried a third time.

"No more, Gus. Something is stopping the flame."

"That's crazy," I said. In actuality it didn't seem crazy at all, but saying it was made me feel a tiny bit better.

"Perhaps we could open a window," said Black Fox.

I nodded even though I knew he couldn't see me. I eased over to the right expecting to find a wall and possibly one of the covered windows. If I could just pull the fabric off of one window, we'd be able to see just fine.

I bumped into the wall and it made a flat, metallic sound. What the hell? I reached out with my right hand. The wall was smooth and cold. Definitely metal. I rapped on it with my knuckles and the strange sound filled the room.

"Sorry," I said, imagining my friends' reactions to the noise.

Black Fox moved up to the wall. I could hear him rustling around in the darkness, then he was suddenly beside me again.

"A metal sheet covers this window. Perhaps all of them. There are nails all the way around and nowhere to get a good grip to pry it free."

I was perplexed. Why would anyone do something like that? The only reason I could come up with was that they just had to keep the light out. But why would a person need to do that? A regular person wouldn't, but a person with one of those shadow things in them was a different story.

"Look, it's a house, right?" I reasoned. "If it's all as empty as this room, we should be able to feel our way around. We can at least see if we can find the front door. Maybe we can open it."

"Very well," said Black Fox. "But be careful of your hands. They lead the way for our eyes, but if we were to touch someone who is ridden by the shadows..."

"Yeah, I get it," I said.

Moving forward in the darkness was the strangest sensation. It made the room feel like it was enormous. It seemed to take at least an hour to cross that room, and it was like an hour spent holding my breath underwater. Every movement had to be forced along. Every step took an eternity.

When we finally reached the far wall, we found more metal plates hammered in place. I tried to remember the shape of the front of the house in order to figure out where we were in relation to the door, but I was so confused by the darkness that I might as well have been in the shed out back.

"I find a door," said Hashi. Black Fox and I reached out in the direction Hashi's voice had come from. Sure enough there was a door handle with a thumb latch, but the latch wouldn't budge.

"What now?" I asked. I felt bad for continually asking that, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Call out to her, Gus," said Black Fox. "Call Jamie's name."

"What? Why would I..."

"Do it quickly!" he hissed.

The urgency in his voice overrode any reticence on my part, so I said, "Jamie?"

"Louder. Do it now!" whispered Black Fox. "She is in danger."

"Jamie!" I shouted. "Jamie, can you hear me? We've come for you! Answer me if you can!"

My voice was still reverberating around the hollow bones of the house when we heard her shout. It was faint, as if it was a million miles away, but I could tell it was her. At first we couldn't tell where it was coming from, what with all the hard surfaces bouncing the sound around, but we eventually realized that she was above us. Upstairs!

"Follow me," I said as I began moving ahead. If we stayed close to the wall and moved in only one direction we had to come upon a staircase sooner or later. Black Fox put his hand on my shoulder and kept up without any problem. I could only imagine that Hashi had done the same behind him. We moved quickly since I was now convinced that the house was completely empty. I couldn't have been more wrong.

I jogged along with my fingers trailing the chair rail in the dining room until I ran into the balustrade. The railing nearly broke my extended fingers. I hissed in pain and Black Fox leaped ahead of me in the darkness.

"Gus! Gus, what is it?" he whispered.

"I'm alright. I jammed a couple of my fingers on the stair rail is all." The middle fingers of my right hand were jammed and the surrounding muscles were already swelling slightly. My knuckles throbbed as Black Fox gently examined them in the dark.

"They do not seem to be broken," he said. "We should continue. Do you wish to wait here?"

"No, I'll be fine. At least we found the stairs."

"Yes," said Black Fox carefully as if that single word held deep meaning.

The stairs were easy. We climbed until we reached a small landing and then we turned to the left. After eight more steps we were at the top, but we were still in complete darkness. I walked forward cautiously and ran right into a closed door. The knob turned but the door wouldn't open.

"Wait here," I whispered and I felt around for the stair rail. Sure enough it continued along the opposite side of the hall. We were on a balcony that overlooked the first floor below. I walked along the length of it to see if there was any other way into the rest of the second floor.

When I got back to Black Fox's position I said, "There are several doors but they're all locked."

"I will try," said Hashi. I heard a scraping sound and a click but I didn't hear the door open.

Black Fox said something to Hashi that I didn't quite make out then he turned back to me. "Call out to Jamie again, Gus," he said.

I was beyond questioning him at that point so I just did as he asked. "Jamie!" I shouted. "Are you up in there?"

"Gus, don't!" It was Jamie's voice, alright, but it was faint. It sounded like it was coming from behind the door that Hashi had just unlocked. I hurriedly reached for the doorknob but Black Fox stopped me.

"Be careful," he whispered. "If you see her, do not rush to her. Do not touch her until I can be sure she no longer holds the shadow. No matter what she says or what you see, you must promise me this."

"We're wasting time, Black Fox! Let me go!" I said. I couldn't see his face but I could imagine his steely gaze upon me.

"No. You must promise me first. You will not go to her until I have made sure we are safe. Either agree to this or I will go inside alone while Hashi holds you here."

I felt a tug at my waistband so I reached behind me. Hashi had taken the LeMat. "Whose side are you on, goddamnit?! We have to hurry! She's in danger!"

"She is, but trading one hostage for another is no way to proceed. You must promise to follow my lead when we go inside or I will leave you here to wait."

Black Fox obviously understood more about what was happening than I did and he was keeping me from doing the one thing we'd come there to do. It just didn't make sense to me. I wanted to scream and yell and stomp my feet, but I knew it wouldn't help. In fact, it probably would have hurt my standing with Black Fox considerably. During that small slice of eternity, standing there in the darkness with my hand on a doorknob that was becoming warm from my own body heat, I accepted the fact that I needed Black Fox's help. The contingency of that assistance was my own trust. Either I trusted him or I went home. It was as simple as that.

I relaxed my grip on the doorknob and tried to let go of my fear. I took a deep breath and said, "Fine. I'll do as you say. I give you my word."

I could feel Black Fox's body relax next to me. "Good. We will go ahead then," he said as he let go of my hand.



I turned the knob, half expecting the devil himself to pop out and spear me with his pitchfork. I never could have expected what I actually saw.

There was a red curtain over a large window at the far end of the room and it cast a brilliant red light over everything. It was so bright that the red light was pretty much all I could see at first. It was just a blown-out blur of color that I tried in vain to rectify into an image. Maybe it was the devil after all.

It took a few minutes but my eyes finally began to adjust. I could make out a chair with a figure standing behind it. Was it Jamie? I moved toward it but Black Fox grabbed my arm and I stopped. That was when the voice spoke to us. I couldn't tell if it was coming from the figure standing behind the chair or from someone else in the room, but it was big and booming and, strangest of all, familiar!

"The door's going to be open a little while longer," it said, "then ya'll can go on about your business. But 'til then, I need you to stay the fuck out of my way. Ya'll understand? If you don't now, you sure as hell will soon enough!" And with that pearl of wisdom, he laughed. Where had I heard that voice before?

"Gus? You there?" It was Jamie. I squinted and I could just make out her figure seated in the chair. It didn't look like she was being restrained or anything.

"It's me, Jamie. We've come to get you out of here." I spoke as calmly as I could.

"How sweet. And you going to take her away from all of this madness, right, August? You shall, but not until you understand a couple of things. It's very important so make sure you've all got your ears tuned up, alright?"

"Yeah, we can hear you," I muttered. My fear was slowly being replaced by anger.

"Good. You need to remember that your little girlfriend here is mine pretty much anytime I want her to be."

"Leave her alone, you asshole!" I shouted, and I felt Black Fox's hand on my shoulder again. *Calm down and we'll all get out of here alive*, it seemed to say.

"You're not listening. Shouting is the opposite of listening, boyo. You're old enough to know that," said the mellifluous voice. I was going to go crazy if I couldn't put my finger on just whose voice it was.

I took a breath and stood there quietly. Black Fox encouraged me with a pat on my shoulder.

"That's better," said the voice. "Always remember that I've had her and I can take her again at the time of my choosing. If you continue to get in my way I'll fuck her up good. Just like your friend Seamus and that sweet old injun horse."

Could it be that this person or thing hadn't been after Mr. Deerson at all? Maybe Shunahoya had been his target. First her and then Jamie. I didn't like the direction these things were pointing.

The voice remained silent but there was a shudder in the air like the boom of a thunderclap without the sound. Jamie stood up and I could see that she was holding a large bowie knife. She raised it to her left forearm and cut through the skin like it wasn't even there.

"Wait!" I screamed. "We'll do what you say! Just stop hurting her."

There was a cold laugh and the knife continued to cut a shallow slice in Jamie's arm. In the red light, I could just make out the blood as it ran down her fingers and dripped onto the floor.

"STOP IT!" I cried but I didn't run forward. My legs so wanted to propel me over to the chair so I could grab that knife and plunge it into the heart of the fucker who was doing this to Jamie but Black Fox and Hashi held me back.

The knife stopped its dangerous journey and Jamie dropped it into the puddle of blood on the floor, then she started crying. Her sobs filled the long room with misery that I could feel to my core.

"I just want you to know that my threat is a real one, boyo. Don't you try and stop us. Don't you do it. If you do, I'll use her to consume all of your souls. How would that be, girlie?" More laughter, mixed with Jamie's sobs.

It was more than I could take. Black Fox finally released me and I rushed to Jamie and ripped off my shirt to

make a bandage. I pressed it to her bleeding arm and she buried her face in my shoulder.

"It's alright. You're alright now," I said, and I almost believed it.

Hashi ran behind the chair, his sword drawn, but I couldn't hear anything over Jamie's sobs. Black Fox flung open the red curtains and flooded the room with sunlight but there was no one else there. The chair had a tall back on it, but it was hard to imagine that I'd mistook that for a man. Hashi was already examining every surface in the room, looking for some other exit, but there was none. Even the window had been nailed shut.

"How is she?" asked Black Fox.

"I think she'll be okay," I said.

Black Fox knelt beside the chair. "Jamie? Can you hear me?"

Jamie nodded but she didn't look up. "Yes."

"Do you know who I am?"

"What on Earth has that got to do with anything?!" I shouted, but Black Fox remained completely focused on Jamie.

"Can you say my name?" asked Black Fox gently.

"Yes," said Jamie. But she didn't say it.

She pulled away from me and wrenched herself sideways. It was too late when I realized she was going for the knife and she knocked me flat on my ass. She screamed the words "impa shilup" over and over. I'll never forget the sound of those words. Impa shilup! IMPA SHILUP! The words were squealed out like they came from a dog caught in a bear trap.

Fortunately Black Fox was expecting something like that to happen so he grabbed her and forced her to drop the knife. She went limp in his arms and she muttered more nonsense sounds

"We need to get her outside," he said, and he picked her up. He carried her out the open doorway and down the stairs. The sunlight from the window illuminated the staircase and even made most of the first floor visible. We made it to the kitchen and Black Fox stopped inside the back door.

"We must leave the darkness inside this house. All of the bad feelings. We must shake them off here. Hashi?"

Hashi seemed to know what to do. He reached into Black Fox's medicine bag and removed a bundle of something. It looked like a little cigar but it wasn't brown. It was green.

"Match?" asked Hashi, and I searched my pockets and gave him his matches back.

"No, you light it," said Black Fox.

I was more in the dark now than I had been when we were trying to get upstairs. Nevertheless, I lit the match. Hashi held the cigar in the flame for a moment then blew it out. A pungent smoke filled the space between us. Black Fox nodded to Hashi who reached once again into the medicine bag and this time removed a black feather that was tied to a small arrowhead with a thin, leather lanyard. Hashi used it to disperse the smoke around us.

Black Fox chanted something in Chickasaw then turned to me and explained, "You must leave your fears here. Your anger toward the Nalusa Falaya. Let the smoke heal you and take away these bad things."

I nodded but I didn't understand. Hashi used the feather to direct the smoke over each of us in turn and Black Fox watched intently. I don't know what he was looking for but eventually he nodded his satisfaction and he allowed us to go outside.

The late afternoon sunlight that was streaming across the back yard was literally blinding. Black Fox carried Jamie away from the house and laid her down beside a whitewashed shed that stood out back.

"I check the horses," said Hashi and he disappeared around the side of the house.

Jamie's face was peaceful, but she was still asleep, or unconscious.

"What did he do to her?" I asked.

"She has been ridden by the shadow. It will long remain a part of her. As he showed us, he can still control her at will. I will do my best to cleanse her spirit and wrestle this control away from him, but I do not know if she will ever be completely free."

I shook my head and thought, *What the hell does that mean?* But I didn't say it. I'd held it together this far, surely I could hang on until I knew that Jamie would be alright. I'd bent over to see if I could wake her up when Hashi came running around the side of the house.

"Sheriff!" he shouted.

"Stand up and turn around. All three of you. Do it slowly."

I recognized the voice. It was that fat, pasty sheriff. The one I'd encountered in Spruce Rocks the day after Seamus died. I did as instructed and I turned to see that he was backed up by two deputies. They all had their guns drawn.

"Sheriff Hays, isn't it?" I said as nonchalantly as I could given that I had my hands up.

"That's right. You look familiar, son. What's your name?"

"August Brumbelow, sir. I'm from Spruce Rocks. We met the morning..."

"That's right. You're the kid who saw all that crazy shit happen down there. Now you're in my town and it looks like some more crazy shit's happening." He looked at Hashi and Black Fox with a critical eye. "I'm starting to think the two things aren't a coincidence."

I shrugged, trying to keep my emotions in check. If I played this right, no one would get hurt and we'd all get away without incident.

"Maybe they're not. Our friend here was kidnapped. We got her out of the house here and were just trying to see if she was okay, but she's still unconscious."

The lawmen took another look at Jamie. I was pretty sure they'd assumed she was a boy, what with the clothes she was wearing.

"Right," said the sheriff. "I saw her in Spruce Rocks too. I also heard you were telling some tall tales back at my jailhouse."

"Sheriff, you know of a better way to get your attention? I've been worried about my girl here and just

wanted some help finding her. Now if you don't mind, we need to get her to a doctor. She's been through quite an ordeal." I sighed, as if I was disgusted by the man, which wasn't too far from the truth. "Can we at least put our hands down?"

The sheriff nodded and turned to his deputies as he holstered his pistol. "Check out the house, but stay on your guard."

The two men tentatively opened the back door and ventured inside.

"Whose house is this?" asked the sheriff.

"I think you know," I answered as I knelt beside Jamie. "It's hers. Well, technically it's her daddy's. She's Jamie Winters. Her father's Levis Winters."

The sheriff nodded but he looked confused. He glanced around sheepishly while I tried to make Jamie more comfortable.

"What is it, Sheriff? You got something on your mind?"

"Yeah. If Levis Winters is actually her daddy, you might want to break the news to her gently when she wakes up. He was killed yesterday."

I glanced up at Black Fox. "Oh. Shit, I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "You mind telling me how he died?" I didn't expect the lawman to answer me, but his belligerence seemed to have drained away all of a sudden.

"He, uh..." He paused to clear his throat then he spit into the bushes. "Mr. Winters body was found bound and burned. His head was painted with his own blood and left to rot atop his horse's saddle horn. The horse wandered into town that way. Caused a genuine panic when people realized what they were seeing." The big man removed his hat and mopped his brow. He was sweating to beat the band but it was nice and cool out there in the shade. I remember thinking that it must be the extra fat that made him sweat so much, but it might be something else. Some folks would sweat in a snowstorm if they were keeping secrets. He seemed to be putting something together and that something was scaring the shit out of him. I wanted to tell him all about the things that had happened to us, but I didn't

trust him. This was one shifty fellow and his behavior that day in Spruce Rocks gave me no confidence in him at all.

The back door swung open and both deputies bolted down the steps taking them two at a time. The sheriff suddenly took on a more commanding demeanor.

"What did ya'll find?" he asked his men.

One of the deputies, a younger man with a knotted bush of black hair on his head looked at us, then back at the sheriff.

"It's alright. You can tell me in front of them," said the sheriff.

"Well, sir, it's mighty weird in there. They got flattened tins over all the windows and no light can get in anywhere but one big window upstairs. There ain't a stick of furniture in the whole place except for a big wing back chair that's sitting in something that looks like blood. There's a puddle on the floor and there's a bowie knife beside it."

The sheriff turned back to me. "She was alone when we got here, Sheriff," I said. "Locked in that room. I don't know if anybody was in there with her, but I expect there was. That blood you found is hers." I held up Jamie's bandaged arm. "That's my shirt in case you wondered why I wasn't wearing one." I'd pretty much forgotten about that myself. No wonder it felt so cool out.

"And what brought you here looking for her?"

"It just made sense to check her house. We thought she might have gotten away from her captors last night. Black Fox here's a good tracker. He saw signs of a struggle and thought she'd run off on her own, but her trail went through a rocky area and we lost it. I figured we ought to check with her father to see if she'd run home." The best lies were the ones that were mostly true.

My mention of Black Fox had directed the sheriff's gaze to the Chickasaw, but Black Fox met that stupid gaze with humility and poise. If white men had done to my people what they'd done to his, I don't know that I'd have ever been able to maintain my composure around them. Even around someone like me, for that matter.

"Alright, you better get her to the doc."



"Thank you, sheriff. Will do," I said, "if you'd just be so kind as to direct us to the closest doctor's office."

An hour later, Jamie was in the capable hands of a local physician named Dr. Brunson. He was young for a doctor, but he had a kind face with a broad nose and a bushy, blonde moustache, and he obviously knew what he was doing. He had Jamie up and around in a matter of minutes, but he still wanted to examine her more thoroughly in private.

Hashi, Black Fox and I stood out on his porch and watched the sun set between the buildings across the way.

"This place is troubled," said Black Fox. "The shadow likes it here because he has fed, but now the well is running dry. He will need a new hunting ground but the distances are too great for him to travel alone. He rode Jamie here in much the same way that we rode our horses and now he will need a new beast of burden to take him to his next destination."

I looked over at Sparks and wondered if his horse mind understood anything that was going on. If it did, he was probably thinking it was about time we humans knew what it was like to be ridden.

"You think he brought her here just to get us off his trail? He could have just killed all of us last night, you know."

"Maybe," said Black Fox. "He is weak when he is away from his power base. He must feed. It takes many to sustain him and his appetite is growing." He paused before releasing the next bombshell on me. "The man you saw beside the grave last night was most likely Jamie's father."

"Great. I don't know about you and Hashi, but my soul felt like it was about to be eaten last night. For most of the day today too, for that matter."

"Do not joke on this, Gus," warned Black Fox. "The threat is real and he has shown that he has the ability to make us do as he chooses."

I took his warning to heart, but I still had no idea what this shadow thing really was. "You're calling it a 'he' now. Is that because of the voice?"

Black Fox looked at his feet and kicked a clump of dried mud off the step he was standing on, then he sat

beside me on the edge of the porch. "I have that impression. That is all. The voice we heard could have been a trick, but I think now that we may be dealing with something more special than a Nalusa Falaya. This being is acting on his own. He has a motive and a drive to achieve his goals. That is why 'it' has become 'he'. I believe he may be the great black being himself, set foot upon the Earth to feed on us and cause havoc. It is possible we have encountered the Nalusa Chito." Black Fox said the words slowly and with great weight, but they were meaningless to me.

"I'm sorry, but I don't get any of this nalusa talk. You saying that this is like the head shadow thing? The leader?"

"It may be said that way. These beings are from the old stories that many Chickasaw no longer believe. Our Choctaw cousins still do, but they are far away if there are any of them left at all. This shadow is also known to the Choctaw as the Impa Shilup. He is the soul eater who consumes men before they may pass down the spirits' road. He is much like the devil white people speak of, only this one can take the souls of the living. It is what he uses for sustenance."

"You mean he literally eats people's souls?"

"Yes. The souls of men."

It was hard to believe such a tale but the voice had been real. We all heard it say the same things. Or did we? "Black Fox, when that voice was speaking at Jamie's house, what did you hear?"

"I heard the words but the speaker was without form. Did you not hear it?"

"No, I heard it. That's not what I meant. Can you describe how it sounded to you?"

"It sounded like a man, only louder and deeper than a man's voice. Very sure of himself. Like an elder. Why do you ask this?"

"What language did the voice speak?"

Black Fox considered for a moment, then rubbed his face with his hands. "I cannot be sure, but I believe I heard Chickasaw. It was almost as if I heard nothing, but felt the words from inside."

I nodded and turned to Hashi. "What about you? Did you hear English from the voice?"

"I hear in Nihongo, the talk of my people. I was frightened, but the words comfort me too. It has been long since I hear this talk."

"Interesting. The voice spoke English to me. I'm certain of it."

"Curious. What do you think it means?" asked Black Fox.

"Funny, I was about to ask you the same thing." I smiled. "If I had to guess, I'd say this thing was talking to us through our minds instead of our ears. You ever hear stories about anything like that happening?"

Black Fox shook his head. "I know you have faith in my abilities, Gus, and I am appreciative, but I am not like Deer Son. Perhaps one day I will be but I am not yet as skilled or insightful."

Hashi sat down beside us and I imagined we looked like three birds perched on a fence. "Do stories tell how to remove this spirit?" he asked.

"I do not know of them," said Black Fox. "I do not think he can be destroyed."

We sat on the porch of the Doctor's house until darkness had taken the sky and our stomachs were grumbling. My thoughts were consumed by the idea that we'd been spoken to by what was for all intents and purposes, the devil. THE devil, like from THE Bible. If we couldn't kill him, then how could we ever hope to win this fight? Wouldn't we be better off just hiding away until the storm had passed? Let him take all the souls he wanted so long as he didn't take ours. Those were selfish thoughts, but I'm man enough to admit that they crossed my mind. All of us had already lost friends to this thing. How many more would it take before it moved on?

I was about to go for a walk when the doctor's front door swung open, flooding the porch with lantern light from inside.

"Ya'll can come in and see her," he said, "but only for a few minutes. After that, you got to skedaddle, but I'll allow her to stay here for the night. Alright?"

I nodded along with the others and we followed the doctor inside.

"I don't normally keep patients here overnight, but you're a homely lot and I doubt you'd get service at the hospital. Just don't go spreading it around, okay? I have a hard enough time without a bunch of hard cases showing up on my doorstep."

"No, sir, Doc," I said. "And don't you worry about payment. It might take me a while but I'm going to make sure you get paid. That's my word on that." And I meant it. Even as a young man, I felt like it was important for me to pay my debts.

The doctor nodded but I could tell he took what I said with a grain of salt. He led us into the little examination room where he'd set up a small army cot for Jamie. She looked so frail and helpless lying there. She'd become the opposite of the girl I knew her to be. I crouched beside the cot and kissed her on the cheek.

"Jamie? You alright, sweetie?" I said.

"I gave her something so she'd sleep," said Dr. Brunson. "She lost a good bit of blood. It'll take a little time for her to regain her strength but she should be back to normal in a day or two."

Hashi and Black Fox knelt beside me and we all rested our hands lightly on her arm. She stirred and her eyes opened slowly.

"Hey, ya'll." She smiled, then immediately fell back to sleep.

"That's the show for tonight, boys," said the doctor.

Hashi and Black Fox stood to go but I asked, "Can I have a minute alone with her. Just a minute, I promise." The doctor kindly consented.

The others left the room as I lay my head on Jamie's chest to listen to her heartbeat. "I'm so sorry I couldn't stop this, Jamie. I hope you'll give me another chance. I promise you. I'll not let anything like this happen again."

Her eyes flickered open and she mumbled my name with a slight smile, then she fell asleep again and I felt doctor Brunson's hand on my shoulder.

"Time to go. You can see her again in the morning."

I thanked him and reminded him again that I'd be footing the bill, then I hoofed it out to the street where Black Fox and Hashi waited. I tried to wipe my eyes without them seeing, but they probably noticed my tears anyway.

"She will be well," said Hashi with a single, stern nod.

"Yes," added Black Fox. "Her spirit is strong. It flows within her and will help to keep the shadow at bay."

I sighed and thanked my friends for their words of encouragement, but deep down I had my doubts about Jamie's safety. How do you protect someone from something you can't even see?

Dr. Brunson persuaded his neighbor, Mr. Carlton, to allow us to bed down in his barn for the night. I wanted to find a hotel that would accept the three of us, but Black Fox said he didn't think they'd let him stay in any of the white establishments. Besides, he claimed he'd rather make camp. I'd have loved to have spent the night on clean sheets, but I decided to stay with my friends instead.

I woke to the sweet smell of hay and I looked up to see Mr. Carlton's rooster staring down at me from his perch on my chest. I was scared, having never quite gotten over being pecked by our chickens back home when I was little. I wasn't sure what to do to get him to move on so I said, "Hi, chicky chicky chicky. Good chicky."

The door to the barn stood open and Hashi turned to look in on me. "He is liking you," he said with a smile.

"Um, yeah. I guess so. You know how to make him go away?" I asked.

Hashi's smile grew into a grin. "You not afraid of small bird, are you, Gus-san?"

"No. Nothing like that. I just don't want him getting hurt if I shoo him away." My words seemed to spark anger in the rooster. He crowed and stared at me as if I'd turned into a particularly delicious kernel of corn.

"Who is your new friend?" asked Black Fox as he entered the barn. It seemed I was the last one up.

I didn't take the bait, instead choosing to stay still, flat on my back. The rooster was content to stay put too. At least he wasn't pecking me yet.

Black Fox smiled at Hashi then walked over and plucked the rooster off my chest with both hands. He whispered something to the animal then tossed him out into the barnyard. "Is that better?" asked the medicine man.

I sat up in the hay and brushed off my chest. "Yes. Much better. Thanks." I wasn't going to ask at first, but then my curiosity got the better of me. "What did you say to him?"

"To this chicken?" asked Black Fox, pointing at the rooster who'd lighted on a fencepost.

"Yes. What did you whisper to the rooster?"

Black Fox looked at Hashi then back at me. He was in a particularly playful mood that morning, probably because it was the first good night's sleep we'd had in a couple of days.

"I told him that he could rest later. He has work to do."

"What?"

Black Fox pointed toward the hen house and I got the picture and laughed. "I wish my job was so easy," I said.

"Life is sometimes difficult for us all. Even for this bird," said Black Fox. "But if you stay to your own path you will find it is never beyond your abilities. Animals know this easily but man has a hard time understanding."

I got up and walked out into the barnyard. Dr. Brunson was on the back porch speaking to Mr. Carlton. He shook his neighbor's hand then came striding across the yard with a big smile on his face.

"Good morning, gentlemen. Mr. Carlton says you fellows took the liberty of taking care of his chickens and horses this morning. Says you even raked the barnyard. He's mighty grateful."

I realized that they'd managed to do the chores without disturbing me and I immediately felt guilty for not participating. Even so, I felt very proud of my new friends because they were good people. While I stood beaming in those warm feelings, I suddenly realized that one of them had to have placed that rooster on my chest as a joke. My money was on Hashi.

"We are grateful to Mr. Carlton for giving us a place to rest," said Black Fox. "He is most generous."

Hashi said, "Hai!"

"How's Jamie?" I asked.

The doctor nodded toward the house. "Go on in and ask her yourself. She's awake."

I started across the yard at a good clip and was almost at Dr. Brunson's back door when I realized the others had stayed put. I turned back and raised my hands in that universal gesture that said *what the hell?* They just waved me on.

I went in through the back door and found the house to be completely silent. I could smell coffee and what had to be some sort of bread baking.

"Jamie?" I whispered.

"In here," came her response. The sound of her voice made me smile.

I rounded the corner and found her standing beside the cot. We embraced as if we'd been apart for a year.

"Oh my God, Jamie. I'm so sorry," I whispered in her ear.

She held me tight and rested her head against my chest. I don't know how long we stood there like that, but we separated when we heard the back door swing open. I looked down into her eyes and saw that she'd been crying.

Black Fox was the first one through the door. Jamie went to him and hugged him tightly, then she turned and did the same to Hashi.

"I don't know what kind of shit I'd be in if ya'll hadn't come to get me. I owe you." She laughed even though she was still crying.

"Everything the power does, it does in a circle," said Black Fox. I wasn't sure what he meant by that but it made Jamie happy so that was enough for me.

"How about ya'll join me for some biscuits and coffee?" said the doctor. "They ought to be about done."

The thought of a hot breakfast brought smiles to all our faces. We followed Dr. Brunson into his dining room to partake of a genuine feast. Not much was said as we gobbled up everything that was set in front of us.

After we'd finished eating, I sat back in my chair and took in the room. That was when I noticed it. The doctor had a piano! It wasn't like the old beaters I was used to playing. It was a dark, wooden upright whose flawless finish showed that it had been meticulously maintained. The others continued to converse but I stopped hearing them. I got up



and slowly walked over to the instrument, afraid that if I moved too fast it might turn out to be a mirage.

The doctor was coming back in from the kitchen when he saw me staring at the piano. "That was my mother's," he said. "Never played, myself. My hands were more adept at stitching up wounds than they were at playing music, I'm afraid."

My heart sank. If he didn't play, the odds were against his keeping it tuned. "It's beautiful," I said, unable to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

"I used to love listening to her play," said Dr. Brunson. "I couldn't bear to part with it after she died so I have it taken care of by Milford Bastin whenever he's through these parts. Good fellow. Do you play, Gus?"

I nodded, hoping that the words I anticipated would actually come out of the doctor's mouth.

"Then I'd love to hear a couple of tunes. If you'd grace us, that is."

"What? Really? Oh no, I couldn't..."

"Well, I reckon you could. I just said so. Don't happen to know any Beethoven, do you? That was my mother's favorite."

"I think I could manage that," I said as I pulled out the little round stool and spun it to raise the seat. "How about the Moonlight Sonata?" If there was one piece I longed to play on a good piano, it was that one.

The doctor practically swooned at the suggestion. "Mama used to play that to lull us to sleep at night. I'd love to hear it again."

I sat down and opened the keyboard cover. The keys were pristine. No chips or discolorations other than the natural yellowing of the ivory. I'd never played a truly fine instrument in my life. I tried middle C and it rang out clear and true. I smiled and looked back at the doctor who waved his hand to hurry me on. I think he was looking forward to it almost as much as I was.

My fingers found the right keys and I gently began to coax the Moonlight Sonata out into the room. I don't know if it was the emotions of the day or the relief that Jamie was alright, but the notes fell right into place one after the other,

ebbing and flowing like a large river, exactly the way I heard them in my head. As the piece progressed, I realized that my heart was overflowing. It was brimming with feelings of relief and love and all those passionate things you feel but can't quite attach such simple words. It felt like my emotions were going to rupture my chest and leak out like so much blood on the floor.

But as I played on, I fell off the eight ball. I started thinking too much about what I was doing and those thoughts delayed my fingers just enough to throw my timing off. The harder I tried, the worse it got. I tried to force the music out for my friends, but I'd lost my way. Here was my one shot at playing one of my favorite pieces of music on a near-perfect instrument and I'd blown it.

After I played the final chord of the first movement, I left my hands on the keys and let the tones ring out. No one moved at first, then the doctor led my friends in a big round of applause, complete with whoops and hollers. I didn't hear them so much, though. I was wrapped too tightly in my self critique.

Jamie came over and wrapped her arms around me. She was saying something about how much she liked it, but I wanted her to stop. I wanted all of them to stop making a fuss. I knew where I'd screwed up. A sonata like that wasn't a sloppy ragtime piece that you could have your way with. It was music that needed the rhythms of nature. It required more skill than my ham hands could provide. I eventually took a deep breath and tried to cordially accept the compliments, but it wasn't easy.

"That was wonderful, Gus. Thank you so much!" said the doctor. I noticed he was wiping his eyes. "That brings so many fond memories back. I know you're intent on paying the bill for Jamie's care, but in my opinion, you just took care of it! So wonderful."

"Thank you, sir," I managed to say, my frustration being replaced by a sort of guilt. I felt like a sham. These people only thought my playing was good because they didn't know any better. I felt like I'd fooled them.

Everyone but Jamie pitched in and helped clear away and wash the dishes. The doctor gave her orders to rest, so

she sat at the piano and dinged out a few notes here and there while we cleaned. It was funny to see four men in the kitchen together but it made for very quick work.

"I feel like a smoke," said the doctor. "Would anyone care to join me?"

Black Fox said, "I will," then he ran out the back door.

"Did I say the wrong thing?" asked the doctor.

"No," said Hashi, but he refused to elaborate.

In a few moments, Black Fox returned with a deerskin bundle that was decorated with beads. "Let us go out under the sky," he said. We all agreed and followed him outside.

There was a lone tree in the doctor's back yard with a wooden bench underneath. Jamie sat there while we men stood and watched Black Fox withdraw a beautiful clay pipe from the bundle.

"This is my tribe's calumet," he said, handling the small object with great respect. I would like to share it with you and grow from the sharing. The smoke will carry our prayers to Aba Binili and perhaps help insure Jamie's release from the shadow. Will you join me?"

It wasn't exactly the kind of thing you could say no to. The doctor stood up a little straighter and pushed his glasses up his considerable nose. "I'd be honored," he said.

There was no ceremony, just a quiet moment while Black Fox loaded the pipe with a generous amount of tobacco from his pouch. The smoke was fragrant and sweet as he fired the bowl with a match. Then he offered it to Dr. Brunson. "We are thankful for our host. You are a great healer."

The doctor smiled and did a sort of half-bow then he placed his lips on the pipe and inhaled deeply.

"No, wait," said Black Fox, but it was too late. The doctor coughed and so much smoke came out that he looked like a locomotive straining to get up a steep hill. He hacked and wheezed for what seemed like an eternity before finally standing upright and wiping his watering eyes on his sleeve.

"I apologize," said Black Fox. "This is not the tobacco of the white man. It is for the poofing." He looked to me and mimed smoking with his cheeks puffed out.

"Puffing," I said, trying hard not to laugh. "He's saying you have to puff on it. Gently."

"Oh," said the doctor. "I am an inexperienced pipe smoker. I should have known better than..." He stopped abruptly and ran around behind the tree to lose at least a small portion of his breakfast. When he emerged again, he looked more ill than Jamie. He politely passed when the pipe was offered to him again.

I sat down beside Jamie and we all enjoyed one another's company for a spell. By the time the pipe was empty, the sun was climbing high in the sky. We all knew it was time to move on. It was just hard to leave the solace provided by the good doctor.

"Well, Doctor, I'd say we've overstayed our welcome," I said. "We certainly don't want to impose on your hospitality."

Black Fox and Hashi began putting away their things so quickly that you'd have thought a starting gun had just sounded. They'd both been eager to leave for a while but had been unable to figure out how to delicately extract us without offending our host.

"You folks are no imposition," said the doctor with a smile, but I sensed that he was relieved to have us on our way as well. He probably had a lot of work to do, just like we did. Fortunately for him, his work didn't involve hunting down an invisible shadow demon.

"Doctor," said Jamie. "I don't know how to thank you. You're a real godsend." And with that she rushed in and hugged him hard, catching him off guard. I thought he might lose a little more of his breakfast, but he managed to hold on until she let go.

"It's my pleasure, Miss Winters. Come on in the house and I'll dig out some medicine for you to take with you."

Jamie followed the doctor inside and ten minutes later she emerged carrying a pair of saddlebags loaded to the gills.

"We got to get him some money," she whispered to me as we went to tack up our horses. "He give me all of this, Gus. Said it ain't right for a lady to be out on the road without the necessities." She held open one of the bags to

reveal soaps and towels and all manner of sweet-smelling things.

"Wow. I reckon we'll be attracting ants with all of that stuff," I joked.

Jamie punched me in the shoulder. At least her strength was coming back. "It ain't the stuff, Gus. It's that he thinks of me as a lady!" She practically swooned and I realized there was a lot more to her than the obstinate tomboy I'd known so far. I tucked away that knowledge in a safe place.

"Don't worry. I intend to pay him back, and then some."

I never had any use for long goodbyes, so once we were mounted up, I waved to the doctor and started off down the street. With one last glance back over my shoulder, I saw him go back inside his house.

We rounded the corner and I eased Sparks toward Jamie's house. We needed a place to talk in private before making our next move and I figured Jamie had every right to be in her father's home.

"Hold on," said Jamie, stopping her horse. "We ain't going back to my Daddy's house are we?"

I nodded. "I don't know where else we're can go. We need to..."

"No! I ain't going back in there, Gus!"

"Well," I stammered, "I figured we could open up those windows and let some light in and it'd be like a completely different place."

"You better think again, then," she shouted. "I don't care where we go as long as it ain't there!"

It occurred to me that she must have remembered more of what had happened to her, but those thoughts were cut short by the sight of the sheriff and several of his deputies easing down the street on horseback. They looked to be angling toward us.

"We must argue about our destination later," said Black Fox, and I was inclined to agree with him.

We turned left onto the next street, which was little more than an alley, and ran straight into another cadre of

deputies. The only difference was that these had their guns drawn and pointed in our direction.

The happy morning we'd had at the doctor's house was well on its way to becoming a miserable afternoon. The sheriff closed off the street behind us and spooked Sparks so much that he spun in place and neighed wildly.

"Easy there, Sparks," I whispered in his ear as I patted his neck. Why the hell were they cornering us now when they'd had us in custody yesterday?

"One of you fellas got a bow on you?" asked the sheriff as if owning a bow was a capital offense. "Maybe you, injun?"

We'd rearranged our packs so Hashi'd ended up with Black Fox's bow hanging from his saddle. He raised a hand but wisely kept the other one clear of his bow.

"Suppose you got arrows to go with that, don't you, Chinaman?" The sheriff's slur sent a ripple of laughter through the deputies. This was no posse. It was a lynch mob.

"Yes, sheriff," said Hashi politely.

"Let's see them then!" said the sheriff as he struggled with his horse's reins.

Hashi looked to Black Fox who gave him the subtlest of nods. He then reached behind his back and held out the quiver of arrows to the sheriff. The lawman gestured to one of his subordinates, a gaunt man who looked like he hadn't eaten in a long while, and the deputy retrieved the arrows for him. I wasn't sure what this was all about but I was fairly certain that it wasn't going to go our way.

The sheriff removed one of the arrows from the quiver and eyed the feathers on the end. They were white with small blue stripes.

"Did you lose one of your arrows recently, chink?" asked the sheriff with a nasty giggle. The other men laughed too as Hashi shook his head. "Well, sir, then I wonder if you

might be able to explain this?" He held up the charred remnants of an arrow that clearly had the same tail feather markings.

"Where'd that come from?" I asked. I knew we'd be better off if we all just shut up but my emotions got the better of me and I fell into their trap.

"Plucked it out of what was left of that girl's dead daddy," said the sheriff.

Jamie turned to me as if she'd been slapped. "What's that? Gus?"

I didn't know how to tell her and I was pretty damn sure this wasn't the place to do so but I had to answer. "The sheriff said they found your father's body a couple of days ago." The story about his head would have to wait. "I'm sorry but I thought it best to tell you when you were feeling better."

The look in her eyes told me that she was in hysterics on the inside, but her outward demeanor remained relatively calm. She wasn't going to let her feelings show in front of the lawmen if she could help it. Instead she just teared up quietly and tried to find something to do with her hands.

"That's right, girlie, and I think we done found his killer right here!" said the sheriff. He waved a big, fat arm toward his deputies. "Take him, boys."

The entire group descended upon Hashi and, to his credit, he didn't struggle. He just looked up at Black Fox and pleaded with his eyes. *Don't let them do this. You know what will happen to me.*

We stayed on our horses but I had to do something. I marched Sparks forward to stand between the sheriff and the arresting deputies. "That arrow's not proof of anything and you know it!" I said as calmly as I could.

"Good. Keep it up and you can take the cell right next to your friend here. Chances are ya'll was all in on it from the get go, but I'm going to let you be for now. At least 'til we get the chink's confession."

I was raging, my face now hot as a pistol, but Black Fox watched stoically from atop his horse. His passive stance made me even angrier. "Are you going to just let them take him?" I shouted at him, but he wouldn't even look at me.



"The injun knows what's good for him, son," said the sheriff. "You could learn a thing or two from him. Now move aside or I'll have you brought in for interfering with an arrest."

I wanted to grab that gigantic pistol that was stuffed in my bag and unload the damn thing into that idiot's face, but I restrained myself and did as I was told. I pulled Sparks back out of the way while I quietly vowed to do anything in my power to make sure that asshole paid for what he was doing.

The lawmen rode off with Hashi behind them on foot, his hands tied to the sheriff's saddle with a length of rope. As they rounded the corner Hashi caught my eye and I nodded to him. One way or the other, we were going to get him back. I just hoped they didn't kill him before we got our chance.

Once we were alone, Jamie broke down in tears and fell off her horse. Black Fox and I dismounted in unison and I checked on Jamie while he went to grab the reins of Hashi's horse.

"Hey, now. It'll be alright," I said as I rubbed Jamie's back with the palm of my hand. She was on her knees, face down in the dirt but no one came out of the neighboring buildings to check on her. The presence of the sheriff and his men had cleared the street.

"Why didn't you tell me?" wailed Jamie through her sobs.

"Jamie, you were sick and I just didn't know how. I'm real sorry, but I never had to tell somebody I loved something so terrible before."

She turned her head and looked up at me through glassy eyes. For a second there I thought she was going to clock me, but then she embraced me and let loose a new bout of crying. I held her close and stroked the back of her head. It had been a mighty rough week for both of us.

"We must go," said Black Fox. He picked up his bow and the quiver of arrows then he looked around at the parted curtains on both sides of the streets. Folks were watching.

I nodded and held Jamie away so I could see her face. "You okay to ride?"

She mumbled, "I'll be okay," and wiped her nose on her sleeve. I pulled her to her feet and brushed the dirt off her dungarees, then helped her onto her horse. Normally she would have given me a load of grief for that, but that day she accepted my assistance and even said "Thank you." That's when I knew for sure that she was in bad shape.

We rode out of the alley as quietly as possible but I had no idea what to do next. I whispered to Black Fox, "We can't leave town. Not yet. We have to help Hashi."

"For now, we will help him most by leaving this place, but we will return," he said.

We rode toward the eastern edge of town, taking it slow and easy. Black Fox was deep in thought and Jamie was deep in her own misery so there wasn't much chatter.

As we approached the town line Black Fox leaned over and asked, "What is a chink?"

"It's a putdown. It's what men of that sort call Chinamen."

"But Hashi is not from China."

"They don't care. Those sorts don't know the difference between a Chickasaw and a Nez Perce. How would they know anything about China?"

Black Fox nodded. "We will help Hashimoto," he said, then he urged his horse forward and he whooped a yell toward the heavens.

"What's that all about?" asked Jamie.

"I think he's got a plan to get Hashi out. At least I hope that's what it means."

We found a place just outside of town where we could camp without being disturbed. There was an expanse of forest there and an unfinished rail spur where an old supply car sat abandoned. When we rode up, we noticed leftover bits of trash that told us we weren't the first ones to seek shelter at that location. That was good. That meant we wouldn't attract any undue attention by being there.

I laid out a bed roll for Jamie inside the dilapidated freight car, then went out into the forest to gather some wood. A short while later, Black Fox and I were enjoying the warmth of our fire while Jamie slept.

"You are worried," said Black Fox.

"They teach you those brilliant observation techniques in medicine man school?" I asked with a smile.

"Yes," answered Black Fox. He was one hell of a straight man.

"Then, yeah, I'm worried. It was bad enough when all we had to do was fight some kind of devil. Now we have to free Hashi AND fight a devil. I honestly don't know which one's going to be harder to do."

"Fighting the devil will be harder." At first I thought he was joking, but then he added, "Men are always easier to deceive than beings from the spirit world."

"So how are we going to get him out of there? You realize they might just kill him for the hell of it, right? They've had a lot of disappearances in these parts and it would be to their benefit to blame it all on somebody like Hashi."

"You mean a man who is not white."

"Yes."

Black Fox sighed and stirred the fire with a stick, sending sparks flying upward to vanish into the darkness. "August, when you look upon my face, what do you see?"

"What does that mean?"

"Who do you see before you?"

"I see you, of course. What kind of stupid question is that?"

"Yes, but who am I to you? To me, you are my friend who plays beautiful music."

"Well, to me you're a Chickasaw medicine man who I hope is a friend of mine too."

"Hrm," said Black Fox. "Why is it that the white man always sees the group before the individual?"

"I beg your pardon?" I was scared of where this was leading.

"I see a friend first. I see a white man third or fourth. White men always see an Indian or a chink first."

"Now hold on a second. That's not true."

"Is it not?"

"No, it isn't. It's just how I said it. That's all." I was truly saddened that this man for whom I had such deep

respect had lumped me in with all the awful white men in the world. Men like my father. "Dammit, Black Fox. You're smart enough to know how much I respect you. Right?"

Black Fox wouldn't look at me. He just stared into the fire. "I apologize, Gus, but they were your words. Words betray thoughts."

I sat quietly and let my defenses settle before I realized that there was a little truth to what he said. "So you mean to tell me that you don't see me as a white man first? Seriously?"

"I see your spirit and it is neither Chickasaw, nor Nihonjin, nor redneck." This time he grinned and it was like the air was let out of a balloon that was just about to pop.

I laughed but was still worried by my friend's comments. "Why'd you ask something like that in the first place? You had to know that... Well," I trailed off, unsure of how to finish.

"It might begin a fight between us?"

"Yeah."

"I needed to know if there was a fight between us already, Gus. Between our spirits. I needed to know if you were being ridden by the Nalusa Chito. If you were, he would not have been able to resist such a conflict."

I nodded, even though I didn't understand. "So, you got any idea how we can get Hashi out of jail?" I asked, changing the subject.

"I do not know, but like all plans, this one must begin with sleep. Good night, Gus." And with that, he climbed into his bedroll. Within five minutes he was snoring away.

I slept a little, off and on, but it wasn't a restful night by any measure. It was a night filled with silent fears that my brain twisted into a series of increasingly bizarre dreams. When I finally saw that the sky was getting lighter, I went ahead and got up. Having nothing better to do, I wandered off to find some more firewood.

The forest was so peaceful that it made it hard to believe there were such evil things in the world as that Nalusa devil and Sheriff Hays. The animals of the forest scurried about getting ready for the harsh winter that was well on its way. Most of the time I thought of nature as a kind and gentle entity, but in reality she was as harsh as a winter storm. She cared not for any individuals, but instead cradled the group, unless of course a group proved it was unworthy of survival in which case she would snuff it out without a second thought.

I considered the words that had passed between Black Fox and me the night before. We're all little more than members of our separate groups and those groups would go on even if we didn't. In the long run, we were all expendable in the eyes of nature.

I sat on a rotting tree trunk and a crow on a nearby stump cawed at me.

"Sorry. Were you saving this spot?" I asked. He tilted his head, bobbed up and down a couple of times, and flew up into the trees.

"He has blessed you."

I leaped up and spun around to find Black Fox standing right behind me. I was about to give him shit for scaring me when he did something most unexpected. He embraced me.

"The crow is your totem animal, August, as he is mine. We are brothers of the crow. We will find our way together and he will help us with our tasks."

I didn't know what the etiquette was in such a situation so I just hugged him back and then stooped to pick up the firewood I'd dropped. Black Fox walked over to the stump and returned with a single, pristine, black feather.

"He has offered you this. You are most honored."

He handed me the feather and I took it gingerly while trying to hold onto the wood.

"I will show you how to tie it into your hair, if you would like."

I nodded and smiled. "Yeah, okay. Or maybe onto my hat? I think I'd like that better."

He nodded and I felt like I'd just been awarded a medal by the president.

We returned to the camp to find Jamie bringing the horses in. We'd let them graze during the night since we didn't have any other way of feeding them at present. She gestured for me to come over so I put down the firewood and crossed to where she was patting Sparks' nose.

"I reckon I owe you an apology," she said without looking up.

I waited, not entirely sure what she was talking about.

"Well, that was it, in case you didn't notice!" she shouted abruptly, scolding me with her unexpected anger.

"Hold up, now, " I said, grabbing Sparks' reins. "I don't even know what you're apologizing for, if that's actually what you call what you just did. You might want to state things more plain if you expect me to understand."

She looked up at me, still hard from her anger. "I'm sorry that I got mad, is all. I'm sorry I blamed you for not telling me about Daddy." She sighed and I realized that she'd been holding her breath until she spoke.

"Nothing to apologize for. I decided not to tell you sooner and I admit that might've been the wrong thing to do. I didn't want to tell you so I convinced myself it'd be better for you that way. The truth is it was better for me." I held my head up and stood my ground. I knew that Jamie was going

to run roughshod over me if I didn't meet her fist to fist. It was a little scary to think about it that way but it was also damned exhilarating.

"Alright, then," she said. "Glad we worked that out."

"Yeah, me too," I said and I let go of Sparks' reins.

She took the horses away and I returned to help Black Fox with the fire. He spoke without looking up. "You have full hands."

"Yeah, I'm starting to see that."

"Your war is only beginning, though."

"War?"

"Yes," said Black Fox. "The oldest war. The war between a man and a woman."

"You say that like it has to be that way," I said, curious about what he meant exactly. I knew men and women had their differences, but in my mind, those were easily overcome.

"It *is* that way, Gus," he answered. "You will learn. Every word is an arrow piercing flesh and bone, or it is salve that treats the wounds inflicted by the world. That is the push and pull. Just like the sun and the moon or the winter and summer. They circle one another, never occupying the same place at the same time. This is what a marriage is."

"Marriage?!" I exclaimed. "Who the hell said anything about getting married?"

"This is the way of your people once you declare love, is it not?" he asked innocently enough, and yet there was a twinkle in his eye that wasn't there when we'd been talking about the crow.

"Yeah, I reckon that's right," I answered. I felt like I was being lured into a trap and I couldn't sort out why it felt that way. I really did love Jamie and I wanted to be with her. So why did the idea of marriage scare me so much? Maybe it was because of the war that Black Fox spoke of. I'd watched my parents battle for years and I'd always thought that I wouldn't end up like them.

"I'll be right back," I said, and I marched off to find Jamie. She'd found water somewhere and was letting the horses take turns drinking from her hat. I strode right up to her and my demeanor made her back away slightly. I

didn't realize it at the time, but I must've seemed rather threatening. I just didn't want to lose momentum once I was headed up the steep hill that lay ahead of me.

"So did you hear what I said to you yesterday?" I asked.

"Say what?"

"I said something important to you, but I didn't say it in an important way so I figure you might've missed it."

"Alright then," she said, knowing full well what I was talking about but not wanting to let me off easy. War indeed. "Say your peace."

I stepped in close to her and took off my hat. As I looked down into her eyes I felt my resolve soften, but not in a bad way. It softened in a way that made me feel the words I was saying instead of just barreling through them like it was some kind of a race.

"Jamie, I love you. I love everything about you, with all of my heart. That's what I meant to say, anyhow."

She smiled and whispered, "I love you too," and she shut me up with a kiss. I thought I heard a certain Chickasaw medicine man laughing in the distance but it could've been that crow.

We held each other close and stood there quietly until Black Fox called us to come and eat.

After breakfast, I knew the time had come to make a decision. "Well, " I started, "I don't know about ya'll, but I still don't have any idea how we're going to get Hashi back." I held the crow feather between my thumb and index finger, twisting it back and forth nervously.

"We will meet him at the river," said Black Fox nonchalantly as he set aside the pan he'd used to make a delicious batch of fry bread.

"You having premonitions now?" I asked.

"It is no dream," said Black Fox. "There is a river behind us."

Jamie nodded. "He's right. It's awful low so it don't make a lot of noise, but I smelled the damp."

"I smelled it as well," said Black Fox.

I'd had no idea there was a river nearby. I guess I was the only one whose nose didn't act like a divining rod.



"So what? So there's a river. That doesn't exactly tell me how we're going to get Hashi out of jail," I said.

"Some things take care of themselves, Gus. Hashimoto is skilled."

I stared at Black Fox. "What does that mean, exactly?"

"His father is a blacksmith who passed on his craft to his son. I have seen what Hashi can do with metal."

"Meaning what?! Jesus, sometimes I feel like this is all some big parlor game and I never win a single round."

"What are these games you speak of?" Black Fox asked innocently.

"Alright. That's enough. Now I know you're just fucking with me."

Black Fox smiled and looked up at the sky. "All we must do is wait and be ready. Hashimoto will come. He will go to the river and walk here, then we will all leave together."

"Really? And just when did you discuss this plan?"

"When you were inside the sheriff's office. Gus, do not be angry at this, but we know the white men do not like us in their town. It was a risk coming here but one we had to take to help Jamie."

Jamie smiled at him and took my hand.

"We crossed this river coming into town. Did you not notice it?"

"No," I answered sheepishly. "I guess my mind was on other things."

"It cuts through this land from north to south on the east side of the town."

"It's a perfect escape route," said Jamie. "If he walks in the water, even dogs'll have a hard time following him."

Black Fox nodded and lifted the last piece of fry bread to his mouth.

"So now we just hope he can get out of there on his own? That's mighty thin," I said.

"Not if you know Hashi," said Black Fox. "We just have to be ready to go when he arrives. We will not have much time. I do not fear the men, but I fear the involvement of the Nalusa Chito. I believe he has been riding a white man. Possibly the sheriff."

The morning hours weren't easy to endure. There wasn't much to do except for waiting and worrying. We were off the beaten path and we had the abandoned rail car to hide in, but if somebody had been looking, they'd have found us easy enough. I sat beside the fire and sought some optimism in my thoughts, but I couldn't find it. Even if we did get Hashi back, we'd have the law on our tails again. That didn't bode well for our success at driving off Black Fox's devil.

I tossed some more wood onto the embers of our dwindling fire. As fresh smoke billowed up from the damp wood, I began to think we'd worked ourselves into a corner.

"You are frightful, Gus," said Black Fox. "What is your fear?"

I shook my head, unwilling to unburden myself to the eternal optimist. Black Fox didn't press me for an answer, at least not verbally. Still, every time I looked up, there were those piercing eyes. I felt that he could see right through me. *Does he know I want to give up and head back home?* I wondered.

"You do realize that there is no home as long as the Nalusa Chito has marked you," said Black Fox quietly as if he were speaking to the log he was sitting on.

I looked over to where Jamie stood grooming the horses.

"Yes, Gus. She will carry this all of her days. If we do not find a way to stop this shadow, none of us will live another day without fear. He knows our names, both those written and those unwritten. Even our totems will not be able to help once he decides to take our souls. We must act."

"That's a crock of shit!" I shouted. I stood up and turned to walk away, but Black Fox didn't waver.

"The Nalusa Chito is having his way with you now. He will drink your fear like a fawn drinks its mother's milk and he will live on you for the rest of your days. If you do nothing."

It was as if the world were collapsing around me, pressing in from all sides. I didn't ask for this task to be handed to me! I never hurt anybody and I never asked for anything from others. All I wanted was to be left alone. Well, that and Jamie. I wanted Jamie's company.

I looked down at Black Fox's weathered face. He was scared too, but he did a much better job of hiding it.

"Okay, but I thought you said there wasn't any way to kill this thing. If we can't kill it, how the hell are we supposed to get rid of it?"

Black Fox stared back at me, his gaze as steely as ever. "There are things worse than dying, Gus."

"More poetry now! Great! Every time I ask a goddamned question I get poetry!" I shouted, but I was embarrassed as soon as the words had left my mouth. Black Fox didn't respond.

I sat down next to him on the log. "Look, I'm sorry. I just need more than platitudes. I need to know if there really is some way to either get rid of this thing or get away from it. I need to know what to do, Black Fox. I can't just follow along and hope for the best."

Jamie must've heard me embarrassing myself because I suddenly felt her hand on my shoulder. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Gus seeks rocks where there are only clouds," said Black Fox.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" asked Jamie in her usual, tactful way.

"It means I'm asking for a way to get rid of the Nalusa thing and Black Fox doesn't have the answer." I turned back to the Chickasaw medicine man. "So what did you mean when you said we had to take action? It's hard to take action when you don't know what action to take."

Black Fox shrugged. "There are some paths that are clear..."

I sighed, but he ignored my impatience.

"...and others that must be followed in fog. Each step into the fog may be rewarded if one's heart is sound, Gus. I ask that you trust me on this and in doing so, learn to trust yourself. That is really the issue here, is it not?"

He looked into me more deeply than anyone. He was right. I had always been fine on my own, but I'd never been able to turn over control to anyone who couldn't show me their plan. That was one of the things I loved about classical music. There was always a map that illustrated all the twists and turns of the journey before I ever took one step. I loved learning the intricacies of those pieces of music and learning where I could push and pull at the boundaries, but I'd never been good at playing anything that wasn't already fenced in. That was why I'd never written any music of my own and why it wasn't likely that I ever would.

"I don't like it," I said.

"I know this. I do not like it either, but it is our fate. We will face it together until we reach the end of our path. This I promise you."

Jamie squeezed in between us and sat down. "I'm good as long as it means squashing the sonofabitch what was in my fucking head."

Sometimes she said the damndest things. I put my arm around her and kissed her cheek. In my selfishness, I'd completely forgotten how bad Jamie'd had it. At the very least, didn't I want revenge? It wasn't noble, but I figured it was a pretty good motivation.

"So, once Hashi gets here, where are we going to go?" I asked. "You said you thought the shadow was riding the sheriff, right? I don't think we'll have a lot of luck if we stick around Twining trying to get to him."

"I said that I thought he had been riding a white man because I felt its presence when Hashi was taken. The sheriff is the first logical choice, but it may be another. It could have just as easily been in one of the deputies or watching from one of the windows. Did you not feel that we were being watched?"

"Yeah. Especially after Hashi was taken away," I said.

"And you, Jamie?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just put out about my daddy getting killed." I hugged her closer.

"Yes, your father may have been the man who attacked Gus and Hashi near Shunahoya's grave, but I do not know how it can be. It is not common for two to be ridden at once and you were already under his control when that happened. This is either a very powerful spirit or your close relationship to your father made an unusual link possible. At least this shadow is no longer with either of you. He has moved on, probably back to the one he is using as a roost."

"What's that mean?" I asked.

"The Nalusa Chito is like a bird who nests someplace safe near food and water. He will have a person who can function somewhat normally even with the Nalusa Chito on him. It must be a very strong person to survive such a thing."

"And a dumbass too," said Jamie. "I don't want that thing in my head ever again. I'd rather die."

I put my arm around her shoulder and asked, "What did it feel like?" She fell silent and I thought I might have made a mistake in asking. "Sorry, sweetie, I just... It might help us to understand."

Jamie's eyes teared up and Black Fox sat as still as a stone, waiting to see if I'd be able to coax any information out of her. When she finally did speak, it was as if her voice were being transmitted from some other place, far away. "It was cold, like being kept in a hole in the ground. I was awake the whole time but something was between me and my eyes and ears. I reckon it's like some of them guys what come back from the war missing body parts. Some of 'em could still feel them parts even though they wasn't connected to 'em anymore. That's how it felt. I was being pushed out of myself. I know that don't make no sense."

Black Fox paid rapt attention to her description. "It is as I've heard," he said. He held his medicine bag to his chest and began to chant softly, then he brushed his hands over Jamie's head and continued singing with his eyes closed. I had no idea what he was doing or why, but it was comforting her. When he was done he opened his eyes and put one hand on each of her shoulders before moving back to his seat.

"Thank you," said Jamie.

Black Fox nodded, but he looked tired. This task was weighing heavily on him and my bitching hadn't made it any better.

"So why would a person agree to act as this thing's roost? I don't get it. If it feels as bad as Jamie's saying, why wouldn't they fight it?"

Black Fox answered, "Because it would not push them so far away as it did Jamie. They would become one person. Together, they would be strong and capable of great influence. Apart, both would be weakened. Over time, each would eventually crave the other."

"Then we have to find the host and kill him," I blurted out. I'd never harmed another person in my life, but at that moment it seemed perfectly feasible for me to walk up to the asshole that was helping this monster ruin our lives and shoot him in the gut. His death would be slower that way.

"Killing the host will not rid us of the Nalusa Chito," said Black Fox, then he drifted off into thought. We'd all gotten used to the lapses in conversations with him.

"What is it?" asked Jamie. "What else?"

"I do not know what will happen if we do this, but if we kill this host while the Nalusa Chito is feeding on him..."

"Then we might kill the shadow too?" I asked. Were we actually coming up with a plan?

"As I stated, I do not know if it can be killed at all, but a feeding spirit is extremely vulnerable."

"Great!" I said. "So now all we have to do is find this host."

Black Fox looked at Jamie. "Perhaps Jamie will be able to sense the Nalusa Chito if it is within a person." He took Jamie's hand in his own. "You know his taste. His smell. He will be fearful of your knowledge but if we are careful, perhaps you can identify him." He paused, then added, "It will not be pleasant."

"I can still taste its stink on my tongue. It tastes like copper. Like blood." For a second there, I thought she was going to heave, but she held it in.

"So where do we start looking?" I asked.

"You already know, Gus," said Black Fox. "Did you not say the voice you heard at Jamie's house was familiar to you?"

"Yeah," I muttered. "But we each heard a different voice. I could have been imagining it."

"No. The voice I heard was that of Deer Son. I believe Deer Son's soul is being trapped by the shadow. Only those who are under its control may be used to speak."

Jamie asked, "So that means them voices is from anybody it's ridden, right? It could use my voice?"

"I do not think so. I think it must use a voice of a soul it owns. One it has consumed. When we were in the house, it had let you go so that you might be allowed to experience your fear."

Another lull fell upon us and Black Fox waited until he saw that I wasn't going to answer without more prompting.

"Tell me whose voice you heard, Gus."

I looked up to see him staring at me and waiting. "It was Mr. Creech."

"Creech?"

"You remember the story I told you about the bar burning down in Spruce Rocks? Well, Mr. Creech was the one who Seamus thought was after him. He said Mr. Creech had painted that weird symbol on his house. The same one that was painted on the bar that night."

"The same one on Deer Son's horse?" asked Black Fox.

"Yeah. I just never saw Mr. Creech do any of it. Far as I know, he's a stand up guy. He was nice enough to me the one time I talked to him." I thought back to that day in the bar when Mr. Creech had complemented my piano playing.

"My daddy knew him," said Jamie. "Did some business with him from time to time." Her face dropped as she thought of the father she'd never see again. I considered the fact that both of my best friends had lost their only parents to this thing.

Black Fox leaned back and looked at the sky. "There is a connection here but it is as light as a spider's web. Your father knew Deer Son, did he not?"

Jamie nodded. "Yeah, they were good friends."

"And did Deer Son know this Creech?"

"I think so," I said, trying to remember what, if anything, Mr. Deerson had said about the man. "He wouldn't talk about him when I asked. Said we should all steer clear."

Black Fox nodded. "Then it appears that we have the next step on our path. We must find this Creech."

I smiled broadly, unable to contain my joy.

"What the hell you smiling about?" asked Jamie.

"For the first time ever, I'm ahead of the game. I know where to find Creech."

Black Fox remained his usual calm self but there was an undercurrent of uneasiness in his voice when he asked, "And how do you know this?"

"Well, some of us are better at going along with things as they happen and others of us are better at planning ahead." I was gloating, yes, but I was feeling very self-satisfied. I reached in my pocket and pulled out a small piece of paper.

"Do you intend on sharing this information or must we guess?" asked Black Fox.

I unfolded the paper and held it up for them to see. The drawing wasn't much more than squiggles and dots but it would be enough.

Jamie looked at me like I was crazy. "Is that s'posed to mean something?"

Black Fox puzzled over the paper then reached out and took it from me with a smile. "It is a map, yes?"

"That's right," I said happily as I rotated it in his hand so the top was north.

"These marks are to show us the way?"

"Right again! When you and Hashi were out buying apples, I was in the land office doing a little research. After I found Jamie's house I noticed a big map of the area on the wall there. Outlying settlements and farms were clearly marked with the names of the settlers. One of those names was Creech."



After our planning session I felt like I'd just worked an entire day in the fields, but I was also energized. Just making a plan made me feel much better.

We tidied up our camp and readied the horses to leave, but we still hadn't seen Hashi yet. As the afternoon wore on, I wondered if he was going to show at all. We took turns walking over to the river and looking downstream but we never saw anything out of the ordinary.

"Think they killed him?" asked Jamie, voicing the possibility that loomed large in all of our minds.

"It is possible," said Black Fox. "If he is not here by sunset, we must leave without him."

"Are you crazy?" I said. "This is Hashi we're talking about!"

"Yes. As I stated before, he can take care of himself. Hashi knows that we must not be detained further. The Nalusa Chito is growing in strength. Hashimoto would scold us if we risked everything just for him."

"Look, I don't give a rat's ass what Hashimoto says, I'm..."

A voice piped up from behind me. "Rat ass? What is rat ass? I must misunderstand."

I whirled around to see Hashi standing there plain as day, looking much like he had when he was taken into custody. I was so shocked that I tripped over my own legs when I tried to run over to him.

"Hashi!" shouted Jamie as she leap-frogged over me and hugged him close.

"Are you well?" asked Black Fox as he grasped Hashi's shoulder and shook it.

"Well enough," said Hashi. "We go now."

I stumbled to my feet and smiled as I hugged Hashi alongside Jamie. "We're ready to..." I began, but I stopped when I noticed blood on the hand that I'd embraced him with. I walked behind him and saw that his shirt was torn and streaked with blood. "What the hell did they do to you?!"

"No time," said Hashi. "I tell you later. We go now."

He was right, of course. The deputies would be looking for him soon if they weren't already. The further away we got, the better our chances of escape.

Jamie and Black Fox had already tacked up the horses so all we had to do was climb on and get going.

"Which way, Gus?" asked Black Fox. He didn't have to explain further.

"According to the map, Creech has a ranch northeast of here. On the other side of this river, I think."

Jamie looked over at me, somewhat fearful of what was to come but also stronger than she'd been in days. Black Fox nodded and I took the lead.

By nightfall, we'd put a lot of miles between us and Sheriff Hays' men, but it wasn't enough to make me comfortable. I'd felt okay about driving Sparks a little harder than usual, since I knew that it would be a short day.

The moon was bright enough to illuminate the path we were on, but it was still difficult to make out the details of everything around us. It was like that silvery light just sucked all of the color out of the world.

Jamie rode up alongside Sparks and spoke softly between the clapping of the horses' hooves. "When we gone stop, sweetie?"

I didn't know how to answer her. Something kept me pushing forward but I couldn't put my finger on it. Maybe it was just fear of camping out in the open where we'd surely be noticed, either by man or by shadow.

Jamie reached out and touched my arm and I jumped. "Sorry," was all she said, but she left her hand on my wrist. I turned my hand over and grasped hers in return.

"Jamie," I started, but I couldn't look at her. "I think we should push on through to Creech's place tonight."

"Think you can find it in the dark?"

"I've got a good enough idea where it is if the river over there is the same one as on the map."

"But we could miss a turn or a landmark this way and then we'd be..."

I interrupted her by squeezing her hand. Her fingers were ice cold. I hadn't even noticed how much the temperature had dropped since the sun had gone down.

"Alright," I said. "We can stop as soon as we find a good spot. This road pretty much follows the river so if we cut over to the right maybe we can find a clump of bushes that'll keep us from being seen from the road."

Jamie's eyes lit up and she squeezed my hand in return before dropping back to tell Black Fox and Hashi what I'd said. I turned and looked at Black Fox and he nodded as I led the group off the road. I guess I really was in charge at that point.

Once we got the horses fed and watered and a small fire burning we all felt better. After we ate some supper, Black Fox dug out his pipe and shared his tobacco once again. It felt like we were all out on a happy camping trip until I asked the one question that had been burning a hole in my brain ever since I saw Hashi's bloodied back.

"What did they do to you, Hashi?" I didn't sugarcoat it. We all wanted to know so I figured why not ask? If he didn't want to talk about it, he could say so. But he did want to. The words began slowly, then they took on a momentum all their own.

"White men take me to their prison. Lock my hands and feet to bars and stretch me on top of bunk. No bed. Just springs. Put me face down and take turns hitting me with whip. No questions or answers, just hitting. Call me chink and other words not to say beside Jamie."

Jamie tried to smile a "thank you" at Hashi but it looked more like a grimace.

"They stop for a while then start again. I sleep. When wake, I am alone. Then I can get hands and feet free, but need water. Very tired. I open lock on prison door with piece of spring and see katana beside desk with man sleeping there. I take katana and think I will have to kill this man, but

he has drinking. Very asleep. I leave but do not know how long I sleep."

Jamie stood up. "I'll be right back," she said, then she wandered into the brush. I figured she had to pee or something.

"How long?" asked Hashi.

Black Fox cleared his throat and said, "One day."

Hashi nodded and looked up as Jamie emerged from the bushes with what looked like bits of cactus in her hands. She walked over to stand behind Hashi.

"Get your shirt off," she said.

Hashi didn't question her. He peeled what was left of his tattered shirt down and winced when the fabric pulled open some of the scabs that had formed on his back.

"Gus, would you get me some water?" asked Jamie.

I didn't have a bucket and I thought carrying it in my hat the way Jamie had with the horses earlier was a bad idea when it came to open wounds, so I grabbed the water bladder I kept on my saddle and handed it to her. I could always refill it at the river later.

Hashi inhaled sharply when Jamie splashed the cold water on his back, but he didn't complain. I watched as Jamie cleaned his wounds and gingerly applied some of the sap that came out of the cactus pieces she'd found. Hashi looked over his shoulder and nodded at Jamie. "Better," he said.

When she was finished, Jamie asked me if I had a spare shirt to give Hashi. I did and I gladly gave it up. The sap and blood quickly soaked through the fabric and formed a strange pattern across Hashi's back.

"That there sap will keep them new scabs from grabbing the shirt this time," she said as she gently caressed Hashi's shoulders. In any other circumstance, I'd have been jealous.

Hashi looked up at her and smiled. "Thank you, Jamie."

She smiled in return then went over to prepare our bed roll in silence.

"We should keep watch," said Black Fox. "You sleep. I will watch first."

"You sure?" I asked. "I'd be happy to go first."

Black Fox shook his head. "You should comfort Jamie. I will wake you when it is your time."

"Okay," I said, then I turned to Hashi. "It's good to have you back."

He smiled and said, "Yes, is good to have back too," but I knew exactly what he meant.

We'd planned to rise with the sun but fog had moved in overnight and it dampened both our spirits and our energy. The gloom even darkened the emotional boost we'd gotten from Hashi's return.

We got back on the main road and followed the river north for what felt like a very long time. I was sure that Mr. Creech's ranch was close by the river, but I began to fear that we'd missed the crossing I'd seen on the map.

Time isn't a consistent entity when you're either enjoying or dreading something. Picking our way toward an uncertain destiny in fog that obliterated everything beyond arm's reach was enough to slow time to a crawl. I began to feel like we'd gone too far.

"Hold up," I said as I drew Sparks to a standstill. I sat and listened to the dense quiet of the fog-enshrouded landscape. Off to our right, I could just make out the faint sounds of the river, but there was little else to hear. Even the animals were huddled up in their dens and nests, quietly hiding from this oppressive day.

After he'd waited there in silence for a few minutes, Black Fox spoke up. "Gus? What is wrong? Did you hear something?"

"No. I just think we might have missed our turn. There should have been a road or a path that branched off toward the east with a little bridge across the river. I doubt we'd miss it in normal daylight, but in this?" I waved the damp air with my hand and made swirls in the mist. "I think we've gone too far north."

Black Fox nodded and raised his head as if he were smelling the air. "Then we will rest until we can see better," he said.

That suited me just fine. Riding was usually a real pleasure, but creeping along in fog that could be hiding any number of dangers had put me on edge. Taking a break from that stress was bound to help. Besides, it was unlikely that any of the Twining deputies would be able to see us through the fog, even if they were only ten feet away.

Like the night before, we ventured off the road in the direction of the river. The horses were just as grateful as I was to be done for the day and they quickly took to the water even though it was very cold. Winter was coming.

Since we didn't fear discovery, we built a roaring fire and we actually relaxed and enjoyed ourselves. Hashi favored us with some odd songs that sounded more like coyote yelps than music, but they grew on me as he went along. Jamie tried singing along, but soon gave up when it became clear there was no rhyme or reason to the compositions.

It made me wonder about the place he came from. How could they create something so chaotic and call it music? One of the things I valued most about the music I liked was its order. It could rein in most any emotion and transmit it again in a package that lined it up like soldiers marching off to battle. Folk music and ragtime had chaotic elements all their own, but they still had a structure.

When Hashi finished, we all complemented him, but I think Black Fox was the only one who really meant it. Come to think of it, there was a similarity between the Chickasaw chants I'd heard and the music Hashi had sung. Maybe there was more to Hashi's music than I thought, but I was still glad that he was done.

We sat and listened to the crackling of the fire until Black Fox began to speak. "A long time ago, a young warrior named Blue Jay fell in love with the only daughter of the minku, a beautiful girl named Bright Moon. Blue Jay was an excellent hunter. He had earned the respect of the other warriors, but he was a brash young man, as many young men are, and the minku did not like him. The minku knew that Blue Jay would soon ask to marry his daughter so he came up with a plan.

"Just as the minku suspected, Blue Jay approached him one afternoon and declared his love for the girl. The minku told him that he could marry Bright Moon under one condition—he must pay for the privilege. The price? A white deer hide."

Hashi and Jamie nodded knowingly and smiled but I was lost. "Hold on, now. What's the big deal?"

Jamie asked, "You ever seen a white deer?"

I thought about it a moment before shaking my head. "No, but I don't hunt a whole lot."

"You ain't seen one 'cause there ain't hardly none out there. The ones there are is s'posed to be magic."

"Oh, okay. I get it," I said. "I'm sorry, Black Fox."

Black Fox nodded, then continued. "The price was set. The minku thought he had won, but the young man quickly agreed to the terms. This made the minku even more sure that Blue Jay was a fool, and he laughed to himself as the boy walked away.

"But Blue Jay felt confident. He went to Bright Moon and told her what had happened. She was upset with her father, but Blue Jay calmed her by promising that they would indeed be married. She was confused by this but Blue Jay told her to be patient. He would soon return with the prize her father had demanded of him.

"Blue Jay left the very next morning, carrying little more than his favorite bow and a good stock of arrows. His hunt had begun. He did not listen to the doubts in his mind, but instead listened to the wind. The wind had never let him down. It had often guided his feet and his hands and it would do so once again on this most important of hunts.

"Weeks passed and Blue Jay had not yet seen a white deer but his faith did not waiver. He was hungry and thirsty and he craved the company of his family and friends, but still, he did not waiver. Then, on the night of the full moon he was awakened by a sound. He sat up and saw the glowing image of a white deer flitting between the trees near where he slept. He crawled to a hiding place behind some bushes and carefully drew an arrow. As he loaded it, he calmed his heart. His entire future depended on a single shot but he put that out of his mind. He only heard the voice of the wind.



"He took a deep breath and slowly pulled the bowstring taut. The deer moved closer and Blue Jay released the bow string! He felt his spirit fly with the arrow as it sought its target. It flew fast and true and drove deep into the heart of the white deer.

"Blue Jay was overjoyed, but as he stood to claim his prize, he noticed that the deer had not fallen. Instead, the animal charged him, the arrow still protruding from its chest.

"In the village, most of the tribe looked upon Bright Moon and despaired for her. Much time had passed and Blue Jay had not returned. Her beloved must be lost or dead. Even Blue Jay's fellow warriors spoke of him in hushed tones. It was decided that he was gone forever.

The minku encouraged his daughter to marry another, but she would have none of it. She had a secret, you see. Whenever there was a full moon, she would stare into the smoke from the camp fire and she could see the white deer running with the arrow in its heart. She knew that one day the deer would fall and Blue Jay would return to her."

Jamie grasped my hand and practically swooned as Black Fox finished the tale. "I love that story," she said.

That seemed to be the consensus but I was never one to just go along. I figured I'd never learn anything if I didn't ask questions. "So the girl never got married and never had a family?"

"The story does not say," said Black Fox. I was afraid that my questions might bother him, but he was in a good mood and he seemed to be receptive to my queries.

"Then what's the point? What's the moral?"

"Moral?"

"Yeah, isn't there supposed to be a moral? Like that story about the tortoise and the hare. That's supposed to teach you that working slow and steady is better than rushing through things."

"Ah. But this is not a fable, Gus. This is a story of my ancestors. It is told to help us understand our spirits. To help us know who we are. You will please forgive me, but I have noticed that the tales of the white man are used to *tell* a person who they are. Our stories are not like this. They may indeed inform us of the values of our people, but they do not

tell us to be a certain way. Instead they offer what you might call food for thought."

"So what is it your story is supposed to make me think about?" I asked.

"Only you can say." He let that statement hang in the air while he stared at me expectantly.

"Well, I reckon it made me think about Jamie." I looked over at her and she squeezed my hand. "About how she was taken from me...from us, and how lucky we are to have her with us again." I caught Hashi's eye and quickly added, "And Hashi too, of course." Hashi smiled and nodded as he sipped his tea.

"Those are good thoughts," said Black Fox, but he would say nothing more about the story of the white deer. After a little prodding from Hashi, though, he began to tell us the tale of his own first hunt. He was describing a particularly exciting moment when I heard a large splash in the river. I looked around at the others but no one else reacted. Maybe they hadn't heard it. They continued listening to Black Fox's story while I puzzled over that splash. The list of possibilities overtook my thoughts and slowly replaced my contentment with rabid paranoia. I didn't want to alarm the others, but I had to know if something dangerous was out there. I told Jamie that I was going to relieve myself and I slipped away to the riverside alone.

I was as quiet as I knew how to be but every step I took seemed to make as much sound as a buffalo stampede. The burbling of the water made my bladder sit up and notice and I realized that I hadn't been at all deceptive when I'd told Jamie I had to pee. I unbuttoned my pants and sighed as I let a strong stream of urine loose into the flowing waters. It was quiet and peaceful there. So why did I feel like I was in danger?

I shook off and buttoned my trousers but I didn't head back to camp right away. I stood in that grey, velvety air and stared into its depths. Somebody was out there for sure. Or something. I thought it might just be a wild dog or a boar, but an animal would have probably made more noise. My chest began to ache and I realized that I'd been holding my breath. I inhaled deeply but the damp air felt heavy in

my lungs. Could it be that the shadow thing was following us?

I stood there for what felt like an eternity before I decided to walk a short ways upstream. My better judgment told me to go back and get the others, but my curiosity reassured me. I'd just go a little ways. Just far enough to make sure nobody was out there.

The sound of the water off to my right became a source of irritation as I strained to hear a footstep or a snapped twig. I waited on that riverbank for what felt like an hour but I didn't hear anything else out of the ordinary. There probably wasn't anybody out there. How could there be? If they *were* there, they'd been standing completely still for a long time. I convinced myself that the splash I'd heard was from a frolicking fish or a toad leaping into the water, and that my fears must've gotten the best of me.

Just as I turned to go back to camp, a crow called out from just a little ways further upstream. Its caw rang out across the distance, clear as a bell. Was it calling to me? Shouldn't I listen if it was?

I decided to go a little further north, hoping that the bird that Black Fox had described as my totem animal was offering its assistance. Surely that was what was going on. My spirits lifted when I saw the bridge ahead. We hadn't ridden too far north after all. I was glad of that, but then it occurred to me that I still hadn't seen the crow or heard it fly away. I turned around to look back the way I came and I saw Mr. Creech standing right in front of me!

"Sorry 'bout this, boyo," he said as he quickly covered my face with his hand, sending me into the deep well of unconsciousness.

I awoke with a nasty headache and a painful tingling in my feet. I looked down and saw that my boots were resting in the freezing river water. I dragged myself back to the path and yanked them off so I could massage some warmth back into my toes. What had happened?

When my feet began to turn from blue to purple and the tingling started to feel more like a burn, I remembered. Creech! Oh god, was he after Jamie? I tried to get up but I was still unable to stand. I vigorously worked the muscles in my feet but I knew it was going to take time.

How long had I been out? The fog shrouded the position of the sun but I didn't think it had been more than fifteen or twenty minutes. My feet would have needed amputation if they'd been in the water much longer than that.

I tried to stand up again but my legs wouldn't hear of it and I ended up falling into some thorn bushes. I picked my way out, nearly losing my shirt in the process, and ended up laying flat on my back in the middle of the trail. There had to be some way for me to get back to camp and warn the others. If I'd been able to think straight, I'd have known that it was way too late for that, but my panic was ruling the roost at the moment.

I got onto my knees and managed to crawl a ways, dragging my frozen feet behind me. The pain was intense, but it was nothing compared to the fear in my heart. Inch by inch, I pushed on. I tried wriggling my toes, but they still wouldn't cooperate. Goddammit!

"Jamie!" I yelled. Surely I was close enough to the camp for them to hear me. "Jamie! Black Fox! Hashi! Help! Can you hear me?! Can anybody hear me?! Help!"

I crawled over a small rise, hoping to be able to at least see the light from our campfire. Under normal circumstances it would have been child's play to climb that hill, but in that situation it was torture. When I finally got to the top, I raised up onto my knees and strained to see into the distance, but I still couldn't make out anything but fog.

I yelled for my friends again but there was no response. I decided to focus on getting my feet working again since crawling was getting me nowhere fast. I rubbed them vigorously, creating heat and spreading it into the muscles. After what felt like an eternity, I began to feel my toes again. Slowly, I realized I could move them. It might be enough.

I threw my boots back on and scrambled to my feet. They hurt like hell, feeling like they were being pricked by ten thousand sewing needles, but at least I was able to stand. I couldn't run yet, but walking was way faster than crawling around on all fours. It only took me a few minutes to find the camp.

Everything was exactly like I'd left it, except for the fact that everyone was gone. The horses were down by the water and the fire was burning just like before. I could even see the places where my friends had been sitting. There were no signs of a struggle, but there were several sets of footprints. Damnit! All I could tell was that there'd been some walking done. For all I knew, some of those footprints were my own.

I stared into the fog, trying to will it to lift and let me see beyond my own nose. "Jamie!" I shouted. "Black Fox! Hashi!" No response.

My panic was beginning to get the better of me. My friends were missing, I was all alone, and I couldn't see ten feet in front of me. I felt like I'd been buried alive and I had no chance of digging myself out.

I plopped down beside the fire and pulled off my boots. If I was going to have to look for the others in this fog, I might as well get my feet in good order first. The heat from the blaze was soothing and soon my muscles felt like themselves again. They'd continue to cramp for a while, but the best thing for that would be exercise.

I put out the fire and gathered up all of our things. It took me a while by myself, but I loaded up the horses and tied them one behind the other so I could bring them with me. It was slow going with all the horses in tow, but I found my way back to the road and over to the little, wooden bridge. The horses' hooves made a hell of a racket on those planks, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. Besides, Creech already knew I was there and he had to know I'd be coming for him. But what was his deal? If he was acting as the host for the shadow thing, what good would it do him to taunt me further? He'd had me at his mercy down by the river. Why the hell didn't he kill me then? Black Fox had spoken of the shadow eating souls and living on fear. Was that it? Did he need me afraid? Well, I was a little afraid, but I was mad as hell too! If he'd done anything to Jamie and the others, I'd gladly shove my gun up his ass and unload it.

I fumbled with my pouch and pulled out the LeMat. Better to have it at the ready. I slid it into my belt and hung the small ammo pouch over my shoulder. I knew how long it took to reload that old shooter, but better to have the ammunition handy than not.

I tried to remind myself of the things Black Fox had said. Be flexible. React to what's actually happening. Don't anticipate. I tried to remember but all I could do was imagine scenario after scenario wherein Jamie was dead or dying at the hands of that asshole.

The road became a trail and that trail became a foot path that was surrounded by dense brambles. Sparks got his leg scratched pretty bad by one particularly nasty branch but he kept plowing forward like a ship in a sea of thorns.

The fog was slowly starting to lift. At best that meant that I'd be able to see what killed me just before it did so. Great. Thoughts of death were creeping in and replacing my raging drive for revenge. What if my friends were already dead? What if I was next?

I shook my head violently, hoping the movement would break the spell that those dreadful thoughts were casting on me. I had to sharpen up if I was going to have any chance of saving Jamie and the others.

A twig snapped nearby and I stopped the horses. I turned in my saddle and the leather squeaked loudly. I stopped moving and just listened. The forest was abnormally quiet. It reminded me of that morning when I set out from Spruce Rocks with Mr. Deerson. What did the local wildlife know that I didn't?

I climbed down off of Sparks and gazed off into the gloomy mist. Sparks nuzzled my ear and it scared me so bad that I dove for the ground. When I realized what had happened I laughed out loud.

"Sorry. I'm just a little on edge," I told Sparks. He seemed to understand.

I looked back at the other horses and made up my mind right quick. "I'm going to leave ya'll here for the time being, alright? But I'll be back directly." They seemed to get the gist of it and they stayed put when I walked ahead on my own. I considered tying them up but I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if something happened to me and they ended up starving to death while tied to a tree. Isn't that funny? I reckon if something that bad happened to me, the well being of a bunch of horses would be the least of my worries. Still, it eased my mind to know they'd be able to find food and water on their own if they had to.

I took the LeMat out of my belt and warmed up the cold grip. It was a good gun. It was definitely past its prime, but it'd sure as hell kill a fellow just as well as those Colt single action revolvers. Besides, it plain out made me feel better just to hold it.

The road took a sharp turn to the left and I looked back at the horses one last time before proceeding around the bend. I continued walking along the edge of the road so I could duck into the bushes if I met someone coming from the other direction, but no one came. The area was as empty of people as the forest was of animals. Unfortunately, that wouldn't be the case much longer.

The oppressive feeling I sensed from the forest let up a little as I rounded the turn that would eventually lead me to Creech's place. My footsteps scattered pebbles in the road as I tried to keep some energy in my stride. Deep down, I wanted to go back to my old life in Spruce Rocks and forget that I'd ever heard the name Creech. That wasn't possible, though. Mr. Deerson was dead. My employers were dead. All of my new friends were missing. My old life was gone. All I had left lay ahead of me.

The underbrush was less dense up ahead, so I stayed close to the trees and tried to remain hidden as I slowly moved closer to Creech's home. A strange sound made me stop in my tracks. Was that singing I heard? I snuck closer to the source of the music. It wasn't folk music or a dance hall tune, but the melody was familiar to me. It sounded like part of Mozart's Requiem. It was odd to hear the choral portion sung without instrumentation, and, if I wasn't mistaken, sung entirely by women. The foggy countryside and the odd music dampened my optimism and sent shivers through my bones. Must be the right place!

I crept through the underbrush and saw that there was a grassy clearing to the left side of the path. In the center of it there stood a barn with several small sheds grouped behind it, and off to the right stood a large, white, clapboard house. Was this Creech's farm? It matched the location I remembered from the land office map, but the barn and the outbuildings looked like they'd been abandoned a long time ago. Everything but the house was barely standing. Maybe everyone was too busy with choir practice to keep the place up. If my friends were in one of those buildings, I was going to find them.



I still couldn't see the singers, though. They must have been on the other side of the barn. The music continued and I slid through the wire fence that surrounded the property. It was easy enough seeing as how the fence posts were all half rotten.

I looked around, trying to get my bearings, but I couldn't see a soul. I took a chance and ran over to the shelter of a large sycamore. When I reached my hiding place, I slammed my back against the tree trunk, certain that I'd been seen. My heart was beating fast and I was sweating like a murderer on the gallows, but no one cried out or came after me. I fanned myself with my hat and took a deep breath. I had to calm my ass down or, sure enough, I would get caught. I pulled my hat back on and peeked around the tree. I was about a hundred feet from the barn. If I could make it over there and slip inside, I'd be able to spy on the goings on over by the house from the safety of the shadows. There was a single large door on the side of the barn that faced my hiding place. That was my target.

I made sure no one was looking then I gathered my senses and ran for that door. I reached it and grabbed the door handle but it wouldn't budge. What the hell? The doorframe was cracked and splintered and the door itself seemed to be rotting but it wouldn't move. It didn't make any sense, but I had to accept it and move on. Maybe I could pry a board loose and sneak in that way. I looked around the base of the building and tried working one of the planks free. It looked like it was already split nine ways to Sunday but the damn thing was rock solid. I tried peeking through the cracks in the wall but I couldn't see so much as a pinpoint of light inside. There might be an open door on the other side of the barn but I'd surely be seen over there. I looked around, frantically searching for a way in. I didn't find anything but my search was cut short when I heard footsteps coming my way.

There was a large wooden storage box at the rear corner of the barn so I dove behind it just in time. Two women strolled past carrying empty bushel baskets. They disappeared into the shed on the far side of the clearing and I knew I'd only have a few seconds to find another hiding

place. Crouching close to the ground, I ran over to a small, empty stable. I slid inside just as the two women reappeared across the yard. Neither one of them said a word as they walked past and disappeared around the far end of the barn.

What the hell was going on? Maybe they were Creech's kin. One of them might even be his wife. I wondered how she'd feel if she knew her husband was hosting a Chickasaw devil in his spare time.

I covered myself with hay and tried to figure out what to do next. The main house was barely visible from where I sat, and there were two other sheds I hadn't investigated. I needed to search everything so I might as well start with those sheds. Choir practice wouldn't last forever.

The hay smelled tangy, like moldy bread, and it was starting to make me feel nauseated. The longer I stayed there, the worse I felt. I was on the verge of losing what little food was still in my stomach when the choir stopped singing and a male voice rang out across the compound. It was definitely Mr. Creech!

"Thank you, ladies," said Creech. "You've outdone yourselves for sure. Our guest of honor may not know it yet, but she just heard your best performance yet. I'm sure that if she could, she'd thank you kindly."

Guest? Was he talking about one of my friends? Maybe the sheds could wait after all. I strained to see the clearing on the other side of the barn, but my angle was all wrong.

"There are other guests on the way, but we're not going to wait on them! We've got bidness to attend to!"

At this a mighty cheer erupted, followed by a rhythmic chant. If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn I was in a jungle village instead of a country farm. Things were ramping up out there but to what end I couldn't tell. I'd have to get a better look if I was going to find out.

The chant continued as I looked for a way to get a better view. I saw that there was a long, single-story structure that I'd overlooked before. It was a bigger stable and it was nestled behind the trees that grew along the back of the property between the barn and the main house. Perfect. Hoping for the best, I used the larger tress as cover

and slowly picked my way over to the back side of the building. I looked up and down the structure but there were no windows or doors on that side. I kept close to the wall and moved down to the other end of the building, sliding my back along the rough, wooden surface. Once I reached the far corner, I risked a peek at the yard between the barn and the house. There was a small, neat platform with a homemade podium behind which Creech stood, facing the house and, presumably, the chanting women. A large feed bin blocked my view of everything else. I could see that there was a pole just in front of Creech's podium, but that was it.

I was thinking of running over to the feed bin when the chanting stopped abruptly. I could stay put for a moment longer.

"At this time, I must ask this child if she'd like to stay here with us and reap the benefits and rewards of our fellowship." He stepped forward and a moment later I heard a muffled scream. Creech leapt back to the platform, clearly nursing a wounded hand, but he laughed in his strangely detached way nevertheless. "It appears she has declined our invitation!" he shouted sarcastically, as if the very fact offended man and God. The women all booed but it felt like a show. No, not a show—a church service. Sort of like the ones the negroes used to have where the preacher said something and the congregation was supposed to give a particular response. Was this Creech's congregation? Were they the women who had disappeared? I had a million questions but I decided they could wait when a woman in a long, gingham dress traipsed by my position. At first I thought she was carrying a basket like the others. Then I saw that she was cradling a sawed off shotgun in her arms like it was her first born. I shrunk back into the shadows and held my breath as she passed. Once she was out of sight, I decided to move closer to the stage. I high tailed it across to that feed bin, jostled it open, and quietly hopped inside. It stunk to high heaven but it afforded me a much better view of the goings on so I stayed put. Creech was leaning on his podium and thirty some odd women stood in the clearing before him giving the devil their undivided attention. I scanned their faces but they were still too far away for me to see their

features. I was squinting, trying to get a better look at them, when Creech shouted a single screeching yell! He held up a long, burning torch and yelled again! Then he crouched beside the pole and quietly addressed someone on the ground there. He must not have gotten the answer he wanted because he stood up and jabbed at the person with the burning end of the torch.

A voice I recognized cried out, "Let me the fuck out of here, you fucking freak! Let me goooooo!" It was Jamie! I'd hardly wrapped my mind around that fact when she let loose a scream that inspired the audience to applaud vigorously. That's when I stopped thinking altogether. Before I knew it I was running toward the clearing, my revolver aimed squarely at Creech's head.

"CREECH!" I shouted as I marched headlong toward death itself. I held the gun up and aimed down the sights at Creech's face. I wanted to punish him for what he'd done to Jamie. Given the choice, I'd have beaten his head to a bloody pulp with the butt of the pistol, but I'd settle for shooting the bastard between the eyes if I had to.

The women in the audience didn't scatter the way I thought they would when they saw me brandishing a weapon. Weren't women scared of crazy guys with guns? Hell, wasn't *everybody* scared of crazy guys with guns? What was the matter with these people?

I ignored the women for the time being and continued toward Creech. I was emboldened by my anger. All I could see in my mind's eye were the inevitable explosions within the chambers of the LeMat that would result in Creech's death. My fist clenched around the chequered butt of the gun. My rage would propel those bullets all on its own if it had to. Just a little closer. I tightened my grip and braced myself for the recoil, but I stopped short when Creech did something totally unexpected. He grinned at me.

"Come here, boyo. We been waiting for you," he said coldly, holding his arms wide as if to welcome me with an embrace.

"Untie her right now," I ordered, trying hard to ignore the grim joviality on the man's face as I stared at it through the sights.

"I don't think I'm a-gonna do that, boyo. I've come to like your little chickadee quite a lot." With that last word, he kicked her in the side with a heavy booted foot, but Jamie remained silent. Probably unconscious. *Hopefully* unconscious.

I couldn't contain my anger any longer. I charged ahead, my finger tensing on the trigger. I was almost there when some remote part of my brain made me stop and think. How many bullets did I have? Eight? Even if I got Creech in one shot, there were more women there than I could take care of with the remaining bullets. Besides, I wasn't even sure I could shoot a woman.

Creech took a step toward me and I grabbed a member of his congregation, pressing the pistol's cold, octagonal barrel into her temple. "Untie Jamie or I'll shoot this lady. I swear to God I will!"

At this, Creech bellowed a laugh. "Go on," he said. "She won't mind one bit, and neither will your god, boyo."

To my surprise, the woman turned toward me and smiled. It was Mrs. Parker! My world tilted sideways. She took the opportunity to grab my hand and push my index finger down onto the trigger! The shot nearly split her smiling face in two. Blood splattered in every direction. I could feel its warmth as it slid down my face and soaked into my shirt. Mrs. Parker was dead. I let go of her body and it fell to the ground at my feet. I looked down to see that her yellow gingham dress was slowly soaking up the blood from the massive wound that had once been her head.

To make matters even weirder, the remaining women applauded as if they'd just seen a really good magic trick. My head swam as I tried to assign a rational meaning to the things that were happening right in front of me. I looked down at my blood-soaked hand and realized that my finger was still holding the trigger of the LeMat down. I released it and quickly thumbed the hammer back again. The cylinder rotated into place and I leveled the gun at Creech once more.

"I'll take your head off too if that's what you want!" I shouted. I moved closer and the women moved to encircle us.

"You ain't the killin' kind, are you, boyo?" asked Creech. "Not got the guts for that sort of shit, less'n you count the brains you just spilled on yer boots." He giggled as he sat down on top of Jamie and I nearly lost my mind. What kind of freak was this? The Mr. Creech that I'd met in Seamus' bar had been civilized. Now he was a sadistic

asshole. Was the shadow thing running the show inside that narrow skull of his? What the hell did Black Fox call it? He called it by a name. Think!

"I'm not talking to Creech, am I? AM I, NALUSA CHITO?! Is that your name or just what they call your particular kind of stink? Either way, you're a coward, hiding inside of folks instead of standing out here in on your own like the rest of us. You disgust me, you piece of shit." I spat at his shoes and a better than average sized loogey hit his pants leg and ran down onto his boot.

For a split second, Creech's expression shifted and his face was blank, but then the shadow gained control again and pushed that smile back to the surface. "Don't you speak words like that to me, boyo. They're too big for your tongue and they don't sound right rolling out of you."

I dug in and searched for every scrap of information I had about this thing. Both Mr. Deerson and Black Fox had said a lot about it, but I'd dismissed most of it as superstitious nonsense. Now I wished I'd paid more attention. How could I get this thing to leave Creech's body, and once it left, how did I keep it away?

"Then I guess I need more practice, Naaaaaa-lusa. Or do they just call you Lou? You didn't answer my question by the way. Did you not understand it? Is that it? Are you just too fucking dumb to get it? I figure there aren't a lot of folks that believe in your dumb ass these days, not even among the Chickasaw, so you're probably a lonely old bugger." I snapped my fingers. "That's it! You're so old, your hearing's going. Do you need me to get you an ear horn, you old fart?" I wasn't sure why I was taunting the thing but if it got off on worship, I figured derision must make it insane.

Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case. The Creech thing looked to be getting off on the whole affair. His answer was sudden and emphatic. He rose to his full height and stomped down on Jamie's head, all the while wearing that shit-eating grin. That smile found its way between the LeMat's sights and I let my finger pull the trigger with a click and a roar. The LeMat fired true and straight and blew a good size chunk out of the side of Creech's face. Brains and skull fragments rained down everywhere but there was no blood.

That wasn't what bothered me, though. What bothered me was the fact that Creech was still smiling. I glanced to either side and saw that all the women were doing the same. Just standing there. Smiling.

I ran toward Creech and shoved him toward the platform behind him, hoping the edge would hit him behind the knees and knock him flat on his back. It didn't. Instead, he jumped backwards and landed in a crouch on the little stage, his spurs jingling as I bent to untie Jamie. I didn't have a knife on me but the ropes were loose enough that I was able to get them off of her in a flash. I tried to see if Jamie could be saved. What I saw made me feel like I was losing my balance again. It wasn't Jamie. It was some other woman and she was dead, her skull crushed by Creech's boot.

I lowered her body to the ground and the women moved in to surround me. I still had the LeMat but it was looking like it wouldn't do me a whole lot of good. Unless...

I turned the barrel back toward Creech and fired. The first shot took off most of the top of his head. The second ripped into his right shoulder. The third finished that shoulder and sent his right arm flying in a spray of shiny gristle. The fourth took his left eye and the fifth plugged his chest. I was about to try for the other eye when the women flew into a frenzy.

Their whooping and hollering distracted me for a split second, but that was all it took. Despite being shot multiple times, losing an arm and the top of his head, Creech was still standing. He charged at me, snapping and biting at my face like a rabid dog. I raised the LeMat again but I was too slow. He bit my right hand and sent the gun flying, then he head-butted me with the sharp white edges of his broken skull. I fell to my knees.

He tried to speak but his voice sounded like it was underwater. He coughed up something and spat it at me. It was thick and black and smelled like rotten tallow. He held one nostril with his remaining hand, blowing out more of the viscous fluid before continuing. "You won't see me out like that, you little shit." He winked at me with his remaining eye, then he rared back and kicked me square in the chin as hard



as he could. As I lost consciousness, I remember thinking that a thing I didn't believe in had just broken my jaw.

When I woke up, I smelled fresh hay. Either the afterlife was run by horses or I was still alive. I tried to open my eyes, but they hurt like the dickens so I let them be. As I moved around, I realized that all of me hurt so I relaxed in my bed of hay.

"You awake?" It was a woman's voice. At least my ears still worked.

I tried calling out Jamie's name, but it came out sounding more like 'shamie'. A hand caressed my cheek and sent waves of pain through my swollen jaw. "OOOH!" I moaned unintentionally. The hand withdrew quickly.

"Gus? It's me, sweetie. Don't try to talk. Creech fucked up your jaw real good. Black Fox done gone to get the doc. Should be back here any minute."

I was comforted by the fact that Jamie wasn't dead. She was right there beside me. I rested my arm on her leg and she softly caressed the back of my hand. It was the one part of me that didn't seem to be damaged.

"You gone be alright, hon. We gone get you all better then we gone fuck up the thing that did this."

I sat up and reached for her arm. "Wha appen?" I asked through a mouth that no longer worked properly.

"Shhhh. Don't talk," she said, easing me back down with a finger on my forehead. I stayed prone but I wanted an answer to my question. I forced my eyes open and stared at her.

"We was down at the camp by the river, waiting for you to come back from taking a piss, when there come this ungodly sound. Something like a coyote being turned inside out. Black Fox ran out to the river but there weren't nothing there. Not even you. We looked for you, but we didn't find

nothing. Not even tracks. It was like you just up and disappeared."

I tried to hold onto my sanity long enough to digest this new information, but it was hard to concentrate. From my perspective, they'd been the ones who'd disappeared, but for them it was the other way around. How was that even possible?

"Orshes?" I asked.

"The horses was all gone when we got back to camp, along with all our shit. We waited 'til daylight to head for that bridge you said was up a piece. The fog lifted some and we found it, so we followed the side road 'til we got to the farm. Just in time, too. You was starting quite a commotion." She smiled and leaned over to kiss my ear. "We seen you shooting at Creech and all them women running in circles and screaming their fool heads off. Black Fox worked something out of his medicine bag then we charged in there after you. Hashi and Black Fox run them bitches off so I could carry you out of... Hey! Don't look so surprised."

I shrugged. I was surprised but I didn't know I looked it. I was trying to move my facial muscles as little as possible. "Where ah we?" I asked.

"We stayed off them trails but headed north. Followed the river a ways. Black Fox thought Creech might follow us so when we found this here barn we decided to hole up and see about getting hold of the doctor. That's about all there is to tell."

"Weech?" I asked, looking Jamie square in the eye.

"I couldn't believe a guy could fight and run like that with half of his head blown off. Fought off Black Fox and Hashi." Her face fell again. Had something happened to Hashi?

"Ashi?" I asked, but she wouldn't meet my gaze.

"Black Fox pushed something from his medicine bag into Creech's skin and hurt him real good with it, so instead of fighting back, Creech grabbed Hashi by the throat with that one good hand. Squeezed him 'til Hashi could hardly breathe, but he..."

Her tears fell onto the back of my hand and I realized that Creech had cost me yet another friend. One who had very likely saved my life.

Jamie continued, "He'd done cut that sonofabitch from shoulder to gut but Creech kept on somehow. Choked him 'til he broke his neck."

"Ut you goh away," I said.

"Black Fox did something that finally dropped Creech. He knows better than me what happened, but them womenfolk come a-running to help all of a sudden. Went from being rabid dogs to attacking Black Fox in just a second or two. They was too much for him so he grabbed Hashi and we got the hell out of there."

Looking up at the roof, I could tell the barn was large but it wasn't in very good shape. Probably an abandoned farm. Possibly owned by one of the families that Creech had destroyed the same way he'd destroyed the Parkers.

I sat up and looked around until I found what I was looking for. Hashi's body was under a blanket by a long feeding trough on the far side of the barn. I could tell because either Black Fox or Jamie had laid his sword on top of his body.

I wanted to get up and go to him—to somehow breathe life back into that once vibrant body, but it was too late. He was well and truly gone. I thought about his smiling face and generous spirit and my chest ached like there was a hole in my heart. In the one part of my body that Creech hadn't been able to reach, he'd still caused me intense pain. I felt like crying too, but I didn't have the energy. Jamie's tears would have to be enough for the both of us.

We remained silent, curled up together for what felt like hours. Then, out of the blue, I heard the sound of a horse's hooves. I shrunk back, ready to hide in the shadows, but Jamie stopped me.

"Don't worry. We found the horses on the road. That's probably Black Fox."

"Spahs?" I asked.

Jamie smiled. "Yes, Sparks is alright."

I smiled at that one tidbit of good news. I'd really grown attached to that horse and the thought that I might have left him in harm's way was more than I could bear.

The barn door opened and sunlight streamed in from outside and blinded me. Two thin shadows appeared and partially blocked the brilliant light before they closed the door behind them. It was Black Fox and Doc Brunson.

The doctor went right to work, opening his bag and probing my injuries while asking me a hundred questions. Lots of 'Does this hurt?' and 'How 'bout this?' was batted around. When the examination was done, he set to work applying salves and bandages where he saw fit. Once he was finished, he allowed himself to relax and chat me up like a normal person.

"So it looks like you got a hold of the pointy end of a bull, young man." He looked around at the others. "Ya'll want to let me in on what happened?"

No one answered but we all looked at one another like children who were afraid to rat out their friends.

"Look, I might be in the dark here but don't you assume I'm stupid," said the doctor. "If it's something illegal, then..."

"No," said Black Fox. "Nothing illegal. Something you will choose not to believe."

"*Choose* not to believe?" Doc Brunson laughed bitterly. "I choose not to believe that all the people in this world are shit despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary." He turned to Jamie and added, "Pardon my language, ma'am," which clearly made her day.

"That is not what I mean, Doctor," said Black Fox. "Let us sit down and I will do my best to explain."

Over the next half hour or so, Black Fox told the doctor about everything we'd been through and how it had culminated with my attempt at separating Creech's head from his shoulders. He also pointed out Hashi's body for the first time. Doc Brunson went to him and pulled back the blanket but I chose not to look. I preferred to remember my friend as he had been.

While the doctor examined Hashi, I tried to keep focused on the hay loft overhead. Directly, he came back to

sit beside us and I glanced over to see that he'd covered Hashi back up.

"This Creech fellow nearly tore your friend's head clean off. You say he did this with one hand?"

"Yes," said Black Fox.

"That's just about impossible. A man's grip isn't strong enough to do that kind of damage."

"As I told you, Creech is no longer a man. A man also cannot fight with half of his head missing, can he?" He had the doc there.

"Yeah. I reckon that's right," said the doctor. Much like Jamie and myself, he was wrestling with the ins and outs of it all. "If all that's true," he continued, "and the law knows about it, why aren't they after him?"

"Either that fool sheriff don't know what he's dealing with or he's done been under that thing's spell hisself," said Jamie.

"The Nalusa Chito will use any beings that will help him achieve his goal," said Black Fox.

"And what exactly does this guy want?" asked the doctor.

Black Fox wet his lips. "Like any living thing, he must feed. Fear and death are his food, as are souls. This is why he has enlisted women to his cause. He is likely controlling them like we might control a mule; reining them in or urging them on. When he needs to feed on their fear, he lets them free and allows them the knowledge of his true countenance. We witnessed this at his farm."

I sat up, determined to participate in the discussion. "Buh ih wah like he los cohntroh. Noh gave."

Jamie interpreted for me. "He said Creech lost control of them women instead of giving it up on purpose." She looked to me for confirmation and I nodded.

Black Fox said, "It may be, but he gained power in that time, did he not?"

I had to think about it. Was that what happened? I remembered the women going wild when he was at his weakest, but they came back under his control just as suddenly. It was like a stream of water had been disrupted

by a hand reaching in for a drink, then it had gone back to flowing. I nodded to Black Fox.

"I believe he released them so that they would feel fear. Fear that he could feed upon. It is bad that we were unable to drive him away when he was weakened. Now that he has a food source, he will remain a formidable enemy. However, we do have one new advantage."

No one spoke because no one could see this mysterious advantage. We all assumed this thing couldn't be beaten. My own beat down at the hand of a man who'd just been blown to pieces was pretty good evidence that we were right.

"I believe the Nalusa Chito is now trapped inside the body of Creech," said Black Fox.

"Wha?" I asked. I wouldn't have accused him of it, even if my mouth had been in perfect working order, but I began to wonder if Black Fox was delusional. This was clearly a fight we couldn't win.

"The damage you did to his body killed the man you knew as Creech. Now the Nalusa Chito is holding what is left of him together. He is using all of his energy for this because he is trapped. If the body were to die before he could flee, he would be stuck in the corpse forever. He may be able to get away if he does it quickly but it would take precise timing. Fear is ruling him for a change."

"Hold on, now," said the doctor. "Ya'll really believe all of this?" he asked, looking at Jamie and me. "I get how Black Fox accepts it, since he was raised with these beliefs." He gave Black Fox an apologetic glance.

"So was I," said Jamie.

"Alright, so you see my point. I wasn't and it's a little hard for me to swallow."

"Foh me too," I said.

Jamie started to translate but the doctor was already nodding. "Yes, exactly. So do you believe this story about spirit possession and demons and whatnot?"

I leaned over to Jamie and whispered into her ear so she could speak for me.

"He says Creech lost a chunk of his head and one of his arms and he still killed Hashi."

I whispered some more.

"He didn't believe it 'til he seen that. Bullets didn't stop him." I added one more thing and Jamie looked at me, chilled.

"What did he say?" asked the doctor.

"Creech smiled at him the whole time. Even when Gus was shooting him. He enjoyed it. That's what made Gus believe."

I don't know why I wanted the doctor to buy into our story. Maybe it was because I needed for him to confirm it all for me. There was a part of me, deep down, that still doubted, but that part was getting smaller.

"Well, if it is true—if ya'll really do have some rampaging devil on your hands—you're going to need help.

"Ah you voluneerin?" I asked.

"I reckon I am," he said, but he was sweating like a groom in July when he said it.



After I healed up some, we buried Hashimoto in the forest. Knowing nothing of the funeral customs of Hashi's people, we improvised. As was the Chickasaw tradition, Black Fox had wrapped Hashi's body and eased it into a seated position before he'd gotten stiff. We buried him that way, facing west.

At the funeral Black Fox sang a song that made me feel lonely despite the fact that I understood none of the words. I'd found an old shovel in the barn so I helped to shovel dirt on top of Hashi until he disappeared from our view forever. Jamie put a bouquet of wildflowers onto the grave and all that was left was for me to say a word or two.

"Dear Lord, you know I'm not a churchgoing man and I hardly ever pray, but if the stories I've been told about you are true, you just might be merciful and grant me one favor. The man we honor this day was a good man. He might not have been much into praying either. I honestly don't know what he believed. Regardless, I ask that you bestow your mercy on our good friend, Hashimoto." As I spoke, tears filled my eyes and I felt Jamie's warm hand in my own. I still couldn't speak perfectly but it really didn't matter. Everyone listening understood. "Please, Lord, accept him and hold him close. His was a rare soul. I only knew him a short time and yet I loved him. I will miss him for the rest of my days. Amen."

Jamie hugged me and pressed her face into my shoulder. Her tears soaked into my shirt as Black Fox began singing again. When she let go, I walked over to the grave and laid Hashi's sword on top of the mound of dirt. We stood there until Black Fox finished, then we all walked back to the barn in silence. That burial was a hard thing to do, but somehow we all got through it.

After that, the days passed slowly for us. The farm we'd commandeered appeared to have been abandoned for some time, but the house was in decent shape. All of its doors were locked and the storm shutters were closed. We could have gotten in easy enough but none of us were willing to move in there. If the owners were to come back and find us in their beds, it was bound to end badly. No, the barn was just fine.

Black Fox spent his time building new bows, making new arrows, and teaching the rest of us how to handle them. He was a right good shot, but Jamie and I had a hard time picking it up. We kept at it, though.

The doctor went back to Twining for a spell to check on his patients there and to pick up supplies for us. He said the law hadn't given him a second look despite the fact that the sheriff suspected he was helping us. I thought that the deputies might've been using him to find us, but he said that they were all preoccupied with a new rash of disappearances.

"The shadow grows strong," said Black Fox upon hearing this news. "We must leave this place soon."

We all agreed, but none of us knew what to do next. I'd tried the whole 'barge right in and get your nuts kicked' plan and that hadn't worked out so well.

One night, after we'd eaten some especially tasty chickens that the doctor had delivered, I brought up the one question that had been on my mind ever since I'd awakened in that barn. "What can we do, Black Fox? How can we kill the shadow now that he's had time to fill his belly?"

Black Fox had just loaded his pipe and was passing it to the doctor when he answered. "I have been thinking on this. I believe we must not address him directly. We must first remove the wood from his fire."

"Them women?" asked Jamie.

Black Fox nodded. "We must not let them nurse him with their energy."

"Yeah, that sounds real easy," I said sarcastically. "There's got to be nearly fifty of them now if what the doc says is true, and we can't exactly kill them. It's not their fault he's using them."

"As I said, I have been thinking on this," said Black Fox. "I think it is helpful that he must control so many at once. He will be spread thin."

"Yeah, but he'll notice if we start messing with his food supply," said the doctor.

"Perhaps not," said Black Fox. "If we stop them from feeling fear, he will become weak again. Then we will be able to cut Creech to bits and trap the Nalusa Chito in him forever."

"Yeah, but we can't stop them women folk from feeling scared, can we?" asked Jamie.

"It's possible," said the doctor. "I don't pretend to understand exactly what it is this thing is consuming, but people generally aren't afraid when they're relaxed. The more relaxed they are, the less afraid they become."

"You talking about getting them drunk?" I asked. I'd seen my share of happy drunks, but I couldn't remember ever having seen a scared one. He might be on to something.

"That's one way, but probably not the best. Alcohol takes time. It doesn't start working right away and it has varying effects dependent upon an individual's metabolism and diet. I was thinking more along the lines of drugging them."

"With what?" I asked.

"Well, I've got anesthetics that would do the trick. They'd knock them out completely." He looked over at Black Fox. "What then?"

Black Fox exhaled a stream of smoke and watched it disperse before he answered. "I am sorry to say that my heart is not pure when it comes to this answer. I am very angry with the Nalusa Chito for taking my friend. So angry that I may not make the best choices when it comes to doling out his punishment."

He stared at his pipe and we waited patiently for him to continue.

"My people often embrace revenge. I usually do not wish it, as revenge does not lead to resolution. In this case, however..." He seemed to be searching the air itself for the words. "He must be made aware of the price of our suffering

so that he does not bother our people again. I do not think we can kill him but I will be content if we make him feel pain until the end of time."

"That's some serious shit," said Jamie under her breath and it made me laugh.

Black Fox smirked slightly and replied, "Yes. Very serious shit. I believe that the doctor's drugs must be used to make the women sleep. Then we must dismember the body of Creech and bury the pieces in distant places. Holy places that will contain him forever."

I bowed my head, thinking for the very first time of the man caught in the middle of our little war.

"What troubles you, Gus?" asked Black Fox.

"I was just thinking of Mr. Creech. Not the demon inside him, but the man who didn't ask to be involved in this."

Black Fox took a puff from his pipe and said, "I would not be so certain of this. The Nalusa Chito rode Jamie so she did not have to consent, but he is inhabiting your Mr. Creech. That is very different. Jamie was eventually able to push him out, but Mr. Creech has become one with him."

Jamie nodded. "I could feel him prying into me. It's hard to explain but it felt like my insides was in a tin can and he didn't have no can opener. He just kept banging the can with a rock hoping it'd bust open." She flushed, embarrassed. "I guess that sounds stupid, huh?"

"No," said Black Fox. "This is a good description.

With that vote of confidence, Jamie sat up a little straighter.

The doctor had been quiet so far, but he'd been listening acutely. "So let's say we can weaken this spirit thing by knocking the women out. How do we keep him from feeding on us instead? I'm pretty sure, if what ya'll say is true, I'll be plenty scared when I come face to face with this guy."

"I will make each of us a necklace of charms. That will help to keep him out, but as you say, he will be desperate and we will be frightened."

"Then the doctor's right," I said. "He won't get weak enough for us to kill him if he can still feed on us!"

"I apologize," said Black Fox. "As I have told you, I am not a medicine man like Deer Son was. I do not know all that this being is capable of." He tapped the ashes out of his pipe. "We must do what we can soon, though. If we fail, the price may be our own spirits." He looked at the doctor. "What you would call our souls."

**31**

I awoke the next morning with no feeling in my right arm. At first I panicked, but then I saw that Jamie was laying on top of it. I slid it out from under her and got up to work some blood back into the muscles. I was still sore from the beating I'd taken and my bruises had turned a nice shade of green, but I felt a hundred times better than I had. The doctor was pretty sure my jaw hadn't been broken at all. Just temporarily dislocated.

I stepped outside, careful not to make any noise. The morning air had a frigid bite, but the area was peaceful and quiet. I walked across to the house and sat in the porch swing to watch the sunrise sparkle across the frost-covered grass. In the stories I'd heard about witches and devils, it was usually a holy man that was called upon to send them packing. Well, Black Fox was the closest thing we had to a holy man and all he'd been able to do was anger the thing. Would a Christian minister have better luck? I doubted it. While it was likely that the shadow thing was what the Bible referred to as a demon, it seemed more like it was actually a part of nature instead of some sort of magical being that fought wars with God. If that was so, then what was his purpose in the overall scheme of things?

"He is here to challenge us," said a voice from nowhere.

I sprang up from my seat and looked around, ready to do battle with yet another spiritual monster. Then I saw Black Fox's face through the porch railing.

"Jesus, you scared the shit out of me!" I exclaimed as I fell back into the swing.

"I apologize for listening."

"But I wasn't saying anything."

"Not with your voice. With your thoughts."

Hang on. "You can read my thoughts? Seriously? Why the hell haven't you said anything about that before?" I tried to remember if I'd had any bad thoughts about Black Fox recently.

He smiled. "You misunderstand. I read them on your face. In your hands. Your walk."

"Huh." I took a deep breath and tried to slow my speeding heartbeat as Black Fox joined me on the porch.

"May I sit with you?" he asked.

I slid over and gestured to the wooden seat of the swing. It's a funny thing, rocking a porch swing back and forth with two people. Oftentimes, the two end up pushing against each other and the swing wobbles. Then they overcompensate and it gets worse. It's only when both let go and just let the swing dictate the movement that it flows freely. Black Fox and I were together from the moment he sat down.

"We have to let go," I said.

"Yes?"

"We want him to die. We want him to hurt because he's hurt us and taken things from us. Valuable things."

"Yes," said Black Fox.

"Hashi. Jamie's father. Michael's father." For a brief moment, the Chickasaw village sprang to life in my mind. Was Michael safe? Maybe this thing had already killed everyone there. I shook my head to get rid of the image.

"I worry as well," said Black Fox.

"Okay, you have to teach me that trick," I said with a smile.

Black Fox shrugged.

After a few minutes of swinging in silence, I asked, "Are you afraid to die?"

Black Fox stopped the swing and looked at me. "No," he said.

"Me neither. I *was*, but now I'm more afraid that something might happen to Jamie or to you. That's my fear. That's what the shadow wants and he's stoking that fire in me right now. Like the doctor said, if our fears feed him even as we fight him, he'll eventually win."

Black Fox looked over at me. I couldn't read his mind but I could tell that he was surprised. "Are you sure you are not Chickasaw?"

I laughed. "Pretty sure."

"Then Choctaw?" I shook my head. "You and the doctor have both offered wise words. If we cannot control ourselves, we cannot banish this spirit. I have been considering the purpose of such a being. Perhaps this is the answer. Perhaps he was put here to challenge us so that we might grow as men and as warriors." He looked over at the barn and waved at Jamie. "Itanale is awake. We should return."

With that, there was no more talk of fear or strategy that morning, but I could see that Black Fox was turning things over in his mind, inspecting the possibilities from every angle.

When he didn't show up to eat lunch with us, I knew he was onto something but I had no idea what. The afternoon shadows became long and we still hadn't seen him. We all were worried but we didn't say anything about our fears to one another. We just stuck around camp, hoping he'd return soon. We were all thinking the same things. Was he attacked by the shadow? Was he dead? Should we go and look for him?

The autumn chill slipped between the cracks in the barn's walls as the sun set. We wouldn't be able to stay in the barn much longer without heat. The house was becoming more and more attractive.

I'd just gotten up to light our kerosene lantern when the big door squeaked open. No one entered and I held my breath in the dark. There were some rustling noises outside and I eased over to my bed roll to retrieve the LeMat. I was just grasping its textured grip when the door opened wider and Black Fox stepped inside. He had a bundle of burlap over his shoulder with a bunch of leaves and branches sticking out of it.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

I immediately dropped the LeMat onto my blanket and smiled. "No. Nothing. We were just concerned when you didn't come back."



"I did not expect it to take so long to find everything I needed. Something has depleted this forest of useful herbs. Perhaps local animal life. Perhaps something else."

We all knew what he meant so there was no need for him to elaborate. "What is that stuff?" I asked as I struck a match and touched it to the lantern's wick.

"I took what you said this morning to heart, Gus. I will make medicine that will keep our fears at bay. I have seen such things brewed by Deer Son for our warriors before battle. I believe I can work out the ingredients, especially if you are willing to advise me, doctor."

It was the first time that Black Fox had sought help from Doc Brunson and it obviously buoyed the man's mood. "Gladly," he said, "but first we ought to see about some dinner."

"I can help with that as well," said Black Fox and he pulled three rabbits from his bag. "I snared these while I was searching for plants. We will need to eat well before our fast."

"Our what?" asked Jamie.

According to Black Fox, the herbal concoctions that he and the doctor were working on would only work properly if we fasted for three days prior to taking them. That meant three days of hunger and dread coupled with hard work. Not exactly a good time.

"Before we take the medicine, we must make sure we know where Creech and the women are," said Black Fox.

"Reconnoiter," said the doctor. That's what they called it when I was in the army."

"You were in the service?" I asked. "Was it during the war of secession?" To my eyes, he didn't appear to be old enough.

"I joined up when I was very young. Too young." His attention wandered from me to his private recollections of the pains he'd endured back then.

"So we will reconnoiter, as the doctor says," said Black Fox. "We must learn all we can about Creech's camp before forming a plan."

"How we gone find him?" asked Jamie.

"His compound was set up to house, feed, and care for a large number of people," said Black Fox. "Moving that would be like moving an army barracks. I believe he is still there."

"Well that'd be plain stupid," said Jamie.

"But it is the last place that you wanted to search, yes?" asked Black Fox.

"He has a point," I said. Jamie's scowl told me I was crossing an invisible line so I quickly added, "but so do you."

"Yes, she does," said Black Fox. "This is why we must reconnoiter."

"Then I'll go it alone," I said. "I know the property better than the rest of you."

"I'll go with you," said Jamie. "I know the way back to the road from here."

"No. I'll follow the river. Besides, I'll be faster alone. Safer too." I imagined her protestations before she even said them out loud. "I promise not to go in there with my gun drawn. I'll just sneak in and sneak out. That's all." She nodded reluctantly.

Black Fox said, "You should conduct your search in daylight if at all possible. Creech will be more active after dark."

"I still say he might be dead," said Jamie.

"If he is, then we will learn this as well," said Black Fox. "While you are at Creech's farm, I will venture further east and circle back here. We must know the surrounding terrain."

Black Fox and I stayed up late and packed a few provisions. Mostly water. Traveling while fasting wasn't going to be a lot of fun but at least we'd have lighter loads. When I finally crawled into bed, I could see Jamie's eyes shining in the dim light.

"I'm scared, Gus," she said.

I held her close. "It's alright, honey. I'll be fine."

She shook her head against my chest and I reached down to raise her chin. I could taste the tears on her lips as I kissed her softly. That kiss turned into a full-body embrace and she kissed her way down my neck and unbuttoned my shirt. I nuzzled the top of her head and helped her out of her clothes as well. On the one hand, I hoped we wouldn't wake the others, but on the other I didn't give a damn. I helped her out of her pants and slid on top of her in the darkness. She guided me into her soft, wet cleft and I looked down into her beautiful eyes. If I had to die soon, this was surely the last thing I wanted to remember.

When we were finished, I pulled the blanket around us despite the fact that the chill in the room had magically dissipated. Jamie rested her head on my outstretched arm and we spooned that way until she fell asleep. I never got there myself. I dozed off and on until I saw the dawn coming.

I slipped out of her embrace and dressed as quickly and quietly as I could, then I grabbed my pack, put on my hat, and looked around the barn. It was no surprise to see Black Fox sitting up and staring right back at me.

He pointed to the door and we went outside together. Without a word, he reached toward me and removed my hat. The crow feather was still there, dangling from the braided leather hatband. He put his palm over it and then over my heart. I nodded that I understood and we both turned to leave without looking back.

Sparks perked up the minute I put the saddle on him. "I hope we make it through this, boy," I whispered to him. His large eyes examined me as if he was skeptical of anything but a positive outcome. I wished that I could feel the same way. Instead, I was apprehensive.

It took an hour or so for me to find my way to Creech's place. Like last time, I left Sparks to graze a safe distance away and I went in on foot. On my previous visit, I'd zipped around the compound sight unseen. If I could do it once, I could do it again, right?

As I approached the farm, I noticed that there was no one about. It looked deserted. A glance at the sun told me that it had to be well past nine o'clock. If anybody was living there, surely some of them would have been up by then. I circled to the east, content to stay in the cover of the forest until I knew whether or not anyone was home. I was about to venture out when the front door of the main house swung open and a group of eight women walked down the steps and straight towards me! Had they seen me? Shit! I hunkered down and held my breath.

The women went to one of the sheds and collected several baskets, then they started walking towards me again. Had I missed my chance to get away? They got closer but they didn't say a word to one another. I looked at the bush I was hiding behind and suddenly realized what the baskets were for. I'd chosen to hide in some sort of berry-bearing plants. I pushed myself deeper into the bushes. If I was lucky, the women would pick a few ripe berries and move on. Was there any way that they wouldn't see me? The closer they got, the less likely it seemed. I couldn't shoot them

without alerting the others inside, and cold cocking them one at a time was definitely out.

A woman who I didn't think I'd seen before leaned in and began picking berries just above my head. I looked up through the leaves and into her dark eyes. They were empty of life, as if Creech had wrung the spirit out of them. I'd only ever seen that look on horses and pack mules who'd been used beyond an inch of their lives. They looked like they'd been hollowed out. The woman could obviously see because she plucked the best berries without any difficulty, but there was no spark within her. It was like she was powered by a steam engine instead of a beating heart and she scared the shit out of me.

No one took note of me as I lay there and they eventually moved on to find more berries a few yards away. I took the opportunity to ease away from their location and toward the north of the house. I'd not seen it up close before and I was startled by one simple detail. All of the windows were covered in tin from the inside, exactly like Jamie's father's house. Creech had to be in there.

The women took their harvest over to a water pump and washed the berries methodically, then they marched back into the house as solemnly as they'd marched out. I doubted that Creech needed food anymore, but the women needed sustenance. Maybe we'd be able to put something in the well water that would tone them down while we fought Creech.

I took out a small piece of paper and quickly sketched a map of the farm. I circled the water pump so I'd remember my idea later. It was out in the open but I was sure we could find a way to get to it. I circled around the perimeter of the property, careful to note where there were large trees that would make for good cover and where the doors were on each of the buildings. I was putting my crude map away when I heard a horse approaching. Strange. I didn't remember seeing horses or even tack when I was there before.

My speculation ended when a man rode up in front of the house and dismounted. It was one of Sheriff Hays' deputies. He climbed the steps to the porch and I noted how

clean the place was. Clean and empty. Just like Creech had been the first time I met him.

The deputy was about to knock when the door swung open and an older woman walked out into the light, wringing her hands in a dishrag. I couldn't hear their conversation, but it seemed pleasant enough. This woman wasn't like the others. This woman was alive and genuine, or at least that was the illusion she created. After a few moments, the deputy tipped his hat and headed back to his horse, the woman right behind him.

"Ya'll let us know if'n you see `em, ahight?" he added as he mounted the mare. "Don't forget, it's four people. There's a young couple, an injun and a Chinaman!"

"I'll tell my husband when he gets back, deputy," replied the woman with a smile. "Thank you for calling and letting us know."

I'm pretty sure the deputy rode off and the woman went back inside the house, but I didn't see either event. Instead, I plopped on my ass, my mind buzzing with the fact that the local law hadn't given up their search for us after all! They had to be shitty trackers to have overlooked us for so long, but they hadn't thrown in the sponge just yet. Goddamnit! I didn't fancy fighting the law at the same time we were trying to take down a demon.

"So if we're going to do something, we'd better do it soon," I concluded as I wrapped up my report to the others. I expected them to be upset or excited or some combination of the two but they just sat there. If anything, they looked happy about it.

"Maybe I didn't tell it right," I began again, but Black Fox held up a hand to stop me.

"You have spoken correctly, Gus. Thank you for the gifts of wisdom you have brought this day."

Oh boy. "But, we have to get going. Now! Don't you understand?"

"Yes. I understand. But there is no need for rash behavior. We must consider this along with the other information we have learned."

"What other information? Jamie?"

Jamie took my hand into hers and the feel of her skin was enough to distract me from my fears, if only briefly. "Black Fox done got back here way earlier than you," she said, "so we been talking."

Black Fox pointed to the east. "There is a train track that runs to the northeast of Creech's farm. It is close enough to walk to."

"So how does that change anything?" I asked.

"The doctor will explain," said Black Fox.

All eyes turned to Doc Brunson. He walked over to a row of cans that had been lined up on the floor. He brought one back and carefully set it in the middle of our circle.

"This," said Doc Brunson, "is a grenade of sorts. Similar to the ones used in the war, except this one disperses a powder into the air when it explodes. An anesthetic. But there's a problem." He pushed up his glasses. "To disperse the anesthetic without killing the people nearby with the

explosion, I have had to use a minimal amount of gunpowder. That means that these will only work within a very small range. An enclosed space would be best."

"Like inside a house?" I asked.

"More like a small, sealed room."

"Well, I wouldn't count on hurling those things inside Creech's place. He's covered the windows with tin, like at Jamie's house." I felt Jamie's hand tense up in my own but she didn't say anything. "There would be no guarantee that all of the women would be present even if we could do so," said Black Fox.

"I thought we might be able to poison their well," I said optimistically as I pulled out the map I'd drawn of the compound. "It's here, just to the west of the front porch, near where Creech held that gathering of his."

The doctor was already shaking his head. "This mixture won't work that way. The efficacy of these herbs is such that the women will need to inhale them, and a good amount at that. Liquid suspension in such a large amount of water would be out of the question. Maybe if I had more time I could come up with a different..."

"No," interrupted Black Fox. "We have no more time. We must use the train."

I looked around and realized that I was the only one who didn't get what the whole train thing was about. Jamie saw the confused look on my face, so she explained.

"Black Fox thinks we should get all them women in a train car and set off the doc's grenades in there. Put 'em all straight to sleep and take 'em far away from Creech."

I almost laughed at how complicated this was becoming. I turned back to Black Fox. "Why not just put them in one of the sheds at the compound?"

"You have seen these sheds," reasoned Black Fox. "Are they not falling apart? They would not hold the women inside and they would let the gas leak out."

The doctor added, "The airflow through the structure would pull the particulates outside before they even got a chance to work."



"Fine, but how the hell do you think we're going to get them into a train car even if we had one? I don't expect they'll just want to do what we say."

"I think that they will," said Black Fox.

"And how's that?"

The doctor cleared his throat, as he did just about every time he was about to speak. I made a mental note that I had to play poker with him someday. "Black Fox came across the lawmen on his run as well. We can pit them against Creech and Creech against them. It's perfect."

"Perfect? Holy shit, man, do you realize..."

Jamie grabbed my arm as I started to stand up. "Listen to him," was all she said.

The doctor continued, "The idea is to send the sheriff to Creech's farm by telling him that you're hiding there."

"Alright. Then what? They find out we're not there and they come after us here?"

Black Fox said, "Creech will take control of the deputies to hold them off."

"And do what with them?" I asked.

Black Fox leaned in closer. "We must ensure that there are many deputies there. The more the Nalusa Chito has to control, the less control he will exert on each one. Once we have removed the women, he will be too weak to do more than keep them from attacking him. That is when we will strike."

"And how the hell do we get the women out of that house if he's busy feeding on them?"

The doctor picked up the thread Black Fox had left dangling. "They'll come to us. Creech will have to be strong to take control of so many men. Stronger than he's been for some time, according to Black Fox. He'll need those women scared so he can suck up their fear."

Black Fox chimed in again. "You saw how they reacted when you shot Creech. They fell into chaos, running about like chickens. He needed their energy to hold himself together so he could continue to fight you. Once the women are pushed into that fearful, panicked state, we will guide them to the east and into the waiting train, like a herd of

cattle. Then we can put them all to sleep in the train car and go back for Creech."

"Hold on a minute," I said, trying to catch up. "How do you know a train'll even be in the vicinity?"

The doctor pulled a neckerchief over his nose. "Hands up," he said as he pointed a finger at me.

"You've got to be kidding," I sighed. This had to be the worst plan ever.

"I'd need to use your pistol," said the doctor. "I'll take control of the train down at Potter's Fork when they stop for water, then I'll have them drive it up to the rendezvous point."

"Uh huh. Sounds like you might get yourself killed. Lots of folks packing iron these days, Doc."

"I only have to watch out for the engineer and the fireman. The passengers won't even know what's happening. We'll detach everything but the first passenger car then I'll lock everyone in the remaining cars and go on alone."

I looked over at Black Fox and asked, "You're actually okay with this crazy idea?"

He shrugged. "I believe it to be within our means. Nothing more."

"Well, I believe it to be a good way for all of us to get our asses shot off!" I sneered. I hated all the nooks and crannies where any number of things could go wrong. We needed a foolproof plan with a clear path to our goal. This one was, at best, a meandering trail through the wilderness!

"You must learn from the crow," said Black Fox, gesturing once again at the feather on my hat. "He is content to accept whatever comes his way."

"Yeah, but I've never seen a crow go chasing after a demon before, have you?" I exclaimed.

Black Fox shook his head. "There are many things in this world that the crow understands. Things that you and I do not know or believe, but those things still remain true. They are part of the crow's world because he accepts them. We humans choose to wear blinders to simplify the world and line it up so that it suits our expectations. There is much in the sky, in the Earth, and in our own hearts which we do not understand because we do not wish to."

I sighed heavily. The mumbo jumbo was getting to me more than ever. I couldn't argue against it because it wasn't based on reason. And yet, I'd seen some fairly unreasonable things of late.

"I think you're all nuts," I said.

"What is 'nuts'?" asked Black Fox.

"Crazy! Loco!" I spat the words at him like they were bullets.

"Why are you so angry?"

Why, indeed? "I don't know. I just need for things to slow down a minute so I can get used to the whole idea of the four of us taking on this thing alone. It really is foolhardy, you know?"

The doctor cleared his throat and said, "I understand, Gus. It seems pretty crazy to me too. I'm a scientist at heart. I prefer the empirical approach, but unlike you I know that most straight lines end up getting broken sooner or later."

"Yes," said Black Fox. "You understand music. This is a music that cannot be written until we are in the middle of playing it."

Of course. I'd never been comfortable playing anything without a template. I either had to hear it first or see the sheet music. "You're talking about making it up as we go along."

"Yes," said Black Fox. "This is the life of the crow."

I'd never improvised music before, yet here I was being asked to improvise a life or death situation. It made me terribly uncomfortable. "Just tell me you're confident that it'll work."

"I cannot tell you what I do not know. Not even to make you feel better. But I can tell you this. We will not act on this plan unless everyone agrees."

My face fell. Was he setting me up to be the goat?

"I am confident in this group, Gus. I believe in our abilities to do what is necessary. If we all have the heart of the crow—if we all see with piercing eyes and react with the instinct of the hunter—no man nor thing may stop us. Not even the Nalusa Chito."

I nodded slowly. "Alright then. What do you need me to do?"

The doctor headed back to Twining the following morning to plant the information that would lead the sheriff's men back to Creech's farm. Odds were that they'd conduct a raid first thing the next morning so we had to be ready for them. Black Fox, Jamie, and I spent the bulk of the afternoon and evening drawing maps and talking through each step of the plan. We even put in a couple of hours of target practice with our bows. Jamie was getting better but I felt like I was getting worse. That didn't discourage Black Fox though. He kept right on with the lessons.

"Imagine the arrow going through the trunk of the pine tree," he whispered.

I lined up my shot and breathed the way he'd taught me as I pulled the bowstring taut. I looked at my target then back at my arrow. Was I doing everything right? My muscles began to ache and the arrowhead wavered before me. I couldn't hold it steady to save my soul. Once I'd decided that my muscles weren't going to relax, I zeroed in on the target with my eye and I let the arrow go. It missed the tree entirely. I sighed and looked to Black Fox for help.

"You must stop thinking with your mind, Gus," he said. "Let your hands think for themselves. They know your fingers well. Let them converse together. Do not get in the way. It is like playing the piano, is it not?"

I thought about it for a minute, then said, "No, Black Fox. It's not like that at all."

Black Fox cocked his head. "How is it not like this? Do you use your mind to tell each and every finger what it must do? Do you force your arms to move in unison with your hands and fingers against their will?"

"Not exactly, but I have to try and make the music I play match what I hear in my head. The harder I try, the closer I get to achieving it."

"Do you really believe that you can simply will such actions into being?"

"That's what practice is all about. You keep trying until you get it right."

"Your words betray much. 'Trying'. 'Right'. This is not the way of the natural world, Gus. Part of you knows this and yet you will not let that part speak." He looked over just as Jamie landed her third arrow in the center of the tree trunk. "See how Itanale breathes through her bow. It is not will. It is openness and awareness. Will is an illusion. You must see through it."

I sighed. I no longer had the energy to resist Black Fox's platitudes. I simply raised the bow carelessly and let an arrow fly, almost without looking at all. "There, you happy?" I asked.

Black Fox smiled but Jamie applauded and whistled. I looked over and my arrow had landed right next to hers in the center of the tree. I felt a tingle up my spine and the corners of my mouth twitched their way into a smile, even though I resisted it with all my strength. I had to acknowledge that there was something to Black Fox's words. Either that or I was the luckiest sonofabitch this side of Twining.

As night fell, Black Fox gathered up some things and left to spend the night alone in the woods. I didn't try to dissuade him but I would have felt better if he'd stayed close by. Jamie and I were worn flat out so we decided to turn in early. She settled into her usual snore-filled slumber quickly, but I was still too worked up to doze off.

Black Fox had spent the rest of the afternoon reinforcing the lesson he'd taught me at target practice. He wouldn't let it go, and, consequently, I played it over and over in my mind as I lay there in the darkness. Maybe I did depend on my thoughts too much. I wanted to let go and rely on my heart, but most of the time I didn't know how. I thought of the day I'd played the piano at the doctor's house.

At first, I'd lost myself in the music and the piece had soared with a life of its own. Then I'd started analyzing my work. Thinking about everything I was doing. I began metering my tempo and struggling to make the sounds match my memories of the piece as I'd heard others perform it. At that point, I'd lost the flow and no amount of effort could rein it back in. I wondered if that was going to happen again tomorrow. Was I going to try too hard and thereby lose the war we were fighting? I sat there in the slivers of moonlight that streamed through the cracks in the walls and tried to think of a way to let go. Was it even possible?

I heard some leaves rustle outside so I sat up and reached for my revolver. I waited, listening, but the sound didn't return. Probably just dead leaves in the wind. I relaxed, but I didn't put the weapon away. I held it in my hands, feeling its power. I tried to put my conscious thoughts in check and sense it with my heart. The cold metal was smooth but it wasn't without imperfections. There were pits and scratches all over the old weapon that betrayed its history of death. I felt the people who'd been killed by the pistol in its day. It held power over the living, but like a puppet, it couldn't act alone. It needed a puppeteer. Alone, it was just a hunk of metal. Maybe Mr. Creech was like that too. Maybe he was essentially harmless before he was wielded by the Nalusa Chito. If that was the case, I hoped his soul would soon be at rest.

I was sitting there, holding the gun in my lap, when I heard a horse approach outside. I waited at the ready. A few moments later, the barn door blew open and the doctor strode in on a frigid blast of air.

"Hey," he whispered as he latched the door behind him and took off his coat. "Sorry to be so late."

"Everything alright?" I asked.

"Yeah, pretty much. I told them what they wanted to hear and they ate it up. They'll be out to Creech's farm at first light."

"That's good. We'll be ready."

The doctor sat down and asked, "Where's Black Fox?"

"He went off on his own around suppertime." Funny how I still associated that time of day with supper even though we'd eaten nothing but a few herbs.

"Looks like he took the medicine with him."

I nodded. "Yeah."

Doc Brunson looked down at Jamie and whispered, "Can we talk for a minute? Just you and me?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Well, I don't want to wake Jamie up or anything."

I smiled at that. "You're welcome to try, Doc. Many lesser men have failed at that task."

The doctor laughed as he pulled off his boots. He stretched his legs out in front of him before continuing. "I want you to know that I'm going to do my best tomorrow."

I wondered where this was coming from, but I just nodded. "I expected no less, Doc. You've been a mighty big blessing to this little group so far."

"Are you going to be alright?"

"Yeah, I reckon so. Either alright or dead. There's not much in between, is there?"

"Well, I'd say Creech's women are in between." He rubbed his shoulders as if he'd gotten a chill. "I'd rather be dead than left like that."

"You don't think we'll be able to save them?"

"My professional opinion is that anything's possible. I've seen men who bled out come back and I've seen others die with nothing more than a stomach cramp. People are resilient but they have to have their heart in it first. Know what I mean?"

"I think I do. Black Fox was trying to teach me such a lesson earlier today but it's not an easy one for me to learn. How the hell am I supposed to stop thinking when ya'll keep giving me more to think about?" I laughed and I could just make out the doctor's smile in the moonlight.

"I don't know what Black Fox has been telling you, but I suspect my own thoughts are a little more grounded. I'm worried about the medicine. About how it's going to affect us."

I looked at him like he'd been speaking Chinese, so he continued. "See, once we take that medicine, our deepest

thoughts will rise to the surface. Whatever we're truly feeling, deep down, will influence our actions."

The doctor didn't sound like himself and it worried me. It occurred to me that he might be under the influence of the shadow. I discreetly slid the LeMat under the blanket and into my hand. Could it be that something happened to him during his trip into Twining?

He continued, "Think of it this way. You used to play piano in saloons and such, right?"

"Yeah."

"You probably saw a bunch of drunk folks in those bars. People you knew outside of the bar who'd come in from time to time and drink a little too much."

"Yeah. So?"

"So then you know what I'm talking about. How people change when they drink."

He was right, of course. Alcohol had a funny way of amplifying otherwise small parts of people's personalities. A friendly guy could become lustful. A disappointed guy could end up in tears, ready to kill himself. There was no telling what would happen, and it varied with the drink and the drinker.

"So you're saying that this medicine you whipped up to keep us from being scared could make us into a bunch of bad drunks?" I asked.

"It could make any of us a liability, Gus. You need to understand that in the event things go awry tomorrow." He laid back on his bed roll, unwilling to look at me and say what he had to say. "See, I picked up a nasty habit when I was in the army. The war was too much for me to take. I was barely seventeen and I had to hold men down while they got their legs sawed off in front of me. I took to drinking and I had a hard time putting it down once the battles were said and done. It cost me my fiancé and it damn near cost me my livelihood." He sat up, looking like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. "I was not a happy drunk. Let's just leave it at that. If I become a liability tomorrow I want you to do what you have to do."

I fingered the LeMat's textured grip and felt tremendously guilty. The doctor wasn't being ridden by the



shadow. He was being ridden by his own demons in the name of helping us take down a creature he didn't even believe in.

"I understand," I said. "I'm not too worried, though. You're a good man. I expect that goes pretty deep."

He dragged a blanket over his legs. "Much obliged."

"We'll all do our best tomorrow, Doc. I've got faith in you." And for the first time, I really did.

The night dragged on and the doctor got in a few winks, but I was never able to fall asleep. I couldn't shake the feeling that it might just be the last night of my life. I eventually wrapped myself in a blanket and wandered outside to sit in that old porch swing. I rocked there in the moonlight and listened to the world around me. Every sound I heard from the forest warmed my heart in a way that it never had before. This little part of the world was a wonderful place. I just hoped I'd have another chance to experience it.

When dawn came, I heard a solitary crow in the treetops. I left my blanket behind and wandered toward the forest, my boots crunching on the frost covered ground. It was a bit early for frost, but the weather was the least of my concerns.

I walked into the woods, looking for the crow I'd heard. He continued to caw at regular intervals so he was fairly easy to find. When I reached the base of the large oak he was roosting in, I was surprised to find Black Fox there too.

"He has been calling to you, Gus. I am glad you came."

I nodded. It was so crisp and quiet there. The only sounds came from the crow and the wind. I sat down beside Black Fox and we both stared up at the crow. He kept his distance for a while, but then he dropped down, branch by branch, until he was just a few feet above us. He cawed again and turned his head to look at us with one big, black eye. I held my breath as I took in the rainbow of colors that were reflected in his inky feathers and I wondered how old he was and what kinds of things he'd seen in his life.

Black Fox began to chant softly and the bird twisted his head sideways. He looked an awful lot like a dog I'd once had. He'd do that same head movement whenever he heard a sound he didn't understand. The crow sat in rapt attention until Black Fox finished his song, then he cawed once more and flew off into the woods.

Black Fox climbed to his feet and brushed off his pants, then he offered me his hand and looked me in the eye. "We have his blessing. We cannot lose."

When Black Fox and I got back to the barn, we found an anxious young woman waiting for us.

"Where the hell ya'll been?" asked Jamie.

"I've been with Black Fox," I said innocently.

Jamie turned her vitriol toward Black Fox and he replied quickly. "I have been with Gus."

She shook her head and the doctor laughed. "Alright, don't tell us then. But I hope you'll do us the favor of joining in a toast. It'll take this stuff a little while to take effect."

He shook up a bottle that was filled with a dark brown liquid. Black Fox accepted it from him and did some more chanting before downing a big gulp.

"A little more," said the doctor. "I made extra."

Black Fox did as he was told then he passed the bottle to me. I took it and caught a whiff. It smelled like a cross between horse shit and marigolds. Whew! If I'd eaten anything in the last three days, I'm sure I'd have thrown it up right then and there. The others were eyeing me expectantly so I held my nose and took a drink. I gagged on the first swallow, but I got enough of it down in the second and third to satisfy the doctor.

"You next, Jamie," he said.

Jamie took the bottle and slammed her share without so much as a cough, then she handed the bottle back to the doctor. He tilted it back and drained it.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Now we get going and hope it's taken effect by the time we get there."

I started to walk outside, but the doctor stopped me.

"Don't forget," he said. "We need to keep an eye on each other, just in case."

"In case of what?" asked Jamie.

"Let's just say 'adverse reactions' and leave it at that, okay?"

Jamie shrugged and I leaned over and kissed her for luck. I'd like to say it was a sweet moment that I'll never forget but the reality is that she tasted like the medicine we'd just choked down. We both played it off but it was clear that there'd be no more kissing anytime soon.

We gathered our things and went over the details of the plan one last time as the effects of the medicine slowly crept up on us. It didn't feel like being drunk. That was a loss of control. This was more like an unnaturally firm *grasp* of control. As if the universe had suddenly presented its reins to me and me alone.

We mounted up and headed out. The doctor rode with us most of the way. When we got close to Creech's place, we stopped and said our goodbyes. He nearly fell off his horse trying to hug each of us. "Good luck, ya'll!" he shouted as he rode off toward his date with the train.

I don't know what jarred my memory, but as he started off, I remembered the LeMat. "Hey, Doc!" I yelled as I rode after him. He slowed and I handed the pistol to him, butt first. "You might need this," I said with a smile.

"Oh, I forgot all about it! I doubt the engineer would stop if I just asked nicely!"

We laughed, then we rode our separate ways. I'd been afraid that letting go of the LeMat was going to be difficult, but by the time I handed it over, the doctor's concoction had put me at ease. I was certain that the bow and arrows I had with me would be enough, but the truth was that only Black Fox was good enough with a bow to be formidable.

Time passed more rapidly than usual as we approached Creech's compound. I rode along, foolishly thinking that our conquest of Creech was actually going to be easy. Several shots rang out up ahead and jolted me back into reality.

"Into the woods!" whispered Black Fox.

We dismounted quickly and led the horses off the road, but they didn't like walking through the underbrush. We tied them up in a secluded spot so they'd be easy to find

if we needed to get away quickly. If we were killed, they'd probably starve to death, but my confidence had grown to such an extreme that I hardly even considered the possibility of failure.

We circled toward the rear of the compound, careful to stay low. I peeked through the bushes and saw several deputies firing off rounds near the house. They looked like they were just shooting into the air for effect. When they stopped, the crisp morning air became silent, but the bluish-white smoke and the smell of black powder were still present.

"Ya'll might as well come out!" I knew that voice, but I had to risk a look through the bushes to be sure. Yep. It was Sheriff Hays. He'd actually dragged his fat ass out of bed because he thought he was going to capture or kill little ol' me.

"I'm gone give ya'll 'til the count of five to come on out here. After that, we're gone be coming in there to drag you out!" There were laughs and nods from the other lawmen who were standing in front of the house. I looked around and saw that all the sheds were standing wide open. The barn too. The deputies must have searched the other structures before starting in on the house.

I tapped Jamie and Black Fox and pointed to the shed on the far side of the barn. "If we can get over there, we could hole up and wait for our moment. They already searched the sheds, so they'll assume no one's inside." Black Fox nodded and we took off in that direction.

"Alright then! You leave me no choice," shouted the sheriff. He'd climbed halfway up the steps to the front porch. "One!"

With each shout, we'd run a few yards toward our next cover. "Two!"

We were at the back corner of the barn, getting ready to make a run for the shed when Black Fox grabbed both Jamie and me and held us back. He pointed and I looked toward the open doorway on the end of the shed. Someone was in there. I could see them standing just inside the door.

"Three!"

I looked to Black Fox and shrugged. *What now?* He picked up a stone and when the sheriff shouted out his next number, he threw it at the shed.

"Four!"

The pebble hit the wooden wall with a plunk, but no one emerged. Since there was no other way for us to stay hidden once the lawmen rushed the house, we decided to risk it. Black Fox drew an arrow and loaded his bow, then we scrambled for the shed's open doorway.

"Five!"

Black Fox ran into the shed and swept the tiny room with his bow while Jamie and I stumbled in after him. A bunch of burlap sacks were hung on a peg just inside the door. Those were the only occupants of the little structure. We'd obviously been fooled by their movement in the breeze. I was just beginning to accept our good fortune when the loud banging sounds started. The deputies had mounted the porch and were using a small battering ram in an attempt to force open the front door.

"Be ready," said Black Fox. I looked into his eyes and saw that his pupils were heavily dilated. "When the shadow sets the women free, they will flee the house. We must corral them the way a rancher corrals wild horses." He stooped over between Jamie and me and added in a whisper, "They will not wish to be corralled."

I nodded but Jamie wasn't listening. She was preoccupied with something that was going on outside. "You ain't going to believe this," she said.

"Believe what?" I asked. I was looking at the side of the white clapboard house, so I didn't see it at first. Jamie grabbed my head and turned it so I was looking back towards the woods.

"It's snowing," she said. Large flakes were coming down in a rapidly increasing downpour.

"Did the stories you heard about this thing mention that it could control the weather?" I asked Black Fox. For the first time that day, I felt my confidence slip.

He shook his head. "We must hurry."

Most of the deputies were at the front of the house, leaving only a couple to guard the back door. The men with

the battering ram were almost inside when black smoke began to emerge from underneath the eaves.

"Look! Creech is burning the place down!" I whispered.

"No," said Black Fox. "Look again. If the house were burning the smoke would be white. It is a trick."

I pressed my eye against a crack in the rough timber wall and saw that Black Fox was correct. The smoke was a distraction.

While the deputies worked on the front door, one of the side windows slid open. Black smoke poured out of the open window, but none of the lawmen noticed. They were too preoccupied with the front door. A woman climbed through the window and carefully dropped the six feet to the ground.

"We've got to run them toward the woods while we can," I said. By that time, another window had opened and more women were climbing out. I was about to make a run for them when I saw that the lawmen had heard the commotion. They ran around the side of the house and tried to help the women to the ground. They must've thought they were escaping from us!

I looked to Black Fox. "Now what?" I whispered. He simply put a finger to his lips.

There must have been forty or fifty women on the lawn. All of them looked quite composed considering they'd just escaped what purported to be a burning house. All of the deputies had converged on their position and were trying to render aid, even though it seemed none was needed. I imagine most of them were thinking back to the fire at Seamus' bar. God, that seemed like it had happened such a long time ago.

"It begins," whispered Black Fox. Jamie and I pressed our eyes up to the cracks. Several of the women had started acting funny. They were twitching and reacting to the deputies as if they were being threatened by them. Creech was loosening his grip.

Within a few minutes the deputies had their hands full with a group of rampaging crazy women. They'd all gone feral. Their empty eyes had about as much life as pinholes in a playing card. Fortunately for us, the lawmen were trying to

keep the group together. One of the lawmen even pulled out his six shooter and fired several rounds into the air but the women didn't seem to notice.

I'd counted twelve deputies and the sheriff. Hays didn't worry me so much but I doubted we'd be able to subdue all twelve of the junior lawmen. That's what we needed Creech for, but so far he wasn't stepping up to bat.

The women's frenzy was escalating and the deputies were beginning to panic. They had no idea what to do. The few who were bold enough to approach the women learned quickly that getting too close was a bad idea. The scene was devolving quickly when all of the deputies suddenly froze in their tracks as the snow continued to fall around them.

"Now," said Black Fox. "The Nalusa Chito is taking them!"

It sure was an odd scene. There were a dozen lawmen all standing stiff as trees, around which ran clusters of women who'd gone bat shit crazy in the middle of a snowstorm! We grabbed at them and corralled them as best we could, but it wasn't easy. There were just too many of them and the snow seemed to aggravate them further.

I tried to ease them toward the trees but they bit and clawed at me like animals. We all saw the futility of fighting them, so we tried to scare them by acting like wild animals ourselves. It worked and we were finally able to get them to run from us. Black Fox and Jamie whooped and hollered and started them running toward the woods. They each took one side of the herd and I brought up the rear. I was almost at the tree line when I turned back for one last look.

The sheriff had somehow gotten inside the house and he was sticking his pasty face out of one of the open windows. He didn't say a word, but the deputies all turned and looked up at him. It reminded me of that day when the women had been singing for Creech. His congregation. I was about to run back into the woods with the others when the deputies suddenly turned toward the trees. Toward me!

Shit! Was Creech going to be able to take control of them after all? That wasn't possible, was it? As if to answer my question, a rifle round struck the tree beside me! We had to get those women knocked out, and fast!



I ran as fast as I could behind the herd. They were easy to follow since they'd trampled all the underbrush. Black Fox and Jamie urged them out into the open field on the far side of the forest, but they'd lost a few stragglers along the way. Jamie turned back to go after them but I stopped her.

"Keep going," I shouted. "I'll take care of the leftovers!" It was easy enough to say but a mite bit harder to do. I got the first two back with the herd pretty easily but the last woman was acting like a mad dog, running in circles and clawing at me. I realized that she'd twisted her ankle. Maybe even broken it.

More bullets flew toward us but the lawmen were advancing slowly through the trees. Maybe they were fighting Creech's control. Whatever the reason, I was glad for the delay but I still didn't know how to save this woman from herself. I was trying to get a hold of her hands when a single shot rang out and a red flower blossomed on the back of her blue dress. She fell to the ground and the dark red patch swiftly spread. She began to scream.

Jamie turned to see what had happened and I shouted, "Keep going! Keep going!"

Unfortunately, the other women had heard Blue Dress's cries too. They began screaming along with her! It was then that I suspected that we weren't actually saving these women from anything. They were already gone. The abuse that Creech had piled upon them had robbed most, if not all, of them of their sanity. Unfortunately for me, I still couldn't let go of the idea of saving them. Not yet. Not when we'd come so far.

I put pressure on Blue Dress's shoulder wound in a futile attempt to staunch the flow of blood. I looked ahead of me and saw Jamie's desperate eyes staring back from across the field. I looked behind me and saw that the stupefied lawmen were picking up their pace.

As I knelt on the ground in that crazy blizzard, I realized that I was at a pivot point that could determine our success or failure. I don't know if it was the medicine talking or just my own conscience, but I felt like it was my duty to face up to the hard facts.

The women we were rescuing weren't like Jamie was when we'd rescued her. Many of them had been under the control of the Nalusa Chito for months; maybe even years. That mental invasion had turned them into fearful prey. They had very little chance of ever having a normal human existence again.

I released the pressure I'd been holding firm against Blue Dress's bullet wound and turned her over so I could see her face. She was much younger than I'd expected—probably only seventeen or eighteen—and, except for the dark circles under her eyes, she was quite pretty. I leaned over and whispered into her ear, "What's your name?" A bullet struck a tree behind me, splintering the bark and sending it showering over the girl's face. I looked back and saw that the deputies were becoming more animated. I didn't have much time.

"GUS! HURRY UP!" It was Jamie. I waved her on and turned to fire a couple of arrows at the deputies. That slowed them down for a moment. I leaned over the dying girl to protect her from further harm. From a distance, an observer might have thought that we were sweet on each other. Instead, I was watching her life slowly melt like the snowflakes that settled on my skin.

"Can you tell me your name?" I asked. I was about to give up when the girl's hand grabbed my forearm and clawed at my skin. Her nails had been sharpened to points and they dug into my flesh leaving deep, bloody gashes in their wake.

I jerked away, causing the jagged nails to slice their way through my forearm. Another couple of shots struck the ground nearby and I knew that whatever I was going to do, I needed to do it quickly.

It was probably the medicine that gave me the balls to follow through on what I knew I had to do. I grasped my bow and whispered, "I'm sorry about this, ma'am," then I planted an arrow in the girl's heart. The hand that had bits of my own skin buried under its nails fell lifeless to the ground.

"I'm coooooooooiiiiiiiing for yoooooooouuu booooooooooooooooo!" shouted the sheriff from the forest behind me. Was the Nalusa Chito in the sheriff now? That thought was all the incentive I needed. I scrambled to my feet and ran across the field to catch up with the herd.

When she saw me, Jamie stopped corralling the women long enough to grab me and hug me hard. "What happened back there?" she asked.

I shook my head. I couldn't tell her yet, but I grabbed Black Fox's shoulder and said, "I think we're fighting a losing battle here."

Just then a train whistle sounded and we looked ahead to see a plume of smoke bellowing across the snowy horizon. The doctor was right on schedule, a fact that didn't make what I was about to propose any easier.

"Do not fear this snow," said Black Fox.

"No, it's not the snow," I said while the women ran ahead of us. "I mean, yeah the snow is weird and everything but...I just...I don't think we can save them."

"What?" said Jamie. "Gus, we got to! They're just like I was and you were able to..."

"No, they're not like you were at all! They've been under that thing's control for too long. I'm not even sure we can put them to sleep with the doctor's grenades. They're a part of the shadow's permanent body now, just like Creech is. I don't think anything can break that connection."

Jamie looked ahead and saw her own eyes in the faces of each of those crazed women. "Please. Gus, please. Don't you leave 'em here. They just need time to get better."

"I wasn't going to abandon them," I said softly. Only then did Jamie realize what I was proposing.

"NO! You can't just kill 'em, Gus! I won't let you!" She ran off toward the herd leaving Black Fox and me standing in the steadily accumulating snow. More shots rang out and inspired us to run up the hill behind her.

"She is determined to help them, Gus. Perhaps she can," said Black Fox.

"Yeah, maybe," I panted. "If we live long enough for her to try."

Jamie disappeared over the top of the hill and we picked up our pace. The deputies were gaining ground fast. If we weren't able to knock the women out by the time the lawmen got to the train, the shadow would have his fuel source and his worker bees in the same place at the same time. That combination could prove to be very bad for us all.

We topped the rocks at the crest of the hill and I could see the train waiting on the plateau up ahead. An engine, a tender and one passenger car, just as planned. The doctor waved at us from the engine and I waved back.

Black Fox grasped my arm. "Gus, I am prepared to send the women on their way if we have to do so."

"But?"

"But I believe we must allow Itanale a chance to help them. By doing so, she will be helping herself. If we release them from their bodies now, it is a choice that she may not recover from."

I thought about his words. There just wasn't any time to think. Why was it that the hardest decisions had to get made when there wasn't any time to consider all the options?

"Alright. But if it comes down to it and it's either them or us..."

"Then, in that case, I will assist you in relieving their pain."

I sighed and Black Fox grabbed me in a bear hug and held me, his fists tense in the small of my back. I hugged him back and held him tightly. When he felt we'd had enough, he released me with a sharp nod.

"Now we must give the doctor enough time to finish his work," said Black Fox as he readied his bow.

I placed an arrow against my bowstring and turned back to take cover behind the rocks at the crest of the hill.

Without another word, we pulled our bows taut and prepared to take out the deputies.

I stuck my head up over the rocks and a bullet nearly took it clean off. Fortunately, Black Fox was ready. He drove his arrow into the chest of the shooter and had another arrow ready before his bow string had stopped vibrating.

"Thanks," was all I could say over the roar of my rapidly beating heart.

The remaining deputies dove for cover immediately. They might have been controlled by an ancient Chickasaw demon, but they hadn't gone completely stupid. Black Fox silently surveyed the hillside with those piercing eyes of his before unleashing another volley of arrows into their hiding places. Unfortunately for them, snow covered bushes provided very little in the way of protection. Several deputies howled in pain and fell out into the open where they were easy pickings for Black Fox. Even I was able to hit a couple of them.

I was checking my inventory of arrows when Black Fox began shrieking an ear-piercing war cry. I looked over the rocks and saw what had prompted his shouts. The remaining deputies were charging toward us all at once. The shadow must have realized that the only way to get them past us would be to present us with more targets than we could handle at one time. A bow wasn't exactly a double action revolver. Black Fox and I held our own, though. I don't know that my arrows were much more than a diversion but every single one of his hit home. By the time we'd run out, only a few of the men were left alive and they had run back toward the woods.

I'd released my last arrow when I heard Jamie calling out from behind us. "HELP! GUS! BLACK FOX! HELP US!"

I turned and saw that most of the women were still running around outside of the train car, their footprints making chaotic patterns in the fresh snow. Jamie and the doctor were trying to get them into the passenger compartment, but they weren't having much luck.

"Jesus Christ!" I muttered and Black Fox turned to see what the trouble was.

"You go. I will follow in a moment." He stood and ran toward the field.

"Hold up! Where you going?"

He only paused long enough to answer, "To get my arrows," then he disappeared over the hill.

I didn't know how much help I'd be, but I ran toward the train, slipping and sliding in the snow. The doctor was inside the passenger car trying to pull the women back inside and close the windows, but he wasn't making much progress. A few of the smaller women had wriggled through and were back outside running from Jamie.

"We have to close these windows or the gas won't work!" Doc Brunson shouted, but it was no use. It was like trying to staunch a flood with a single sandbag. No sooner would we get one window closed than they'd open another with a fresh round of caterwauling. After a few minutes of trying, I gave up and hauled the doctor out of there.

"It's no use, doc. Let's see if we can get them in there at all. If the bigger ones stop up the windows, maybe the little ones will be stuck inside there too."

The doctor smiled grimly. "These are people, Gus. Ladies."

"Not any more, they aren't," I said as I climbed down to help Jamie.

It didn't take us long to get them all inside the car. We locked the doors and the women bellowed to beat the band. The doctor's face and arms were covered in scratches. He fell against the door, ignoring the crazed screeches coming from within.

"We have to change the plan anyway," I shouted over the noise. "You drove the train here, right?"

"Yeah," said the doctor. "I left the crew with the other passengers. Didn't seem right to involve them in this."

Jamie shouted, "Gus, I'm serious. You can't kill 'em. You can't!"

"What's that?" asked the doctor. "KILL them? Look, I didn't commit grand larceny just so you could commit murder! Regardless of what you think right now, those are human beings, Gus!"

I waved him away. "I know! Jesus, if you two'll just shut up for a second, I can explain!" It had been a hard day and my words were harsher than intended, but I was getting sick of being made out to be the bad guy in all of this. I was still of the opinion that those beings inside the train car were no longer human, but I was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt if for no other reason than the fact that Jamie wanted so desperately for it to be so.

I continued, "I'm talking about driving this train as far away from that shadow thing as we can. We might not have to knock them out at all if we can get them far enough away from here."

Both the faces before me brightened noticeably. Jamie even went so far as to take my hand.

The doctor said, "We've still got the tender and the boiler's full of water. It's pretty easy so long as you keep an eye on the temperature gauge."

He climbed up into the cab of the locomotive and his pleasant demeanor drooped somewhat.

"Fire's low. It'll take some stoking to get it back up again. I didn't count on us needing the train beyond this point, you know."

"Yeah. Then I guess we better get to work," I said.

I felt like I was losing my mind what with all that wailing going on. The women in the train weren't letting up one bit, partially due to the fact that Jamie was outside the passenger car, beating them back from the windows with a big tree branch she'd picked up. Every now and then one of the women would duck back inside and Jamie would climb up to close that window, but then a new wave of shrieks would begin and the window would end up open and stuffed with flailing arms.

The doctor and I stoked the engine fire as best we could and the temperature gauge indicated that we should be able get the train going again shortly. But then what? Where had Black Fox gotten off to and where the hell was Creech? We still hadn't seen him.

"Hey, Doc?" shouted Jamie from behind the tender. "Mind if I try one of them bombs of yours? That screaming's getting on my last nerve."

"Okay. Probably won't work with those windows open though."

"I don't give a rat's ass as long as it shuts a few of 'em up!"

Doc Brunson tossed the canisters to Jamie and we watched eagerly as she pulled their cords and flung them into an open window. There were a couple of muffled booms and some extra loud screeching, but then a few of the women actually did pass out. There were still enough awake in there to make a good racket but at least the volume dropped a notch or two.

The doc turned to me and said, "You ready to get this thing rolling?"

I shook my head. "I'm staying here. I've got to go back and find Black Fox, and once I do that we've still got to



take care of Creech. Ya'll go on. The further away you get the weaker he should become. At least that's the theory."

"Then you'll need this more than I will," said the doctor as he took the LeMat out of his waistband and handed it to me. One side of the gun was cold from the winter air and the other was warm from being pressed against his body. Holding it presented a rather strange sensation, sort of like crossing your fingers and rubbing a stick between the tips. I nodded my thanks as he opened the throttle and released the brake. I jumped off the gleaming locomotive as it started to chug forward along the snow-covered tracks. I looked up to see Jamie struggling to get the passenger compartment door closed while she cursed up a storm. I was glad that my last image of her was so characteristic. After one last look back, I ran over the crest of the hill, seriously doubting that I'd ever see Jamie again.

There was nothing ahead of me but the dead bodies of deputies on the snow covered pasture, but I was afraid to call out to Black Fox just yet. For all I knew, Creech was waiting nearby, hoping to lure me in. None of the bodies had arrows in them so I figured that Black Fox had made it at least that far. I reached the bottom of the hill and ducked behind some large rocks to check the cylinder of the LeMat. It was still fully loaded as I'd suspected. I don't think the doctor could have shot anybody if his life had depended on it.

I stuck my head out and surveyed the woods that lay between me and Creech's farmhouse. Was Black Fox in there? I didn't want to leave my cover just yet, so I made my best imitation of a crow. "Caw! Caw caw caw!" If Black Fox was within earshot, he'd surely know it was me and respond in kind. The snow made my crow calls sound small and flat. Growing up in south Georgia, snow was quite a novelty. The couple of times I'd experienced it in my youth were memorable occasions. My most vivid recollections were of the way the world sounded in the snow. It sounded like it had been wrapped up in a brand new blanket, all fresh and clean. Now, instead of comforting me, that thought frustrated me. I waited a few minutes and then crowed again. Still no response. I couldn't wait forever. For all I knew, Black Fox could be hurt or dying.

I crept down into the darkness of the forest and out of the snowfall. The LeMat was my only comfort as I made my way back down to the house, cawing every so often just in case. I could see the farmhouse up ahead through the trees, but there didn't appear to be anyone left alive there. Even the horses were gone.

It was time to take action. I was about to leave the safe cover of the forest and dash over to the house when a strong hand grabbed me by the belt and pulled me back! I started to cry out but another hand quickly clamped my mouth shut.

"Be still, Little Crow," whispered Black Fox in my ear. I nodded and he released me.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I gathered the arrows." He pointed at his full quiver. "Would you like your share?"

"Nah, I'm still better with this," I said as I held up the LeMat, but my limited ammunition was a concern. "How many men are in there?" I asked.

"That is the problem. I have only seen one living soul. I believe the presence of the Nalusa Chito has drained everyone else. All but the sheriff."

"You saw him?"

"I believe so. A large man was inside the window to the left."

"Acting as lookout."

"Presumably."

"Then what do we do?"

"I do not know, Little Crow." I suddenly realized that Black Fox had given me a Chickasaw name. It happened so quickly that I almost didn't catch it. I couldn't have been prouder, but the respect of Black Fox came with a price tag. He expected me to do more than follow.

"What is wrong?" asked Black Fox.

"Nothing." I wanted to tell him that this was the wrong time for him to be sharing the reins, but I didn't. Instead, I just stared at the house, pretending that I was thinking up a brilliant new plan. I expected Black Fox to lecture me on something or other in that detached way he

had, but instead he just sat next to me, waiting. Was he testing me?

I was about to explode at him, accusing him of putting me on the spot when he knew I wasn't the leader here. I inhaled, ready to bless him out and I realized that the nasty smelling smoke was gone. The air smelled fresh and clean.

"You notice something?" I asked.

"Many somethings."

"Okay, smart ass. You notice the smell?"

Black Fox inhaled deeply, turning his head back and forth. "Creech's smoke has stopped."

"Yes! And the house is still standing. The house was never on fire." I was pleased with my observation but I wasn't entirely certain that Black Fox hadn't noticed it first.

"If this is true, the Nalusa Chito did not expect us to return here."

I nodded and a crazy idea occurred to me. "Then why don't we just burn the place to the ground?"

Black Fox raised his eyebrows in surprise. Had I finally come up with something he hadn't seen coming? "I do not have the experience of this much snow," he said. "Will it affect a fire?"

"Not if we make it big enough and hot enough."

Black Fox looked away, thinking.

"What?" I asked.

"I do not know what will happen if the Nalusa Chito's host is burned. The fire may free the shadow so that he may inhabit one of us or he may remain trapped in the burned flesh of Mr. Creech."

"Do you think we should risk it?"

Black Fox shook his head. "I am unsure. I would like to know what you think, Little Crow."

"I don't know anything about this stuff, Black Fox. Jesus, you know I don't!"

"But you do. I have been relying on stories that old men once told to women and babies. There are truths there, but sometimes our minds can obscure what is standing before us. When it comes to the Nalusa Chito, you think more like the crow than I do, yes?"

"Um, I'm still a little fuzzy on what that means."

"It means seeing what you see and feeling what you feel. We must use the things before us and within us to determine our actions."

I sort of understood what Black Fox was getting at. His expectations might be coloring the way he perceived what was happening.

"I don't have any special insight, but it seems like burning the house down is the right thing to do. I'd rather burn his ass from out here than have to face him up close again. That didn't go so good the first time."

Black Fox smiled. "Then we will burn his ass, as you say."

I couldn't help but laugh.

We got to work searching the forest floor for dry brush and dead tree limbs. It was the kind of plan I preferred. Simple, straightforward work that was safe. Well, relatively safe.

Black Fox used pieces of vines to wrap dead leaves and moss around the heads of several arrows while I built a small fire. The plan was for me to light the arrows in the fire and give them to Black Fox to shoot into the windows of the house. They wouldn't burn for long but they wouldn't need to if there was anything flammable inside.

The fire was crackling away when I heard a loud slamming sound coming from the house. Then I heard it again, and again. I stopped what I was doing and ran over to where Black Fox lay at the edge of the tree line.

"What the hell was that?" I asked, my breath visible in the air between us.

"Look at the windows."

I did and immediately saw our new problem. Somebody was locking the place down. All of those tin-covered windows were now closed and presumably locked from the inside.

"Well, so much for the arrows, but I reckon we can still set fire to the place from the outside. At least they won't be shooting at us while we're doing it."

Black Fox spoke, but his gaze didn't leave the house. "He is laughing at us, Little Crow. He thinks he has already beaten us. Whatever he is planning, he is confident that he will win."

"How do you know that?"

Black Fox closed his eyes and raised his nose into the air. "Can you not smell it? The air feels like it does when a lightning storm is coming. That is the laughter of the Nalusa Chito."

"Yeah, I reckon I can feel it, but I don't think there's going to be a lighting storm in this cold."

"Perhaps not, but if we are to set this fire, we must do it quickly."

That was all I needed to hear. I gathered up more brush and began to ferry it over to the house. The dead wood would help the building catch fire but the whole process might take a while. Folks were always afraid of their houses going up in flames, but truth be told, they often had to simmer for a long spell before they actually caught fire.

Once I was done, I returned to the woods to find that Black Fox had been busy crafting torches. He'd broken up tree limbs and laid them in the fire. They were all happily burning away by the time I arrived so we each took two and headed for the house.

"Be alert," whispered Black Fox. "He may still try to attack us."

I nodded, but I felt like I couldn't get any more alert without setting my own hair ablaze. We ran around the house, lighting small fires wherever we could get the flames to catch hold. Thankfully, it didn't take long for the fire to grab those clapboard walls. After that, there wasn't much to do but watch and wait. By the time the roof collapsed it was clear that no one was getting out of there alive. The house was engulfed in flames that reached twenty feet into the air. They were so hot that we had to move back to the tree line to keep from being burned ourselves.

Everything that was flammable eventually burned itself out, leaving little more than smoldering timbers, a chimney, and a pot bellied stove on a blackened rectangle of Earth. Black Fox eyed the smoking carcass with suspicion.

"I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess that you think we shouldn't go over there just yet," I said.

"You are correct. Something feels wrong. I did not sense any anguish from the Nalusa Chito. I do not know if he can feel pain, but he has shown us that he is quick to anger. He would not suffer this fate without incident."

"So what, then? We wait?" To be honest, I was sick of waiting but if Black Fox thought it was the right thing to do, I'd do it. Hell, if Black Fox had suggested I stand on one foot and pat my head, I'd have even done that.

"Yes. We wait," said Black Fox, but he wouldn't look at me. I caught a glimpse of his eyes and what I saw there gave me pause. I saw fear.

I was nodding off by the fire when I was awakened by the sound of chanting. I jumped up so suddenly that I couldn't figure out where I was. I tried to sort out the difference between the dream I'd been having and the reality around me. In my dream, I'd been flying over a field of snow. Reality wasn't all that different except for the fact that the fire had melted most of the snow around the house. I walked over to the edge of the woods and watched as Black Fox chanted and danced beside the remains of the house. He shouted to the heavens, but the rubble just continued to smolder. He performed the same ritual at each corner of the house, each time with the same result. Nothing.

When he was done, he looked up and waved me over. I proceeded cautiously, trying not to get too excited. Had we actually killed the shadow thing?

The house was gone and I couldn't help but feel a small tinge of regret over the destruction of the property. These days, crews can build an entire spit and tissue paper subdivision in the blink of an eye, but back then it took significant amounts of time and resources to construct a home like Creech's.

The ashes smelled terrible and that smell could only be one thing: fried Creech with a side of roasted sheriff. I knew what our next task had to be. We had to go in there and look for whatever was left of them. At least the snow had stopped. That would make it a little easier.

Black Fox surveyed the scene. "You understand, yes?" he asked.

I nodded as I pulled out my kerchief and tied it over my face. "Let's get it over with," I said. I stepped over the rocks that had formed the house's foundation and into the blackened rubble.

"One of us should stand guard in the event Mr. Creech is still alive in there," said Black Fox. Given what I knew of Creech, it was hard to refute his logic.

The ruins of the house were still hot in places so I pulled my shirt sleeves down over my hands and began pushing bits and pieces of debris out of the way. After fifteen or twenty minutes of that, I was hot and dirty and I hadn't seen anything but charred house.

"Look, if we're going to find them we have to move everything out of the way," I said. Black Fox stayed where he was so I tried to make my point clearer. "I need you to help me. I can't move these big beams by myself."

Black Fox looked at the pile of charred wood. He didn't like the idea of going in there with me, but he had little choice. If there were bodies left in that mess it was likely

that the only remaining parts were bones. Burnt bones would look an awful lot like burnt everything else. Without a little help, I could search that area for days without finding anything.

Black Fox pulled his medicine bag out of his shirt and muttered something before gingerly stepping inside the foundation. He didn't say a word, but he helped me move the larger pieces out of the way. We were able to see the ground in no time. We were lucky that most of the house had gone up like dried leaves.

I was poking around in the smaller debris when Black Fox called me over. I ran to where he crouched and saw a big metal ring sticking up out of the ground. When I went to pick it up, it wouldn't move. It was attached to the ground in some way.

"We must clear this area quickly," said Black Fox.

We both got down on our hands and knees and cleared the ground of ashes and soot. It didn't take long to uncover the large metal door that had been underneath the kitchen pantry. Black Fox grabbed the ring and heaved so hard that I thought he'd hurt himself.

"Hold up! Let me help you!" I said.

We both grabbed the ring and pulled as hard as we could but the door wouldn't open. Black Fox was becoming more and more agitated, his eyes as black as the ashes we'd just been sifting through.

"We must get inside!" he shouted. "We must!"

He continued to pull against the ring. When that didn't work, he began beating on the metal door with his fists.

"Hold up, now!" I said.

Black Fox jerked around and said, "We must know if he is down there, Little Crow. If he is not..."

"So what if he isn't? We'll keep after him. What's got you so spooked?" No reply. "Look, you've got to tell me."

He sighed. "There was one story. I thought on it last night as I waited in the forest. It is told that there is a breeding ground for Nalusa and it is underground. There could be a lot more of them below, Little Crow. If so, the Nalusa Chito will attempt to awaken them even as we linger here. If he succeeds..."



Fighting one of these things was hard enough. I didn't want to think about there being more of them. "What do we do?" I asked.

"We must find their hosts and dismember them before they awaken."

"You mean there could be people down there?"

"Not exactly. These Nalusa will be feeding."

The thought scared the shit out of me. It was one thing to be possessed by the shadow, it was another to be kidnapped and eaten from the inside out by its young. "Can't we just leave them there? We could pile some big rocks on top of the door so they can't get out."

Black Fox shook his head. "No. If their hosts are intact, and the Nalusa are close to mature, they will escape in spirit form, killing the hosts. We must trap them just like you trapped our enemy inside Creech's body."

"Damnit!" That was all I had to say. The whole situation was so frustrating. I'd never asked for any of it! I wasn't the spiritual law of the Oklahoma territories! Why the hell had I been saddled with this?

I hauled off and started kicking anything I could find. "Fuck this whole goddamned mess!" I roared. Even if we succeeded we might end up being responsible for the deaths of a lot of innocent people before the day was out. I kicked all of my energy out and fell to my knees beside the door. I had no idea what to do next.

But then I looked at the metal ring sticking up and I was struck by a memory. Back when I'd worked the docks in Savannah, I'd seen rings like that every day. They were most often used to tie down a boat's moorings, but occasionally, they were used as doorknobs on some of the older ships. You just turned them and...

I leaned over and began digging at the area around the ring. The dirt there was soft so it didn't take long for me to clear it and see that there was a bowl shape underneath, just like on those old doors! I tried turning the ring but it wouldn't budge. I propped it in a vertical position and kicked at it with all my might but it still wouldn't turn.

Black Fox had been watching. He ran off into the forest. It wasn't the most comforting turn of events, but in a

minute he returned bearing a large tree branch. He tried to slide it into the ring but it was a little too big.

"Do you have a knife?" he asked, but before he could finish the question I was shaving away the outer layer of wood. He'd found a nice green tree limb that wasn't likely to snap under pressure. When it finally fit in the ring, we took opposite sides and grabbed hold.

"Wait a minute," I said. "How do we know which way to turn it?"

Black Fox shook his head. "Chickasaw houses do not have doors such as this."

"Fine," I muttered. "Counter-clockwise, then."

Black Fox just stared at me.

"This way," I said, twirling my fingers.

We got into position and shoved. All it took was one good push and the ring turned. We grabbed the edges of the door and lifted it, exposing a large rectangular hole. We pushed the door over and let it flop down into the ashes, sending clouds of grey dust billowing into the air. Surprisingly, there were no screams of anguish and no bad smells. There was nothing but darkness down there.

"We must hurry," said Black Fox and once again he ran off into the woods. This time he came back with two torches from our fire. He handed one to me and we started down into the cellar.

The opening was large—at least seven feet across—and there were no stairs. It was a square hole at least ten feet deep. At the bottom, the floor sloped away at a steep angle. Perfect if you were throwing bodies down there. I looked into that hole, hoping I wouldn't slip and tumble down that ramp. I wasn't too keen to land on top of whatever was at the bottom.

I hopped inside the hole before I lost my nerve and Black Fox jumped down behind me. The light from our torches flickered on the walls and revealed a rough hewn cave. The air was damp and musty but there was a hint of something pleasant in the air as well. It smelled like hay. What would hay be doing in the nest of this thing unless its crazy babies liked to roll around in the stuff? I was imagining stranger and stranger scenarios as we moved cautiously

down the ramp. We stayed close together as we slid forward, uncertain of what might be next.

The ramp veered off to the right ahead. We took the turn slowly, staying close to the wall in the event something leapt out at us. Once we made it around the turn, the tunnel suddenly widened and I saw the source of the smell.

Horses! There were actually horses down there in the dark! At first thought, I imagined Creech's babies killing and eating them, but then I noticed they were all in full tack. Not a single one of them was tied up. The fire from the torches spooked them, but I spoke to them softly and patted their necks to calm them down.

"Just horses. No shadow babies. That's a relief."

Black Fox didn't speak. He was preoccupied with the dirt floor. "One man has taken two horses this way," he said, pointing further down the tunnel. "We must follow him."

"One man, huh?" My mind was working overtime. "Any idea if it was Creech?"

"I do not think so. The footprints indicate a large man. Possibly the sheriff."

"Then where'd Creech get off to?"

Black Fox shook his head. "I do not know. He may be more powerful than I thought. I do not believe he was killed in the fire. He may be riding the sheriff now."

"I thought he couldn't get out of Creech!"

"Gus, this is not an object that can be analyzed and understood. This is a spiritual being who abides none of man's laws. His existence is beyond my comprehension and yet he does exist. I accept it. You must as well."

"I believe he's real, Black Fox. You know that."

Black Fox held his torch low to the ground between us. "Your world was the size of the small area this torch now lights." He held the torch high and illuminated the entire room. "Now your world is much larger, but there is even more world beyond this small cave. The whole of the world is larger than both our imaginations. The stars show us the way to other places where we cannot journey in these bodies. This is the path the Nalusa Chito trods. To defeat him, we must remain open to any possibility."

I nodded but I didn't fully understand. "Look, all I know for sure is that he's getting away. He's already got a hell of a lead on us, so if you don't mind, I'd like to get going!"

Looking back on it now, I realize that my words were harsh. Black Fox was taking the time to teach me something he'd only just learned himself, but I was too bull headed to listen. I was afraid that Jamie was in danger, but my conscious mind was unwilling to go there just yet so I took out my frustrations on my friend.

"You will think on my words, Little Crow," said Black Fox as he grabbed the saddle of one of the mares and pulled himself onto her back.

The horses had been well trained so they didn't give us any trouble. In fact, they were fine specimens and they were obviously familiar with the tunnel. They charged ahead at full speed with very little prompting from us. It wasn't long before we literally saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

Black Fox slowed his mount. She chomped at her bit, eager to get back out into the open air. "We walk," he said as he dismounted. "It will take time for our eyes to adjust."

I climbed off my horse as well. In the dim light I could see that he was a chestnut color, with a very pleasant face. I wondered what he thought of all that had been going on around him.

We took the horses by the reins and walked toward the single bright spot. It grew slowly as we got closer, but remained little more than a blur. I didn't think my eyes were adjusting at all.

The horses urged us on by nuzzling our shoulders, but Black Fox took each step slowly. The tunnel was narrowing so I stepped ahead and took the lead. If he wanted to take it easy, that was his business. I, for one, needed to see where we were.

When I emerged into the bright daylight, I realized that it was snowing again. No wonder the world had looked like a bright blur. The ground was covered in snow as far as I could see. I waved Black Fox forward. The tunnel entrance was a small opening that was nestled between some rocks in the side of a large hill. If you didn't look closely, you'd miss it completely. Black Fox soon joined me and we stared across the convoluted plains together.

"The snow wiped out their tracks," I said. "They could be anywhere by now."

Black Fox shook his head. "I believe the Nalusa Chito is still close by. This snow is his doing. The ground is still warm so it should have melted. And yet it is still accumulating."

"I'll admit that's a little strange but that doesn't mean he made it snow, does it?"

"It is to his advantage, Little Crow," said Black Fox. He paused to consider another angle. "When he left the burning house, did the snow not stop falling in that area?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Yeah," I said reluctantly.

"And has it not begun here where we believe he escaped to?"

"Fine. For now, let's just say he's making it snow and move on. How do we find him?"

Black Fox turned and climbed up the hill, leaving his horse beside the tunnel entrance. I sighed, wondering if this was ever going to end. I was tired, I was starving, and I smelled like a camp fire. As far as I was concerned, the shadow had disappeared, maybe forever, and it was high time we found the doc and Jamie and got our asses back home. I followed Black Fox up that craggy hill to tell him so, and what I saw changed my mind as surely as I'm writing this.

About 500 feet ahead of us in thick drifts of snow stood the train. It was silent and still, trapped in the dense piles of frozen precipitation that lay before it on the tracks. The cow catcher on the front of the locomotive worked alright for bigger things, but it was not a snow plow. Not by a long shot.

I shouted, "Jamie!" and started to run forward, but Black Fox grabbed me and pulled me back to cover. "What the hell are you doing?!" I screamed. "Get off me!"

"You must be quiet," he said. When I stopped struggling, he released me. "Now go back up and look carefully, but try to stay in cover"

I crawled up to the top of the hill and Black Fox followed. He leaned in and pointed just behind the locomotive. There were two heads poking up from inside the tender. "They are hiding," said Black Fox.

"From what? Ain't nobody else over there."

Black Fox pointed again, this time at the empty passenger car. "The women have escaped, but look between the wheels of the car. Right in the center. Someone is standing on the other side."

I looked but my eyes couldn't focus. It was all just a hazy, white blur. Then I saw it. There, on the other side of the passenger car, stood a thick pair of legs in light tan pants. It had to be the sheriff.

Black Fox whispered, "He has not moved since we arrived. He may not be with us right now."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I asked. My fatigue was getting the best of me and the doctor's confidence potion was wearing thin.

"It means the Nalusa Chito may be riding the sheriff. He may have been able to abandon Creech's body after all."

"Jesus Christ. So now he's back at full strength? We can't handle that, Black Fox. He could jump into any of us."

"Possibly. But his fuel is depleted. I believe the women are all dead."

"What makes you say that?"

Black Fox looked at me as if I were a petulant child. "Do you not have eyes to see?" he asked. His fatigue must've been getting the better of him too.

I slid up the hill again and looked across the field. There was nothing there but a sea of snow, the train, and that awful pair of legs in tan pants. I couldn't even see the train tracks. I was about to crawl back down when I saw something sticking out of the snow beside the passenger car. It looked like a broken tree branch, but it was an arm! Frozen in place, as if a statue had fallen over and been buried in the snow.

I slid back down to Black Fox's position. "So you think he killed them all? They're all up there in the snow?"

"It is likely that he drained them too quickly and killed them. I am amazed that he has not taken the doctor and Jamie as well."

"We don't know that he hasn't."

Black Fox's eyes widened. "It is possible he has left the sheriff and is trying to lure us in with the others."

I knew what I had to do. I also knew that Black Fox probably wouldn't like it. "I'm going over there," I said. "If I can save Jamie and the doc, I will, but we can't wait for Creech to get stronger."

Black Fox nodded. "What do you propose?"

*Well, I hadn't given it much thought beyond just running my skinny ass over there to check on our friends,* I thought. Thank God, I had better sense than to say it. "I'm going to approach the tender. If I'm quiet, maybe I can reach it without alerting the sheriff. Then I'm going to see if I can get Jamie and the doc to follow me back here. If we need to hole up somewhere, that tunnel's looking pretty good."

Black Fox said, "So you wish to retreat? If hiding was our goal, we could have remained hidden on the reservation."

He was right, of course, and the realization embarrassed me. Thinking of the shadow attacking Jamie again made me more conservative, I guess. At that moment, I was being selfish. All I wanted was to get her off that train and make sure she was safe. It was that dead arm in the snow that'd worn through whatever was left of my false confidence. I was afraid that we'd all die if we kept after that thing.

"I'm sorry, Black Fox. I have to save Jamie."

He reached out and put a hand gently on my shoulder. I could smell the soot on his sleeve as I looked into his stern but caring eyes. "Neither of you will ever be safe so long as the Nalusa Chito roams the Earth. Every rustle of a leaf or flicker of a candle will frighten both of you. I know this well, Little Crow. There is a reason I have remained on this journey with you."

"Well, yeah. Because you're the medicine man, right?"

"No. As I have told you, I do not yet possess the skills or experiences to hold so esteemed a position in the tribe. When I was very young, our tribe sought revenge against a neighboring tribe who had raided our stores of food and ponies. They were starving, Little Crow. Their children were dying. The white man had driven them to an area without the possibility of sustenance. I see now that their fear had brought forth this being from the spirit realm. One among them was taken by the shadow. When my father's warring



party attacked, the Nalusa Chito found a new source of life. When my father returned to us, he was not the same."

I listened but I couldn't help but think that we needed to get moving. Hell, for all we knew, the sheriff was as dead as those women—frozen in place on the other side of the train. Creech could be off somewhere recharging.

"I recognize your urgency, Little Crow, but it is important that you understand," said Black Fox as if he'd just read my mind again. "My father murdered my mother in her sleep and attempted to kill me as well. Then he leapt to his death from Itanale's star watching rock. My survival marked me for both the medicine man position in the tribe and this burden I now bear with you and the others. I must see this through for my family and for my tribe."

"Isn't that just revenge? Isn't that what you wanted to avoid?"

"Revenge is felt in the heart. It is a savage burning that is never quenched. I do not feel this. I am building a shelter against the elements. Yes, the wind and rain serve a purpose in this world, but to ignore them and simply let them have their way would be foolish."

"Well, when you put it like that," I said sarcastically, but I could see that Black Fox didn't understand my humor. "We'll see it through," I added, "but first I have to try to get the others out of there." I crawled up to take another look at the train.

Black Fox slid up next to me. "Very well. If you can bring them back here, do so. I will circle around to see what is happening to the sheriff."

I nodded and, since there wasn't anything left to say, I bolted across the snow toward the locomotive.

I scurried across the field in a crouch, aware that the knee-deep snow could be hiding any number of hazards. I didn't care. I just wanted to get to Jamie. I tripped on something and looked down to see a woman's face staring up at me from her final resting place. For a brief moment, I tried to remember if I'd seen her amongst the women in the train car, but then I looked away and kept running. Best not to dwell on that just yet.

I drew the LeMat as I neared the train. Holding it out in front of me, I leaned against the tender and peeked inside the cab. The stoke hole stood open. There was no fire inside and the small area where the engineer normally stood was empty. Where'd they go? I was trying to figure out what to do next when a log came down and smashed my gun hand to the floor! I lost my grip on the LeMat and it went skating out into the snow on the other side of the train! The log was coming down again, this time directly toward my head, when I heard a scuffle in the engine compartment. I looked up and saw that the man wielding the lethal log was none other than Doc Brunson. Jamie had stopped him just in time.

"Jesus, it's Gus," he whispered. "I'm sorry, Gus. I thought you were the sheriff."

I climbed up into the cab and felt the urge to whisper something gentlemanly to the doc about how it was alright and I'd have done the same thing, but I couldn't take my eyes off Jamie. I felt like I hadn't seen her in years, probably because I'd been trying to brace myself for the inevitable reality of her death. Now that she was standing there before me, I could hardly even think. I just breathed heavily while I convinced myself that she was still alive. She embraced me, her cold lips finding my own. For just a moment, everything was okay again. The tender caress of her mouth was my

world and everything else fell away. Then she pressed her face to my chest and I could hear her quietly sobbing.

"I was sure you was dead," she said softly. "When Creech showed up, I was sure of it. Oh God, Gus. He killed them poor women. All of 'em."

"I know. But we're okay, aren't we? We're going to finish this." I said the words, but did I believe them? I'm not really sure. I *thought* I did and that was enough for the time being. "I'm going to get ya'll out of here!"

"Not so fast," said the doctor. "Don't you think we'd have made a run for it if we could?"

Jamie said, "They come straight here and started it snowing like crazy. Them women went mad and..."

"Hold up," I said. "They?"

"Creech and Sheriff Hays." Jamie was looking at me like I'd lost my senses.

"Jamie, we burned down Creech's house with Creech in it. We think the shadow left Creech's body and is in the sheriff now. Is that him over by the passenger car? Is he dead?"

Jamie shot a look in the doctor's direction and I asked, "What's going on?"

The doctor sighed softly. "You better take a look over the edge there, but be careful. I don't know what'll happen if they see you."

I crawled on top of the stacks of wood in the tender and slowly raised my head above the side. I could just make out the top of the sheriff's head. His hat was missing and snow was accumulating in his thinning hair, but he looked pretty much how I expected. I was about to turn back to Jamie when I felt her settle in beside me.

"Keep looking," she said.

I climbed higher on the pile of wood so I could see a little better. What I saw next nearly made me cry out! The sheriff was standing there, sure enough, but cradled in his arms were the bloody remains of Mr. Creech! At first I thought they were both dead, but then I noticed small clouds of vapor emerging from their mouths! Both of them were breathing!

I turned and dropped to the safety of the floor. What the hell? Was Creech really still alive?

"You see 'em?" asked Jamie, but I couldn't answer her right away. My thoughts were spinning like a damaged wagon wheel. Clunk, clunk, clunk!

"He saw them, Jamie," said the doctor.

The sheriff must've carried Creech the whole way from the burnt out house. First into the tunnel, then on horseback. Finally, they'd arrived here together to try and stop us from trapping the shadow in that ravaged body. It was good news and bad news. Good that we now had a chance to finish what we'd started, but bad that the Nalusa Chito was still strong enough to hold onto the sheriff.

I was staring out into the snow, considering our options when a familiar face appeared beside the locomotive. "You have seen them?" asked Black Fox as he climbed up the small ladder to join us.

"Yeah. Just now," I said.

The doctor patted Black Fox on the back and Jamie stood to hug him. "We must move quickly. Before he can mobilize others."

"What others? He already killed everybody else," I said, but I could see that the doctor was already shaking his head.

"He's still reaching out for more," said Doc Brunson. "I could feel him in my own head a little while ago."

"He's right," said Jamie. "I felt him poking around inside my head too but he can't get a hold of me no more."

The doctor continued, "And there's something crawling around in the snow at his feet."

"What do you mean, 'something'? Like an animal?" I asked.

"We haven't been able to see it. Just the snow moving. Could be one of the women. That's why we stayed put. All those women are out there in the snow. It's like a mine field. Creech still has some control over them and he used it to keep us here."

"I think they're dead now," I said, remembering the face in the snow. "I stumbled over a couple of them on my way here but they didn't budge."

"Then what are we waiting for?" asked the Doctor. "Let's get going."

"We still have to determine how to deal with the Nalusa Chito," said Black Fox.

I looked out the doorway where I'd lost my gun. "We could try shooting them, except I lost the LeMat."

"If their bodies are still under the protection of the Nalusa Chito, no bullets will harm them," said Black Fox. "Not even in this weakened state."

"I hope that's not supposed to make me feel better," I muttered.

Black Fox acted like he hadn't heard me at all. "We have until sunset to take action. I do not believe he will act against us until then. He is weakened but he may take solace in the night when the Nalusa Falaya will reach out and help him to heal. Until then, he will use his remaining power to protect these bodies."

"Good, then let's get out of here and find someplace warm. If we stay here much longer we're going to freeze to death," said the doctor.

"Very well," said Black Fox. "We can take refuge at the tunnel entrance and build a fire with some of this wood." He indicated the locomotive tender that was well stocked for a long journey. A journey it wasn't destined to take.

The doctor and Jamie climbed down first then I leapt to the ground as well. I was eager to put some distance between us and Creech. Black Fox passed down the firewood then climbed to the ground himself. When he reached the bottom of the ladder, he paused and traced his finger along the rusty floor of the engineer's station. It was buckled in places, with seams that didn't quite match up. Black Fox seemed to be fascinated with it.

"What is it, Black Fox?" I asked.

He wouldn't say. Instead he motioned for us to go ahead.

I led the others through the knee-deep snow as quickly as I could, pausing only once to look back and make sure that the sheriff was still there. He was, so we continued toward the mouth of the tunnel. Once we got there, Jamie started building our fire.

I helped her with the wood but my attention was on Black Fox. He was distracted. I tried talking to him but he brushed me off and returned to the crest of the hill. He knelt in the snow and sifted through handfuls of the powder as he stared across the white expanse at the train.

Once the fire was going and we'd thawed out our frozen extremities, I broached the subject that was on all our minds. "Ya'll have any idea what he's doing up there?"

Head shakes all around. "He was his usual self 'til we left the train," said the doctor. "You don't think..."

I nodded and pushed more wood into the fire. "We have to be careful around him until we know for sure."

"What?" Jamie was indignant. "Ya'll can't be serious. There's no way that shadow thing done jumped into Black Fox!"

"Well, I'm a mind to find out. Ya'll wait here." I stomped forward a couple of steps, full of momentum to get to the bottom of this and finish what we came to do. Then I relaxed a bit and turned back to my friends. "If anything happens, get back in that tunnel. If nothing else, it'll give you cover until..." Until what? If we didn't kill the Nalusa Chito here today, none of us would have any futures to speak of.

I never finished my sentence. Instead, I turned and marched up the hill to find Black Fox. He was crouched at the top of the hill, wringing his frozen hands as he sang to himself. He stopped when he heard me approach behind him.

"What's this all about, my friend? You're scaring us." I stayed out of Black Fox's reach, but he still had the high ground. If he turned on me, I didn't think I'd be able to put up much of a fight. Black Fox stood and I tensed up, fearful of what was coming. Then he did a most unexpected thing. He held his medicine bag out to me.

"What? You want me to take that? I think it's better off in your hands."

"I fear I have been wrong all along," he said. "I do not deserve the tribe's confidence. I have failed you, Gus. You and the others. Even Deer Son and Michael."

Michael. I hadn't even thought of Michael recently. I wondered what he was doing at that very moment.

Black Fox continued, "I have failed myself by embracing that which I am not. I have tried to apply logic where there is none. All this while, I thought I was teaching you a lesson. 'Be like the crow,' I said, and yet I did not listen to my own words."

I moved closer and rested a hand on my friend's shoulder. His muscles were relaxed. Maybe he was alright after all. "Hey, now. Didn't none of us know what we were getting into here. You did your best. We just have to figure out how to finish this." I looked at the sky. We still had several hours before nightfall but all the time in the world wouldn't do us a lick of good if we didn't use it wisely.

Black Fox looked at me with those piercing eyes. It felt like he was using them to dig into me. What was he looking for? When he spoke again, he sounded hoarse. "I do not think any reasonable plan of attack will work. I must embrace disorder."

I cocked my head at him. "I don't understand."

"I must do that which he least expects."

"Which is what, exactly?"

"I must use the power of the war party."

I didn't know a lot about the Chickasaw, but their thirst for revenge was famous. Of all the tribes in America, the Chickasaw had the most enemies because they were the most ruthless and unpredictable. They also rarely lost until firearms were used against them.

"Are you saying we ought to charge out there like crazy people and take whatever ass whooping he's getting ready to hand out?"

"He will not expect it, Little Crow. He does not understand sacrifice. That is the strength of the Chickasaw heart. It is OUR strength. The Nalusa Chito has glimpsed our minds so he knows us to be rational, but he cannot see into our hearts. I do not believe he even knows of the heart's existence."

"I think charging in there is just going to get us killed. It's a lot like what I did when I thought he was hurting Jamie at his farm. That didn't exactly work out."

"But he was at full strength then, was he not? I believe it was our most effective skirmish. You did more in that single moment than we've been able to since then."

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to be the good guy. I wanted to get rid of this thing and move on with my life, but that would be mighty hard to do without a life to live. Unlike Black Fox, I didn't believe in the spirits' road.

Black Fox must have seen my skepticism on my face. He took my shoulders in his hands and forced me to face him. "Your inability to accept even the possibility of this idea indicates how unlikely it is to the Nalusa Chito."

"Black Fox, I..."

"I do not think this in my mind, Little Crow. I feel it in my fists. In my belly. There is no truer path. The animal in my heart is angry."

"Alright. But what's the point to all of this?" I asked, trying to disguise the fear I felt. The medicine was no longer having any effect on me. I was scared that the only plan on the table was to run out and get killed by a corpse and his lawman valet.

"We have buried our righteous anger. Now is the time to release it. It is not like playing a sonata, Gus. It is the beating of the war drums. It is the killing frenzy. If we can truly embrace such a feeling, we may be able to rid our world of this thing forever. But if, for even a second, we question the morality of our choices and pause to consider right and wrong, he will drain us and take us as his own. That would be far worse than death."

"Are you telling me that this victory will *require* us to die? Black Fox, we've lost so much already."

"This task asks for even more, Little Crow. I am sorry, but this is a war of the spirit. It is waged differently than a war of the flesh. I understand if you do not wish to embrace this. I will go alone if that is how it must be."

"So that's what you've been doing up here by yourself? Getting ready to die? That sure sounds like a sorry way to go out."

"No. Not getting ready to die. Getting ready to win this battle and climb the spirits' road. Like my brother, the



crow, I am not afraid to die." He took my hands into his own icy fingers.

"Let's just go sit down by the fire and talk to the others about this first, okay?"

"No, Little Crow. There is no time." He reached out and embraced me. "Tell this tale to the tribe," he whispered in my ear, then he pushed me away and ran off toward the train. He didn't even have his bow with him.

I ran down the hill toward Jamie and the doctor. By the time I got close enough for them to hear me, both of them were on their feet.

"Black Fox! He's going after Creech by himself!" I yelled. "We have to help him!"

None of the things that Black Fox had just tried to impart to me had taken root in my panicked mind. All I could think about was my friend. He was out there by himself taking on an enemy greater than any I'd ever imagined. I couldn't let him face that alone. I ran up the hill and caught a glimpse of him as he dropped to his knees in the snow next to the passenger car. I watched and waited, but he didn't pop back up.

Jamie ran up and grabbed me. "Where is he? Gus, what's goin' on?"

The doctor arrived just I time to hear my answer. "I saw him crawl under the passenger car."

We all stared at the train but there was nothing to see. "Why'd he run off by himself like that?" asked the doctor.

I ignored his question. "Doc, I need you to hang onto Jamie for a few minutes. I'm going over there."

"Like hell, you are!" shouted Jamie. "Not by yourself!"

I wasn't in the mood to listen to anyone. I grabbed her and kissed her, then I shoved her into the doctor's arms and ran across that snowy field toward an uncertain fate. Had Black Fox gone crazy? My greatest fear was that the shadow had taken him. I didn't think I'd be able to fight them if that was the case. Not even if my life depended on it.

I made it to the passenger car and crouched down to take a look underneath. Black Fox was there, alright, but he wasn't moving. I crawled under the car, the icy ground hard

against my knees. His face was a bloody pulp just like Mr. Deerson's. I laid my head on his chest and heard no heartbeat. He was dead. Just like that. No fanfare, no big battle. Just gone.

I mustered all my strength, both mental and physical, and took a deep breath. If Black Fox had just lost some sort of spiritual battle with Creech, maybe Creech was weakened. I scrambled out from under the train and dove at the backs of the sheriff's knees, hoping to topple him to the ground. I hit him with all of my weight, but his knees didn't buckle. Sheriff Hays was standing there, cradling what was left of Creech in his arms, but he was dead. Frozen solid. I got up and grabbed at what was left of Creech, hoping I could wrench him free of his throne of frozen flesh but I never got close enough.

I heard Jamie yelling something at me. I looked over and saw her running around the front of the train with the doctor but I didn't get a long look. Something under the snow grabbed my right ankle and pulled my feet out from under me. My body was snapped like a whip and I was suddenly being dragged away. Slowly at first, then faster and faster. The snow was hip deep, so it was all I could see as I struggled to keep my head up. White snow and white sky. I couldn't even tell what direction I was moving in. I kicked with my left foot, jabbing the thick, snake-like appendage with my heel, but it didn't let go. If anything, it held on tighter and picked up speed.

The ground underneath my body was like a washboard made of knives. The frozen landscape slowly, painfully ground against my body. Part of me wondered what the snake thing under the snow was, but I had more pressing issues. Like how to keep from being killed. Snow flew into my eyes and up my nose and made it hard to breathe. I was numb all over from the cold but somehow the pain still penetrated my frozen nerves. I could see my blood on the ground every time the thing twisted me over. I struggled against it but it didn't help.

Panic was setting in, when, for a brief moment, my thoughts returned to Jamie. Why hadn't the doctor held her back like I'd asked? Was Creech riding her again? As that

thought crossed my addled brain, I felt the tentacle loosen its grip slightly. I could see Black Fox in my mind's eye admonishing me to be more like the crow. In this case, I thought that meant I had to fight like my life depended on it, even if it meant losing my life to save Jamie's.

I roared Jamie's name and grabbed at my ankle with both hands. Somehow I found the strength to reach the serpent arm and I dug my fingernails into its flesh. The slimy skin didn't give way at first, but then my fingers pushed past that barrier and into a core of bitter cold. It was sinewy and wet but more frigid than anything I'd ever felt before. In comparison, the snow around me felt as warm as an army bed roll.

Something in the distance made a screeching sound and my ankle was suddenly free. I tumbled a few more yards before I was able to sit up and get my bearings. When I finally did raise my head above the snow, I was shocked to see that I was only fifty or sixty feet away from Creech. He was currently attacking the doctor and Jamie with several more of those snake arms! Where the hell were they coming from?

I struggled to stand and saw that the snow around me was covered with my blood. Still, I was able to move on my own. As long as I had breath in my lungs, I was going to try to save Jamie. I knew the tentacles were going to be too much for me to take, so I focused on their source. I ran toward Creech, digging into my thoughts of all the pain he'd caused. I neared that frail, bloody form, my arms outstretched and my teeth bared. I was prepared to chew him to bits if that was what it took!

Creech just sat there. You'd have thought that such a broken thing wouldn't have had much fight left in him, but you'd have been wrong. A whirling gust of wind whipped the snow around him up into the air and turned it into an icy tornado. The funnel of snow encircled him and flung stinging ice into my eyes.

Jamie'd gotten away from the snake thing she'd been fighting, so she ran toward me. Before I could warn her off, she hit the outer edge of the tornado and was flung into the air like a pile of leaves in a wind storm. She screamed, and I

could feel Creech get stronger. Her emotions were feeding him. He was soaking up her energies like a cracked desert floor in a rain storm.

I half expected to see her fly apart when she hit the ground, but she didn't. She landed in the snow and the wind around Creech intensified even more. It was drawing me in toward the eye of the storm. Toward Creech. I covered my face with my arm to keep the tiny ice particles from burrowing into my eyes. It was incredibly loud but I could still hear Creech's laughter on the wind.

Black Fox was dead, Jamie was compromised, and I had no idea what had happened to the doctor. I was alone and I felt my warrior spirit wane. How the hell did we ever think that we could combat such a powerful force as this? I stared at Creech through the twirling storm of ice and snow and felt defeated. It seemed like time had stopped. It felt like every minute that had ever existed had just been spent. All and nothing. Beginning and ending. Ending. Ending. These words echoed in the increasingly fragile recesses of my mind. Then I heard the voice.

"You are my chosen disciple, August." It was Creech again. The tornado parted as it drew me forward, but his feeble body didn't move. Not even his crooked, bloody mouth. His words were projected into my mind along with energies that I knew didn't belong to me. I wanted to reject them, but I needed them so badly. Our roles were reversed. I was now the infant; Creech, the nurse maid.

I wanted to help Jamie, but her needs were slowly being obscured from my thoughts. All I could see was Creech. All I could hear was Creech. I knew I could no longer fight him, so I let myself go. I wondered why we'd been fighting this benevolent god at all. Why not serve him? We should be helping him. His is the way.

Light shone from behind Creech's broken form and that light lifted him toward me. "You shall be my final vehicle, August. My most esteemed body. Together we shall rid this world of its infestations and turn it back into the spiritual wonderland it once was. Before the disease came. Before people rotted the fabric of the Earth."

*Yes, I thought. Yes, that's right. That's what we need. No more Indian wars. No more suffering. No more abuse of the land and its resources. Erase the scourge!* I stared into the eyes of my new god and saw beautiful things. Snow-capped mountains and starry skies; beautiful vistas filled with wildlife, among them great flocks of birds. Birds! It was then that my thoughts shifted. Everything in the visions that Creech was pouring into me suddenly transformed into crows! Hundreds of them. Millions! All in flight, circling overhead like a whirlpool of life. I looked at Creech and saw him for what he was—a damaged thing who was neither man nor god. His legs and feet had become a mass of large snakes, all writhing headless and reaching out for me. He'd wanted me all along, and for a minute there he'd had me. But then the crows had come. The crows weren't projections of the Nalusa. They had grown from the seed that Black Fox had planted in my heart. A reminder of what life really was and why it was worth fighting for.

I cried out for their help but the crows acted like I wasn't even there. Maybe I wasn't. Maybe it was like that time by the river when I'd been thrown into my own reality. It didn't matter, though. Only one thing still mattered.

Creech stood alone before me, restored to his original appearance. No one else was around. Not even the snakes. The train and its surrounding landscape had vanished into limbo. There was only me and Creech and that gigantic flock of crows that obscured the setting sun like a dark raincloud. Strangely, there was still warm light on Creech's beaming face, despite the fact that the sun was being blotted out by the birds. It occurred to me that he might not be able to see them at all.

Creech smiled and ground his teeth together before he spoke. "I'm looking forward to being with you, August," he said. At that moment, looking into those crystal clear eyes but feeling the power of the broken Creech just under the surface, I understood. He was an act of nature, as violent as a wildfire and twice as destructive, but the Nalusa Chito could no more change his place in the world than I could. He was trapped in a never ending struggle with humanity that he thought he was about to win. That optimism was the

chink in his otherwise perfect armor. It was a toe hold I could use to destroy him once and for all.

"I pity you," I said into the face that the Nalusa Chito now wore like a mask. "You've come so close to the finish line only to fail again."

Creech's crystalline eyes darkened as did his entire countenance. "Together, we will not fail," said the sugary tongue. "You know this must happen, August." The words were soft and smooth but the energy behind them was jagged and raw. He'd almost had me but I'd gotten spooked. Now he was trying to reel me in slowly.

It was then, teetering on the precipice between two worlds—one that I knew and loved and one that Creech wanted me to embrace—that I knew what I had to do. The moment I acknowledged it, I felt a calm descend upon me like a cool breeze on a humid summer afternoon. Black Fox had had the right idea. We had to let go and embrace our true nature. But he was wrong about what that true nature was. People weren't angry savages at heart. Deep down, we all existed in the calm eye of the storm where our hearts were free to live and love and flow like water.

"I really do feel sorry for you," I said. He was so lonely. Forever chasing something he'd never have.

He spat his next words at me despite his best efforts to keep his anger reined in. "You mock me and yet you live on only because of my mercy." His bitterness was showing through as surely as if it were sweating out of that freshly repaired skin of his.

I continued calmly, "What do you know of mercy? I didn't see any when you abducted Jamie and held her hostage. I didn't see any when you killed Hashi."

Creech stepped closer, wooing me with each breath. "Don't disappoint me, August. You were to be humanity's greatest achievement. Didn't you notice the symbol I left for you everywhere? That's not my symbol. It's yours, Little Crow! I brought you to this very moment for a reason and I won't give you up just yet! When we become one, we will be unstoppable and you will have everything you've ever desired. You name it and it's yours, unless you're foolish enough to think you could actually harm me! I've enjoyed

toying with you, but this game is getting old. I offer you one last chance!"

I could feel him pressing in on me, trying to occupy my mind, so I let my body go limp and I watched as it fell to the frozen ground. I floated above that blank landscape, borne on the wings of all of those crows. I was each and every crow in that gigantic flock, and each of them was me. Everything they felt and saw was channeled through me. I could influence their movements and emotions, though to say I was controlling them would be an exaggeration. Still, I could impart general ideas to them, so I sent a single, gentle thought to the flock. *Creech is the most delicious food you could ever imagine.*

The chorus of black birds instantly descended onto Creech like an arrow thrust from the bow of God. He saw what was about to happen but he was too feeble to get away. The birds reached him and blocked him from my view, but I could hear his screams. Those sounds of terror turned into gurgling hisses, and then Creech was finally silenced.

I was still above the scene, but I was no longer a part of the flock. I watched as the birds ripped and tore at the flesh of Creech and consumed him one small bite at a time. They pecked him away, slowly, until there was nothing left but bones and a patch of blood-spattered snow. The birds picked at the ground until there was nothing more to consume, then they flew off into the west.

I felt myself falling to Earth, toward my prone body, and just as I was about to strike the ground, I woke up. I was on my back, staring straight up into the darkening sky. I sat up and saw that all the snow had melted away. Was what I'd seen real? I couldn't tell you for sure, but it felt pretty damned real to me.

My legs ached but I stumbled to my feet. It was hard to see in the low light, but I could just make out a body on the wet ground a few yards away. I ran toward it and saw that it was Jamie. I fell onto my knees beside her.

"Jamie? Oh god, Jamie!"

Miraculously, she opened her eyes. "Hey. You all right?" she asked.



"Don't worry about me. I'm going to go find the doctor. Don't move!" I kissed her cheek and ran to the train engine where I'd last seen Doc Brunson.

He was lying on the ground beside the locomotive's cattle catcher, soaked to the bone. I slapped his face lightly, but when I got no response, I tried a little harder. "Wake up, Doc. I need you! Please!"

His eyes flickered open and he sat up with a start. "What?! Gus?"

I grabbed his arm and hauled him to his feet. "It's Jamie. Come on!"

He followed me over to where Jamie lay and his professional instincts took over. Several times during his examination, Jamie cried out in pain. What had Creech done to her? I held her hand, offering her my strength but the look on the doctor's face told me more than I wanted to know. He pressed her abdomen and she let out a howl, then she passed out, her firm grip on my hand falling away to nothing.

The doctor shook his head. "She's got internal injuries, Gus. I might not even be able to fix her up in a proper operating room. I sure can't do anything for her out here."

I held her hand and shared her warmth as the doctor went around the field checking to see if any of the women were still alive. Her eyes opened once more, but it was to be the last time. I looked into them and whispered, "I love you, Itanale," as I felt her heart leave her body. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her but she didn't respond. I put my head on her chest and was deafened by the silence within her. She was gone. At that moment, my emotions let go and I began to sob. I don't know how long I sat there with my face on her chest, wishing beyond all hope that she would miraculously come back to me, but it was no use. What had the Nalusa said? That he'd been gunning for me all along? He'd used my friends to get me close then he'd discarded them like spoiled hash.

The doctor sat next to me and put his arm around my shoulder. We sat there together as the day became night. It was a harvest moon that night, big and bright and shining

onto a world that Jamie had given her life to protect. I didn't want to let go of her but I knew I had to.

I looked out across the eerie landscape and saw the women that Creech had killed laying there in the moonlight like felled trees.

"Any of them still alive?" I asked.

"No, sir. Not a one," said the doctor.

At that moment, I looked over and saw the LeMat gleaming in the moonlight not six feet from where we sat. I crawled over to it and took its cold weight into my hand. Truth be told, at that moment I didn't want my life. My friends looked more peaceful than I'd ever felt. I didn't understand why I'd been the one who'd survived.

"Why don't you give me that for safe keeping?" The doctor had walked up behind me and I hadn't even noticed. I handed him the gun without a second thought and we sat there and kept vigil over our friend's bodies until daybreak. The sun was heralded by a solitary crow. He flew out of the forest and circled overhead before landing in the snow-trampled grass beside the train.

I watched as he cocked his head sideways and cawed at me. "What more could you possibly want from me?" I asked.

Now, you might say I'm just a crazy old man telling tales woven out of lies and false memories, but I know the difference between truth and fiction and what I'm about to tell you now is as true as it comes. That crow walked over and stood in my lap, his black eyes gleaming up at me. I stared into those eyes and the crow opened his beak as if to smile. Then he leapt up and flew away, cackling to himself.

"I'll be damned," said the doctor. "I've never seen a wild bird come up to a person like that."

I just nodded and climbed to my feet.

"Hold up, now," said the doctor. "Your back is a mess!"

I'd completely forgotten about my injuries but my muscles hadn't. "Never mind about me, Doc. I'm alright. Let's tend to our friends."

We decided to bury Jamie and Black Fox ourselves. We gathered them up and put them in the train to protect them from the local wildlife while I hiked back to Creech's house to look for a wagon. As it turned out, there was a small one inside one of the sheds and I was lucky enough to find our horses right where we'd left them grazing. I hooked the horses up to the wagon and drove them across the fields to where the train now stood, its burning heart as cold as those of Jamie and Black Fox.

We gently wrapped the bodies up in drapes from the passenger car and loaded them into the wagon. We were climbing into the wagon ourselves when the doctor said, "Think we ought to pick up the sheriff and those women?"

"There's a mess of dead deputies out there too." I considered the possibilities. "Might make it look like we're hiding evidence, though."

"Well, we can't just leave them out here. Scavengers will eat them in no time."

"Fine," I said, climbing back down from the wagon. "We can put them in the train, but only the women. The deputies stay right where they are." To this day, I don't regret that decision.

We rode back to the barn but I still couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that Jamie was dead. I would have liked to have stayed at the barn for a while, but I knew we needed to get a move on before those dead deputies were discovered.

We built a travois and gently loaded Jamie and Black Fox onto it. There were a couple of shovels in the shed so we grabbed them and commenced to drag what was left of our friends up to the spot in the woods where we'd buried Hashi.

It took the better part of a day and almost all my physical and emotional strength, but we were able to finish the job. The doctor said some nice things and prayed but I was all out of words. I knelt between the graves and placed one hand on each mound of dirt as I hummed the moonlight sonata. It was the best I could do to honor two of the best people I'd ever have the pleasure to call my friends.

When we were done, I just sat there, afraid to leave them behind. Leaving that spot gave their deaths too much finality. I wasn't sure I could actually face it. The physical work of digging the graves had been a good distraction, but that was over. Everything was over. Now came the time when I had to decide what was next, and, for me, there was no next. Not yet.

I stood and backed away from the graves slowly. It was late afternoon and the sunlight blasted through the colorful leaves, painting the scene with uncanny beauty. That was how I wanted to remember that day. Yes, there was sorrow that would remain in my heart forever, but there was also the kindness of spirit that both Jamie and Black Fox had transferred to me. It was my responsibility to nurture it so it would grow and spread. If I was able to do that, Jamie and Black Fox would never die.

When we got back to the barn, I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep there, so I tacked up Sparks.

"Doc, I don't know how to thank you." I grabbed him and hugged him tightly. I was going to miss him, but he'd be better off if we put a bunch of miles between us.

He whispered in my ear, "If you're ever back in Twining, you can just play me another tune. How's that?"

I nodded and we parted. He climbed onto his horse and pulled the LeMat out of his waistband. "You want this back?" he asked.

"No, you keep it. I don't need it any more. You might be able to get three or four dollars for it."

The doctor shrugged, put the pistol away and rode off. I never saw him again.

I rode all night, not entirely sure where I was headed. The night sky was peppered with stars and when the backbone of night showed itself, it took my breath away. That

was the spirits road—the path to the place where Jamie and Black Fox now resided. If I was lucky, maybe one day I really would see them again. And Hashi. Maybe even Mr. Deerson. Seamus, I could do without.

That thought struck me as funny and it wasn't long before my snicker had evolved into full-blown hysterics. I wiped my eyes and felt guilty for letting myself laugh. I wondered if I'd ever laugh freely again.

It took me a while to get back to the Chickasaw reservation, but I couldn't say how long. I just wandered idly from place to place, trying to take stock and see the world for what it was—an illusion.

When I finally did ride up to the village, I must have looked pathetic because the men who greeted me took great care in helping me down off of Sparks. They helped me to a house and urged me to rest, but I didn't want rest. I wanted to see Michael. The one warrior who spoke English told me that Michael had returned to Spruce Rocks to tend to his father's store, so I asked if I could be brought before the minko to tell my tale. At first they protested, but I insisted politely. If I didn't tell my story soon, I thought the weight of it might crack my very being in two.

The minko was kind enough and curious enough to lend me his ear, so I told him every detail, through the interpreter, of course. The warmth of his home and the kindness of his people made me want to burrow in and stay there the rest of my days, but I knew that wasn't to be. As Black Fox would have said, that wasn't my path.

I'd ridden into the reservation in the late morning. It was well past dark when I was done telling my tale. Over the course of the telling, the minko had remained quietly attentive only asking for clarification when he didn't understand the translation. He shared his food and the warmth of his fire and I got the whole thing out in one sitting. When I reached the end, I felt empty, but not in a bad way. I was simply waiting to be filled again.

The minko stared into me for a long time, then he got up and motioned for me to stand as well. We stood beside the fire together and he grasped my hands. Through the

interpreter he said, "You have so much love in your heart. It was placed there by the people who cared for you, and now it is your responsibility to sew those seeds within others, Little Crow."

At that I started and tried to pull my hands away, but the old Chickasaw man held on. "How do you know my name?" I asked in a strident whisper.

"Your name is known and it will be celebrated. Do not forget to celebrate it yourself, Little Crow."

The minko turned and led me outside, his interpreter helping him along the way. Many of the Chickasaw villagers were waiting there, curious to learn the whereabouts of Black Fox, Hashi, and Jamie. I was both shocked and moved by the warmth they exhibited toward me. Looking around, I realized that the entire village was dark. The few fires that were present were hidden away within homes. I asked about this.

"We have not lit fires outdoors for many days in an effort to deceive the evil spirit you destroyed," the minko whispered. He then turned to the crowd and held his arms aloft. His interpreter whispered his speech in my ear. "My people. This man is your brother, Little Crow. He is of the divine spirit, just as those who accompanied him are. They are all here with us tonight, eager to celebrate their victory over the Nalusa Chito. The long black being will not bother us again!" At this the people cheered. "Our safety is owed to these warriors who fought on our behalf. Let us honor them!"

The crowd cheered again and then there was a frenzy of activity. It was like watching one of those newfangled factory machines at work. Each part knew its function and fulfilled it without question. Soon, there was a brilliant bonfire in the center of the village and every family had brought out some of their recent harvest for us all to enjoy. There was dancing and singing and many members of the village asked me to tell the tale so that they might tell it to their children and they to their children and so on. The interpreter sure had his hands full that night as I dove back into the past again. This time was a little different though. This time I minimized my own contributions and emphasized the things that Jamie, Hashi, and Black Fox had contributed. I found myself wondering if the doctor had made it home

alright, but that was a question for another day. For me, that night was for honoring the dead by stretching my memories of them across the reservation like a sail, to pick up the wind of these people's spirits and help the village soar.

I slept until noon the next day and no one disturbed me. I'd been given a place of honor in Black Fox's home, so when I woke up, I examined the things my friend had left behind. They made my heart ache. For the first time in my life I really knew what that expression meant. It was an actual pain that was heavy in my chest like bad gas. I knew it'd be present for quite some time. I also knew there was only one remedy.

When I emerged from the house, I saw that my interpreter was waiting there. He asked me to follow him and we went back to the minko's home. The minko was as bright-eyed as ever despite the fact that he'd spent the night partying just like I had.

"You must go and seek your path now, Little Crow, but you will always have a home here. You are a part of our tribe and we will welcome you home any time you need us."

I didn't know what to say, so I leaned over and gave the old man a gentle hug. His face was so smooth that I thought I might cut him with my scruff, but he held me there and whispered the song that black Fox had sung over Hashi's grave.

When I emerged back into the bright noonday sun, I saw that Sparks had been brought out and saddled for me. He looked happy and that happiness was contagious. I hugged his long face and kissed him on the nose. Later, I was told that my love for Sparks had endeared me to the Chickasaw women, many of whom had declared that they were planning to wed their daughters to me. I never did marry, though. There was only ever the one woman for me.

I climbed into the saddle and looked out at the tiny village and the resilient people who had weathered storms much worse than my own.



"Thank you all for your hospitality. You are my family, and I yours," I said, mimicking a greeting I'd heard the night before. The interpreter spoke and the people seemed to approve as there were nods all around. "May God bless you and keep you until we meet again." That last bit betrayed my Christian upbringing, but I figured God was God, no matter what name you called him by. Besides, it seemed like the sort of thing you were supposed to say in a situation like that.

I took the reins and urged Sparks forward. We headed toward Spruce Rocks, but at the last moment, just before I rounded a ridge that would obscure the village from view, I turned to see all those wonderful people standing and waving. The memory of that image warms my heart to this day.

By the time night fell, I realized just how late in the year it was. It had been a long time since I'd seen a calendar. The weather had turned genuinely cold. Not that frozen fakery that Creech had flung at us but the real deal. I made camp and tried to get warm beside the fire I built, but I knew I wouldn't be able to truly rest again until I talked to Michael.

Every time I thought of him, I felt a tremendous surge of guilt. For some reason, I imagined that Michael was furious at me for leaving him at the reservation while I went off and got everybody killed. Everybody, including Jamie. That was the real issue. He'd loved Jamie. Not the way that I did, but love was love. I missed her every second of every day, but at least I had some idea of what had happened to her and why. Michael was all alone with only his imagination to fuel the fires of conjecture. I was certain that he'd blame me once I told him what had happened.

The closer I got to Spruce Rocks, the more nervous I became about our inevitable meeting. More than once, I considered a detour that would take me someplace where I could settle down without anyone ever knowing who I'd been before. While that path would have been emotionally easier to bear, it would have also been fraught with what ifs. No, I was better off being a man and facing Michael, come what may.

My second night on the road was difficult. I knew how close I was to Spruce Rocks and I couldn't get Michael and Jamie out of my mind. I eventually apologized to Sparks and put his saddle back on. We were going to ride straight through 'til we got there. Sparks stepped up to the task as if he was as ready to be back home as I was.

We got to Spruce Rocks in the middle of the night and the streets were empty. There were lanterns burning here and there, but many of them had been blown out by the bitter wind that was bound to bring snow. It gave the town a threatening appearance and made me even more tentative about my visit.

I rode up to the Deersons' place and took Sparks back to the stable. After I brushed and fed him, I closed him in for the night. I latched the door behind me and stood there in the moonlight contemplating my next move. Maybe I should just sleep in the barn with Sparks instead of waking Michael up with my bad news.

After some difficult wrestling with my conscience and some time spent out in the cold, I felt it was best to wake my friend and get it over with. At the very least I'd be able to feel my fingers and toes again.

I walked up to the back door and felt around in my pocket. I had my key, but I didn't use it right away. It was still my room, wasn't it? My stuff was still there. Didn't I have a right to go in without knocking? Jesus, I was making this too hard. I stood there on the stoop for what felt like an hour, trying to imagine how I was going to explain things to Michael, but the picture wouldn't form. I was trying to force it into existence when I saw movement inside the house. Shit! I looked around for someplace to hide as someone inside lit a lantern.

I ran off to one side of the house and stumbled over the pump that I should have remembered to avoid. The metal handle made one hell of a racket and my shin felt like it was on fire. The back door opened as I fell to the ground.

"Who's there?" It was Michael.

I got up and limped back around the side of the house. "Hey, Michael," I said with a feeble wave of my hand. "Sorry. It's just me."

Michael dropped the lantern and ran over to hug me! He enveloped me in great big bear hug that would've knocked me flat on my ass if he hadn't been holding me up. "Oh my God, Gus? Gus! It's really you!"

We laughed together and he slapped me on the shoulder the way guys do when we feel the need to touch another guy but we don't want it to be weird. I couldn't take my eyes off of him. At first, I didn't know why, but then it occurred to me. While the Chickasaw were now part of my family, Michael was the only real friend I had left.

The dawn came and went and we were still sitting in that deliciously warm kitchen talking up a storm. I learned how the minko had offered to educate Michael in the ways of their medicine and how Michael had agreed to do so after he'd finished settling his father's accounts. He offered me my old room back and I gratefully accepted, hopeful that I'd be able to find my way back to the life I'd had before. That wasn't to happen, though.

Not too long afterwards, word started getting around about the train robbery and the murders of those women and lawmen. Talk was mostly about the white boy, the injun and the chink they'd seen together. The more the story spread, the more I realized that I was going to have to move on. There was a new sheriff in Twining and this one was neither stupid nor possessed by a shadow demon. It wouldn't be long before he sent a few of his boys looking for me. Michael disagreed, claiming that there was no way they could ever know my name. I went along with this for a while, but then the wanted poster showed up.

It wasn't a bad likeness really. In fact, it was good enough that several folks around Spruce Rocks tore the posters down in a vain effort to protect me. The last thing I wanted was to implicate those good people, so one night I just slipped away with Sparks and I've been slipping ever since. I wish I could say Sparks was still kicking. He's not. He died of natural causes, but in a moment of weakness, I sold his remains to a rendering plant in Texas. If you knew how hard it was for me to do that, you'd cut me a little slack in your judgment of that act. It's practically impossible to bury

an animal the size of a horse when you don't own any property and all the land around is getting developed.

My name was eventually attached to my face and both of those items stayed on the most wanted lists for decades due to the heinousness of the crimes attributed to me. I changed my name a few times and stayed on the move, picking up work where I could but never staying anywhere for very long. I spent most of those years in Texas. If there ever was a place to get lost in, that'd have to be it. I often thought of visiting my parents or the Chickasaw reservation but I never did either one. Too afraid of being caught, I guess. I just kept going.

Decades passed and I found myself in a post office in Port Isabel after coming back across from Mexico. Some crazy old guy who had nothing better to do than spend his days studying the wanted lists looked at me suspiciously and even took my picture with his little Brownie. I didn't know why at the time, but he did that to anybody he didn't know so he could check them against the wanted posters. Sure enough, he found me and reported me to the feds. He even did a little research on my whereabouts so he could send the officers down to the docks when they showed up.

In a way it was a relief. I went willingly. Prison was almost like a vacation after drifting for so many years. I was alone with my thoughts at last and nobody messed with me because of the rumors about what I'd done.

The trial went off without a hitch because I refused to defend myself, much to the chagrin of my public defendant, one Wallace Crenshaw the third, who'd only just passed the bar exam a month before. What was I supposed to tell them? A Chickasaw shadow demon possessed Hammond Creech and he did most of the heinous things they'd accused me of? That they ought to be thanking me for getting rid of the real threat? They'd not only lock me up, they'd put me in with the loonies. No sir. Not for me. I'd rather be dead. Guess I got my wish.

They passed judgment with great rapidity but then they planted me in a cell on death row at the Walls Unit in Huntsville, Texas where I waited. And waited. Despite the

fact that I had no desire to fight the charges, my attorney thought otherwise. Seems his granddaddy was some big shot lawyer who'd never lost a single case. His grandson was bucking for the same record, but it was not to be. All he achieved was drawing out what was left of my life.

All those hours spent alone in that cell taught me a thing or two about what life meant to me. Most people spent their time making money or babies or, for the fortunate few, both. At the end of it all, the best they could hope for was a respectable family name and a good nest egg for their grandkids to use to follow in their footsteps. A handful of people, though, got to make a real difference on this Earth. Some were war heroes, some were firefighters, and one was a mangy old man who'd done one good thing when he was young.

So that's about all I have to say. I just wanted to write this all down so that a handful of folks might learn the truth of what happened. Most people are less interested in truth than they are in comfort, but I've requested that copies be sent to the current Chickasaw minko and to Michael Deerson if he's still alive. I'll leave it up to them what they do with it.

I'm just glad I had time to finish this. Tomorrow morning's my execution. I'm looking forward to it. I might actually get to see Jamie again. I didn't put much stock in those Bible stories until I lived through some Biblical shit myself. Now I'm willing to accept just about anything as a possibility.

There's really only one thing I regret. I never played piano again. That night at Doc Brunson's place was my last word on the subject. Some might say that's because my muse had died. Others might say it was due to the fact that I didn't have the music in my heart anymore. But the fact is, after all that happened, most music just left me feeling heartsick.

Well, I've got to run. My last meal is here and I intend to savor it. Texas style barbeque sandwiches with all the fixings.

I love you, Itanale, wherever you are.

THOMAS RAVEN

**THE END**

## **Author's Notes**

This is a work of fiction. As such, I've taken considerable liberties with the legends of the Chickasaw and Choctaw people. I have great respect for the native peoples of North America and chose these particular tribes because I had some first hand knowledge of them from my years spent living on the Mississippi delta, their original homeland. Great crimes were committed against these people by my ancestors and I don't mean to add insult to injury by transmitting their legends incorrectly. Rather, I want to bring to light their rich cultural histories within the framework of a story of my own creation. Any errors or missteps are my own and I hope you'll be so kind as to forgive them.

I'd also like to mention The Look of the Old West: A Fully Illustrated Guide, by William Foster-Harris and Evelyn Curro. It proved indispensable while I was writing Creech, and it was a fun read as well. I highly recommend it if you're at all interested in what the "old west" was really like. I'd have sworn that Mr. Foster-Harris had leapt forward in time to describe the things he'd just seen around him.

I'd also like to thank Anthony Kuhn for once again being my first reader. His insights were invaluable and they helped to shape the final version of this story.

And of course, thank you for taking the time to read my work. I hope you'll let me know what you think of it.

-Thomas